



MALLORY DUNLIN

THE
SORCERESS
AND THE
INCUBUS

ECHOES OF THE VOID BOOK 1

**THE SORCERESS AND THE
INCUBUS**

MALLORY DUNLIN

“The Sorceress and the Incubus” by Mallory Dunlin

mallorydunlin.com

Copyright © 2023 Mallory Dunlin

All rights reserved.

This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by United States of America copyright law and fair use.

For permissions contact: mallory.dunlin@gmail.com

*To all those who have been wounded,
and all those who thought they'd never heal:
this book is for you.
As long as there is life, there is hope.*

Regarding the four planes, and their magical characteristics.

The Material Plane – a spherical plane and the home of mortals; the dominant race are humans, the planar reflections are elementals, and the power coalesces are chimera. Mages are ruled by the Triumvirate. Material power is associated with strength, perseverance, solidity, and alchemy. It is represented by stone, chalk, soil, and iron. Opposes the Ethereal Plane.

The Abyssal Plane – an eternal plane and the home of abyssals; the dominant race are demons, the planar reflections are shadows, and the power coalesces are amalgams. Mages are ruled by the Council of Shadows. Abyssal power is associated with passion, emotion, heat, and transformation. It is represented by flame, charcoal, ash, and gold. Opposes the Celestial Plane.

The Ethereal Plane – a spherical plane and the home of fae; the dominant race are elves, the planar reflections are primals, and the power coalesces are pixies. Mages are ruled by the Glories. Ethereal power is associated with creativity, mutability, escape, and movement. It is represented by wind, kohl, pigments, and silver. Opposes the Material Plane.

The Celestial Plane – an eternal plane and the home of celestials; the dominant race are archons, the planar reflections are stars, and the power coalesces are wisps. Mages are ruled by the Starry Host. Celestial power is associated with intellect, cold, immutability, and fate. It is represented by water, abonos (bog-wood), salt, and copper. Opposes the Abyssal Plane.

CONTENTS

1. Falling Stars

Rain

2. Here, Kitty, Kitty

Rain

3. Follow-through

Rain

4. War-mage

Saker

5. Seeing with Fresh Eyes

Rain

6. Keeping Busy

Rain

7. Resurrection

Saker

8. First Impressions

Rain

9. Lunchtime

Rain

10. Figuring Things Out

Rain

11. Solace

Saker

12. The Nature of a Cat

Rain

13. Kissy Mew-Mew

Rain

14. Hyperfocus is a Bitch

Rain

15. Contemplation

Rain

16. Turmoil

Saker

17. Conversation

Rain

18. Getting to Know You

Rain

19. Coming to an Understanding

Rain

20. Longing

Saker

21. The Poet and the Princess

Rain

22. Thinking Too Much

Rain

23. Paperwork

Rain

24. Lullabies

Saker

25. Servanthood

Saker

26. Merrhenya Spire

Rain

27. The Triumvirate

Rain

28. Cornered

Rain

29. Home is Where You Hide

Rain

30. Recovery

Rain

31. Shapeshifter

Rain

32. Hunger

Rain

33. Penance

Saker

34. Gravitational Anomalies

Rain

35. Don't Kill the Messenger

Rain

36. Motion & Emotion

Rain

37. Dinner Conversation

Rain

38. Rihhadiza

Rain

39. Another Messenger

Rain

40. Star-Iron and Ice

Rain

41. Summoning Diagrams

Rain

42. Balanced Spellcasting

Rain

43. The Very Big Rock

Rain

44. The Fall of Tarandrus

Rain

45. Confessions

Rain

46. Dancing

Rain

47. Something Like a Date

Rain

48. On Purpose This Time

Rain

49. Hope

Saker

50. Preparations

Rain

51. Qavan Vipereye

Rain

52. Confrontation

Rain

53. Adventures in Vannport

Rain

54. Dowsing

Rain

55. Comfort

Rain

56. Playing Catch

Rain

57. Gifts

Saker

58. Homesick

Rain

59. An Unwelcome Guest

Rain

60. The Fallen Star

Rain

61. Twin Stars

Rain

62. Falling Together

Rain

63. Family

Saker

64. Aftermath

Rain

65. Happiness

Rain

[Epilogue] The Eclipse Gala

Rain

About the Author

The Changeling and the Dragon

1

FALLING STARS

RAIN

The summoning circle of Barixeor Spire burned with abyssal power as I leaned into the strength of the volcano beneath it. Standing more than five thousand feet above the peak of the caldera island, at the very apex of the Spire, I called the swirling flow of the ley confluence together, feeding it through the complex lines of my diagram until it narrowed to a beam of focused power collared by the seven rings of the circle. The burn-off of my spell filled the massive room with blinding light that I could see even through the layers of black silk over my eyes, as bright white as starlight.

I kept my eyes closed and focused on my mage-sight. The invisible world of magic blazed into life in every direction around me for hundreds of miles, appearing as rivers and coronas and filaments of light. From this height I could see the curvature of the Material Plane in which I lived, the home of nearly a billion people who I'd sworn to protect. It was my home, too, a beautiful place I couldn't bear to see scoured to the bedrock by the fury of the stars.

Near Kamenhe, I reminded myself. To the southwest.

With a steadying breath, I turned my attention to the great spells written deep in the ley of the Spire, a curling lattice-work of magic through which the power of the Tsirisma Confluence flowed. The spells stretched across space in a way that hurt my mind to think about, so I didn't try to comprehend the how, instead following the entangled ley-lines of the Spires to Kamenhe Spire halfway across the world.

My mage-sight twisted into incomprehensible shapes for three heartbeats before snapping into the patterns around Kamenhe. In the same instant, my spell connected to my friend Jace Songdog, who stood in the matching diagram in Kamenhe's pinnacle.

The pattern of her magic was as familiar to me as her smile, a steadying sight in the face of what felt like an endless task. Pale light gleamed in her soul, as if the seed of a star glimmered in her chest, and for a moment guilt pinched me. I pushed it aside. The damage of the past couldn't be allowed to ruin the future.

"Over Ibexen," I murmured dreamily, examining the drifting flow of power in the sky. The strands of ley energy curved around an eddying current of celestial power. As I watched, the pool started pinching outwards, like watching the funnel of a tornado form. When it touched the ground, a meteor would follow in an instant, a broken piece of the celestial firmament falling between the planes, drawn towards the opposing Abyssal Plane through the world that sat

between. “It’s broken into three parts. They’ll come through in a two-point-one-three second timespan. Are you ready?”

Jace’s power shifted, twining through the world. The tiny motes of magic in every particle of chalk-dust in her diagram glittered in my vision as they drifted up off of the floor, held in the patterns she’d drawn by the flow of magic through them but affected by the gravitational negation of her power burn-off. Even in the state of meditative calm every mage maintained during complex spells, the sheer magnitude of Jace’s magical strength left me feeling awed, as if I stood in the presence of a goddess. I was the sixth-most powerful sorcerer on the Material Plane, and I couldn’t hold a candle to her.

“Yes,” she said, her sweet voice calm and clear. “Trigger the spell whenever you’re—”

My connection to Jace and Kamenhe cut out.

“Shit!” I yelled, tearing off my blindfold and wincing as the light made tears spring to my eyes. Something was disrupting my diagram. Something was on my lines—

A mouse worked its way along one of my carefully-chalked marks, sniffing along it, chalk dusting its whiskers. Panic flared beneath my calm. No time, no time—

I called the first thing I could think of to my hand – a heap of rock salt – and flung it at the mouse. It fled, bolting for the stairs. With my eyes squeezed shut and the world seen red through my eyelids, I flung myself back into the spell, grabbing for Jace.

“Rain!” she cried when my power slammed into hers.
“Rain, what’s happening?”

There was no time to answer. I threw my focus out towards the city of Ibexen, desperately hoping that I could get in place before the pieces of the Celestial Plane broke through into mine. As I raced for the line of power, it touched down in the Ibexen market.

In desperation, I triggered the spell before I reached it, hoping against hope that Jace would be able to compensate. In the blink of an eye, the three pieces of star-iron broke through the sky. For a moment, a rippling patch of the beautiful blue of the material sky showed the velvet black of Celestial’s eternal night, before the meteors turned into flaming death streaking towards the city.

Jace’s power flared into light far more blinding than even that of the confluence. It washed over me like a physical force, a blast-wave of magic flung into the breach.

The meteors stopped midair, glowing red-hot from their passage through the atmosphere, three little pieces of the broken sky drifting so peacefully in the air.

With a sweep of my hand, I finished the summoning, capturing the burning firmament and dropping it into my summoning circle, leaving the sky over Ibexen clean blue once more.

Heat beat out at me from the star-iron as I swayed in place, fear-exhaustion hitting like a hammer as I released my grip on my emotions. I stared at the pieces of the Celestial Plane with

something that felt too close to despair, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. This was the third capture Jace and I had to do in the past four months, and we'd almost failed because of the stupid mice in Barixeor Spire—because of *me*. We would have failed, if Jace hadn't been the most powerful sorcerer in the world. It had been a fucking *decade* since Tarandrus had fallen, and if anything, the situation was getting worse.

Her voice slammed into my mind—*What the fuck was that?!*—the words slung through the connection between us in a sting. Jace could do it because she was so damn powerful, putting the force of her power behind it.

But I could do it, too, because I had the most precise and fine-scale mage-senses ever documented. I found the slender ley-thread that marked our friendship and stung my response through it. *Mouse on the line.*

The response came a heartbeat later, a scared-sounding, *Fix it.*

I focused – stinging was difficult, even for people like me and Jace, and especially at these distances – then sent, *I will.*

I didn't know how I'd keep the promise, but I chewed on the problem as I linked to the diagram I had chalked in one of the storage levels deep beneath the earth, where the volcanic power seared through the Spire's spellwork. Mice and rats were notorious for their ability to evade warding spells by following ley-lines places, an obnoxious characteristic shared with cockroaches and cats. Short of summoning every mouse

in Barixeor Spire and dumping them in the lake before every meteor-snare I cast, I wasn't even sure what I *could* do. I didn't have a skillset particularly conducive to mouse extermination.

With care, I settled the newest chunks of star-iron in the basement with the rest of the pieces of the celestial firmament we'd captured, letting the power of Tsirisma bathe it. The abyssal strength of the volcano countered the celestial power of the meteors, keeping the Material Plane from warping around the pieces of the Celestial Plane, but if it kept on like this we were going to start overwhelming the volcano.

I sighed, trying not to think too hard about it. I had to report to the Triumvirate soon on the situation, anyway, and I could let the three of them come up with bright ideas for trying to keep the echoes of the void from destroying our whole world. There weren't a lot of options, when it came right down to it; if any other material magic-users touched the firmament, the stars would show us no mercy. It was me and Jace, or no one.

Feeling weary, I trudged down the stairs, my mind churning. I didn't see the fucking mouse until it darted out from underfoot, startling me enough that I stumbled and fell, crashing onto my hip on the stone stairs and smacking my head against the wall hard enough that I bit a chunk of my cheek off.

Rage spiked under my skin.

Fuck. This.

I shoved myself up, spitting blood onto the steps for the stupid Spire's cleaning spells to deal with, and stalked back up the stairs to the summoning circle. I was done dealing with the fraying wards. There was one thing guaranteed to keep mice out of my working spaces, and I was going to summon it.

2

HERE, KITTY, KITTY

RAIN

Cats.

They were exactly as good at getting into forbidden places as mice, and they were insatiable hunters. I didn't have the inclination for keeping a pet mouser, but I didn't need a mundane cat to get all the benefits of one.

I was a sorcerer. Magic-users at my level almost never bothered with familiars; they didn't do much that sheer power couldn't cover, and those of us who ranked as sorcerers had power coming out of our proverbial ears. But that didn't mean I *couldn't* do it, and a soul-bonded cat would get a nice little intelligence and longevity boost from me, so it could – for example – keep mice out of my fucking summoning diagrams.

It would set the Archmage's hair on fire to have one of his Spirekeepers show up with a cat as a familiar, but given that I already despised him, that was kind of a bonus. He cared too much about the appearances of things, a political monster with the veneer of a kindly, wise sage who only wanted the best for everyone. I cared about little things like “making sure a

massive rock doesn't slam into a city full of innocents" and "not falling down the stairs and breaking the neck of one of the two people necessary for keeping such rocks from impacting the Material Plane."

I glared at the summoning circle, its glimmering metal and gemstone rings all but devoid of power after their use. That didn't matter. Calling a familiar wasn't like other summonings. It was more like a request to the universe, opening the soul to the world with gentle intent and asking someone to respond in the same way. Even the weakest hedgewitch could call a familiar merely by drawing a circle in the dirt and focusing. I had a circle worthy of summoning stars and shadows, and more power than every hedgewitch on the plane put together. This would be easier than breathing.

I settled back into the stance of spellcasting with the ease of long years of practice, my heart rate slowing and the spreading ache of my bruised hip dulling as I drew my focus together. Instead of calling on the power of Barixeor, I drew a shining strand out of my own wellspring, slipping it into the curve of the summoning circle. It moved in a lazy current, turning into a growing gyre of magic I fed with my ocean of power.

Give me a cat, I thought, shaping my request. *A strong hunter with a taste for mice*. The soft yearnings of my heart beat against the cage I'd built for them – *someone who loves me, someone to protect me, someone who will stand beside me* – but I pushed them away. I'd sworn never to make myself vulnerable like that again, and I wouldn't. I didn't need love or

companionship. I could be happy on my own. What I needed was a cat.

A cat, I repeated to myself to stabilize the spell, and bared my soul to the universe.

The spell... frayed. Near-invisible filaments of power split off of the circle, whipping out in every direction, to every creature on every plane who matched my request. Most vanished in the same moment they appeared, bare flickers as the cats they touched dismissed the call, content with their lives or uninterested in me. Others steadied and thickened into threads as I was considered. I could feel them at the other end of my spell, a faint sensation of creatures ranging from simple mortal cats to sphinxes, a bewildering array of souls brushing against mine.

In less time than it took for me to take my first breath, the spell found me a familiar. One of the ephemeral strands of power flared into a column of burning light, making me cringe back, covering my eyes. A confusing sensation pressed into me, like a flickering flame, of battle and fear and the sensation of teeth crushing through bone before the room filled with light and a phantom sense of heat, as if a pillar of fire stood in the center of the summoning circle. Then, all at once, the room went dark again and the summoning no longer tugged at my power.

My eyes flew open in shock—no cat had the sort of magical strength to cause those sorts of fireworks.

A demon stood in the circle. He was easily six feet tall, his indigo skin spangled with pale markings, like stars on the night sky. Sweat-soaked black hair hung around an angular, sculpted face, falling out of a half-undone braid, and long, arching black horns curved over his head. He swayed, leaning forwards, balancing against bat-like wings and a long, powerful, black-furred tail.

His wings were torn, I realized with horror, the massive gashes leaving pieces of membrane hanging. Green-black ichor splattered his soaked body and ripped clothing, water running down his skin and dripping off of the obsidian blades clutched in each clawed hand. There were *arrows* in him, three of them sprouting from his chest, fletched with crimson feathers.

Bright gold slit-pupil eyes met mine for an endless span of time, but when my heart again thudded against my ribs, his eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed to the ground. The obsidian blades fell from his lax hands and shattered, the pieces screaming across the stone floor.

Agony slammed into me with physical force as the soul-bond completed.

Not water—*blood*. Clear blood, pouring from a wound in his belly and a series of deep slashes across his thigh, dripping from the ragged tears in his wings, running down from the three arrows buried in his chest, and choking him where he'd been stabbed in the throat.

His desperate need tore my power from me through the soul-bond, pouring into him. I moved without thinking, flinging myself at him.

A sweep of my hand threw the obsidian shards across the room and out of my way, and I skidded to my knees at his side. I wasn't much of a healer, but with the soul-bond I almost didn't need to look for what was killing him the fastest, and as soon as I touched his skin I knew every wound on his body as intimately as if it were my own.

It wasn't the blade that had nearly gutted him, nor the claws that had slashed him to the bone, nor even the stab to the neck that had severed his trachea. It was the arrows. Poison leached off of the barbs, spreading along the flow of his blood and power.

Only the torrent of energy raging from me kept him from being dead already. It poured out of my wellspring without my will or direction, falling into the dying demon like a river thundering into a chasm—but he was abyssal, and so was my Spire. With a snarl, I grabbed the strength of the confluence and slammed it into him instead, feeding a volcano into his heart. His body arched in a rictus at the surge of raw power, and I jammed my knee under his back to keep him off the ground.

One of the three-edged arrows had pierced through his back beneath his shoulder blade. I snapped off the head, throwing it to the side, and yanked out the shaft. The second sat just beneath the skin, so I grabbed the shaft and rammed it through

to give it the same treatment. ignoring his choking, wet sound of agony as the pain thrust him back into awareness. The third was lodged next to his heart. Any movement could tear open the walls of his heart, and I didn't have the knowledge to save him if his heart burst.

With grim necessity, I focused and called a tool to my hand from one of the horrible medical experimentation rooms lower down in the Spire. It looked like three-pronged tongs made of curved steel, a hateful thing made for pulling out exactly the kind of arrow the demon had buried in his chest.

Mercilessly, I slid the tool into the torn meat of his chest between his ribs. He sobbed and spat blood as clear as water, foam bubbling at his mouth as he fought for air through the blood in his lungs. The pain seared through the soul-bond, making sweat pour off my body and my muscles tremble from the agony, but I forced myself to move smoothly. He couldn't die. I wouldn't let him die.

The arrow-extractor hit metal. I forced it open and around the barbed arrowhead, sliding it deeper into his body until the tongs touched together underneath the tip of the arrow, feeling the terror of that pressure against my own beating heart. With a wrench and a gasping cry at the sensation of his pain thundering into me, I yanked the arrow out of his body and threw it to the side with the rest of the detritus.

His power was flame. I could feel it, the lure of burning heat, and I used that ley-path to turn his clothing to ash, then

slammed my hands against his chest to fight the toxins in his blood.

I blessed my sometimes-lover Qavan a thousand times over for his fascination with everything poisonous. I'd spent enough time in his labs that I recognized the thing killing the demon instantly. It was a mage-killer, one that ate power and destroyed the body's wellspring, turning a mage into nothing more than meat. They were unnatural poisons, held together with the pale traces of alchemy that made them, and they couldn't stand against true strength. I bared my teeth and drove my power into it with all the finesse of a sledgehammer, shattering the poison into its harmless component pieces.

Power roared through me and around me, flooding the ley-channels of the demon, and I put it to work—closing up torn arteries and organs, summoning the blood from the inside of his lungs, and stitching together muscle. It was sloppy work, and I knew it. I was too unfamiliar with healing and he was too badly injured for me to take my time and do it right, or use only the necessary power. The two of us flared with the light of my burn-off, his blood glittering like liquid diamonds and the pale spangles on his skin turning into brilliant molten platinum.

The dreadful pull against my magic eased, then stopped, and I released the power of the Spire for the second time that day with a groan of relief.

My body ached with the aftermath of the unbridled flow of power, and I stared down at the unconscious form of the

demon with exhausted horror. I'd been too shocked to banish him before the spell had completed, but even if I'd thought of it I didn't think I'd have been able to send him back to die. As soon as he'd appeared in my circle, my fate had been sealed.

I'd asked for a cat, and for reasons unknown, I'd gotten a demon. There were so few recorded sapient familiars, and by all accounts those relationships were intensely intertwined. I didn't want this. I couldn't handle this. But we were soul-bonded, and there was no going back.

3

FOLLOW-THROUGH

RAIN

The job wasn't done. He wasn't currently poisoned or bleeding to death, but the demon was still grievously injured, with deep slashes, broken bones, and tattered wings. There was only so much I could do with raw magic; healing still used the resources of the body, and if I ran through all of them, attempting to force further healing could kill him or damage his body irreparably. I didn't know enough healing to have a good instinct for how much was too much, but I remembered that healers almost never fixed everything in one go. Better to go slowly and guide the body than to use magic as a cure-all.

I used an incantation to strengthen myself, the power fizzing under my skin with a surge of energy, then picked him up and carried him out of the summoning room and down the stairs, watching for mice. None showed themselves. I didn't stop, walking through the preparation room directly to the transport ring, leaving a trail of spattered, clear blood behind me.

“Fifty-two Sky,” I said, my voice clear despite the flood of pain through the soul-bond of my familiar. Gods, my *familiar*, a demon bound to my soul. If I thought about it for too long, I knew I would panic, so I focused on what was happening around me. The four doors around me blurred and shifted with a sensation of displacement, then solidified into four identical doors in a different orientation. I turned to the left and opened the door with a twist of power, walking through it into a massive bedroom.

The bedroom of the 52 Sky suite was made of the same smooth basalt as the rest of the Spire, with patterned wool rugs laid across the floor. This particular suite was low enough in the Spire that the thick quartz panes in the wall gave a view over the edge of the caldera and into the mountains, but I focused my eyes on the enormous bed across the room. With a mental force of will, I summoned a thick sheet of waxed cloth to protect the bed, then a clean cotton sheet atop that. It was patterned with daisies, and I decided not to care.

With a carefulness born more from not wanting to feel the pain than care for my patient, I laid the demon on his back, spreading his wings to either side. His head lolled to the side, his pulse visible in his throat. Blood still oozed from his wounds, but I’d stopped most of it, so I took the time to duck into the bathing room of the suite, stand in the tub, and summon all of the blood and ichor off of his skin to dump down the drain. I tried not to gag as the gelling mass splatted onto the porcelain, nausea twisting my stomach.

I took a moment, closing my eyes and breathing. I could do this. I *had* to do this. There was no one else in Barixeor who could, and I needed him to live. He was bound to my soul, and his death would tear us asunder, leaving wounds on me that might never heal.

When I had pulled myself together enough to face the gore again, I walked back into the bedroom to stand next to the demon, trying to assess his remaining injuries with clinical detachment.

The demon was mangled. There were four deep tracks across his left thigh, the triangular punctures in his shoulder and chest from the arrows, the slash across his belly, two more parallel cuts on the front of his right thigh above the knee, several shallow wounds and one jagged one on his arms, a cut across his face that split his left upper lip and eyebrow, and the stab wound in his throat—and that was only the humanish part of his body. His wings were broken and torn, and his tail had what looked like a bite mark in it.

I chewed on my lip. I'd already dumped a lot of magical healing on him, and if I kept going there was a good chance I'd screw up and do too much. Instead of taking that gamble – for him and for me – I summoned the materials for mundane wound treatment and went about closing the wounds that still crossed his body with neat, precise stitches. I placed drains in the deepest wounds so that they wouldn't need to be reopened to release any infection, taping them in place so he wouldn't accidentally pull them out if he moved.

I got to his wings and paused. I'd spent enough time with flighted people to be familiar with how wings worked, and I'd seen what happened when bat wings healed badly. The little creature had been a cute pet and had taken well to his flightless life, but I was pretty sure that it would be beyond devastating for a sapient creature to lose the ability to fly. Humans often fell into deep depression when they were suddenly disabled, but even a quadriplegic could move through the world with the right tools. What would it be like to lose the sky?

Grimacing, I set the needle aside. It wasn't worth risking his flight on chance and the vagaries of natural healing, especially not when I would have to live with his suffering for the rest of my life. I hadn't done any magical healing on his wings yet, except to stop the bleeding; those I could use my power on without fearing that I might ruin his body forever.

I settled onto the bed next to him, drawing his first wing across my legs and settling back into the meditative trance of spellcasting for the third time of the day. I didn't know any spells for doing what I wanted, but he was abyssal, and I had the power of an abyssal confluence to call upon. The volcanic power came easily to my hand after all these years, glowing in my spectral sight like lava in the night, and I fed it into his wings.

With enough power, anything can become a spell. I sang lullabies to the force of a volcano, tender words about the wind and sky, shaping the way with my desire. Between my fingers, jagged wounds smoothed away and new flesh grew,

joining the torn pieces together as seamlessly as if they had never been injured. Broken bones shifted, sliding back into the places they belonged and knitting back together.

The spell-song caught me, the touch of my hands on the demon's wings soothing me as much as him, transferring through the soul-bond. I finished his second wing smiling and feeling momentarily at peace, wanting to keep singing forever. But the lullaby drew to an end, my voice and magic trailing off as the natural flow of the confluence reasserted itself, and the world crept into my awareness again.

Everything hurt, my body reacting to the demon's injuries almost as if they were my own, but I pushed it away despite the physical exhaustion tugging at me. With hands that wanted to tremble, I bandaged his wounds, summoning the supplies to me and levitating his body with a fusty old incantation Jace always teased me for using. I guided him back down onto the bed, arranging him by feeling through our soul-bond for what felt the least uncomfortable, then sat back, still channeling power to keep from feeling the burnout I knew would soon follow from the use of raw magical strength instead of spellwork.

I walked myself step-by-step through the way we'd taken care of patients at the charity hospital when I'd been studying at the University, summoning the rest of the supplies I needed for the demon. Anti-infection pills, to kill the microscopic things that liked to infest open wounds. Anti-chimerals, which would repel enough of the magical power around us to prevent chimera from crystallizing in the eddies of his disrupted

energy. The materials needed to set him up with a hydration line, including bags of saline. Sedatives and pain medication, which I almost couldn't believe I'd forgotten, given how badly this hurt from just the echoes of his pain through our bond.

I set up the line first, then started attempting to sedate the demon. I prised his mouth open, holding his jaw agape with one hand, then unscrewed the top of the dropper-bottle with my teeth. The inside of his mouth was black, from his forked tongue to the roof of his mouth, and he had sharp white teeth reminiscent of a hyena, meant for tearing flesh and crushing bone. That probably meant he was a carnivore, or close to it; I made a mental note for when it came time to feed him, whether that was a proper meal or through a tube.

Carefully, I slid two fingers underneath his tongue to reach the absorbent skin beneath, noting as I did how much warmer he was than me. That wasn't uncommon in abyssal creatures, but it would affect the things he needed to recover. I'd need to keep him warmer than a human to ensure he didn't get sick. I shook my head to chase out the stray thoughts, focusing on the ley-patterns of his body, and started dropping the yellowish liquid under his tongue in a slow cadence.

It did nothing after four drops, which would have taken down a human of his size. It did nothing after fifteen, which would have felled a horse. I stopped at thirty, trying to smother the rising panic without much success. Gently, I slid my shaking fingers out of his mouth and checked the potency of the sedative by putting a drop on my tongue. It made my mouth go numb almost immediately, and sent a wave of

relaxation through me, which meant it was working fine. The demon was simply immune.

I rested my hands on the bed, trying to cudgel my tired, scared, hurting self into thinking logically. Plenty of abyssals had resistance or immunity to the toxins and medicines that worked on mortal creatures. Qavan and I had summoned enough of them for testing various concoctions of his; some, like the ferret-like imps called echnumon, were completely immune to all consumed poisons, while others were pick-and-choose. Echnumon were in the cat-like category of abyssals, which – given my request – the demon had to be, as well. Feliform, that was the term. So perhaps, like them, the demon wasn't capable of absorbing medication through his digestive system.

It was as good a place to start as any, and an easy theory to test. I summoned a different substance, one that was often used recreationally for producing feelings of euphoria and which had no chemical or magical similarities to the sedative, and tried it on him. Even in triple the dose that it affected humans, it didn't so much as nudge the energy of his body. So the oral route for medication was out.

I cast a despairing glance at the pills I'd brought up and mentally sorted through my other options. At last I gave up and went down to the medical storage to rifle through the supplies, coming up with an injectable alchemical tranquilizer and plain morphine, which hopefully would do the trick. I tried the tranq first—success! He was more sensitive to the injected medication than a human would have been, so I took

care with the morphine, feeding a quarter-dose into the line and waiting a full fifteen minutes before adding more, keeping careful track of the movement of his ley.

Preventatives were next; luckily they came in liquid form as commonly as solid, though I had to guess at the dosages. Hopefully it would be enough to keep him from getting sick without wreaking havoc on his body, but only time would tell. I spend another long moment going carefully over his body's ley-pattern, checking for any hidden injuries and smoothing away a few remnant blockages from the mage-killer poison.

At last, I released the flow of magic entirely. Agony came screaming through my body again, as if I'd laced a hot wire through my veins, far worse than I'd anticipated. Even with the sedative and morphine, it was enough to make the demon's body tense, an expression of pain flickering across his face. With a gasp as the action whited out my vision, I reached clumsily with my power and grabbed a decoction between my fingers from storage. I uncorked it with my teeth and tossed it back, my throat spasming in protest at the slimy texture. But a moment later blessed relief hit me like a wave of cold water, the tincture shutting down my ability to handle magic temporarily, enough to quiet the flow of power through my channels so that they could heal.

With the shutdown of my power, everything else besides keeping the demon alive came to the fore, and I fumbled for a chair before I fell to the floor. The adrenaline drop left me shaky and cold, my whole body trembling. I stared blankly at

the unconscious form of the naked demon on the bed, the reality of my situation hitting me all at once.

I was soul-bonded to a demon, a strange man who had almost died in front of me. He still might die despite everything I'd done, if his body couldn't handle the shock. I'd leapt into summoning a familiar with no thought about the consequences, and now for the rest of my life I had to share everything with a person I didn't know at all—my life, my power, and my soul.

Tears started dripping down my face, and when the first sob escaped my throat I couldn't stop the rest, burying my face in my bloody, shaking hands. Oh, gods. What had I done?

4

WAR-MAGE

SAKER

I took a deep breath, bracing myself for the presence of people, then rapped on the door to the field office and stepped inside. The eyes of every person in the room locked onto me the moment my presence registered, the heady taste of lust coating my tongue as they responded to my aura. I pushed away the momentary discomfort that always twinged inside me at that reaction and smirked, flicking my tail and sauntering towards the coordinator, who gazed at me with a hungry smile on her face.

“Firesword,” she said with pleasure, her smoke-harshened voice rasping across the name I used for the army. “You’re early today.”

“The wind’s blowing dextral across the Varosha Plains,” I purred back, knowing she didn’t care about the answer, only the sound of my voice. “It made the trip much faster.”

Not for the first time, I wished that I could be anything other than cubari when I interacted with the field office. Only as an incubus did I have the powerful aura that made others desire

me—but in my four other forms I couldn't talk, and none of them were sized right for interacting with most people. Dragons don't fit through doorways, and cats are far too easily overlooked.

“Wonderful.” The coordinator twisted her hand above the black stone of the desk, making a map of the current battle-lines appear in stark relief. “Not much has changed in the past rising cycle. The general wants to throw you at the lines here,” she said, tapping one of the ridges. “If you can break them long enough to allow the vanguard to make it up the slope, there's a bonus in it for you.”

“Risky,” I said, murmuring the word as I assessed the topography. “Who's shielding?”

“Jackal,” she answered.

I looked up at her sharply, the surprise making me move too quickly, like a predatory animal. “She's Valmari.”

Her nostrils flared and her pupils dilated in response to the danger I posed, her body reacting not with fear but with desire, everything I did filtered through the lust aura I emanated merely by existing. The scent of her want mingled with the taste of her lust, a combination that woke the hungry instincts that coiled deep inside of me. I kept them leashed with iron control, refusing to allow myself to be driven by the things my body craved, even if I couldn't help feeding off of the ambient lust in the room.

“Not since last cycle,” the coordinator said, her voice husky as her eyes dropped down to my groin.

My tail lashed, wings mantling slightly in my unhappiness. “You put her on shielding when she turned coat *yesterday*?”

“Not my call.” She licked her lips and dragged her eyes up my body until she reached my eyes again. “Valmari’s had a sorcerer-rank shieldbreaker in the field for the past four hours. Jackal’s the only one with any hope of identifying them so we can stop losing mages. But tell you what, incubus.” The woman leaned forward, baring her neck and displaying her breasts, as if either might win her what she only wanted because of what I was. “I can do you a favor and pull her from the field for, hmm, Lightning-glass, if you’ll take care of what your body always promises and you never give.”

“I’m a mercenary, not a whore,” I replied, putting a sultry croon into the words as I leaned across the table. Her lips parted as I reached towards her, but as soon as I had the talisman I needed, I stood back up, looking down at her from under half-closed eyelids as I hooked it over my ear. “Aerial gate, please. Let Jackal know to expect me.”

She pouted, not a pretty expression on her face, but she laid her fingers on the call-stone to let the mages who manned the war-gates know to open one for me. “Until tomorrow, then, Firesword.”

“Until then,” I said, turning and striding out of the room. The lust abated but didn’t vanish as the door swung closed, the after-effects of my presence lingering. I paused for a moment to measure my hunger as I ate their lust, an instinctual and subconscious action cubari couldn’t entirely control. I had

another few days before I truly needed to feed, but I preferred not to take myself to the edge like that. Perhaps tonight I would visit one of the people who'd invited me when not under the influence of my aura, once I'd washed off the blood and soot of battle.

The warmth of power bloomed against my skin as the war-gate opened, so I put away my consideration of sex and instead launched myself into the sky, my broad wings digging into the air and carrying me upwards. Nobody bothered putting aerial gates at high altitude, so I only needed to get a few body-lengths off the ground before diving into the circle of clouds hundreds of miles away.

The entire magical landscape changed as I crossed the gate's boundary, all of it felt as different kinds and intensities of heat against my skin. Most mage-senses manifested as sight, which worked well for people, but my unique mage-senses gave me an unusually good grasp of the spatial dynamics of power, and I didn't see the appeal of visualizing magic. Beneath me, a little wild-ward, I could feel the jagged electrical sensation of Jackal's power signature, and a moment later I felt her shielding spell snap around me.

"Firesword, what a pleasure to be on this side of the battlefield with you," a girlish voice cooed into my ear.

"Keep me from getting skewered by arrows, and the pleasure will be all mine," I replied absently, shifting in the air to pinpoint the location of the armies beneath me. "Ready to block my aura for the Achaean lines, this time?"

“Aye, and eager to see what you can do, pretty boy,” Jackal replied with a giggle.

I hated that she sounded so innocent and sweet. A person who had as much blood on her hands as she did ought to sound worldly, not like a girl-child who had never seen someone die choking on their own blood.

Without replying to her, I started incanting my spells, drawing my twin obsidian swords and wrapping flame around me, preparing the destructive power I wielded. The general wanted me to break the defensive lines. I could do that.

I folded my wings and dropped, trailing flame behind me, and put the power of a sorcerer behind an incubus’ aura of lust. The blastwave of my strength blew through the patterns of magic over the battlefield, breaking spells and making power-sensitive creatures stagger. I didn’t pay attention to whether Jackal had kept the Achaean soldiers protected as all eyes on the Valmari side lifted to the sky, sharp lust blooming in my mouth. She had her job to do, as little as I trusted her; I had mine.

I struck the defensive lines of the Valmari army like a warhammer, slashing my blades through the heated ley-channels of the spellwork with enough force behind them that they *burned*, visible flame arcing in the patterns of the spells as they flared and died. Fire was the natural expression of my power—flame hot enough to vaporize metal and shatter stone. I didn’t even need a spell to send a column of fire roaring

through the front lines of the army, consuming everyone and everything in its way and leaving flames raging in its wake.

Before anyone could get an enchanted weapon near me, I threw my wings open again and clawed for the sky, chanting a spell of destruction as I wheeled and turned back towards the scrambling lines of people. I threw it with a sweep of my sword, severing the line of a spell that reached for me and sending flame down along it.

The scent of charred meat rose with the smoke, enticing and nauseating at the same time. It was a familiar smell, one I caused over and over, and I shut it out of my awareness with grim despair. *You were made for this*, I reminded myself, catching a thermal and using it to gain the altitude for the next pass. *You were made for this, you were made for this, you were* —

Power like lightning struck my chest with agonizing force, lancing through Jackal's shield as if it wasn't there. And then it truly *wasn't* there, broken by the power of a sorcerer.

The shieldbreaker was here.

Cold seeped into my body from the line of fire through my chest—mage-killer poison. I snarled as I drove my power into it to break it, forcing myself to gain altitude. If they thought they could kill me with a single fucking poisoned arrow—

Another struck me, and then a third, the last plunging into my lung and coming to rest almost beneath my breastbone. The pain blinded me, leaving me flapping like a shot bird as I plummeted to the earth. I hit the ground hard, landing badly on

my wing and gouging it as I skidded across sharp stones. The spell I'd been holding went off as I lost control of it, sending a blast of flame booming away from me in all directions. It gave me time to stagger to my feet, my wing torn and bleeding and my hip screaming with pain.

They were on me within a heartbeat. Burned, frightened, and furious, an army threw itself at me, giving me no time to deal with the poison chewing its way through my power. But I was still a sorcerer, even with mage-killer eating at my wellspring, and I wouldn't die quietly.

I fought with spells and flame, drawing on everything I had left in me, leaving corpses and ash in a seared circle around me. They didn't stop coming, even knowing it was suicide. Killing an enemy sorcerer was worth far more than the lives of a single battalion.

My power burned out, leaving my spells guttering and only natural fire burning around me. The next soldiers into the breach met only my obsidian swords.

I tried to fight as the poison corroded my wellspring, killing the source of my life, but all savagery fled as claws and teeth and blades sliced into me. A snarling demon plunged his blade for my throat as jaws snapped closed on my limbs to tear me to pieces, my death gleaming in his eyes.

Everything went very still, time stretching around me. The softest of spells brushed me, a gentle touch with the force of a sorcerer far more powerful than I behind it, like feeling a breeze and discovering it was the breath of a dragon. The

warmth of it kissed me, a soft request murmured from the soul that waited naked behind her call.

It wasn't meant for me. I knew it the moment I felt it, like feeling the eddy as a falcon stooped past. She was looking for a familiar, a *cat*, something similar enough to my nature that I could overhear her call.

That was life drifting past me, delicate and warm, something I'd never expected to find on a battlefield. She was seeking a companion to her heart, a marriage of the soul, asking for a cat, a hunter, a mouse-killer. I could be those things for her. To live as a cat was better than dying on a blade.

The moment passed, war and death snapping down against me, and as the sword pierced my throat, I threw myself into her summoning circle.

5

SEEING WITH FRESH EYES

RAIN

Somehow I dragged myself through bathing and crawling into bed. I must have fallen asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, because between one blink and the next my bedroom went from night-black to the dreamy pale light of early morning. For a terrifying, confusing moment, I felt like I was in two places, lying on my face and on my back, with my arms and legs akimbo and with my limbs laid flat and wings spread. Then I fell back into my own body, my heart pounding as my sense of self reasserted itself.

Soul-bonds tied together the intrinsic beings of two creatures together, whether that was a woman and a cat or a woman and a demon. It gave them the ability to feel each other's emotions, step into each other's bodies, and sometimes even talk telepathically with each other, in a way that was much more effective than the stinging Jace and I could use to communicate across distances. I wasn't used to having two bodies accessible. I didn't know if I would ever get used to it.

I took several calming breaths, not allowing myself to freak out or break down like I had the night before. What was done, was done. I had a demon familiar, making me one of a handful of mages to have such a bond with a sapient creature. It was rare and extraordinary enough that there would surely be books on the topic, and maybe I could read them all for some sort of hope of understanding what I'd gotten myself into. The thought was comforting enough that I managed to roll over in bed instead of lying there like I'd been killed, starting to think with focused intent.

There was a certain strength in knowledge, and given how familiar summonings worked, I currently knew next to nothing about the demon in my guest bedroom, while he – I felt pretty certain it was a “he” – had gotten the chance to feel the shape of my soul. That put me at a rather distinct disadvantage in the knowledge arena. The sum total of what I knew about him came down to what I'd asked for in my summoning: a cat who hunted and liked the taste of mice.

My spell had summoned him, so he had to be aligned enough with the things I'd wanted to even have felt it. I hadn't specified “mortal cat,” though I hadn't really expected to pull a cat from one of the other planes. I supposed that, given I currently resided atop one of the most powerful abyssal confluences on the Material Plane, it wasn't that surprising that I'd gotten someone from the Abyssal Plane. Shapeshifting wasn't all that uncommon, especially in demons, so I was willing to bet that he wore the shape of a cat at least sometimes.

I could make a couple educated guesses about him from the circumstances, too. The swords, leather armor, and horrific injuries suggested he'd been in the middle of battle, and there were at least two ongoing wars on that plane. Hedgewitches and witches weren't strong enough for it to matter, but leather armor was pretty standard for war-mages, since it was less likely to attract errant power. Nobody fought with obsidian blades instead of steel ones unless they were doing magic with them, so he had to be a magic-user of some kind. The mage-killer arrows sort of clinched that.

Which meant that he had to be magician-ranked, at least. If I'd had the presence of mind last night to try to measure his ley impact before taking the suppression potion I would have a much better guess. My ley impact was strong enough that anyone less than an eight or so would be completely hidden by my presence as long as they were within ten or fifteen feet of me, so I hadn't gotten any sort of impression while I'd been near him. Until I was ready to test my magic-handling abilities, though, his exact rank would have to stay a mystery. "Mage" was enough of a head-turner as it was. I couldn't think of a single instance of a mage familiar, which meant this was new territory.

Let's not think about that too hard, Rain.

Okay. War-mage cat-shifter. That was a place to start, at least. He'd accepted my summoning, too, which meant that he was willing to bind himself permanently to a stranger for the sake of survival. Whether that meant he was the sort of person who would do anything to stay alive or someone who was

flexible and willing to accept mercy remained to be seen, but given that we'd be sharing emotions as soon as he woke up, I assumed I'd figure that one out sooner rather than later.

Pain crept in as I considered the demon, and that got me up out of bed. He needed more drugs of every kind, and I needed more power suppressant before my innate magic-handling reasserted itself. With preparation, I could do far more than I'd done the night before, but using raw magic instead of spells was very costly, and I'd used a fuck-ton of it. I'd need to be a mere mortal for a week, at least.

My three servants almost never came up into the non-public parts of the Spire, so I didn't even bother with clothing, wandering down to medical storage wearing only the loose shirt I'd slept in. I'd left a mess behind me when digging for supplies, so after chugging my horrible power-suppression potion, I tidied up for a bit, then headed upstairs to tend to the demon.

It felt weird to be around a strange man while mostly naked, but after a moment of consideration I decided to chuck that particular bit of recalcitrance. I'd woken up as much in his body as in mine; we were going to get awfully familiar with each other's senses and anatomy in a hurry. The fact that he was sapient and a mage meant that the bond was more powerful than it would have been if he'd been a regular cat, and I had limited experience with maintaining psychic blocks outside of the usual ones used by mages. Once he woke up, I was going to have to figure a lot of things out very quickly, or have a miserable time of it.

My hands did the necessary work without me needing to spend a lot of energy focusing on what I was doing. He'd pissed himself in his sleep, a side effect of the deep sedation, but I'd anticipated that and prepped accordingly, so it wasn't too bad to deal with. He did have enough fur that I ended up wiping him down with a wet washcloth, but other than that, tending his unconscious body was simple enough.

The demon's male anatomy was all internal. I would have catheterized him if he'd had a visible dick; as it was I thought that fishing around inside his body to do something like that would be uncomfortably intrusive for the both of us. Hopefully he wouldn't be weird about getting nursed by his bonded mage or by a woman. Human men had an annoying tendency to enshrine their penises as something special and sacred; I'd gotten bored of that long ago. As a result, I tended to date outside my species, a habit which earned me more than my fair share of pages in the sleazier mage reports.

Once he was clean, medicated, and I'd tidied up the resulting mess, my stomach was loudly reminding me that I needed food to survive. I took the transport ring down to the 1 Sky ground floor, remembered that I was only dressed in a nightshirt, and went right back upstairs to wash my face and put on something more like actual clothing.

When I made it to the ground floor the second time and headed into the kitchen, my minotaur man-of-all-work, Bashen, was plowing through a flake of hay at the table while Marin poured steaming water into a teapot.

“Morning,” I said, dropping into the seat across from Bash. “Is that tea for me?”

“If you like, magus,” my cook said cheerfully, flashing me a smile. “I was holding off making breakfast until you arrived. Safira’s brought in some fresh spinach this morning, and the hens are back to laying now that you’ve banished the skolex, so I thought an omelet might suit.”

“Sounds delicious. Any chance for some starch alongside it?” I asked.

She laughed and shook her head, turning to start oiling the pan. “After ten years, magus, I would have imagined that you’d be used to being able to have me cook anything your stomach desires.”

“After ten years, I’d have imagined you’d have learned to call me Rain,” I replied, grinning at her.

Across the table, Bashen snorted and tossed his horns a little. “It’s a hard habit for us smallfolk to break, even out here in the back of nowhere,” he rumbled, sounding amused.

“Ha! ‘Smallfolk,’ he says.” I wagged my finger at him. “Don’t you get started with me. You’re a power null almost on par with a chimera, Marin’s outside time, and Safira’s a damn elemental consort. The lot of you aren’t anything approaching smallfolk.”

Marin set a mug of black tea in front of me, giving me a look worth of a schoolmarm. It did nothing to me; I’d never been a very obedient child. “We all started out small, though,”

she said, *tsk*-ing at me. “And even now, all of us prefer quiet. You’re a great deal flashier than even the three of us put together, magus.”

I grinned at her, lacing my fingers behind my head and leaning back in my chair. I enjoyed the company of my staff a great deal, even when the conversational ground we trod was well-worn. “Flashy I’ll give you, but do recall even sorcerers start out as regular folk. I was a farm girl in the Barrens until I manifested. Doesn’t get smaller than that.”

“But my, how you’ve grown,” Bashen replied in a deadpan voice.

I burst out laughing at the joke, then settled the legs of my chair back on the ground and picked up the mug of tea. Marin had gotten the temperature exactly right for once; the hot mug didn’t sting my hands at all to hold, and when I took a sip the black tea didn’t scald my tongue like it usually did. The comfortable morning routine eased a little of my stress, though when Marin set my breakfast in front of me, complete with two slices of toast slathered with butter and honey, the worries settled back onto my shoulder like vultures onto a particularly delectable corpse.

“Usually my cooking gets better reactions than that,” Marin said, with curiosity in her voice. “What’s gotten you so troubled?”

“I tried to call a familiar last night,” I said with a sigh, then started to dismantle the handsome omelet into bite-sized pieces. “It didn’t go well.”

Bashen paused nosing through his hay to give me a baffled look from under his mop of rusty orange hair. “Since when do summonings go poorly for you?”

“Remember when you asked me to summon your order of hay for you, but neglected to mention that you’d had the whole year’s worth purchased and put into my storage? And how I then proceeded to dump several tons of hay directly into Safira’s garden?” I asked drily. When he snorted a laugh and nodded, I shrugged and turned back to my breakfast. “Something like that, I think. I’m powerful enough as it is, and with Barixeor’s confluence behind me, I really pack a punch. If I’m not careful about capping my spells, I have a tendency to overshoot.”

“And I suppose you didn’t cap well, magus?” Marin asked, looking across the room at me from where she was washing out the pan.

“Yeah.” I sighed and shook my head, thinking about the mess I’d made of things. Classic Rain: jump in with both feet and deal with the consequences later. It always seemed like a good idea at the time, and my earth-shattering power usually got me out of trouble, but sometimes the consequences were very hard to bear. I didn’t regret saving the demon’s life, as I didn’t regret saving any of the lives I had, but it remained to be seen how difficult it would be to deal with the aftermath. “Called for a cat and got a cat-associated abyssal. He’s a demon mage of some sort.”

Marin whistled at that. “A mage familiar? There’s not even tall tales about that.”

“Yes, I’m deeply aware of that fact,” I said, making a face. “Gonna be a shitshow when he wakes up. He was in pretty bad shape when I got him. Speaking of which,” I added, looking back up at Bashen. “You mind helping me this afternoon with changing his bandages, Bash? I burned out my channels keeping him alive last night. Someone made the man a pincushion for weapons, and it’ll be easier on me and him if you move his body for me.”

“Of course, magus,” he said in his deep voice. “Would four in the afternoon work for you? I’ve been working on putting rain baffles in the burn scar on the northern slope of the caldera so the soil doesn’t wash into the lake, but I’ll be fair tired of it by then.”

“Oh, that’s a thoughtful thing to do for Celyn.” The elemental water-horse of the caldera lake had bartered with me several times in the past decade for tending to the lake; keeping his goodwill seemed important when we lived on an island in the center of his lake. “Thank you for that.” I flashed a smile at him. “I’ll be in the library, so whenever you’re free will work for me.”

The minotaur shrugged one shoulder. “The algae blooms make Safira itchy, and I have little enough work right now.”

My lips twitched at that. For all that Bashen acted as if the cares of the world never bothered him, he was a huge sweetheart. Doing weeks of hard labor so a friend could be a

little more comfortable was well within my expectations of him. “Well, you have my blessing, for what it’s worth. If you need anything, feel free to buy it and I can summon it for you.”

“Not into Safira’s garden,” he said with amusement.

“Not into Safira’s garden,” I replied solemnly, drawing a cross over my heart. “Fourfold Noetan as my witness.”

We chatted about idle things as Bash and I finished eating breakfast, with Marin pulling over a stool and holding a mug of tea companionably once she finished her kitchen tasks. She and I lingered after Bashen left to go work on his burn mitigation project, sitting at the table with our mugs of tea—mine mostly empty and hers still full.

“I’m going to keep him down for a few days,” I said at last, looking down at the tea leaves at the bottom of my cup. People did divination with such things sometimes, but I suspected my future was far too roiled and complicated to get even a glimpse into. If only it could be that simple.

“For your sake or his, magus?” she asked gently.

I chewed on that for a little while, turning it over in my head. At last I answered, “Both, I guess. He needs time to heal, and I need time to... think, I guess.”

Marin took my mug out of my hands and replaced it with her full one, the tea still hot enough that the ceramic felt warm against my skin. “Too much thinking can get you into dark places,” she said, one hand going to her throat where the

invisible collar of her curse sat. “He must have been very frightened to see death coming for him.”

“Not everyone’s afraid of death,” I pointed out, taking a swig of the tea. “But I think I see your point. You don’t want me to get myself prepared for something that’s all in my head, yeah?”

“Something like that, I suppose,” she said with a sigh. “People don’t grab at the chance for survival when they’re ready to die.”

“I guess you’d know,” I said, feeling a bit moody at the topic. I didn’t like thinking about the times I’d almost died, or what they had cost me. “Just... what if he regrets his choice as much as you do? This is already going to be difficult. If he hates me for it...”

My cook shook her head, a few strands of her curly hair drifting with the motion. “It’s not the same, and you know it. Whatever’s truly bothering you, magus, talk to someone about it, even if it’s not one of us. It will help.”

I flashed a smile at her, trying to look at ease instead of afraid. By her expression, I wasn’t all that successful. “What will help is learning more about what I’ve done before he wakes up,” I said, willing it to be true. “Could you bring me lunch in the library at the usual hour?”

“Of course,” she said, getting up and letting the conversation slide away from the things I didn’t want to talk about. We were friends – or as close to friends as it was

possible to be with someone you employed – but there were some lines I didn't let anyone cross. “Any preferences?”

“Comfort food.” At her lifted eyebrow, I shrugged. “The demon's enough of a surprise for me. Something I'm used to will be nice.”

“Then comfort food it is.”

I watched her as she started moving about the kitchen again, leaning towards my mage-sight out of habit and flinching as I couldn't reach it, with a yawning, sick feeling in my stomach from feeling that part of me missing. *It's just the suppression potion*, I told myself, holding back a shudder as I shoved myself up to go to the library. *You're going to be fine.*

But it still felt awful to be unable to touch my magic, and I felt a pang of sympathy for the demon, the shadow sensation of his body filtering into my awareness through the soul-bond as I thought about him. He'd been dying of mage-killer poison. He'd had to feel his power getting eaten away, piece after piece of his life being devoured. What had that been like?

I wrapped my arms around myself as I stepped into the transport ring to travel to the library. I couldn't imagine it—didn't want to imagine it. I knew what it was like already to have pieces of myself consumed by an implacable force. I'd forgotten so much, but that I remembered with crystal clarity. I would never forget the void.

6

KEEPING BUSY

RAIN

For all its faults, Barixeor Spire possessed a truly excellent library. Each of the Spires had been grown inside one of the great ley-line confluences of power on the Material Plane, and each tended to have massive accumulations of writings and work related to the flavor of power available from the confluence. The Tsirisma Confluence – named for the volcano that formed its core – was abyssal in nature, so Barixeor had an enormous number of rare tomes on the Abyssal Plane, abyssal and fire magic, and on the various creatures associated with them.

Unfortunately, part of the reason the Spires had such drool-worthy collections was that they also had floors outside the flow of time used for storage. It was a ridiculously expensive way to preserve supplies, and only possible on a confluence, but as all the Spires sat on confluences and as they were intended to last millennia, you could find timeless storage in all of them. I tried to appreciate that I could handle manuscripts from before the Spire Wars that looked like they'd

been inked yesterday, and not to think about the fact that some of the food I ate might have been eight hundred years old.

It was exactly as unpleasant to be in as it was useful. In the timeless rooms, hearts didn't beat, breathing was unnecessary, and digestion ceased. Entering felt like dying. Leaving also felt like dying, just in a different sort of way.

I'd never met anyone who enjoyed being in timeless rooms, and thankfully the long-ago sorcerers must have felt similarly, because while the majority of the multi-story library was timeless, it also had a lovely, time-containing reading floor full of sunlit window nooks, comfortable couches, and oversized carrels made of slabs of wood or stone. Since I couldn't use a finding spell or topical dowsing to search out useful books, I did things the hard way, making forays into the timeless floors of the library to hunt for books, then taking breaks to let my poor body recalibrate.

After a while, I'd collected a respectable heap of books, ranging from manuscripts ancient enough that they'd been old when they'd been added to the Spire to a work by Kera Ashfall that she'd published only eight months ago. I'd only just sat down to open a slender, handwritten volume titled *Blade Magic* when a knock on the doorframe caught my attention. I looked up to see Bashen ducking down to peer through the door at me, his fur damp and tousled in a way that suggested he'd taken a bath before coming to fetch me.

"Four already?" I asked, glancing out one of the windows. Since it was a rainy day, that gave me exactly zero

information, and when I looked back at the minotaur, he was smiling at me.

“A little after five, actually,” he said with a huff of laughter. “C’mon, magus. Let’s go take care of your familiar, and maybe this time you’ll agree to buy an alarm.”

I made a sound of disgust, noting my place in the book before setting it aside. “Alarms always go off when you least want them to interrupt you. I’d rather read my way through every meal of the day than deal with one of those janglers, and you know how much I like to eat.”

He stood up and strolled back to the transport ring as I trotted over. Luckily for Bashen and other tall people, the vast majority of the ceilings in the Spire were solidly fifteen feet high, even if the doorways were still designed for only moderately-tall people, rather than a minotaur’s eight or nine feet of height.

I called out 52 Sky, which made him start laughing, a rich, almost lowing chuckle. I frowned at him as the doors blurred and re-formed. “What?”

“You put him in the boyfriend suite?” he asked with obvious good humor. “Do you have grand plans for him?”

“It’s not a *boyfriend* suite!” I said, aghast. “What gave you an idea like that?”

His cow’s tail whipped from side-to-side as if he was swatting flies, and he shook his head as he headed for the bedroom door. “Oh, it’s certainly a boyfriend suite, magus.

Magus Embergold kept all of his play-boys here. Or didn't you notice the sex furniture and decorative whips?"

"There isn't sex furniture!" I protested, following him in and scanning the room for suspicious objects. "And there's a big fucking oil painting of people rounding up wild horses, of course there's whips! Or am I to believe that the saddles and shit are *sex* saddles?"

"You ought to take a closer look at some of those decorative-looking end tables and chests, magus," Bashen said cheerfully. "And at least one of the saddles is a sex saddle, judging by the amount of dried semen I cleaned out of the stitching when he died."

"I hate this fucking place more every day," I muttered, glaring at the bridle hanging off of the fingers of a statue of beautiful young man dressed in formal riding gear. Redecorating 52 Sky shot up to the shortlist of things I wanted to change about Barixeor, starting with the gods-damned mice and ending with the obnoxious flame motif in the central rooms that someone must have thought very clever once upon a time.

When I looked over at the oversized bed, the demon was still conked out in the exact position I'd left him in, flat on his back under a sheet and a down comforter. I took a moment to be grateful that he was unconscious for this conversation; I didn't want his first impression of me to be horrified discussion of surprise information about my predecessor's

sexual predilections. I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted that first impression to be, but it sure wasn't that.

As we worked our way through the bandages, Bash didn't give any commentary about the demon himself, for which I was grateful. I hadn't spent a lot of time paying attention to anything outside of the grotesque injuries when I'd summoned him, but with sex on the mind, it was impossible not to notice that he was pretty. Well, gorgeous. He was lithe, like a dancer, but with the sort of muscle that lined up with being a war-mage, and that screamed "virile male." His elegant face looked sculpted, with high cheekbones and a straight nose that had miraculously survived without ever being broken. And he had the sort of hands that looked like they belonged running down someone's body, long-fingered and strong.

Stupid to even think about being attracted to him. Having sex with someone who was literally bonded soul-to-soul with me was way too intimate, in a terrifying way. It already freaked me out to consider the fact that another person had that sort of access to me; the thought of amping up the connection between us made me break out in a cold sweat. He could hurt me so badly, and there would be nothing I could do about it.

Familiars don't like hurting their mages, I told myself, trying to soothe the fears as they churned in my gut. *It would hurt him, too*. It only sort of worked, but it was enough to at least shake myself loose from the anticipatory fear and think more rationally about things.

“I’ll take these to the incinerator,” Bash said in a comforting voice, taking the tray of bloody bandages out of my hands. “You’re looking a bit green, magus, and blood doesn’t bother me. I can do this with Marin tomorrow, if you prefer.”

I bit back the retort and gave him a weak smile, instead. Blood didn’t much bother me, having grown up on a farm with all it entailed, but I didn’t want to give him the real reason for my shakiness. “I need to check his injuries, so it has to be me, but I’ll appreciate your help again tomorrow,” I said, which was true. “Thanks, Bash.”

“You’re a good woman, Rain,” he said in his basso rumble, looking at me from under his untidy bangs. “Don’t fret. These things have a way of working out.”

He didn’t often use my name; hearing it now made me smile. “I appreciate the sentiment,” I replied, looking up into his eyes. “I don’t know what I’d do without the three of you.”

“You’d be fine.” Bashen tossed his horns in minotaur amusement. “You don’t need much management.”

That made me grin. “Oh?”

He flicked one cow-like ear, his expression not quite deadpan as he said, “I never even have to clean bodily fluids off your decor.”

I made an over-dramatic expression of disgust and accompanied him out of the bedroom to the transport ring. “Honestly, that’s the grossest fact you’ve ever told me about

Barixeor. Do you keep a little book of them so you can dole them out whenever I'm a bit too uppity?"

"That would be very wicked of me," he said in a serious voice, stepping into the circle and turning to look at me. "You surely wouldn't think I'd stoop to such a thing. Thirteen Sky."

He blurred and vanished as I laughed out loud, leaning against the doorframe. Gods. I might have gotten stuck with Barixeor Spire as my punishment for my good deeds, and I might have to face being soul-bonded to a demon in a few days, but at least I had excellent company for it all.

I spent the next several days poring through books, freaking myself out when I forgot I couldn't use magic, and staring moodily at the demon lying unconscious in 52 Sky. I even worked my way through most of the twenty-three volume monstrosity of *Fulgrim Firetongue's Bestiary for the Nine Rings of the Abyssal Plane*, a set of stuffy tomes that claimed that it was the "exhaustive guide to the devils, fiends, imps, and other denizens of the Abyssal Plane." I remembered Fulgrim as a rickety old man with a penchant for hitting people with his cane, but he'd been the greatest living source of mortal knowledge on the Abyssal Plane when I'd been a student at the University. The fact that his guide rambled its way into saying that abyssal natures had stronger associations with summonings than appearances comforted me somewhat; I hadn't been as stupid as I'd thought, only ignorant.

Said demon was healing well enough that I couldn't justify keeping him fully sedated any longer, and put off having to

actually meet him for even one more day. I still couldn't seem to manage staying only in my own body with him unconscious, and I wasn't looking forward to sharing emotions as well as senses, but there was nothing for it. I couldn't keep him in a coma for the rest of my life.

Well, I *could*, theoretically, but that seemed unnecessarily cruel and immoral. Even if I'd been so inclined, my staff would have had strong words with me about it, followed shortly thereafter by my friends. I didn't want to see Jace in a righteous fury, so I put away the guilty fantasies and the sedative, took off the hydration line and the diaper, fetched food for myself and for him, and waited to see if he would wake up.

7

RESURRECTION

SAKER

I clawed my way to consciousness like a deer crawling out of a silted lake, from a sleep so deep and clinging that it felt like drowning in mud. The strange reality of dreams slid away, the calm scent of dust and parchment and the feel of movement and the ground under my feet drifting away into blackness. In its place grew a slow awareness of my body. First the pressure on my back, something soft and smelling of clean cotton. Then the location of each of my limbs: my left arm raised and curled above my head, my right arm flat, my wings splayed and relaxed, my legs spread and my tail flopped straight between them. Something soft and heavy draped over my naked body, keeping me warm.

Exhaustion still held me in a stranglehold, too fatigued to so much as curl my fingers. More signals from my body trickled in as I woke. My whole body hurt, every inch of me, as if I'd been beaten with rods and then lashed with whips. Sharper pain registered in stripes across my limbs and gut and in a deep ache in my right chest with every breath. I tasted old

blood; it glued together the corners of my mouth and stuck my teeth together. The reek clotted in my nose, but with each breath I caught other scents over the top of it: crushed herbs, seed-oil over warm wood, wool and lanolin, and the rich warm inviting scent of a woman.

She was there in the room with me. Without opening my eyes, I knew where she was—sitting to the right of me with her face towards me, her legs crossed at the knee. She had long hair down to her hips, its weight a pleasant comfort where it rested along her body.

She was cleaning her nails with a knife.

She knew I was awake.

With a force of will I made one of my eyelids crack open, looking for her. I turned my head towards her and caught sight of her face, meeting those placid slate-gray eyes, and memory crashed into me.

surrounded, bleeding, power failing

jagged teeth closing in on me

a filament of power asking

marry me

the sword driving for my throat

the jaws tearing me backwards

the hot slice of steel

YES

wide eyes meeting mine as I die

and the soul of a woman

pouring out light

I let my eyelid droop closed again, the weight of my decisions settling down on me like drifting ash. Fate had given me a chance at a new life in the form of a beautiful, passionate woman who now sat watching me as if she might dissect me where I lay. For an unsettling flicker I could see through her eyes, looking at my own battered, naked body lying sprawled on the bed.

“Well, familiar,” she said in the common tongue of the Material Plane, her voice as lovely as the sky and as distant as the stars. “Dare I ask how you’re feeling?”

8

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

RAIN

“Nngh,” came the response.

My lips twitched, just a little. His emotional turmoil bled through the soul-bond, enough that I suspected it matched my own. Was it a little too vindictive to enjoy him suffering some tumult, too? Maybe. But it still felt good to have him off-balance, even if not quite as off-balance as I'd been with him in my summoning circle.

“You know, I wanted a cat,” I continued in a more conversational tone of voice. “Nice, handsome tomcat to keep the mice out of the library and ride my shoulder at parties to scandalize the other mages.”

He winced a little, a flickering spasm of one cheek muscle. The fingers on his left hand twitched; his thumb curled in. I could feel the strain of focus even that much movement took, and returned to cleaning my fingernails with my penknife to distract myself from compassion.

“M a cat,” he slurred out. “S’mtimes.” His fingers moved again, spreading a little wider, and his eyebrows pulled together in concentration.

I felt the stitches on his face tug. “Stop that,” I said with exasperation. “I’m still burned out, so I can’t magic your face back together if you rip out your stitches.”

He tensed a little more before his face eased back into relaxation, then opened his right eye again, a hair wider than he’d managed the first time.

“Can’t... move,” the demon said, his voice still slurring despite the obvious effort he was making not to sound like he was sedated and drooling. Which he was, both.

“You dropped into my circle with, let’s see,” I said, holding up a hand and starting to tick off his injuries. “A gut wound that would have had your intestines on the outside if you’d fallen wrong, a four-clawed rake on your thigh that almost severed the muscle in two places, the top of one wing half-bitten off and the other in shreds, a dozen slices taken out of you, a stab wound to the neck that severed your trachea and came within a hair’s-breadth of cutting your arteries, internal bleeding, and, *oh yes*, three mage-killer arrows lodged in your lung.” I stopped, flattening my mouth at him.

He merely watched me with one yellow cat-eye.

“You’re sedated, *obviously*,” I said, my annoyance bleeding through. Or maybe it was fear manifesting as annoyance—it was easier to be angry than frightened. “You’ve been down for

a little more than three days. I wasn't interested in having you fuck up all my hard work."

"Mmn," he said by way of response, that luminous eye closing again. He said another slurred word that took a moment to register, given that it was in Abyssal.

I snorted. *Inati*, hah! The image of myself as maternal as the kitchen-cat was amusing indeed.

"Such endearments, familiar," I cooed back. "I'm sure you'd love for me to hold you down and kiss you better like a momma cat, but I'm afraid you're going to have to suffer through it like a big boy and heal the regular way."

The demon sighed, but I saw the corner of his mouth tilt up. I smiled a little in response. At least he had a sense of humor. That was something.

I finished cleaning my nails and closed the penknife, tucking it back into my pocket and giving it a little pat. "I know you have to be feliform, since you managed to hook onto my summoning," I said, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my thighs and drop my chin on one hand. "Is it just a cat you can shapeshift into, or what?"

His triangular ear jerked like an animal flicking off an annoying fly. It had a notch in the lower edge that looked recently-healed, and not by me. He breathed carefully, and in our bond I could feel focus, as if he was trying to make sure he could move his mouth correctly. I didn't try to rush him. This was my Spire, so it wasn't like he could go anywhere, and he probably wasn't going to be able to do more than twitch and

mumble for another ten minutes at least. I could pretend to patience.

“Five... shapes,” he said after a few minutes, very slowly and carefully, a line forming between his brows as he focused. “Cat. Kro... cu. Tex.”

My brows crawled up. Shapeshifters were common in the Abyssal Plane, given the changeability of abyssal power, with some demons having dozens of forms. But a krocutex was an unusually powerful secondary form, and had to be a reflection of his sorcerous strength. According to Fulgrim, the krocutex was considered a lesser abyssal dragon, a horse-height hyena-like creature with a long tail, dragon wings, and the ability to breathe and walk through fire. That lined up with my sense of his power, at least, and with the obsidian swords. Obsidian had a tight connection to heat and flame.

The demon licked his lips, the skin around his eyes tightening with what looked like disgust. Well, he'd been spitting blood when he appeared, and I hadn't brushed his teeth. It probably tasted awful.

He took a slow breath. “Ech... nu... mon.”

Ah. So his resistance to ingested compounds wasn't only similar to that of echnumon, it was because he *was* an echnumon. That was interesting. Qavan was going to love him.

I let him breath for a while before leaning forward and giving him a gentle flick on an uninjured part of his wing. That yellow eye opened again, looking rather baleful.

“Cat, krocutex, echnumon...?” I prompted.

He licked his lips again, and tried flexing his fingers. This time they moved under his command, and he sighed through his nose.

“Linsang,” he said, though I didn’t recognize that one. “This.” He drew a breath. “I’m incubus. Obviously,” he finished, muttering the last word.

I raised a brow in disbelief. Though I’d never been present for any of the, ah, parties where people summoned cubari, I wasn’t ignorant of the practice, or the allure. Cubari came in a huge range of shapes, colors, and genders, and most were shapeshifters, but the division between incubi and succubi was strict: an incubus had an aura that boosted lust and made them intensely attractive to anyone near them, while a succubus took whatever forms the people around them found most attractive. When people said “*call a succubus for a good night and an incubus for an orgy,*” they weren’t exactly joking.

“Try me again, pretty boy,” I drawled. “Incubi lust is infamous, and I’m hardly lusting, as you’d know if you were really cubari.”

That faint line appeared between his eyebrows again as he focused. “*Yemyikhali,*” he whispered in Abyssal. *Impossible.*

Disbelief and fear trembled through me, sweat breaking out on my upper lip and palms. I leaned up, my breath catching in my throat as my eyes widened, his response telling me that he really hadn’t been lying.

The demon flexed his fingers, then his wings, and under the blankets his tail lifted up a few inches before thudding back onto the bed. It looked and felt instinctive, as if he was trying to scramble for his bearings. His eye flicked back up to me with the light of panic behind his gaze. “Gone?”

“Shh, shh,” I said, my heart hammering in my chest as I tried to keep my breath steady and my emotions separate from his. Not sure what else to do, and remembering that cubari tended to be very tactile creatures, I leaned forward and started stroking the edge of his trembling wing. “You’re going to hurt yourself if you move too much. It’s okay.” I tried to keep my voice low and soothing. “I’ll sedate you again if I have to, but you might bite me for trying, and I’d hate that.”

He barked a soft laugh through his panic, startled into it, and started controlling his breathing again. The tension dropped out of him within a few breaths, draining out of me as he got his emotions contained. I almost whistled appreciation for how quickly he did it, easily the equal in skill as any mage I knew. My estimation of the demon rose a few notches, and it had already been pretty high.

The two of us stayed like that for a few minutes—him breathing with his gaze resting on my face, me stroking the smooth skin over the bone of the outer rib of his wing. Bit by bit, I felt the strength of his will ease, until his body settled of its own accord, his heartbeat keeping the same slow rhythm as mine.

I leaned back again, lacing my fingers behind my head, regarding him. “So,” I said, after another lengthy pause. “You’re an incubus.”

He gave me a slight nod, a trace of anxiety flickering across his face again.

I blew out a breath, thinking hard. “Alright. Well, your aura doesn’t affect you, so since we’re soul-bonded, it might not affect me, either. I don’t know that anyone’s done... this... before.” I unlaced my fingers so I could flap my hand between the two of us. “So it’s all exciting new territory.” Maybe I could write a paper: “*A novel method for immunity to cubari sex-magic.*” One to pitch straight into the garbage, as it would never be repeated. “You’re a mage, yeah?”

The demon nodded again. He looked hesitant, like he might not like my next questions.

Well, I might not like the answers. “What’s your ley impact?”

“Seven-fourteen,” he said, watching me with caution.

I stared at him, feeling as if I’d been disconnected from reality. That was solidly in sorcerer territory—and there were only fifty-three resident sorcerers on the Material Plane. The Abyssal Plane was a much, much larger place, but even there, being a sorcerer was nothing to sniff at. I was almost a hundred times more powerful, but who was counting? Aside from everyone.

“Seven-fourteen,” I repeated, sounding dazed.

His shoulders hunched slightly. “Yes.”

“You’re a sorcerer.” I was struggling to believe it, even though he had no reason to lie. A *sorcerer* as a familiar? It was theoretically possible – a familiar could be up to a hair less powerful than their bonded partner, and my ley impact measured in at nine-oh-four – but the actuality of that felt so impossible that I almost couldn’t imagine it.

“Yes,” he said again, sounding and feeling like he thought this might be a red mark in his ledger.

That didn’t seem good—there was no reason to make him feel like he was intrinsically bad, even if the last thing in the worlds I’d wanted was to have a sorcerer as a familiar. So I took a breath and let it out as an admiring whistle, watching him as the tension in his body drifted away. “Holy fuck,” I said. “You must have been doing one hell of a slaughter before they hit you with those bolts.”

The demon smirked, his lip lifting enough to show the shining white arc of one of his canines. “It took three, didn’t it?”

“Ha!” This time it was my turn to be startled into laughter, and I dropped my face into my hands again, until I stopped. I lowered them and stared at the demon – *my familiar* – with a helpless expression. Familiars didn’t affect one’s ley impact measurably at my level – another reason why most sorcerers didn’t bother – but I’d be willing to bet that he did. “Ishkaia’s tit’s, what the hell am I supposed to do with you?” I asked. It

was more of a general question than one I expected him to answer.

The corner of his mouth tipped up a little more. “You could feed me,” he said.

That wiped the smile off my face. “I’m not going to fuck you,” I warned, my brows pulling together in a sharp motion.

“Wouldn’t if you offered,” he snapped right back, his visible ear pinning back.

I could feel the lie, and snorted at him.

His ear flattened further, and the blankets pulled as his tail lashed. He relaxed again before I could scold him, and sighed. “I can smell the raw meat. You *tilich’i* don’t eat meat raw. So...” He wiggled the fingers on his left hand.

I glanced over at the plate I’d brought up for him—a collection of raw organ sausages, which I’d figured would appeal to a carnivore. Though it bothered me, I decided to ignore the abyssal slur for humans he’d used. We might be soft like grubs compared to the average demon, but there was no need to be rude about it, and if it came down to a fight between the two of us, I’d be the one squishing him like a bug. But he was also injured and in a new, weird place, with his autonomy sacrificed to save his life, so I decided to let him get away with it for the time being.

“Yeah, alright. The sedative should mostly be out of your system by now, so you shouldn’t accidentally bite through your cheek.” I stood and stretched, lacing my fingers together

and pushing them over my head. “I’m going to help you sit up and eat so you don’t tear out any stitches. You’re cut up pretty badly.”

He made a catlike *prrt* sound that I decided to take for agreement, so I swept the blankets off of him, to a yip of protest as the cooler air of the room hit his bare skin. I didn’t bother asking him if he was comfortable with nudity; he was an incubus, after all, and my familiar, to boot. The soul-bond meant that we shared all our senses and could use each other’s at will—all of them, including touch and proprioception. Even thinking about it gave me the flickering sensation of being in two places at once, though I shut out the physical sense of his body almost as soon as it impinged on my awareness.

Even with his sorcerous ranking, I should be strong enough to block him if I wanted with enough focus, and he’d have no such defense against me. “Should” was the operative word there: familiar soul-bonds were incredibly strong, and emotion bled through even when there was a far vaster power differential than between me and the demon. I shoved the concern out of my mind before the panic could grip me by the throat. There was nothing I could do about it. I’d just have to figure it out as I went.

9

LUNCHTIME

RAIN

I moved the plate to the side table and slid onto the bed near his hips, taking care not to jostle him. “Okay. You are still remarkably fucked-up, so we’re going to do this slowly. Got it?”

He huffed out a breath that sounded annoyed, but he nodded.

“Great. Can you roll to your left side? Try not to move that leg, you’ve got drains in it still.”

The demon made a little sound of agreement and slid his right hand up, gasping a little at the pain I could feel radiating from the arrow-tracks in his shoulder. I helped him tuck his left wing, grimacing at the deep ache welling through the soul-bond. The morphine was wearing off, but I didn’t want to dump a whole bunch more into him before he ate if I could help it. With a grunt of effort, the demon pushed off of his right side and rolled onto his left—landing directly on the four lines of stitches across his left thigh.

It sent sharp pain lancing through the both enough, enough to make me gasp in surprise. He let out a groan, a long low moan of sound that probably shouldn't have been sexy, but definitely was. Hearing it shot heat between my legs and brought a flush to my face.

He let out a little *oh* of sound at that, one that absolutely was sexual. You can't hide arousal from an incubus, and they definitely like the taste. He moaned again, this one a small, breathy sound of pleasure, and arched his back, his chin tilting up as he inhaled through his open mouth.

Tissit *fuck*.

“Are you kissing Xair down there?” I snarled, naming the god of war and rough sex, whose wife was the goddess of pleasure and whose consort was the goddess of pain. Despite the spark in my words, I kept my movements gentle as I slid one under his left arm and wrapped my other arm around his hips.

“Is that what you like?” he asked, a low, heated purr in his voice. “Keep touching me like that and you can find out.”

I narrowed my eyes and dug my fingers into one of the bruises on his upper thigh, making him flinch away.

”*Bik gehani!*” he barked. “Woman! What kind of healer are you?”

I helped haul him upright, wrapping my left arm around his lower ribs and letting him fall back against me while he panted, his head on my right shoulder. I was kneeling with him

leaning back between my legs, his wings pressed against my breasts, and, honestly? Not really where I wanted him at the moment. He rolled his head to the side, looking up at me with his unbandaged eye. His breath smelled terrible, and I wrinkled my nose.

He frowned, a pretty expression on his pretty face. “You should be nicer to me.”

“It’s magus, *familiar*,” I said, emphasizing the word. “And, for your edification, I’m barely qualified to be a healer’s assistant. The only reason you’re alive is that I happen to be the sixth most powerful sorcerer in the Material Plane, and I threw raw power at the problem.” Not to mention that I’d spent hundreds of hours playing with alchemical toxins alongside the most accomplished poisoner in a generation. “Thanks a lot for that, by the way. Burnout is just my favorite thing.”

He made a disgruntled sound, then tilted his ears toward me and smirked. “I could make it worth your while, magus,” he said, saying the honorific like it was a sultry endearment. The demon flicked out his forked tongue, curling it up with deliberate motion so that the tips came together in a lascivious promise.

“I’m going to kill you,” I muttered. “Whatever happened to ‘not even if you offered’?”

“I changed my mind,” he said, his tail wrapping around my waist. “You taste deliciou—*shaix!*” he yelped, as I jabbed him

in the bruised muscles under his right wing with my free hand.
“Can you stop that!”

“Stop trying to incubus at me, and I’ll stop tempting you to rip out your stitches,” I said, feeling rather mercenary. “You’re going to have a fucking massive resistance to healing for the next year or two with what I had to lay on you, and you’re the one that’s going to have to wear the scars.”

The demon sighed, but uncurled his tail from around me and relaxed, resting against my body instead of trying to flirt at me.

The two of us sat there for a few minutes while he recovered from the effort of sitting up. I focused on his pain as it settled to keep my mind off of his naked body, paying attention to the soul-bond and getting used to his waking senses.

“I can feel you there,” he murmured, almost without vocalizing, the vibration in his chest felt as if it were my own body. “Under my skin.”

He inhaled, and I felt the spread of his ribs and the smooth motion of a lung that had possessed shredded holes only a few days ago with not a little pride. “Part of the deal,” I replied, my voice as quiet as his as I drew my senses back out of his body. “You hijacked my spell to save your life, but now you’re mine forever.”

“That sounds like something I might say while in someone’s bed,” he said, his amusement plain. “It’s somewhat odd to hear someone else say it to me.” The demon turned his head so his

nose lay against my neck, his heated breath playing along my skin, but he didn't try to start anything with the contact, merely resting there.

“For the record, this isn't my bed,” I said, smiling despite myself. “I live in the Spirekeeper's suite, a bit higher up. This is one of the three guest suites in the private area of Barixeor.” I paused, then sighed, leaning my head back. “Probably you already have navigation access to the Spire, since you're my familiar, but I can key the Spire to your energy signature once I'm done healing, if not.”

“I'm a cat, remember?” He nuzzled a little closer to my neck, in a way that felt like seeking comfort instead of anything sexual. “A Spire is child's play to navigate.”

I glanced down at the top of his head. His braid was more than ruffled, the black hair fuzzing out and glued together in places by what was probably some form of blood or ichor. The demon desperately needed a bath. “If you say so. You ready to sit on your own?”

He made a little sound of assent, and started to tense his core to sit. A line of fire cut across both of our stomachs, and the two of us gasped in unison at the pain. The demon flopped back against me, jaw clenching and brows pulling together with tension, his right hand going to his stomach. Instinct or soul-bond made me press my lips to his forehead, where the faintest sheen of sweat had formed, and the gesture of affectionate comfort relaxed him almost instantly. He made a

low sound in the back of his throat and went lax against me again, his face smoothing.

”*Inati*,” he said again, voice marked with humor and pain.

“Whatever works, familiar,” I said with a smirk. “Barixeor could handle you if you lost it, but I like my stuff, you know? No need for a conflagration.”

“Mhmm,” he replied, drawing out the sound. “I think you like *me*, as well.”

I rolled my eyes, but knew better than to use a direct lie. “I’d like you better if you were catching my mice.”

He purred on his inhale, a deep rumbling sound that was pure feline, and nuzzled against my neck again. “I’ll catch as many mice as you like,” he promised, his lips brushing my neck in a way I focused on ignoring. “I can be a very good kitty.”

I didn’t dignify that with a response. Instead I searched the room, trying to figure out how I was going to get him fed. The carved backboard of the bed would be too painful for him to lean against, even if he hadn’t been mostly made up of bruises. All the pillows were underneath the sailcloth, and it wasn’t like I could summon more for padding.

“New plan,” I said. “We’ll scoot towards the headboard together. I’ll lean on it, you’ll lean on me, and we can feed you that way.”

He nodded, in the process rubbing his nose along my neck.

“Do I seriously smell that good?” I asked, choosing vexation instead of interest.

Along my neck, the demon’s lips curled up into a smile. “Good enough to eat,” he said, his voice low and sultry.

I flattened my lips, preparing to fend off another stab of incubus flirtation.

He only laughed against my skin. “You asked, magus,” returning to a conversational tone, as if he’d been tweaking my tail.

I wasn’t about to open the soul-bond wide enough to find out if he’d meant it or not, and shook my head instead. “Ooookay,” I said, drawing out the word. “Let’s go.”

It wasn’t all that far to the headboard, but the two of us had to move inch by inch, and all the physical contact was making it impossible to keep the demon’s pain separate from the sensations of my own body. By the time we’d made it to the back of the bed, both of us were damp with sweat. My hands and his wings were trembling in little shaky motions. He leaned against my chest, his body heavy and limp, breathing hard, with his eyes closed and his head lolled against my shoulder.

“Morphine,” I said, panting out the word.

The demon made a questioning sound, something halfway to a moan of pain.

“The morphine,” I repeated, pointing to the vials and syringes on the side table. “Can you reach it?”

He turned his head to look, then nodded, leaning to the side with a soft gasping sound of pain to grab the supplies with a fumbling grasp, his reach longer than mine. The demon dropped them into his lap, falling back against me and panting with his mouth open and eye closed, a line between his brows as he fought to control his body.

I shoved back the pain and reached around him to grab the morphine, measuring with sharp, precise motions and using his previous reaction to the medication to dose him. I fed the needle of the syringe into the port for the hydration line that I'd left in his arm for precisely this reason, and pushed the morphine into the line to be caught in his bloodstream. It started working within heartbeats, much to the physical relief of me and my familiar both, and I closed my eyes to focus on how it interacted with his body. The demon stayed still, with calm, focused breaths as the drug quieted the pain and fuzzed out his senses.

With my focus already on him, I reflected on what I was learning about the demon. Despite everything, I did like him. He had a sense of humor and surprising resilience. I imagined that most people, when faced with death, didn't joke and flirt, and I didn't think all the flirting was due to him being an incubus. I almost got the sense that he was being *more* sexual with me than he would have been if I'd been slammed with his incubus lust, which suggested a weird type of restraint for a cubarus. They weren't known for shying away from the use of their natural allure. It didn't even really feel like

compensation; the sense I got through our soul-bond was that he was simply enjoying the non-magical enticement.

The demon shifted into a more comfortable position against me, the tension in his frame draining away as the minutes ticked past. He was almost dozing against me, the full weight of his torso against me, when the morphine had fully taken effect and I set the supplies to the side. He shifted with a soft, sighing breath, his right hand curled around my leg just above the knee. His thumb swept back and forth in a slow cadence, the tip of his blunt claw whispering against the cloth of my pants.

Luckily, the food and water was on the closer side of the table, within my reach, so I reached to the side and grabbed his glass, then snaked my arm around to lift it to his mouth. He must have gotten used to the innate knowledge of where I was and what I was doing, because he shifted to meet me without opening his unbandaged eye, and drank with ease.

He took a few breaks in drinking to rub his black tongue against the corners of his mouth, or simply to rest and breathe, but he finished the glass before sighing and leaning his head back against me. I set it aside and snagged the plate of sausages to start cutting them on his lap, craning my head over his shoulder to see.

The effects of the morphine through the soul-bond took my mind off of all my troubles, pain and otherwise. Mellow warmth spread like fog through the link between the two of us, and even though I knew it was only chemical comfort, it still

felt good to lean a little bit into that. It was something of a reinforcing cycle, though: I'd relax a fraction into the soul-bond, which meant the connection opened wider, which made the naked incubus in my lap melt a little more against me, which made it feel better to relax...

I yanked myself out of it for the second time with a huff when the knife I was holding clattered out of my lax fingers onto the plate. "For fuck's sake," I muttered, pinning the sausages with a fierce frown as I focused on cutting them into bite-sized pieces.

The demon hummed, a low sound that I felt in my chest more than I heard. He shifted and planted a heavy kiss on the base of my neck, just above my collarbone. "You like me," he said, in that peculiar slow tone of voice reserved for the very tired or very drugged.

I tried to ignore him and pay rapt attention to the raw sausage, which was a bitch to cut and was instead getting mangled.

"You *like* me," he said again, emphasizing the word. This time he bit me, hard enough to make me feel it, but not hard enough to hurt.

I inhaled sharply at the contact, my body responding to the inherent promise, and for a moment my legs pressed tight against the sides of his thighs.

He purred, the fucker, and nuzzled my neck. "I can feel you enjoying me, and I won't feel it if you poke my bruises."

“Impossible creature,” I said, putting down the utensils with a clink. “You need to eat, or you’re going to be miserable in the morning.”

“Mmm,” came the reply. “I ammmm eating.” And he bit me again.

I flicked him in the nose. Hard. He jerked his head back and stuck his tongue out at me in childish protest.

“Bad kitty,” I said. “You’re going to split that lip open again, and what will come of your pretty face then?” I stabbed one of the mangled chunks of sausage with the fork and held it up to his face. “You need to eat solid food. The all-energy diet is all the rage until you can’t take a shit for a week.” I wagged it in front of his mouth. “Don’t make me make little zooming sounds like you’re a toddler.”

With a petulant expression, he opened his mouth and took the bite, chewing it with his head resting against my shoulder.

He swallowed and opened his mouth again, and I fed him another piece.

“There’s a good boy,” I said in a sing-song voice.

He made a sound like a laugh, the end of his tail lifting up and flopping back onto the bed. The tip of his tail kept flicking as he ate, though it slowed as his energy flagged, and came to rest halfway through the fourth sausage. I brushed some of his hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear, and except for a tiny flicker of his ear, he didn’t react. His breaths came deep and even, and he lay boneless against me. Fast asleep.

I set the plate back on the bedside table, added the syringe and vial of morphine, and braced my hands on the bed. Getting him back to a lying position proved easier than getting him sitting: I simply pushed against the bed with my hands and slid his hips forward with mine, keeping his legs out by pinning them between mine. No doubt it would have been coupled with salaciousness if he'd been awake, but he was blessedly quiet. Once he was far enough down the bed, I squirmed out from under him, spreading his wings to the side before lowering him the rest of the way down to the bed.

He didn't rouse at all during the process, which spoke to how exhausted his body was. Despite all the magical healing I'd done to him, he didn't seem to be in any trouble from it, much to my relief. He'd woken, and he was healing. Now it would just take time.

I covered him with the sheets and blankets again, moving his hands so they lay on top of the covers next to his body. Brutalized and unconscious, he was still beautiful. It was easy to see the appeal, though not all – or even most – incubi were classically beautiful. It was all about the lust, and their intense focus on giving you as much pleasure as possible. But he was lean and powerful, like a dancer or a gymnast, with long, elegant fingers and high cheekbones. His dark skin was smooth and silken, the platinum freckles and marks across his skin limning the lines of his body and the hard planes of his chest.

It had been too long since I'd had a handsome man drape himself all over me.

I shook my head, pushing aside the attraction. Despite his looks, despite my enjoyment of him, the idea of jumping into bed with him sent terror skittering up my spine. I was *bound* to him, forever, someone who could destroy me with a smile, and there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing at all.

10

FIGURING THINGS OUT

RAIN

I needed to distract myself, and movement would help. I tidied up the room and prepped it for when he next woke up, bringing up the materials for changing his bandages along with his next doses of medication and a bedpan. I didn't look at the demon as I moved, keeping myself focused on the work instead of on the man lying unconscious on the bed. When I finished, I cast my eyes around the room one last time in a scan for stray garbage before quelling the lights and leaving the demon to sleep.

Taking a bath to clean off the sweat and antiseptic smell warred with doing more research; I settled for scrubbing my hands and arms and splashing some water on my face before heading back to the library. Knowledge would give me power over the situation. You can't be surprised by what you already know, and even the worst information is better than the dread of not knowing.

I went to the top level of the library, where the modern Spire records were housed. There were many, many blank books on

the shelves; every Spire held identical, linked copies of the books, which couldn't be taken out of the Spire and which would slyly reshelve themselves if left out for too long. Part of my duties as a Spirekeeper was to record major events and use of the Spire confluence in those pages, which I guiltily put off for now. Instead, I pulled the volumes that were kept maintained with information on known sorcerers and exceptional thaumaturges who didn't quite have the raw power to rank as sorcerers.

One of the many benefits of the Spire records was the ability to move pages around at will. I could add pages wherever they were needed, or move sections of writing to new pages; there was never any need to worry about preserving enough space for ongoing documentation. The sorcerer records made good use of it, so there was no issue with having to keep delving back in time to look for the origin of ancient mages like liches or fae lords. Every known living sorcerer was kept in the sorcerer records; when they died, they were simply moved to the appropriate historical records, instead.

Of course, this worked better for sorcerers on the Material Plane, where the Monitors constantly tracked the movement of magical power. The manifestation or death of a sorcerer was impossible to miss, as their ley impact flared or vanished, but there weren't enough mortal mages to keep track of the magic-users in other planes. Our records of the Abyssal, Ethereal, and Celestial Planes were pretty hit-or-miss. There was no

guarantee I'd be able to find out anything about the sleeping demon, but it was worth a shot.

A prior Spirekeeper had been something of an artificer, with a fondness for building delicate contraptions with complicated enchantments. One of their additions to the Spire had been a device for searching books and scrolls for given keywords, and placing what it found into a blank book. It wasn't perfect, of course, and it couldn't translate between languages, but it was a useful starting point. I clattered down the stairs with my armful of books and plunked them onto the table of the assistant, and spread them out until the covers of each one touched the table.

On the other end of the table was a simple pane of glass and a leather-bound book, with several small switches and a thin jade rod next to them. Beneath the table gleamed complex machinery, none of which I ever intended to interact with. I flicked on the switch to turn on the assistant, and it whirred to life. The glass pane glowed faintly, and, using the jade rod, I wrote "*cat + krocutex + echnumon + linsang + incubus ; 1000*" across the pale panel, leaving dark lines behind. Another switch, and there was a flow of energy across the table and into the books, like a forest of fine roots growing through and across them. Long fingers of visible golden light, delicate enough that I was impressed every time by the enchantments on the machine, snaked their way to the gold wire underneath the wooden veneer and shot along them to sprout into the book. Everything stopped moving after about two minutes, and I flipped the book open.

Ah, rats. Each of the volumes of the books I'd laid on the table was listed, with an \square inscribed below it to indicate that no thousand-word section had contained all five of the words I'd requested. I huffed a sign, turned off the search, flicked the third switch on and then off to clear the writing, and tried again, this time with “*abyssal* + (7.13 | 7.14 | 7.15 | 7.1x) ; 1000” instead. The demon had said his rank was 7.14, but there was enough fuzziness in measuring ley impact that I didn't want to rely on that number, in case he was close enough to get a rounding error.

This time I got luckier. There were sixteen known living abyssal sorcerers that fell within that narrow range; the Abyssal and Celestial Planes were much larger than the Material and Ethereal ones. I flipped past several sorcerers that were definitely not my familiar, and skimmed through the rest. Nothing jumped out at me as obviously being the demon sleeping downstairs, but there were a couple options. The most apparent match seemed to be a warlord called Panthera, who'd carved out a territory and defended it with blade magic and a construct army, but there were a few sketchy profiles on war-mages that might also fit, including one that read only:

Abyssal rank 7.1x, approximately 7.15. Detected the unknown signature during my [Zaishen Coldfire] visit to Lord Haiylon's territory-house on Midsummer 607. When remarked upon, Lord Haiylon stated: “The battle-lines [referring to the ongoing Achaean-Valmari War] are close these

past days. There are always a few low sorcerers sent out to the slaughter; who knows which wretch is there today?" Signature suggestive of carnivorous nature, possibly warm-blooded dracoform. Reminiscent of flame from blackthorn and hawthorn over the embers of ashwood.

I tapped the edge of the table. Mage-senses manifested differently for everyone, and therefore descriptions of mage-signatures were about as helpful as an unlit candle in the night. But Zaishen's visit to the demon lord had only been a few months ago, and it wasn't impossible that he'd detected my demon in the fray. The Achaean-Valmari War was one of several major conflicts raging across the Abyssal Plane, but it was the only one I knew of with constant, ongoing bloodshed. It was likely that I'd yanked my familiar out from that very slaughter. I'd have to find out if I needed to recompense a more powerful sorcerer or elemental power for the loss, or if he'd been on the battlefield for other reasons. The warlord would be simpler.

With a sigh, I shut down the assistant and left the books on a chair to reshelve themselves – another neat trick of the Spire records. While I'd been hopeful that I might find my demon in the records, the fact of the matter was that most of human knowledge of the other Planes was focused on individuals that interacted with the Material Plane in some way. Whoever he was, the sleeping demon beneath my feet had clearly never spent any time in my Plane before, or interacted on any

significant level with human mages. Not every incubus did—not even most. He spoke Common fluently, but knowledge of the four common planar tongues was standard practice for most mages, and didn't really mean much otherwise.

I headed down to 1 Sky for dinner, frustrated and upset. I didn't *need* to know who he was before he told me, but my lack of control over the situation was leaving me feeling skittish and scared, and I didn't like it. I'd have to contact the Monitors soon, too, to give them some reason why there was an abyssal sorcerer living in my Spire. The ley-monitoring arrays would have picked up his presence the moment I'd summoned him, and the Monitors would want to know why. Sorcerer-rank mages from other planes did visit the Material Plane with some frequency, and given my special status as a friend of the Starry Host the Oculus gave me a lot of leeway, but that probably didn't extend to sketchily hosting a sorcerer without telling anyone why.

I scrubbed at my face as I tried to figure out how best to inform the Monitors that, not to worry, the abyssal sorcerer in Barixeor Spire was meant to be there and would be remaining there for the next seventy years or so, no need to send out an investigation team. I didn't exactly want to let them know that he was my familiar until I figured out how to deal with that particular set of fallout. Someone was bound to blow a gasket at my irresponsibility in soul-bonding to a sapient creature when the world relied on my ability to function at top form—the Archmage, probably. I could practically see the apoplexy.

Tissit Kalar. What would they even do about it? Try to force him to swear the material mage-oaths? I was bound with the oaths I'd sworn so that I could train as a mage instead of being squashed like a bug, and I was responsible for the actions of a familiar, so maybe it wouldn't be necessary. The oaths were needful—I knew that more than anyone else. It had been broken mage-oaths that led to the fall of Tarandrus and my brush with the void, and that had only been a thaumaturge.

At my rank, I could wipe out a country or two with little opposition. There were maybe a dozen people on the Material Plane who could challenge me head-to-head, and only six I would really be worried about dueling. And then you had people like Jace, the sort of sorcerer who came along once a millennium, who presented a legitimate extinction threat to humanity. The next twenty highest-ranked sorcerers on the Plane combined were only two-thirds as powerful as she was. She'd manifested at nine years old and been made to swear her oaths within hours. Even an untrained mage of her caliber was a threat that couldn't be ignored.

Someone cleared their throat and I dropped my hands fast enough that my elbows complained from catching the weight. Three pairs of eyes stare at me from the kitchen, and I flashed them a gleaming smile. My staff were used to how fucking weird mages could be in general, and me in particular, but this was a little more off-kilter for me than usual. Marin shook her head and disappeared back into the kitchen, while Bashen leaned his massive head on one hand and the gardener, Safira, struggled not to laugh at me.

“Bad day, magus?” she asked, her lips twitching.

I strolled over to the kitchen table and dropped into my usual seat across from Bashen. I didn't often see the three of them in the same place; Bashen ate at odd intervals and Safira tended to eat outside with Celyn. Lucky, I supposed; I'd have to tell them all to be wary of the incubus upstairs, anyhow.

“Complicated one,” I said with a sigh. “My shiny new familiar is an incubus sorcerer.” I dropped my chin into my palm as Safira laughed, and pointed my finger at her. “Rude girl. I know exactly what you're thinking, and it's not like that.”

“Even though he's in the boyfriend suite, magus?” Marin asked in a diffident tone, setting down a plate in front of me with a steaming wedge of shepherd's pie.

Safira laughed again, and even Bashen coughed to cover up his levity.

I stabbed my fork into the pie. “Why is it that mage's servants never respect them?” I asked the air. “I am a great and terrible sorcerer.”

“We see what you're like when you're not putting your mageliness on,” Bashen said in his deep basso rumble. “Like that time you ran out naked and soapy into a downpour because you'd gotten the timing wrong on that lightning storm you wanted to play with...”

“The thing with the lindworm,” chimed Marin from across the room.

“That besotted archon who kept showing up,” Safira added.

“When you re-numbered every floor because you kept forgetting where your bedroom was.”

“The nokk you didn’t banish for a fortnight—” That one from Bash again.

“Celyn *hated* that,” Safira said.

“All right, all right!” I said, laughing and holding up my hands in surrender. “Imagine what it’s going to be like now with *two* sorcerers in the house.”

Safira shivered dramatically. “Magus, I fear for my life.”

I snorted and stood, picking up my plate. “You’re all impertinent wretches. I’m going to go eat upstairs and leave the plate for you to find as punishment.”

Bashen chuckled, and Safira’s dancing eyes crinkled in the corners.

“Truly, a fate worse than death,” she said solemnly.

I made a rude gesture, earning another laugh, and stalked out of the room with my nose in the air.

I could have stayed. Perhaps I should have. We all shared a comfortable camaraderie out there in the backwoods of beyond, and they were a lot of fun to be around when they were in the mood for companionship. But I wasn’t in the right mindset to keep up the banter, not when my thoughts kept circling between how to deal with the incubus and how to keep the Monitors and the Archmage off my back.

Someone was probably going to want me to write a paper on familiar-summoning. I'd gotten lucky – or something – with my call, but pennies to platinum, someone was going to want to see if summoning by circumstance rather than nature could be used to take advantage of the desperation of powerful creatures.

The thought was depressing. I ate the pie without really tasting it, licked up the crumbs to keep from giving more ammunition to the mice, and poured myself two fingers of resinous gin. For a long while I sat there staring at one of the tapestries on the walls, thinking. I didn't like the idea of mages dangling a chance at survival over dying beings in exchange for servitude. Familiars and their mages were integrally bound together, each an extension of the other through the soul-bond, but it was far from the only sort of summoning or exchange. Some skated closer to enslavement than anyone should have been comfortable with.

Never will I take into unwilling bondage a sapient creature. Never will I, for the purposes of securing an exchange or pact of any kind, use external means to coerce a sapient creature. Two of the many oaths I had sworn. What I had done accidentally hadn't broken either oath – he had come willingly, and I hadn't had anything to do with his near-death – but would searching out creatures on the brink of death count? A question for the philosophers, I supposed, and for any mage cruel and foolhardy enough to try to do so.

I wasn't going to write that paper. The University could go fuck itself.

I left my empty glass on top of the plate and drifted around for a while. The three-story greenhouse, with its exotic trees, shrubs, flowers, and herbs, wasn't the comfort it usually was, nor could I convince myself that I wanted to return to digging through the library. Nobody was in the kitchen when I returned to 1 Sky, nor was the water-horse Celyn on the island or responsive to me skipping stones across his lake. I ate a few snap peas from the garden and went back inside.

For lack of better options, I took a shower, finished up a slender book on demonic warlock bonds, and went to sleep.

11

--

SOLACE

SAKER

The growing insistence of pain dragged me from my muddy dreams into awareness. A whine escaped me on a juddering breath, but she was already there, the warm skin of her bare thigh pressed against my right side and my arm in her lap. She wore only a thin nightshirt, her long hair tumbling down around her in loose waves, brushing against my bare skin in a delicate caress. I almost shivered at that touch in appreciation. Nobody had touched me like that in so long—contact that had nothing to do with hungry desire, only gentle kindness.

The scent of her skin soothed me as well as daylight and wide-open skies ever had, as if her presence promised me freedom from all pain. I knew it was a dangerous lure to follow, baring me to the sort of pain that had always followed intimacy, but I was utterly helpless to resist the touch of her hands and soul. Her cool fingers stroked down my wing before she pulled the needle out of the port in my arm, setting the syringe of painkiller aside and turning back to me.

She stayed as the minutes passed and the morphine spread warm fingers through my body. Her hands stroked me with long slow gentle motions, the way someone might touch an injured child or pet a hurting cat, and I responded to her without even intending to. A purr started in my throat, soft and thrumming, my whole body easing at the feeling of being *touched*, of being *comforted*. I'd once curled up with simple cats for the sake of physical contact, until the mockery of my fellow children had shamed me out of it. I'd forgotten what it was like, and now I craved it with every fiber of my being.

I could feel her preparing to get back up, and without thinking I turned my hand to rest palm-down on her thigh. *Stay*, I said, or thought, unwilling to lose that comfort, when all I had left was the agony of my body and soul.

With a soft sigh, she did, sliding down under the blankets with me and settling against my skin. She curled up with me, her arm across my ribs and her leg hooked over mine, and sleep took me again before I could even think to resist.

12

THE NATURE OF A CAT

RAIN

I 'd been worrying about the wrong thing. I'd spent the afternoon focusing on who he might be, rather than what he was. The demon was a *cat*, a creature whose nature was tightly linked enough to those beasts that a spell meant for one could reach the other. Domestic cats were sociable creatures that groomed and cuddled with each other, living closely together and even sleeping side-by-side.

His other shapes weren't much different. Krocutex, like the spotted hyenas they resembled, lived in extended family groups that slept together, played together, and hunted together. Echnumon slept in heaps in their burrows, cuddled with their family and mates, and every one I'd summoned had been delighted to eat strange new poisons for Qavan in exchange for snuggles, petting, and scratches behind their expressive ears. I didn't know about linsang, but cubari? They weren't only sexual. They were sensuous, tactile creatures, luxuriating in the pleasure and comfort of touch.

He was all of those things, a person whose nature was overwhelmingly tactile and social. No wonder he was comforted by affectionate touch, and no wonder that he so badly wanted me to like and touch him. The demon was the sort of creature who couldn't comfortably survive without companionship and platonic touch, and he was badly hurt. Of course he wanted me here, lying next to him, skin-to-skin.

I lay there in the dark of the night, his warm skin pressed against mine, and listened to his quiet breathing. The demon had fallen asleep almost the moment I'd curled against him, more relaxed than even the morphine could explain. I wasn't egotistical enough to think that his comfort had anything to do with me as a person; any port in a storm.

But he *was* my familiar. The soul-bond didn't change us as people, and it didn't make us friends, but it connected us on a deep level. Our emotions bled into each other like watercolors on the page. If one of us wanted something badly enough – like, say, a kiss on the forehead when in pain – the other one of us would feel that desire, and be moved to respond. If we were in synchrony, we'd be able to step into each other's skins at will and wield each other's powers. I could effectively be in two places at once, an enormous benefit that typically outweighed the cost of picking up a few animal instincts, especially for magic-users too weak to qualify as mages.

If he needed physical contact, I, too, would suffer if he had to go without. The thought made me uncomfortable, a squirrely feeling of unease scrabbling around in my gut. It wasn't like I didn't like touch; I did, very much. But I wasn't

casually tactile. With close friends, family, and lovers, I could be something of a limpet, but I didn't even like shaking hands with strangers.

My demon was both closer than any lover I'd ever had and more distant than many strangers. I didn't even know his name. And yet, here I was, my head resting on the foresail of his wing, my naked thigh slung over his, my fingers brushing down the muscle of his chest.

I still wasn't going to fuck him.

13

KISSY MEW-MEW

RAIN

I woke up again in the night to give him more morphine, around an hour before dawn. Looking down at his relaxed form, I decided to get up instead of going back to sleep and seeing what he did when waking up with me in bed with him. Maybe it would be fine, but maybe he'd try a little more seduction on me while I was wearing only a nightshirt, and I didn't want to deal with it. There were plenty of things I could do with the early morning, anyway. Since I was already awake, I might as well do them.

The morphine worked well as a painkiller for him, but I wasn't keen on dosing him multiple times a night, and there were better medications available for someone with my resources. I was still days away from being willing to test out my magical abilities, but unlike an alchemist like Qavan, I'd trained my power to work on the large scale and was thus garbage at the smallest scales. As a result, any time I needed to compound supplies, including medication, I had to do it by hand anyway. I pulled the necessary alchemical ingredients out

of timeless (ugh) esoteric storage and set about mixing the proper dosage for the demon, one that would work for a full day. It was a pain in the ass to make and more expensive than powdered emerald to buy, but I could always make pleading eyes at Qavan if I needed more, and he'd be happy to make it for me.

When I'd finished up and cleaned up the mess I'd created all over the alchemical lab, the sun had managed to come up, so I meandered downstairs to see what I could find for breakfast. Marin was in the kitchen making baked goods for the week, so I snagged a few hot pastries and tea, then sat and chatted with her for a while as she worked.

Eventually, though, I felt the demon upstairs slowly drifting towards waking, so I had Marin put together a bowl of something a cat might eat for the incubus and prepared to deal with him again. She put together a handsome bowl of sliced raw trout and fresh whole minnows, alongside some rolls of salmon-skin, giving me the meal without any fanfare. She brushed off my praises and shooed me off with the tray, and I went willingly enough, not wanting to impinge too much on her routine.

The demon wasn't awake yet, so I swung by the library to pick up one of the books about sapient familiars I'd been intending to read. I'd found the biography of Wexford Quickgate the day before, and it seemed like it might be a more pleasurable read than a dry discussion of the topic. He'd lived almost five hundred years ago, an 8th-rank human

sorcerer who had familiar-bonded with his warlock, one of the rare pixies to gain sapience.

It did turn out to be enjoyable, an active story written in Ethereal by an elven scholar Wexford had been close friends with. Unlike me and the sleeping demon, Wexford and Glitter had spent a long time developing their relationship, with Glitter hungry for access to greater power and Wexford fascinated by the nature of pixies and their lack of a wellspring. When Wexford had performed the familiar-calling, it had only been Glitter he'd been asking.

According to the author, the duo had worked in tandem with shocking ease, often without speaking to each other or even being on the same plane. The book spoke of instances when Wexford and Glitter conducted complex rituals in perfect synchrony from across vast distances, completing feats generally thought impossible at the time. Glitter's innate ability to attract power meant that they could open a path between the two of them with astonishing speed, earning Wexford his new epithet.

I was poring over a diagram of a gating spell the pair had invented, my nose just about touching the paper, when the end of the demon's tail thwacked down in front of me, hard enough that the hair stung my face. I all but levitated from the chair with a shriek of "*Tissit Kalar!*", dropping the book and reaching for power I couldn't access in an automatic defensive reflex.

“Motherfucker!” I snapped, glaring at my familiar, who was shaking with the force of trying not to laugh. I planted my hands on my hips and scowled at him, my body shivering from the adrenaline of the surprise and my inability to channel power. “Ishkaia’s tits, do you *want* to get turned into a greasy smear?!”

His tail lashed in his levity, straight-up yanking the sheets onto the ground. He was all but fucking *crying* with laughter, one hand over his arrow-wounds and the other on his gut, shaking with silent laughter. And, damn it all, his mirth was leaking across the soul-bond, until my lips were twitching up against my control, filling me with a light, bubbly feeling.

“*Amalikti isa ch’iriak’okhi! Ledaji*, you should have seen your *face*,” he managed to gasp out.

I growled at him and picked up my book, finding and marking the page I was at with a ribbon and setting it on the table. “You might have said my *name*,” I said, trying to sound exasperated despite his mood washing away my adrenaline shock.

“I did!” he protested. “I begged for the smallest drop of attention. ‘Sweet Rain, fall on me’—not as much as a twitch!”

I opened my mouth to respond.

Paused.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

“I never told you my name,” I said, as I realized it.

He dropped the silliness, looking at me with a steady yellow gaze. I held his stare, unblinking, and he looked away.

“You didn’t have to,” he said, directing his comment towards the ceiling. “This is Barixeor Spire, and I can feel your power. It’s like standing next to a forest fire.” The demon’s tail flicked. “You’re Rain Leyweaver. You bound the Fallen Star when you were only fourteen. You forged a path to slain Tarandrus and anchored it back among the constellations. You tracked the ancient echoes of the Eye of Souls and returned it to the Vicereign of the Iron City when it had been lost for a millennium.” He looked back at me with a wry smile. “Everyone knows who you are, magus.”

“Oh.” The sound was soft, involuntary.

I’d done things, sure. The incident with the aberration known as the Fallen Star had been what manifested my power as a sorcerer, when I reached outside the Barrens to call down starlight to bind the thing that had been eating unmanifested mage-children for centuries, and that had come for me. I’d been holding it, impaled on spears of light, blood running down my face, when my first teacher stepped out of the shadows and gave me the words to bind it for a hundred thousand years.

I had the token of favor from the Vicereign for the return of the stolen treasure of the Iron City, and a standing invitation to emigrate to the Abyssal Plane, to live my life as I liked.

I had the friendship of the stars for my part in saving the constellation Tarandrus from dissolution in the void, a

friendship that allowed me to stand between my world and the aftermath of that conflict.

But there was a difference between doing things – even spectacular things – and being known for them by someone like the demon I’d summoned, who had never before interacted with the Material Plane. In my heart, I still felt like the girl standing in that blood-soaked field as I held on for just one more minute, with no idea what I was doing or how I could keep on doing it.

I rubbed at my face and sat back down in the chair. I still compared myself to all those who were greater than me— famous figures in history, my teachers, people like Jace. No matter how often I remembered that I was one of the best sorcerers in the Material Plane, or gloated about my skill or strength or even the things I’d done, I didn’t feel like the sort of person other people would know about.

“I guess you’ve got me at a disadvantage, then,” I said, then blew out a long sigh, looking back up at him with my fingers on my temples. “Unless you happen to be Panthera?”

The demon snorted, his tail flicking once with disdain. “That *mabet’i* would rather die than throw himself on someone’s mercy,” he said, using an abyssal slur that roughly translated to “*oozing pustule.*”

“Worth a try, I guess.” I shrugged and laced my fingers behind my head, as if it was no matter. “You gonna tell me your name?”

He smirked, a lazy expression, and flicked one ear at me. “Why would I do something like that, Leyweaver?” he asked in a slow drawl. “Names have power.”

I yawned, covering my mouth with the back of one hand, leaning into my lack of sleep to really sell the lack of caring. “Just thought you might want a say in what goes in the record-books,” I said cheerfully, then tapped my lips with one finger, putting on a thoughtful expression. “But since I get to name you... hmm.” I paused for dramatic effect before looking back over with my best innocent eyes. “Kitty-boo? Bluebell? Floofums?”

With each name, a growing expression of horror spread across my familiar’s face.

I pretended not to notice. I could do this all day. “Snoogy-woogy? No, hm... oh! Kissy Mew-Mew!”

”*Teve*, magus, have mercy!” he said, as I opened my mouth for another terrible name. “Saker! Call me Saker!”

I lifted my eyebrows at him in a pert expression. “I thought names had power, kitty-cat.”

He made a face. “‘Saker’ is only part of my name.”

“Sure you don’t prefer Kissy Mew-Mew?” I asked with my best beatific smile.

He wrinkled his nose at me and muttered something in Abyssal that I didn’t manage to catch, the tip of his tail twitching. I grinned and got back up, collecting his medication for the day, including the fancy new painkiller. The morphine

was well on its way to being completely worn off; the only reason the pain wasn't unbearable was that he'd been lying still since the previous afternoon.

"Alright, pretty boy," I said. "Medication time."

The demon made another face, but gave me his arm so I could feed the medication into his bloodstream.

I petted his hair while he rested, perching on the bed next to him as we waited for the painkillers to take effect. It was almost comical how relaxed he became while being touched, his whole body going boneless except for the push and tilt of his head as he got my hands into the best position and pressure. All good things must come to an end, however, and as his pain diminished, other demanding bodily functions came to the fore.

He turned his head so his face was against my hand. "I have to void," Saker said, the words muffled by my fingers.

I scratched him under the chin before moving my hand to rest on the top of his head. "I have a bedpan for you, but if you prefer you should be able to walk if you lean on me. It might be good for your body to move. Pain or indignity, pick your poison."

"Pain," he said, almost before I finished the sentence.

I laughed at that immediate decision, my eyebrows going up.

Saker looked up at me with a weary expression. "I'd rather your memories of me not include cleaning me like an infant.

Pain is preferable.”

Too late for that by far, but I decided not to rub salt in the wound, so to speak. I understood pride; if our positions were reversed, I wouldn't want to be conscious while he watched me piss or wiped my ass.

“Fair enough,” I said instead. “Let's not have a repeat of last night, though, yeah? We'll go slow, I'll sit you up, and let's keep your weight off of your left side.”

He nodded and pushed himself up a little ways off the bed, bracing with his elbows. I'd done well with the painkiller, by the faintness of the pain leaking through the soul-bond—more ache than agony, even when he moved. I helped him tuck his wings, then slid further onto the bed behind him to lever him upright. It was rather more awkward than it would have been with a human; his wings went from the top of his shoulder blades to past the bottom of his ribs, so I had to bodily wedge myself behind him and sit us both up.

Saker started purring as soon as he was wedged between my thighs, no doubt to annoy me. I had the fickle urge to bite him on the neck, turnabout being fair play and all that, and squelched the urge before acting on it—but not before my familiar caught a glimmer of it and tilted his head back and to the side, baring the long column of his throat for me. My mouth and nose were right about on level with the muscle at the base of his neck, where little fine wispy curls of black hair escaped his mussed braid. Apparently the lust aura wasn't enough, either; the incubus had quite enough masculine

pheromones to get the job done. Even with the tang of old blood and the sharp scent of antiseptic on his skin, he smelled deliciously of woodsmoke and musk.

“Ridiculous,” I muttered, bracing him upright with one hand as I slid out from behind him.

He laughed at that, a low sound of amusement that cut off his purr. I wrapped my arm around his waist and helped him slide to the edge of the bed, then helped him lower each of his legs, feeling through the soul-bond for any problems. There was a little bit of pull in the stitches on his left thigh, but not enough to worry me over-much, so after sitting long enough for his body to recalibrate to being upright, I helped Saker slide off of the bed. He winced a little as he put weight on his legs, and the sympathetic ache of sore muscles spread through my body.

“Okay,” Saker said, taking a shallow breath. “Okay.” He slung his left arm over my shoulders and settled his weight down onto me. Like Qavan, he was lighter than he looked; he had hollow bones and large, four-chambered lungs, like a bird.

“Ready?” I asked.

He jerked his chin down in a nod, shifting his weight to take it off his left leg. Pain was seeping through the alchemical numbness of the painkiller, so we didn’t waste any more time in getting moving. It was a bit of a challenge, though. I would take a step with him leaning on me, he’d touch his two-toed foot to the ground and hop his right leg forward, then pick his

left foot up again with a wince. Then we did it again. And again.

Both of us were breathing a little hard when I finally lowered him onto the seat of the privy. He leaned back and closed his unbandaged eye, simply breathing while I grabbed a box of disinfecting wipes. I left him to it, closing the privy door behind me, then cracked my neck and tackled the bedding.

The sheets were pretty gross, despite my best efforts, so I balled them up and chucked them into the central room to get taken to the laundry. I similarly hauled the sailcloth off the bed, rolling it up and dragging it to be cleaned and stored again. The heavy down comforter stayed; I suspected that the demon would be more comfortable with the blankets until he got used to the cooler ambient temperatures of the Material Plane. I even had time enough to fold the actual sheets of the bed back and grab a sacrificial pillow before Saker called my name.

14

HYPERFOCUS IS A BITCH

RAIN

“Coming!” I called back, tucking the pillow under my arm and grabbing the bowl of fish Marin had sent up with me before heading back into the bathing-room. I chucked the pillow into the massive stone tub that dominated the room and set the bowl on the rim, then went to the privy and opened the door. “Up for a sponge bath?” I asked. “You can’t shower or soak until the stitches and drains are out, but you could use—”

“*Amalikti*, yes! Yes, please,” Saker interrupted, waving me over with both hands.

I laughed and went, hauling him up and helping him limp over to the tub. “There’s a cantrip on it to get in without climbing. The full spell-trigger is ‘*Yeles Kamen-majstor, komanda Taihr, vo laden bazalt, da se dozvoli premin*’, and the cantrip is ‘*Zalpremin*’ with material fey. Mind doing the honors?”

His tail flicked twice before he reached out and laid two fingers of his right hand on the hip-high basalt. “*Zalpremin*,”

he said, in clear perfect pronunciation, using a whisper of the ambient fey energy off of the stone itself.

A section of the basalt wall vanished, and we stepped through. I helped lower him to the pillow, and he flicked his fingers at the hole in the tub with a clipped “*zavrsi*.” The cantrip finished, replacing the stone in the wall.

“Nice,” I said. “Jazik isn’t a common spell-tongue.”

Saker shrugged his wings as I vaulted out of the tub to grab basins, sponges, and towels. “Simple luck,” he said. “I acquired a material grimoire a while ago that was two-thirds Jazik incantations. It had a few useful tracking and hunting spells, and one excellent vampiric drain for a whip that I use often.”

I made a sound of interest, but the demon didn’t elaborate further, so I didn’t press. I shrugged and stripped down to my breeks and breastband, earning a purring sound of appreciation from Saker. “I can leave you there to die,” I threatened, pinning him with a glare.

He smirked at me, knowing full well I would do no such thing. “You’re too sweet for such cruelty,” he said with a croon.

I wrinkled my nose at him before clambering back into the tub. “It’s got nothing to do with sweetness,” I sighed back. “I just don’t want to have to deal with how flat my butt will feel if I leave you sitting on stone all day.”

“My butt is far too shapely to be flattened in such a way,” Saker said agreeably, as I set up for giving him a sponge bath. “It would be a terrible shame.”

Hands on my hips, I glared down at him, trying – and failing – not to be amused. “Any chance you’ll behave?”

He snaked out his long tongue in a lascivious motion, then gave me a pretty smile. “None at all, magus.”

“Of course not,” I muttered, getting onto my knees to wet the sponge in the soapy water. I scooted over to Saker, dragging the two basins with me, then pointed at his right leg. “Foot.”

Obligingly, he lifted his leg and rested it on my lap, and I started washing him. Like his other shapes, his demonic form was a toe-walker, with two powerful toes equipped with partially-retractable claws. I smirked at the discovery that he had dark pads on the bottom of his feet like a cat, and he unsheathed his gleaming black claws as I washed dried mud out from between his toes.

“Not a fan of shoes?” I asked. He’d only been wearing leather armor on the tops of his feet when I’d summoned him.

My familiar made a sound of disgust. “Shoes are loud.”

“Spoken like a true cat,” I said with a laugh, glancing up at him. Saker was smiling at me, the corners of his mouth slanting upwards and the corner of his visible eye crinkling. The expression warmed me, with a feeling like soft affection suffusing my body, and I resolved to set up the bandaging over

his face wound so that he could see out of both eyes. He had beautiful eyes, golden and slit-pupiled, with a captivating gaze.

Mentally, I shook off the desire to stare into those eyes forever, and turned back to the task of washing him. I didn't move the bandages, washing around them and trying not to get the edges more than damp, keeping my mind focused on the narrow slice of what I was doing to keep from thinking about how Saker was naked, how I had my hands on his bare legs, or how much I was simply *enjoying* him. The combination was risky, and paying attention to soot and various other dirt felt a lot safer than admiring the strength of his legs or the heated smooth skin of his thighs.

His dark skin hid a lot of grime, so I did a lot of it by feel, washing and rinsing before running my fingers along the clean(er) patch of skin to feel for any sticky spots. To my surprise, the demon stayed silent throughout, only his tail making sound when it shushed across the smooth stone as he flicked it.

I was finishing his second leg, sliding my hand up his inner thigh up to the velvet edge of the dark fur on his groin to double-check I'd gotten everything, when Saker made a whimpering sound and grabbed me by the wrist, stopping my motion. I looked up in surprise and caught sight of his parted lips and pleading golden eye, and all the information from the soul-bond that I'd been conveniently ignoring slammed into me like a tidal wave.

Arousal burned through me, heat and tension pooling in my groin and singing along my nerves. I could feel my hand on his thigh, the touch of our skin electrifying. Saker panted, the tips of his teeth visible as he met my eyes. His heartbeat thudded inside my chest, and without thinking I ran my eyes down his naked body. I could see his pulse under his skin, desire making his nipples harden and his abs tense, his right hand cupping his groin. I could feel the hard heat of his erection against his palm like it was mine—and his hand as if it were pressed between my legs instead of his.

I scrambled backwards, standing up and staggering away from him, my pulse throbbing and heat blazing down my body. He tilted his face up to follow me, ears pulled down and neck bared.

“Rain,” he said, his voice hoarse. Saker licked his lips. “Can I—please?”

Fuck fuck Tissit fuck—

“You—you can do whatever you want with yourself,” I said. My voice cracked. I backed up until I hit the wall.

Saker moaned and closed his glowing eye. He ran his fingers up through the fur between his legs and pressed down with two along his shaft, and I felt him slide them into his sheath with the same intimacy as if he’d slid them into me. My body clenched around the phantom sensation and I whimpered, drawing a desperate, pleading look from Saker.

Tissit *FUCK*.

I fled. It didn't really matter; soul-bonds weren't affected by distance, only focus and mental blocks, and physical contact with Saker obviously eroded any mental barriers I'd managed to put into place.

I went down to the forges on 25 Deep to try to yank my focus away from my familiar's body as he pleased himself, and I didn't so much as pick up a hammer. Clad as I was in nothing but breeks and a breastband, it was unclear what I even thought I was going to do there. I ended up holding myself up on an anvil, my fingers between my legs as sensation thrilled through me.

I could feel my claws digging into my thigh and lust coating my tongue like honey. My hand was wrapped around my hard length, slick and blazing with heat, every stroke sending silvery pleasure shocking through me, holy fuck, holy fuck, holy *fuck*—

It was like getting hit by lightning.

My spine bowed forwards in an arc, my fingers clawing at the anvil and spasming against my thigh. I pressed down against my sensitive nerves and gripped my shaft as white pleasure blazed through me like battlefire, giving voice to wordless ecstasy and gasping *amalikti, Rain—!* I shuddered from the rapture of it, my body gripping as tightly against itself as if the burning shaft pressing against my palm had been deep inside me.

I came down from my orgasm – *our* orgasm – clinging to the anvil, my face pressed against the cold steel, gasping. I

could hear my blood roaring in my ears. I slithered to the ground and lay there on my back, staring up at the ceiling, trying to get my breathing under control and to slam up as many barriers between me and the incubus as I could. When we were two separate people again, and all I could feel was where he was and how he was moving instead of being as much in his skin as mine, I took a shuddering breath and blew it out my nose.

Sweet Helena. If it was going to be like that every time, I wasn't going to get anything else *done*.

So. Perhaps it hadn't been a great idea to bathe a naked incubus. Or to... caress him. My mind oh-so-helpfully replayed how the heated skin of his powerful upper thigh had felt under my hand, and the brush of his dense black fur as the tips of my body reached the join of his body. This time I re-experienced how it had been for *him*—I'd felt that, too, after all, though it had gone unnoticed in my focus. Exciting and electrifying and so close to what begged for touch as to be torture—

I swallowed and gave a tiny shake of my head, pulling myself instead into meditation. I twined my fingers together and placed my forefingers and thumbs into the triangle of a meditative stifle and let the comfortable routine pull together what little remained of my sanity.

It didn't take long to slip from arousal back into calm, but I stayed in that mode for several minutes to ensure that I could maintain it. With preparation, I could function under any

physical or emotional circumstances. I had completed complex and exacting rituals while in white-hot agony, while numbed and drowning, and while pleasure wracked my body. But preparation was the key; I was still human, and my body was very much a part of me. I couldn't maintain such a state forever, even if I wanted to. Saker and I were just going to have to figure out how to balance ourselves.

I took one more deep breath, then hauled myself up off the floor to head back up to Saker, blessing the creators of the Spire for their obsession with cleanliness, which meant that I wasn't covered head-to-toe in soot. I paused on the transport ring for 52 Sky to check on my control and listen in on the soul-bond, feeling Saker as a subdued roil of emotion, like a faraway storm cloud. That made me close my eyes, my brows pulling together; I didn't like feeling his distress any more than I liked feeling my own. But I couldn't hide from him, and I wasn't going to leave him to die in the bathtub, so I might as well go talk to him.

When I walked into the bathing-room, I found Saker sitting folded up, his wings loose and his arms wrapped around his legs, with his face resting on his knees. I perched on the edge of the tub looking down at him, watching the tip of his tail flick side to side in catlike unhappiness. He didn't react to my presence at all, staying in that curled-up position in silence.

“You okay?” I asked at last.

“I'm not used to being the only one,” he mumbled, muffled enough that it took me a few seconds to sort out what he was

saying.

“The only one what? Oh,” I said, getting it as soon as I asked.

His ear flickered. While he probably didn't have a lust aura in his animal shapes, Saker was surely used to having all eyes on him when he was standing on two legs. He was a fucking incubus, and while there were people who didn't experience sexual attraction, they were probably not the types to seek out the company of cubari. This might have been the first time in Saker's life where he'd been turned on and teased – even accidentally – by someone who was wholly un-lustful.

Well, at the time, at least. There'd been a lot of lust, erm, afterwards.

I pursed my lips and cast about for some form of distraction. I spotted a crumpled hand towel tossed to the side—nope, we were not going to dwell on that. Ah! The bowl of food! I leaned over, grabbed it, and swung my legs into the tub. Saker tucked himself a little tighter into himself, not looking up.

“*Ledaji*,” I said, keeping my voice as gentle as if I was trying to coax a whipped animal out of hiding. I used the same endearment that had slipped off his tongue earlier this morning, an Abyssal word akin to “darling” or “sweetheart.” “Eat something. Let me finish getting you clean. If you're up to it, we can even wash out your hair, and I'll brush it out for you. You'll feel better for it, I promise.”

He sighed, then relaxed and turned his face towards me, resting his chin on his knee. After a moment, he held out his

hand for the bowl, taking it when I held it out to him. “I don’t know how to do this,” he admitted quietly. “I... I can be your cat once I’m healed. But right now...” His voice trailed off, and his wings and shoulders slumped. “I feel as if I should apologize, but I’m not sorry for accepting your summons.”

I looked at him, my brows drawing together in concern. “You don’t need to pretend to be a mortal cat, Saker, and you don’t need to apologize. I don’t regret saving your life, and if I’d wanted an animal familiar that badly, I should have done a better job hedging my request. Okay?”

Saker hesitated, then nodded, not quite meeting my eyes.

I got down to the ground next to him and ran my fingers down along his wing, drawing a startled look from the incubus. I offered him a smile, trying to lean into compassion. “This is one for the history books, right? Nobody’s done this before, so let’s, I dunno, try to show each other a little grace.” After a moment, I added, “Besides, everyone’s got to eat, and that includes incubi. It’s not a bad thing.”

His mouth twitched back into something that didn’t quite qualify as a smile. “I should have... asked.”

“You did,” I said, still stroking his wing. “Really, it’s okay. I’m not upset at you. We’re figuring this thing out as we go.”

He nodded again, then started eating his fish meal, and I let the topic go, turning instead to getting the rest of him clean.

15

CONTEMPLATION

RAIN

The water was still warm enough to use, and we made it through the rest of the bath without further incident. I even did his wings, having him stretch each one out so I could wash the blood off of his membranes. They were beautiful, midnight spangled with platinum, like broad sweeps of the night sky. The burnout felt worth it, looking at those perfect, uninjured wings. I'd made the right decision.

Saker started drooping before I made it through washing his wings, so I declared that we'd wash his hair later and helped him back to bed. We settled him facedown, using pillows to keep the weight off his stitches, and I worked on his hair. While he drowsed, exhausted, I unbraided the long length of his black hair and carefully undid the tangles, until I could run my fingers through his smooth dark hair without them catching.

At last I finished and quietly ran my fingers through his hair as he slept, enjoying the feel of it, long and silky. His wing

rested warm across my lap, and when I tired of touching his hair I ran the backs of my fingers down the ribs of his wings.

Saker was truly beautiful, all long lines and supple strength, and exhaustion and injury did nothing to steal it from him. I'd always had broad appetites when it came to men; Qavan was an excellent example, being a quarter swamp-dragon, but I'd had trysts with a star-beast with a face like a wolf and an archon with wings of sunlight, in addition to a few naga and an elven falcon-knight. Humans, too, of course, but wings and tails had always been something of a perk, and Saker was no exception.

I exhaled in a sigh and let the thoughts go before I could follow them any further. I didn't think Saker would be up for handling my complex emotions about him, whether awake or dreaming. Hell, I wasn't sure *I* would be up for handling any contemplation of those emotions. All of them tangled together, fear and enjoyment and yearning bound together with the twin pains of betrayal and loss.

I slid out from under his wing, unwilling to stay and torment myself. He shifted, making a little noise of protest in his sleep, but the demon didn't fully wake, drifting back into sleep as I turned out the lamps, leaving only the sunlight coming in through the windows. I cleaned up after us and got dressed again before heading for the outdoors, needing to get out of the damn Spire and everything it represented.

On my way out, I dumped the dishes in the sink for Marin, who was blessedly absent, then went straight outside, striding

past the gardens and down a little trail that led to a sheltered lakeside beach. A weeping cherry grew there, planted by some long-ago Spirekeeper's gardener, the branches hanging down low enough that the waves of the lake wet their tips. I dropped down onto the bench beneath it, staring out through the branches of the tree at the sunlight playing on the clear water.

For a long while, I simply sat there, watching the water lap at the shoreline and the long branches of the cherry tree shush against each other in the light morning breeze. My eyes unfocused as I turned my attention inwards, tracing the shape of the soul-bond within me. There was no separating the two of us, ever; changes to the soul were irreversible. Severing the bond would be as devastating as bisecting our bodies with a sword. All that could be done now was to turn one's attention away – through focus, as I'd done when washing Saker, or through meditation, as I'd done afterwards – or to try to dam the flow between us.

But time would erode those barriers, as would close interaction. It would happen faster because Saker was sapient, and because his wellspring was so powerful. The power differential between us was large when it came to spellcasting, but not when it came to familiars. Even a hedgewitch would have more magical space between herself and a cat than I did between myself and the incubus.

I did it anyway, crafting careful mental blocks between us, like trying to dam a river with sticks. I could feel the pressure of the bond wearing away at them before I'd even completed the process, making frustration prick at the corners of my eyes.

I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't prepared for this. This was – *he* was – too much. I dropped my face into my hands and let the tears come, hot and stinging. I wept silently, as I'd done as a child in the hermitage after my manifestation, tears dripping off of my chin as my chest clenched and my throat ached with unvoiced sobs. I didn't want this. I'd *never* wanted this. It was one thing to share space in my body and soul with a cat, a creature with simple emotions and a quiet mind. But this?

Thousands of feet above me, an incubus slept, injured and exhausted. He was beautiful, playful, and intelligent, the kind of man I always enjoyed—someone who could be a companion to me, if I could find a way to allow him into my heart. He couldn't hide his emotions to save his life, not with that tail giving everything away. I didn't even need the soulbond to tell me his moods, but I could feel the longings of his heart like they were my own.

Saker wanted to drown in me—in my touch, my scent, my taste. He wanted to press his face against my neck and his tongue against my skin, and to bury himself inside of me, forgetting the world and everything in it. If I wanted to, I could go upstairs and slip into bed with him, resting with my bare body against his heat. I could run my hands down that silken skin, slide my fingers into the slit of his sheath and wake him with my mouth and tongue, and he would be only too happy to oblige.

He was hurting and scared, and he was an incubus. Touch and sex were the only comfort he had, and I was the one person in the world he had to turn to.

Damn it all to the Crucible of hell. I blew out a heavy breath and sniffled, wiping off my face with my shirt and leaning back against the bench.

As little as I was ready for this, Saker had to be even less so. I'd called, after all—I'd been asking the universe for someone to complete my soul. He'd only answered, and the combination of our two sets of displacement was surely contributing to my emotional instability. Saker had dodged a gruesome fate only by luck and happenstance, in a decision he'd had to make in a heartbeat, while dying in agony. The process of dragging him back from the brink of death had been almost as brutal as putting him there, and I was sure he remembered some of the pain I'd heaped on him.

I was fucking lucky that he was responding with a desire for affection rather than bitterness and hatred for the position I'd put him in. I could have gotten anyone, but I'd gotten someone with a sense of humor and a willingness to be whatever it was I demanded in return for his life. He'd started calling me "magus" as soon as I'd enforced his position as my familiar, and he'd offered to live as a mere cat, if that's what I wanted.

Gods. I'd been kind of an ass to him thus far, hadn't I?

It felt as if someone was watching me, and I glanced sidelong to take a look at the water. The water-horse of the lake was more curious about humans than many of his kind, and had willingly bargained with humans in a non-malevolent fashion for thousands of years. Safira had gone from his friend to his consort in the first year I'd lived at the Spire, and she

spoiled him; I knew she snuck him my fancy apples from storage, and probably some of the best cider in the cellars.

I didn't really mind. Having the water-horse as a friendly neighbor sure beat being trapped on an island by one, and if Safira liked thinking she was pulling one over on me for the sake of her elemental beau, I didn't mind. I was more than happy to supply him with snacks.

"Hi, Celyn," I said, suspecting he was lurking along the shoreline.

He solidified and pushed himself out of the water in his humanoid form, resting on his elbows with the branches of the cherry tree draped across his mid-back. Dark gray-black hair dripped water, and the corners of his blue slot-pupiled eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Hi, Rain," he replied, the informal greeting sounding odd coming from his lips. "Are you watering the garden?"

I sniffed, the sound wet, and gave him a wry smile in return. "Ever heard of privacy?"

His horse's tail switched through the water, the long strands floating along the surface. He was a real beauty as a horse, an elegant mouse dun stallion with black-barred legs and a sooty stripe down his back, and not half-bad as a human, either. Even if he and Safira hadn't been madly in love, though, the dangers of riding a water-horse and the weirdness of elemental creatures were a bit much for me to contemplate any sort of amorous pursuit. I merely appreciated his physical form, and stayed out of his way as much as possible.

“You are the one raining tears on my shore,” he pointed out.
“Do you desire to speak of it?”

My mouth slanted up, one brow raising. Celyn and I weren't any sort of friends—but his consort and I were. “Safira sent you, then.”

He laughed, a bright peal of sound. “I think I should say that I do not recall,” the water-horse replied. “But you are surely a thundercloud, and interfering servants always wish for their masters to be a sunny day.”

I slung my arms over the back of the bench and tilted my head back with a sigh. “I don't know if she told you, but I did a familiar-calling for a cat, and got an abyssal one,” I said, looking up at the weeping cherry's canopy. “It's rather more complicated than I'd hoped for.”

“Ah,” Celyn said. He fell silent for a moment, then added, “This abyssal cat... it is the great power that entered the tower some days ago?”

I nodded, looking back down at him.

His tail swished again. “Rare as it is for such a power to bind itself so, I am surprised to see the chosen sorcerer mourning the event.”

“I wanted a cat.” Ishkaia's tits, I sounded whiny, even to myself.

Celyn narrowed his eyes. “You have a cat,” he said, his voice bland. “If you merely desire to feel sorry for yourself

over your uncommonly good luck in your draw of cats, I have apples and honey to claim.”

“Bribed, eh?” I asked. “You know she steals those from me.”

The water-horse only stared at me with a flat expression.

I sighed, looking away. “No, you’re right. He isn’t what I was asking for, but he’s...” I paused, trying to think of how to describe what it could be like to be soul-bonded to another sorcerer, once we stabilized and figured out how to deal with the link between us. The things we could do together. “He’s incredible,” I said at last. “It’s just a lot.”

“When two great waves crash against each other, they are both thrown skyward in spume and spray,” he said, his voice soft enough to almost be kind. “And the aftermath of their collision rewrites the patterns of the water for years to come.” Celyn swished his tail again, then pushed himself away from the shore, past the curtain of leaves. With one hand, he pulled the branches to the side so he could look at me. “Your nature is that of earth, but you do not need to be as hard and brittle as diamond,” he offered with a smile. “If your soul is now entwined with fire, perhaps it is time to remember what it is like to be in the mantle beneath the frozen stone, young volcano-keeper.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We humans are sometimes a bit shortsighted, are we not?”

“So has wailed every man who thought to put me to plow, as I carried him to his doom.” The water-horse tilted his head,

still smiling. “You would have overwhelmed a mere cat, Rain,” he said. “The challenge will surely be good for you. Enjoy yourself.” Celyn flicked some water at me, then dropped the branches and turned, diving back under the water without so much as a ripple.

I blew out a breath and rubbed my face. Enjoy myself. Easier said than done. Celyn was right, at least, in that it was only logical that this would be turbulent. Unlike Wexford and Glitter, who had worked in close communion for more than a decade as master and warlock, Saker and I had never even met, and neither of us had prepared for our soul-bond in the least. I certainly would have overwhelmed a regular cat; with the power differential, I would have been able to keep mental blocks up indefinitely with essentially zero effort.

Saker was another story altogether. It had been a while since the last major state-shift in my life, though this was significantly less traumatizing than my manifestation, or what had happened with Tarandrus. Maybe it *would* be good for me.

I turned and lay down on the bench, bracing my legs on the arm and lacing my fingers over my stomach. I’d been on my back foot since the summoning, scrambling for answers and trying to keep the upper hand over the demon sleeping in Barixeor. It didn’t need to be that way, though. I could choose to trust that Saker wasn’t out to get me—or at least to act that way, even though the very thought made my heart rate pick up with the edge of panic. Instead of trying to keep one step ahead of whatever might happen, I could start treating Saker like what he actually was: my life’s partner, no matter how

much the thought made me break out in sweat. We could figure things out together, instead of with me dictating events for the both of us.

There were a lot of moving pieces to my life, but I had some space to devote to the task. Some things needed to be done post-haste, informing the Monitors about Saker and updating the sorcerer records as my duties demanded chief among them. But the rest of it wasn't exactly pressing. I still had a few days before I needed to travel to Merrhenya Spire to give my quarterly update to the Triumvirate, and the next closest rockfall was small, remote, and more than a month away. The long-running experiments I'd established several years ago, looking at the differences in ley degradation for variants on seer enchantments, required no interference and very little monitoring. I was between commissions for mage-tools and not at all in need of money, so I didn't need to go looking for work. Barixeor mostly ran itself, and the research project I was working on to keep myself sane had no deadline.

Focusing on Saker and our relationship was not only probably the wisest course of action right now, it was something I could do without putting anything else at risk. Stabilizing would require familiarity with each other, and that would come with time and conversation. He was what he was, too, and I thought that simple touch and companionship would go a long way towards being comfortable with me. It might help me, too, making him feel more like a friend instead of a dangerous, alluring stranger.

I swung my legs back onto the ground and got up, ducking out from under the weeping cherry and heading back up the slope towards the Spire. Saker and I wouldn't have to spend every waking hour together to learn how to be mage and familiar, and I suspected that we'd both crave at least the illusion of independence, but it would be good to spend some time together where I wasn't in a caretaker role.

Maybe there were even things I could do, or get, that would help Saker settle in, or help us settle together. This didn't have to be a disaster. It didn't even necessarily have to be a struggle. We could find a path, and do amazing things together.

16

TURMOIL

SAKER

I hadn't meant to want her so badly. But she was beautiful and full of fire, a woman out of stories who cursed like a soldier and sparked with humor and her strong will. I couldn't escape the song of her soul, and I had no desire to. Her passionate emotions wound through me, waking pieces of my spirit I had thought dead long ago, and I knew before I'd spoken with her for ten minutes that I would be hers completely, whether she wanted me or not.

An incubus doesn't have many options for interacting with people. Most people I'd interacted with since I'd manifested – as incubus and sorcerer both – either wanted to fuck me with a single-minded intensity, or had been on the opposite side of a battlefield from me, and sometimes both. The few people I'd met with no interest in having sex with me or killing me I'd done the courtesy of avoiding with religious fervor. I brought death and pain with me everywhere I went, and I wouldn't bring it into the lives of those who didn't seek me out.

But now I was on the Material Plane, in Barixeor Spire, soul-bonded as the familiar of *the* Rain Leyweaver, and she was so much more than I had ever anticipated. I tried my best to give her reasons to want me around, throwing all caution to the wind and baring myself the way she'd bared her soul to me. I didn't have many tools for interacting with people, but I tried to live in the moment with her, setting aside the pain and terror and instead trying to enjoy how different this world was than the one I'd left behind. I smiled. I laughed, and *meant* it. Her pleasure and happiness sang under my skin, a reward born not from the cubari magic I couldn't control, but simply from my company.

I was in trouble from the first moment she ran her hands up my legs, touching me in a way I had only ever been touched during sex. Flirtation, neck kisses, my tail wrapped around her... all those things were casual for me, a way to move through the world. That, though? I couldn't even joke about it, putting every ounce of focus I had into not falling apart from the way her hands felt on me.

Rain had strong hands, callused and careful. She caressed me, not for the way it felt but to complete a task, her focus blocking out everything I felt with casual ease. She was so *powerful*, a bonfire blazing next to me, and her hands were on my thighs, running up my bare skin, brushing against my groin, I wanted her to have me so *badly*—

I grabbed her hand, unable to take any more torment, covering myself as I couldn't keep my desire hidden any longer. Rain's lust bloomed on my tongue the second she met

my gaze, as sharp and electric as the lightning of a wild storm and as honeyed as mead. It was a taste I could drown in, better than any desire I'd ever had focused on me before, because it was her desire—not out of any incubus lust aura, but simply because she looked at me and felt my want, and wanted me in return.

Only once before had I come with someone's soul pouring into me, and this time it wasn't a tragedy. I couldn't forget myself, because her soul was already mine. So I let go of everything and fell into her, coming with my hand wrapped around my shaft and two fingers pressing up against my sensitive clit, two bodies and two people and one shared self, so intimately entwined that we could never be separated.

Shame flooded me as she pulled herself apart from me. I'd spent my entire adult life being careful not to take advantage of how my aura affected people, but I'd fallen into Rain with reckless need. I could feel her discomfort with me, layers of fear and uncertainty, and still I'd given in to the beautiful oblivion she offered me.

I would do better. I had to do better. I'd forced myself into her life knowing that I wasn't what she was looking for, and I needed to make sure she didn't regret saving me.

She came back to care for me, and I fell asleep with her thigh pressed against my side and her fingers running through my hair, helpless to resist that simple tactile comfort. I woke to her turmoil, and for a moment I couldn't find my place in the

world, feeling as if I was plummeting from the sky once more until my sense of my body settled around me again.

At all the edges of my senses I could always find Rain. If I felt the position of my body, I knew where I was, and that Rain was several thousand feet below me in a seated position. If I scented the room, I caught the phantom smell of pine and clean air with her every breath. When I tried to focus on the quietness of the room, I heard the sound of her voice as she spoke.

I couldn't *not* sense her, either, I discovered, as I tried to give her some amount of privacy. Everything I knew about familiars came from the side of the magic-user, which only made sense, as the number of documented sapient familiars could be counted without moving off of one's fingers. But now, on the other end of that relationship, I discovered that it was only the mage who could control the openness of the soul-bond.

If Rain wanted to block me out, she could. If she wanted to reach me, there was nothing I could do about it, save to control my emotions.

The thought sent a shiver down by my spine, and not in a bad way. I had spent so long needing to be in complete control of myself to keep people safe, but now...

I shared a soul with a woman powerful enough to defeat me in a contest of strength, who was totally immune to my incubus allure, and who could break through any shield I attempted to put up with a simple thought. She could stop me,

wielding my power like her own, no matter what happened. If I lost control, or slipped up, or if instinct caught me because of exhaustion or pain or hunger, or any of a thousand different things that I had spent my life hedging around, it no longer mattered.

Rain could stop me. And I was her familiar, an extension of her, so she would. She'd have to, even, her mage-oaths compelling her to take action.

It was the most comforting thought I'd had since the first time my power had burned someone.

Thank you, I thought to her, knowing she wasn't listening, as the sound of her conversation murmured at the edge of my hearing. The wind stirred her hair as I closed my eyes again, evergreen brightening the room as sunlight played across water like a dream of sight. I would never be alone again, and the woman who held my soul in the palm of her hand could stop the monstrous power that coiled through me like a hungry serpent.

I felt her look up towards the sky and imagined she thought of me as I drifted towards sleep again, at peace for the first time since magic had touched my life.

17

CONVERSATION

RAIN

When I made it back to Barixeor, I found Marin in the kitchen with Safira, chatting and putting together a salad. They both paused and looked towards me as I came in, which gave me an instant burst of self-consciousness. Safira had definitely sent Celyn to go talk to me, and I suspected both of them knew it.

“Uh, hi,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “How’re things?”

A smile twitched at the corner of Safira’s mouth. “Things are fine,” she said, with the sort of voice people use when they’re trying to sound serious instead of full of laughter. “The spinach is getting a bit bitter, so I pulled the rest of it in. Want a salad? Marin could make you one.”

“Volunteering me, hmm?” Marin asked, laughing.

“That’s correct!” Safira hopped up onto the counter and started swinging her legs. “How’s our new resident doing?”

She was so cheerful about it that I decided not to be angry with her, though I didn't really enjoy the nosiness or pushiness. I just gave her a tight smile and leaned against the wall, crossing my arms across my chest. "A salad will be fine for lunch. Could you make something for Saker as well, Marin?"

"Of course, magus," she said, giving Safira a sidelong look as the younger woman started grinning.

"So his name's Saker! That's a cute name. When do we meet your new boyfriend?"

"Safira—" Marin started, a warning tone to her voice.

"What?" she asked, still with levity in her voice. "It's funny!"

"It really isn't," I said, and something in my voice must have conveyed my total lack of amusement, because a flicker of fear crawled across Safira's face, a remnant of the life she'd led before coming to Barixeor.

"Well, I think it's funny," she said defensively, with almost a belligerent edge to the words. "It's like some sort of comedic romance setup—"

Marin shoved a plate into Safira's hands. "Go get a bone-in steak, duck giblets, and some ground turkey," she said in a nonsense tone.

"I don't—"

"Now, Safira," Marin said sharply, her words brooking no argument.

Safira looked at Marin, then at me, and paled slightly under her brown skin before hopping down off of the counter and leaving without another word.

I relaxed slightly when she left, some of the tension leaving my shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Marin started.

“Don’t be,” I said with a sigh, turning a chair at the kitchen table and sitting in it backwards. “I get it.”

“Oh?” she asked, her hands moving as she put together the salad for me.

I shrugged, even though she wasn’t looking. “Eight years isn’t that long to learn how to balance being what she is with what she used to be, not when the only people she has to interact with are us lot,” I said, leaning forward against the back of the chair. “She’s only just starting to figure out how to wield Celyn’s power, and how to measure herself against others. There’s not a lot of opportunities for her to interact with her new peers, and usually I really enjoy seeing her figuring out how to be confident.”

“You’re more forgiving than many sorcerers,” Marin murmured, shaking her head. “She’s going to have a rude awakening whenever you retire.”

“Or kick the bucket,” I said brightly, which made Marin snort. “Either way, though, she’ll have a strange relationship with the next Spirekeeper, whoever they are. It’s not like she can be fired, since she’s bound to the lake, and staying on

good terms with Celyn is a pretty important part of running Barixeor.” I offered Marin a smile as the other woman brought over my salad, then sat properly and started stabbing the leaves with my fork. “Young bucks of any kind always step on some toes as they figure things out. Better that it’s me than someone like our dear Archmage. I’ve wrenched tolerance out of him for my toe-stepping only by dint of being so damned useful.”

She shook her head again, taking the seat across from me. “One of these days you’re going to do something the Archmage can’t bring himself to forgive, and your life is going to get a great deal more difficult, magus.”

That made me snort. “You say that as if he’s ever forgiven me anything,” I replied. “Rillian’s hated my guts since the fall of Tarandrus, and nothing I’ve done since has endeared me to him.”

“And you, of course, are so forgiving of his faults,” she said drily.

I almost choked on my salad, pointing my fork at her while I laughed. “He’s a slimeball, and you know it. Maybe it made sense for him to be Archmage when the Marevic Experiments became public, but we’re long past the need for someone as obsessed with image as him.”

Marin shrugged, looking off into the middle distance. “There’s worse things than having someone who cares about making sure mages aren’t doing things like Marevic in charge.”

“Except he doesn’t,” I said, my lip raising as I contemplated the Archmage. “He cares about people *thinking* mages aren’t doing things like Marevic. I told you his pet mage Dastan wants to do a soul vivisection here, right? Fine, upstanding Archmagus Whitescale is perfectly happy with *that* sort of despicable.”

She wrapped one arm around herself, a dull look settling onto her face. “Mages are the gods’ mistake.”

I set down my fork and reached over, offering her my hand. After a moment, she shifted and set her hand in mine, her skin cool and lifeless. I wrapped my fingers around her palm, holding her hand for a little comfort. “I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I know we are. Nobody deserves to have the sort of power we have, and so often it goes to peoples’ heads. I can’t change what I am. I can just do the best I can with that power.”

She squeezed my hand, putting on a smile for me. “That’s all any of us can do, I suppose,” she said. “Even mages answer to Noetan when death comes for them.”

“At least there’s that,” I agreed, looking up as a much more subdued Safira came back into the kitchen, carrying a plate of meat for Saker.

She flashed me a smile, a dim shadow of her earlier expression. “For Saker,” she said, setting the plate down on the table next to my salad. “I’m sorry I teased you, magus. You never laughed at my troubles with Celyn, and I ought to give you the same respect.”

I let go of Marin's hand and leaned back in my chair, regarding Safira. "I appreciate that," I said, meeting her dark eyes. "Apology accepted. To answer your question, you'll get to meet my familiar when he's recovered enough to walk around on his own, but I suspect you won't want to spend much time with him." I speared more leaves and a tomato moodily. "Incubi can't turn off their lust auras, and that aura has no respect for marriage, or anything else. It's a good thing they're so damn uncommon, or nobody in Abyssal would get anything done."

"I'll do my best not to stare," she said, offering me a hesitant smile.

"Oh, you're welcome to stare. I guarantee he won't be offended, and neither will I," I said, returning her smile with a warm one of my own, trying to give her some reassurance. Even after a decade of knowing me, Safira struggled when I expressed even the mildest irritation. Given what I knew of her past, and how badly she'd been abused by her mage husband, I had a lot of sympathy for her fear. I knew what it was like to be betrayed. I, too, struggled to trust.

Safira made herself scarce, returning to the gardens, and I ate with Marin in companionable silence, the other woman sitting quietly with me for the sake of the company. When I finished, I sighed, then put my bowl over the meat to keep it from drying out.

"Is there anything else you need for him?" Marin asked. "I'm assuming the raw meat went well this morning?"

“Yeah, it was perfect,” I said, flashing her a tired smile. “I’ll try to get a bit more information about what he needs so far as diet goes today. He’ll probably go through a lot of food at first. Magical healing really takes it out of you.”

“Then I’ll keep making meals like this until you tell me otherwise, magus,” she said, standing up. “Please let me know if there’s anything you need. I’ll be in the stillroom until dinnertime.”

“Sounds good,” I replied, following her up and picking up the table. “See you then.”

I skipped Saker’s room and went to the room in the library where I kept my work for my pet research projects. Catching meteors with Jace was by far the most important thing I did, and it was the reason I had Barixeor, but doing so was hardly a love of mine. My work forging mage-tools for others earned me a great deal of money outside of the Spirekeeper’s stipend, but while I enjoyed it, forging was similarly not the desire of my heart. If I’d been left to my own devices, I would have indulged in my “little hobby” (as the Archmage called it) constantly, but my life didn’t belong to me.

Nobody in recorded history had mage-senses like mine. My range wasn’t any more staggering than any other sorcerer, but the resolution of my magical sight tended to boggle even those who worked with alchemy. I could not only see weaker traces of power than any other living mage, but I could see it at infinitesimal scales, discerning ley-patterns that others didn’t have a hope of detecting. With my dowsing tools, I had found

and followed echoes from the movement of things thousands of years in the past, like looking at the ripples on the ocean waves and learning where the warships of fallen civilizations had sailed.

I loved the beauty of those secret patterns, something the world revealed to me alone. If I'd been allowed – if it wouldn't cost the lives of tens of thousands – I would have given up wealth and the Spire in a heartbeat to do nothing but hunt for the forgotten. In another world, I would have been a traveler and inscrutable sage, seeking out things spoken of only in stories and poetry, and bestowing things of ancient power on the worthy. Instead, I was a sorcerer in a tower, bound by my duty to the people of my plane, with tasks I couldn't escape.

But when I could, I spent time doing research into things, and even going out to find them. It kept me sane in the face of a decade of catching the falling sky and clashing with Rillian, and from time to time I even managed to find something worth telling a tale about.

I always kept a half-dozen projects going, picking up whichever one struck me at the time. Some were legendary relics: the Blackwings cloak, the demoneye crown of Kaelor the Red, and the Copper City of the Abyssal Plane. Others were simpler things I might actually succeed at finding: the aberration known as the Weeping Woman, the Sarkand Amulet, and my sister's lost wedding ring. The last was actually something of a pain, given that the Barrens were

almost entirely devoid of magical power, and I'd probably have to go do it in person.

For the time being, though, I grabbed a manuscript I was working on translating that related to Blackwings, two reference books to help with the archaic writing, and the notebook I'd been recording in. Translation work would help keep me focused, and the project was enjoyable enough that it might lift my spirits. Plus, it would be a delightful feather in my cap to actually find the thing. Purported to have been woven out of shadows and wind, and dyed with the tears of a basilisk, the Blackwings cloak was immortalized in a popular children's clapping rhyme I'd learned in the Barrens as a young girl:

*Mister Crow flaps high, high, high
Way up in the sky, sky, sky
Black wings up and black wings down'
Til he grabs the sun's own crown
Mister Sun says ai! ai! ai!
Asking that crow why, why, why
Black wings up and black wings down
Missy plucks 'em for her gown
Now Mister Crow will cry, cry, cry
'Cause he's gonna die, die, die!*

I'd been fascinated by the thing since I'd learned that it might actually exist, especially when I found several legendary histories that claimed the cloak not only gave its wearer the

ability to fly, but literally turned into a pair of black shadow wings. If nothing else, the cloak would be dramatic to show off at an Eclipse Gala, and it would remind people that there was a good reason for me to be a Spirekeeper and friend of the stars.

After some hesitation, I added two of my private journals to the small heap—the one I'd written last year and the first one I'd written at the hermitage, where I'd first trained as a mage. It felt uncomfortable to offer them up to Saker, but I'd already showed him my naked soul. Maybe it would give him a way to anchor himself in this world, or connect to me.

Maybe he'd show me something of himself in return.

18

--

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

RAIN

With one arm full of books, I headed to the top floor of the abyssal greenhouse. I could feel the tension draining away from me the moment I stepped into the endless sunlight, the room set up almost as a slice of the Abyssal Plane, with trees soaring through the openings in the floor and small creatures roaming through the exotic plants. Songbirds twittered and small, jewel-toned creatures darted across the floor, each of a kind whose parts – feathers, eggshells, scales, and so forth – could be used for alchemy or spellwork.

I absconded with a pot of flowering smoke orchids, a spiraling succulent with long, slender stalks from which sprang fragile white flowers. They weren't used for anything magical that I knew of, but I'd first seen them when returning the Eye of Souls to the Iron City, and fell in love with their otherworldly beauty. Importing things from other planes was fairly easy for someone of my caliber at summoning, so I'd added them to the greenhouse not long after. Maybe Saker would like them; a piece of home might be comforting.

In 52 Sky, I kicked off my shoes, dropped my books into a chair, and carried over the small breakfast table to sit next to his side of the bed. I settled his lunch onto it, along with the pitcher of water and glass he'd used the night before, then looked over at him with a little hesitance, less sure that I was doing the right thing now that I was facing crawling into bed with an incubus.

He was still dozing, sprawled out with all the grace of a puppy with his long black hair draped across his back. One of his wings twitched in his sleep, drawing a smile to my face. Being bonded to Saker was a lot for me to handle. But he was also disarming in how he interacted with me, without even a hint of danger in his actions. And, too, I got the sense that he was lonely, in a bone-deep sort of way, like a man in the desert desperate for water. As uncomfortable as it felt to open myself up to intimacy of any sort, I didn't think he would take it amiss. When it came to sitting in bed with my familiar while he slept, my reaction was the problem, not his.

Thus chastened, I picked up my translation supplies and went to the open side of the bed. The mattress of the damned boyfriend suite bed was plenty large enough for a three-or-more-some, so it was a bit of a production to scoot over to where the demon was sleeping without jostling him awake, but I managed. After a few minutes of psyching myself up, I got under the covers with him and rolled onto my stomach, draping his wing over my back so I could lie next to him.

Saker roused at that, but he didn't open his eyes, or even seem to wake up all the way. He only shifted towards me,

settling his wing on me so that it fell over my left shoulder in a loose embrace. The weight of his tail slid over my legs and came to rest across the backs of my knees, the soft plume of it curling alongside my calf.

I looked over at him, paying attention to our connection, but as he relaxed back into sleep all I felt from him was the same quiet sleepiness I'd been getting since I'd put him to bed. I closed my eyes, took a few meditative breaths to soothe myself, and turned to the translation.

I was puzzling my way through a fragmented piece of the manuscript when I felt Saker blink awake, his eyelashes brushing against the pillow and his lips parting as he woke. He made a soft noise, pushing himself up enough to turn his face towards me, his body still lax with sleep and his wing warm over my back.

“Hey, sleepyface,” I said, still trying to fill in what had been eaten by an industrious moth, likely many centuries ago. *Yihuri wehshurian*, maybe? Or *yihwet lehvaheian*? *Yihhesseh*...? But then what the fuck was *xxxian*??

“You’re still here,” Saker said.

There was enough surprise in his voice that I set aside the translation to look over at him. He looked worried and wary, his brows drawn towards each other and tension tightening the skin around his eyes..

“Yes, I’m here,” I told him, trying to be gentle. “I live here, and you’re my familiar.” I reached over and stroked his cheek

with the backs of my fingers. “This is our home, Saker,” I said. “Where else would I be?”

“Our...” he started. His jaw tensed for a moment before he blew out a breath through his nose. He turned his face and kissed my fingers, then shifted so he could rest his head on his forearm. “You got me flowers,” the demon said instead.

“Seemed apropos, given this morning,” I said with a shrug, embarrassed about the impulse now that it had been pointed out, and falling back onto the sort of distance that existed between two people when they’d had a one-night stand and woken up in the same bed. “You gave me one hell of an orgasm.”

Saker flinched, hunching his shoulders. His wings tensed, too, the one around me hugging my side as turmoil rolled through the bond, turbulent and unhappy.

I closed my eyes, making a face, feeling like an ass. “I’m sorry,” I said, then made myself relax, turning onto my side to look at him. “That wasn’t kind of me.” I scrubbed at my cheek with my knuckles, giving him a wry smile. “This is all a lot for me, and I don’t really know how to handle it. But I like you, Saker, and I think we could do incredible things together. I’m really sorry for being so pissy about all this.” I crinkled my nose and added, “I’m afraid I’ve gotten used to going solo, and I’ve not been treating you well as a result.”

His expression didn’t change, unsure and worried. “I know this isn’t what you wanted...” he started, sounding guilty.

I put my hand on his neck and stroked his cheek with my thumb, choosing compassion. “You’re welcome to tell me to piss off if you want,” I said gently. “Once you’re healed enough to travel, I can get you back to the Abyssal Plane if you want to live your own life as much as you can. If you want to stay with me, I’m happy to summon friends or family for visits, or even travel with you to the Abyssal Plane when I can.” I paused as I contemplated how to phrase what I wanted to say, my mouth pulling to one side. “I’d like you to stay, I think. It’ll make our lives complicated, but we could become something spectacular. I know you had a home and a life before me, though, and you can go back to it. I won’t stop you.”

He looked away from me, his tail lashing moodily. “I didn’t, actually,” the incubus said. “Have a home.”

“Oh?” I asked, when he didn’t elaborate.

“My sire is one of the six governors of the Iron City,” he said. “You must have met him when you returned the Eye of Souls. Kemikh’tu *Metjosh’a*.”

My eyes widened in recognition. Lord Kemikh’tu, called The Hammer, was nearly two thousand years old, among the oldest and most powerful of the demon lords. He had an entire shelf in my library devoted to him; he’d had many warlocks through the years, and when I’d met him I’d been careful not to so much as brush his cloak or touch his footsteps. The demon lord was a soul-drinker and blood-mage, and I’d seen the lich magic twining around his bones.

“Don’t worry,” Saker said, his voice sharp with bitterness as the part of my brain dedicated to logistics began to panic about how to make recompense for stealing his son. His tail snapped to the side. “*Metjosh’a* isn’t the fatherly type, and because I’m cubari, my blood is worthless to him. Our power doesn’t work with close relatives.” He sighed, relaxing again. “My mother was human, and one of his warlocks. As best as I can tell, she got pregnant with me as part of a pact with him, and when I wasn’t what he wanted, he disowned me and returned me to her. She left me with the priests of Xazan,” he finished, naming an Abyssal god whose order took in abandoned creatures of all kinds.

“Tissit Kalar, Saker,” I said, shocked at the recitation. “That is deeply fucked-up.”

He barked a laugh, then tucked his wing and rolled himself onto his right side to look at me. “Full ritual disownment, too,” he added. “There is no magical link between us anymore. No way for anyone to know he’s my sire.”

“I bet I could find one,” I said with a smirk, trying to add a little light to the conversation. “He’s only, what, a nine-three? How hard could it be?”

The incubus snorted at my bravada. Well, a lot of people snorted in disbelief when they heard me talk about dowsing. The things I could do sounded like folktales to most people.

I let my smile fade. “How’d you figure it out?”

“He didn’t include my mother in the ritual, and I paid a witch to do my lineage when I was twenty. She found my

mother, but no evidence of a sire, and only a sorcerer could have erased our connection, given my ley impact,” Saker said. “I manifested at twenty-two. Everything hit at once for me. I got overwhelmed with power and my incubus abilities at the same time.” He shook his head, just a little. “First time having sex. A terrible way to manifest.”

I’d never heard of a sorcerer manifesting that late, but I supposed it wasn’t impossible, and the Abyssal Plane was vast. He must have been a late bloomer.

“I think I can challenge you on that one,” I said, trying for a smile. “Being hunted by an ancient abomination seems a bit worse.”

Strong emotion led to manifestations, and the manifestation paralleled the emotion in question. I’d impaled an aberration with starlight in mortal terror; Jace had levitated everything around her in joy. Manifesting while losing one’s virginity might have been embarrassing, but it wasn’t the worst thing I could think of, by far.

Saker smirked, but there were shadows in his eyes, and despair aching in the soul-bond between us. “I came blood onto a boy I was in love with, then burned his neighborhood to the ground.”

Horror struck me like a hammer—not at the words, exactly, but at the echo of his memory as he said them. Agony, and terror, and pain—

People must have died.

Maybe a lot of them.

Maybe his lover.

“You came *blood*?” I said, picking the least dangerous of the horrors, because I had to say something, and I didn’t think he would be willing to accept comfort.

“A truly astonishing amount of blood,” he said with a little nod, his eyes and tone still bleak despite the levity in the words. “Blood out of every orifice, actually, but that was the most upsetting one.”

“Yeah, alright,” I said, my gut twisting with nausea. “Give me an ancient abomination any day.”

“I’ll be your ancient abomination any day,” Saker purred at me.

I recognized the desire to move away from the past and shot him a pained expression, making a pleading sound.

He laughed away his memories with practiced ease, the sort of ease I recognized from laughing away my own. “Too soon?”

“I may never have sex again.”

We were quiet for a little bit, and he settled back onto his stomach, resting quietly.

At last, I asked, “Mind if I ask what you were doing getting gutted on a battlefield?”

He shrugged his wings. “The same thing all of Achaea is doing these days. There’s not much call for war-mages outside

of war, and I like to eat.”

“So you’re a... mercenary?” I asked.

He shrugged again. That was deeply strange to me. There were mercenary mages, of course – magicians and wizards, and the occasional thaumaturge – but a mercenary *sorcerer*? But then, in that brief little description of the war in the sorcerer records, the demon lord had seemed pretty casual about throwing “low” sorcerers into the fray, and given the size of the Abyssal Plane, there were more sorcerers to go around.

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said, “I was worried about trying to deal with the legal repercussions of stealing someone’s soldier, but mercs don’t have the same vows, so that’s nice. Let me know if you owe a default on your contract, and I’ll get it settled.”

“You’d do that?” Saker sounded surprised, almost shocked.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re my familiar,” I pointed out. “That makes you my responsibility, as far as mortal mage jurisprudence goes. The imprint of my power is on you, and familiar soul-bonds supercede pretty much all other bonds. The cost is on me for any broken vows you might be carrying around.”

He hunched up again. “But you don’t want me,” he said. “You wanted a cat.”

“I got a cat,” I said, echoing Celyn’s words from earlier. “A very handsome one, who is going to turn heads when I bring

him to the next eclipse gala. Assuming you want to stay.” I smiled at him, and brushed some loose hair behind his ear. I could feel the warm tingle my fingers left on him, so I did it again, deliberately dragging my fingers across the sensitive edge of his ear. “And I do want you to stay.”

“I really will catch mice for you,” Saker said, his voice soft, with a tiny touch of a smile.

I grinned. “And I will be delighted if you do so. They are a menace.”

I brushed his ear again, for the sake of that pleasant frisson. He made a catlike sound, then turned his head and nipped at my fingers, clipping me lightly with his sharp teeth. I flicked his nose, feeling playful; my familiar caught them again and held them more firmly.

“Rrr,” he said, in a fake growl. “You are teasing ‘e.” It came out a bit garbled, since he still held my fingers captive.

I giggled and shook my hand a little.

He licked the tips of my fingers in return, a hot press of his tongue. “‘E good,” Saker said, and released me.

I flicked him on the nose again, just because I could, before rolling onto my back and wiggling over to him again, fingers laced on my stomach. He shifted his wing, fitting it to the curves of my body, and pulled me a little closer, so we were pressed together.

I looked over at him and found him looking back, his cheek resting on the back of his hand.

“So,” I said.

“So,” he echoed, smiling at me with a warmth I didn’t deserve.

“This is nice,” I offered, feeling hesitant. I didn’t know what else to say, faced with the sort of easy affection radiating out from him. We hardly knew each other, but Saker was simply... accepting all of this. He’d chosen to be mine, and he wanted me to like him. What was I supposed to do with that?

“Yes,” he said, still smiling. “This is nice.”

19

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING

RAIN

I bit my lip. “Um. About this morning.”

Saker stopped meeting my eyes again. Something like shame slid through the soul-bond like an oil slick, a feeling that went far deeper than embarrassment.

Compassion rose in me in response, a desire to do nothing more than comfort him, whether it was with words or with a kiss. For a heart-pounding moment, the urge to bury my fingers in his hair and press my mouth to his overwhelmed me, a desire that could have come from either of us. Saker was an incubus, and physical touch and sex would reach him better than anything else; I was tactile and lonely, and the sort of affection he offered was all but impossible to resist.

“You don’t have to feel badly,” I said, yanking my thoughts away from that path, my pulse pounding beneath my skin. “I’m not good at that sort of thing. Horrible, really. Atrocious. Not a lot of people are interested in tangling with a sorcerer between the sheets, and most of the ones that seek that out are one-and-done, or are mages with their own paths to follow.” I

chewed on my lip again, trying not to babble in my awkwardness. “I’ve pretty much been relegated to courting Xair for the night with near-strangers, or having liaisons where we both knew it wouldn’t last forever.”

Saker watched me, very still, the faintest gleam of golden light in his eyes from the echoes of my desire.

With the backs of my fingers, I stroked the underside of the wing that lay over me, trying to soothe him, and smiled when I felt him exhale and relax, settling deeper onto the bed.

“You and I, we’re forever. My forever, at least.” With his father’s heritage, Saker was surely one of the demons who would live for a thousand years or more. Demonic lifespans were as variable as their natures, but demonic blood ran true in the Abyssal Plane, regardless of the nature of the other parent. I sighed. “I know sex is as easy as breathing for cubari, but it’s not the same for me. I don’t do permanent, and we’re really, really not a fling. Maybe if we were friends, but I just don’t know you that well yet.”

“But we can become friends?” Saker asked, looking at me with those big golden eyes.

“I can’t imagine we won’t,” I said, a smile curling up the corners of my mouth. “The flowers were actually because I thought you might like having something familiar around. They’re my favorites.” I flushed, laughing at my own embarrassment. “It really was a spectacular orgasm, though.”

He laughed softly and ducked his chin. His tail shifted, curling over to fall between my legs and over my thigh.

“Rain,” he said with a smile, “You are beautiful, and you taste like lightning and summer wine. You touch me like you love me, even when you spark and growl.”

The incubus pushed himself off the bed and slid over, until he was bracing himself on either side of my shoulders, his hips still next to mine, but his torso curving across. Even full of stitches, he moved with the poised languor of a cat, and he lowered himself down until his weight was on me, his chest pressing against my breasts. His fingers found mine and laced through them, lifting my hand to rest above my head, our palms pressed together.

Every inch of me came alive as he touched me, and every part that wasn't pressed against him wanted to be. I could feel it in him, too, the sizzling heat of desire—a deep want to fall into me until we forgot where each of us began. Our hearts beat together, quickened with lust, his golden eyes gleaming.

He dropped his gaze to my mouth and leaned a fraction closer, his lips parting, drawing a panting whine from me. With the blunted claws of one hand, he brushed aside my hair, then ran them along the shell of my ear, an electric touch that shot heat between my legs. He pressed his tail down against me, dragging the length along my core before swishing it out behind him, the hint of a smirk at the corner of his mouth.

Motherfucker knew exactly what he was doing.

Fear and desperate longing warred within me, neither able to win, but he didn't make me choose. Saker brushed his claws

along my cheek, then laid his fingers across my parted lips like a ward between us.

“Yes, it was spectacular,” he said, his voice low. “I think it would always be spectacular for us. But, *ledaji*, we share a soul. I feel what’s in your heart.” He leaned down, his nose brushing the side of mine, with his fingers the only barrier between our lips. “You’re attracted to me. You like me. If there wasn’t forever to consider, you would have been tormenting me on purpose, so that when I begged you could be the one to teach me the meaning of worship.”

His warm breath fanned against my face, and I could feel the heat of his mouth against the back of his fingers. “Saker,” I whispered against his skin. “You’re playing with fire.”

“Fire mage,” he murmured back, and kissed his fingers.

Yeah, I fucking felt that, too. Saker’s tail swept up my side and I snatched it, holding it in place so he couldn’t use it to further his torment.

He chuckled, the sound dark and full of promises, then leaned up and bit me on the nose.

I yelped and let go – nose-bites are no fun at the best of times, and even his incisors were sharp – jerking backwards against the bed to get away.

Saker laughed again, bright and delighted, before getting off of me and settling back down, this time on his back.

I turned and glared at him, flushed and horny and very, very teased.

“Bastard,” I snapped.

“Literally,” he said, sounding quite pleased with himself. “But the fact of the matter is that you *do* care about forever, and you aren’t in agreement with yourself on if you want to have your unruly way with me or not. No spectacular sex for you.” Saker flashed his teeth at me with a smile that didn’t look nearly as pleased as he sounded.

I wrinkled my nose at him in response, faking annoyance. I’d quite enjoyed the teasing, even with the anxiety that sprang from it. He knew how to get a girl hot.

After a moment, his expression smoothed, and he took on a serious tone again, dropping his gaze in a way that looked submissive. “This morning... I should have stopped you sooner. I thought I could keep myself under control, but then I was on fire and you were running away. I’m sorry for that, and I won’t let it happen again.”

“Apology accepted,” I said. “You didn’t do anything wrong, and if I’d been paying any sort of attention to you, I’d have known better.” Feeling somewhat shamefaced, I added, “I, ah, tend to get caught up when I’m focused on something.”

“Do you?” he asked, all innocence as he lifted his eyes to mine again. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Feh!” I flicked him on the side of his wing. “Eat your steak. I’m going to figure out if it’s possible to resurrect, and then kill, an ancient moth.”

Saker made a questioning noise, and I held up the copy of the moth-eaten manuscript, then pointed over his body to the table I'd moved next to the bed, on which sat his covered plate.

“Ah! Can you help me sit up?”

“Sure,” I said, and did so. The alchemical painkiller was doing its job well, and with pillows behind him, Saker was able to lean against the headboard without too much discomfort. I leaned over him to fetch the plate, whisking the bowl off with a flourish and passing him his lunch and utensils. It was still early afternoon. Ish. Eh, he was an invalid, he could eat lunch whenever he wanted to.

Saker started eating with enthusiasm, and I downed a glass of water before settling myself back in, lying on my stomach across the blankets with my books spread out in front of me. I didn't get quite as lost in the translation work as before; Saker kept absently touching me. His tail would brush across the backs of my legs, or he'd shift his position so that his thigh would lean against my arm, or sweep his toes along the side of my leg. The contact was nice. It was the sort of comfortable, casual physicality I liked and shared with my friends, and sharing it with Saker made him feel like a friend.

I wondered what his life had been like before I'd summoned him out of it. As a ward of the priests, he would have been educated and cared for, perhaps even loved, but the priests of Xazan didn't keep children past their age of majority unless they swore to the god, so far as I remembered. Saker, coming

into his powers as he had, would have then lost the ruins of his old life and been given to a mage-teacher as soon as possible.

I gnawed on the end of my pen as I pored over one of the references on poetic structure of oral histories in the Starry Court of the fae, hoping for a clue that might help me figure out what the unusual phrasing of part of the manuscript was meant to suggest. Saker didn't seem unhappy to be here. He was, if anything, leaning into being entwined in my life, despite feelings of displacement and uncertainty. I was pretty sure I hadn't been mistaken at the flush of warmth I'd felt from him when I'd called Barixeor our home; even after he'd manifested, it sounded like he'd never found a place to call his own.

And he seemed touch-starved, in a way that didn't seem to make much sense for a cubarus. A mercenary loner was an unusual profile for an incubus; cubari usually lived in nests of six or more. But, then, Saker hadn't been raised with other cubari. He probably hadn't even known what he was until he'd manifested. Even if he'd known his parentage, Lord Kemikh'tu wasn't cubari; Saker's heritage had likely been through the dissolved remnants of an incubus who the demon lord had devoured. The cubari culture might have been as uncomfortable and alien for him as the high protocol of the fae Solar Court was for me.

I couldn't imagine what it must have been like to go from being a regular young man to a full-blown incubus. Untrained and inexperienced, he must have been a danger to everyone around him.

I wondered if he'd been as scared of himself as I had been.

Saker crunched his way through the bone of the steak before sliding back down onto the bed, spreading his wings to the side and tucking them around himself, batlike. He kicked at the sheets and I twisted around him to grab them, pulling them up over his hips again. My demon purred for a moment, then closed his eyes and breathed, the aches that he'd been ignoring coming due.

"I might sleep again," he said, fatigue lending his words a deep lassitude.

"Want me to stay?" I asked, still half-propped up, looking down at him.

He shook his head, once, and shifted into a more comfortable position. "You don't have to," came the murmured reply.

I felt him pulling back through the soul-bond. One corner of my mouth turned up as I looked down at him. "Of course I don't," I said. "But you're hurt and unsettled, and you're mine. If it will bring you comfort, I'd like to stay."

His mouth tugged back into a small smile before relaxing again, as exhaustion pulled him back down into sleep. "Possessive," Saker said, barely more than a mumble. His wings started to relax, and with a sigh he lowered his right wing to the side in invitation.

"Very." I moved so I was next to him – the translation would keep – and lay down on his wing, between the first rib

and his body.

He sighed again, a soft sound, then wrapped arm and wing around me, tucking me against his side.

I placed my limbs with care for his wounds, much as we'd slept last night, and nestled my head against his shoulder, my hand over his heart. "Sleep, *ledaji*," I told him. "I'll be here when you wake."

Saker fell asleep in minutes, his body's energy devoted to healing the damage that remained. I was tired enough from my intermittent sleep that it didn't take long for me to drift off, either. My dreams were soft and strange, full of longing and loneliness. Figures drifted into and out of the dream like ghosts, wearing the faces of my friends and lovers.

Jace laughed and held my hand, her fingers slipping out of mine as she turned and stepped into a sea of grass. I made love to Qavan under the bright noonday sun in a doe's bower, riding him with my head lifted up to the sky, feeling nothing but sunlight on my face. I looked down and buried my fingers in the thick white fur of the bright crown star of Tarandrus as we raced for the sky, and closed my eyes as he dissolved into starlight. I lifted my face and saw myself, the green eyes I'd once possessed framed with wet dark lashes, silver tears running down my cheeks. We reached out, lacing our fingers into each other's thick hair, and kissed, tasting salt and sorrow.

The fingers stroking down my arm resolved into solid touch: Saker's hands, pulling me out of the dream. My face was damp with tears, and my throat tight with sorrow. His long

fingers brushed along my shoulder and upper arm, and his nose and lips were against my hair, as he made little sounds of comfort. I shivered and pressed up closer to him, and then it was his turn to kiss me on the forehead.

“Bad dreams?” he asked.

I could feel how tired Saker still was, the lassitude that dragged at him even while he lifted me out of sleep. For a moment, I felt what it would be like, to tilt my face up and kiss him, to wrap myself around him and chase away the ghosts. I could hear the way he’d breathe, the sharp inhale he’d make when my mouth touched his. The way he’d moan. I shivered, and pressed my cheek against his warm skin.

“Sad ones,” I said. “Lonely ones.” I reached up and wiped away the tears with the back of my hand. “Did I wake you?”

“I was already awake,” my familiar said, giving me the gentle lie, even knowing that I would know.

I wanted to cry at the sweetness of it, of having everything I’d ever wanted given to me like a curse. *Marry me, marry me, marry me...*

Wait.

I blinked, my lashes sweeping across Saker’s skin, and I remembered what it had been like, when we’d—what it had been like, this morning. As if I’d been in two places at once, feeling his body and emotions as keenly as my own. And we’d been lying here, for hours, skin-to-skin, asleep.

“We’re all tangled up,” I murmured to myself.

My incubus reached over and brushed the hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear. “I have no respite from you,” he replied.

I tensed, gnawing guilt building in my chest.

“Nor do I need any,” Saker said, his voice terribly gentle, offering absolution. He paused, his fingers still stroking my arm, and I could feel him gathering the strength to say something more.

“Don’t,” I said, before he could continue, feeling like whatever was going to come next should stay unvoiced, at least for now.

He sighed and brushed his nose against my hair before settling back on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m doing my best.”

“I know,” Saker said, and despite his control, I could hear the soft quaver behind it. “*Ledaji*, I know.”

20

LONGING

SAKER

“**W**hat was it like?” she asked at last, her voice quiet and sad. “When you heard me calling?” I closed my eyes, those memories flashing through me again, brutality paired with supplication. I touched the bandage on my throat, covering all that remained of the stab wound that should have ended what little was left of my life.

Rain was so self-contained, a ship cutting straight and clean across the waves, with a path and destination. I’d been drowning, and she’d rescued me, when no one else had even wanted me. *I am going to fall in love with you*, I wanted to say – to warn her, or perhaps to plead with her, I wasn’t sure which – and she was right not to want to hear it. I inhaled, breathing in her scent, and locked this away with the rest of my sorrows.

“Soft,” I said, “And warm. For a moment, I knew everything in your heart, and you were holding out your hand.” I smiled, an expression as quiet and sad as her question, remembering that timeless moment and the vivid, beautiful

soul who had offered herself to me. “Then I grabbed your hand with the desperation of a dying man, and you yanked me out of hell. Not exactly the wedding you were dreaming of, was it?”

21

THE POET AND THE PRINCESS

RAIN

I wanted to cry again, this time tears of my own. I took a deep breath instead, pushing the emotion away.

“When I was a little girl, I used to daydream that I was a changeling princess, you know,” I told him. “I was going to turn sixteen, and the most beautiful elf prince in the world was going to come riding through a shining gate, and he was going to hold out his hand and lift me onto his horse behind him, and ride off with me. The baker’s son Marty was going to weep and mourn and throw himself in front of the horse, realizing how much he’d loved me all this time, and we were going to ride right over him and back into Fairyland and be married in front of all the elves in a field of wildflowers. It all looked remarkably like the wedding Nanse Smith had when I was eight, Nanse being gorgeous and blonde and the worshipful center of my young life.” I pushed myself up and rested my elbow on the bed, propping up my head on my hand.

“Do elves even have horses?” Saker asked, levity warring with his solemn expression.

“They sure do not,” I said. “Nor do they have princes and princesses. It was all very silly.” I quirked up the corners of my mouth at him, in something akin to a smile. “That’s the only wedding I’ve ever dreamed of, Saker. Those dreams died for me while I held the Fallen Star in that field. Did you know it took them seven hours to find me?”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. I wasn’t surprised it hadn’t made it into the stories; it didn’t look great for the Monitors that they hadn’t been able to pinpoint the location of a newly-manifested sorcerer for seven hours, even if she *was* in the Barrens.

“I finished binding it eighteen seconds before dawn, and if it had been any later, I think it would have gotten free again. I was in a coma for almost three months, afterwards. You can read about it, if you want. I brought down a couple of my journals for you,” I added, pointing over at the chair I’d left them on.

“I don’t understand,” he said, after a moment. “Why tell me this?”

“Because it feels like you think you’ve robbed me of something, and you haven’t,” I said. “We were both caught unprepared, and it’s going to take a little while for everything to shake out, but... you do realize that you’re basically a summoner’s wet dream, right?”

And, gods and goddesses, he laughed, bright and clear, and the haze of sorrow cleared away at the sunlight in his voice. I

smiled at him, broad and glad, and he smiled back with the uninjured side of his mouth.

“Not a dream, summoner,” he said, then flicked his tongue out at me between two fingers in an extremely crude gesture. “I’ll make you wet anytime you like.”

My smile broadened to a grin, and I walked my fingers up his bare chest to flick him on the chin. “Now that’s more like it, incubus,” I said. “It’s been a grand total of, what, twenty-four hours since you regained consciousness? And you’ve spent most of that sleeping in my bed?”

“Not your bed,” he said with a smirk, a low purr in his voice. “Though I won’t complain if you move me there.”

“It’s taller, the privy’s further, and the tub’s smaller,” I retorted, raising a brow.

He wrinkled his nose, his forehead furrowing. “I take it back,” Saker said, putting on a prissy tone of voice. “You should move here, instead.”

I laughed and grabbed his nose between two fingers, giving his head a little shake before releasing him. “The point I’m trying to make, my darling familiar, is that I am only overwhelmed *right now*. Give me a couple days to catch up to my good fortune.”

I rested my fingers on his strong chest, and Saker reached up, capturing my hand with his own. Slowly, as if he was afraid I would yank out of his touch, he slid his fingers

between mine, until our palms rested against each other. His soul twined around mine, full of fear and longing.

“*Yi’nikelu, menai aderegulih?*” I asked him, a line from a tragic Abyssal love-poem. *What have they done to you, my cherished one?*

His eyes fluttered closed, and I leaned forwards, over him, until our foreheads were resting against each other and our noses were brushing. I stayed there as the minutes ticked past, just breathing with him, feeling his turmoil in the depths of my soul. At last he shifted, taking a breath and relaxing.

“Sword and flame have ravaged me, and the black hounds were loosed against me,” he recited in Abyssal, then opened his eyes, looking up at me with a soft smile. “But what care have I for them, when I am in your arms?”

I smiled back in surprise, then rubbed my nose against his. “You’ve read T’shaelah,” I said, with a touch of wonder.

He touched my cheek with the backs of his fingers, sliding his hand back and down to rest on my neck. “I like poetry,” Saker replied. His thumb swept against my jaw. “When I was a child, I would memorize it, and recite it to the animals as I did my chores. I was going to become a famous poet, so my parents would realize what a terrible thing they had done, and we could be a family again.” His voice went dreamy and his gaze distant as he said it. Then he smiled, a wistful expression, and focused on my face again. “Foolish, I know.”

“No more foolish than me, *ledaji*. Princess, poet, what’s the difference?” I asked, and kissed him on the nose before lying

back down next to him, still holding his hand.

He turned his head to look at me, a hesitant smile on his face.

I flashed my own smile at him. “Though, while my mother may still have the princess crown I wore for a solid year and a half, if any evidence of your early poetic proclivities still exists, I’m willing to bet it’s much, much more embarrassing.”

“Don’t you dare,” he said, his eyes widening.

“Ooh, now I have to,” I said, in as sultry a voice as I could muster.

Saker growled, a deep animal snarl that made my adrenaline spike and the hair on the back of my neck and arms stand up. His mouth spread in a satisfied smile as I let out a nervous laugh, and he did the slow blink of a happy cat. Well, that was fucking terrifying. And also... kind of hot. The image of Saker holding me down, with his predator’s teeth on my throat, flashed into my head, and I definitely liked it. Wow. Huh. They say you learn something new every day.

“I’m going to instead go fetch dinner,” I squeaked out, trying to quash the direction of my thoughts before Saker caught wind of them. “And a double of whiskey to stiffen my spine, Tissit Kalar.”

He laughed, low and pleased, and released my hand. “How do you like your kitty-cat now?” he asked, his voice a caress.

Ah, shit, he totally knew. Oh well. I decided I might as well lean into it, at this point.

“Gonna be thinking about his teeth later tonight,” I said in my most casual tone of voice as I sat up, trailing my fingers across the sheets over his hips and thighs.

His tail waved beneath the blankets, and I could feel the plume of it poofing up through our soul-bond. I slowly turned my head to give him an arch look, raising my eyebrows. Saker had pushed himself up on his elbows, and his mouth was open enough that I could see the points of his canines. His chest moved in a fashion a romantic might have called “heaving”.

“Cruel,” he breathed out.

I smiled, as slow and satisfied as he had, and got out of bed.

I spent a while brainstorming with Marin about things we could feed Saker, while petting wobbling kittens and getting washed by their dam. My cook seemed rather charmed by the whole thing, and I appreciated the lack of commentary on him being an incubus. Together, we put together a taster-tray with a range of interesting meats that might appeal to him: a whole plucked songbird, thin-sliced venison, snake medallions, eel fry, a rabbit haunch, bear cheek, oxtail, and a pheasant neck. Marin added a few other things: some mixed grains cooked in beef broth, a small wedge of oiled black bread, a sliced pear, and a little vase with edible flowers “for fun.”

By the time we had Saker’s meal put together, the meal for the three humans was complete, and Marin doled me out a bowl of hearty split-pea soup, together with some rye bread and a crystal glass full of candied rose petals. There was no way both meals were going to fit on one tray – we’d used one

of the larger serving trays when putting together Saker's alone – and Marin offered to help me carry the food up.

I eyed her, trying to decide if I wanted to expose my staff to an incubus, before deciding that we'd have to rip off that particular bandage at some point. "Incubus lust auras affect everything about a person, not just their body, so you're not going to be immune," I warned her. "Ever been in a room with one before?"

She shook her head, looking a touch embarrassed. "Most people don't have such opportunities, magus."

"I know." I paused for a moment, then decided to be blunt. No reason to sugarcoat. "It's like walking into a room and coming face-to-face with the sexiest person you've ever seen," I said, giving her a wry look. "Worse even than being a teenager around your crush. The first time is always brutal. You're probably going to want to climb him like a tree."

Marin shook her head again. "We're going to need to meet him eventually," she said in an echo of my own thoughts, her voice steady. "There's no reason to protect me from seeing him."

"I know," I said, a feeling of warmth for my friend's dedication spreading through my chest. "Just wanted to make sure you knew what you were getting into. Shall we?"

She smiled at me, then picked up my tray of food. "After you, magus."

I gave her a faux-serious expression and a grave nod, picking up Saker's tray and heading for the transport ring. I took her up with me, then glanced over at her as the doors resolved around us.

Her lips were twitching. "You never moved him out of the boyfriend suite?"

"Do *not* call it that in front of him," I said, giving her a pained look. "Moving grievously injured people isn't exactly easy, you know, and it's not like an incubus is going to be bothered by sex furniture."

"It might give him the wrong idea, magus," she replied, smiling in a way that suggested she was trying very hard not to laugh. "After all, a familiar serves his mage in whatever ways he can..."

"We've already had that little discussion, thank you very much," I said, trying to hold onto any scrap of dignity I had left while also trying not to remember how very hot it had been to have Saker pinning me to the bed, looking at me like he wanted to devour me. "Let's just go feed him the regular way, alright? You ready?"

"I'm as ready as I can be," she said, still smiling.

I balanced Saker's tray on one arm and opened the door, letting us in. Saker had been drowsing, but he blinked sleepily at me as I brightened the lights. He came all the way awake when Marin stepped into the room, his chin lifting and lips parting. The eye-glow that showed when he fed off of lust

gilded his long black lashes as he ran his eyes down across her body.

“Breathe, Marin,” I said out of the corner of my mouth.

She audibly swallowed before letting out the breath she’d been holding, sounding shaky.

My familiar switched his gaze over to me with a self-satisfied smirk. “*Ledaji*, when you said you were fetching dinner, I didn’t think you meant a beautiful feast of a woman,” the incubus said, his voice in a low growling purr that had no doubt caused many, many people to drop their pants.

“Saker, meet Marin. Marin, this is Saker, my familiar.” I tried to keep my voice calm and unaffected rather than laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation, which wouldn’t be very fair to Marin.

The woman stood stock-still, not even breathing. Her eyes stayed fixed on his face in what looked like a concerted effort not to ogle his bare chest, which was a sight worth ogling even without incubus lust involved.

“Marin is our cook and quartermaster,” I said, giving him a warning look. “She’s the most senior member of Barixeor’s residents, unless you count the water-horse.” I’d gotten the impression from him that he didn’t use his lust aura to take advantage of people, but the reminder wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“It’s good to meet you, Marin,” Saker said, his voice shifting to a more conversational pitch. “Thank you for your attention to my meals. I’ll ask the magus to write down for you

the things I can eat, and I'm certain I'll like what you prepare for me.”

She made herself move, taking a breath and bowing to him before walking over to the small breakfast table next to the bed to set down the tray with my food. “Magus Leyweaver and I put together a tasting tray for you this evening, magus,” she said, her words measured and calm.

“Call me Saker,” he said, smiling over at her. “Please.”

“Saker,” she replied, almost breathing out the word with an expression that looked yearning.

One corner of his mouth kicked up a little higher and he inhaled slowly, his eyes closing into pleased slits. I walked over to set his food down alongside mine, then flicked him on the wing. He opened his eyes and gave me an innocent expression, the tip of his tail flipping up where it hung off the side of the bed. Given what he was, and the fact that I could feel how pleased he was with himself seeping through our soul-bond, it was not a particularly convincing attempt.

Marin took a step back from the bed, looking over at me with a questioning expression.

I flashed her what I hoped was an encouraging smile. “Thanks for the help, Marin,” I said. “We should be good for now.”

She bowed towards the two of us. “Very well, magus,” she said. “Saker.” Her voice wavered a little on his name, but my cook kept it together and left as if nothing was the matter.

When she closed the door behind her, Saker leaned back and smirked, lacing his fingers together over his chest.

“Pleased with yourself?” I asked, amused with him.

“Relieved, I suppose,” he said with a laugh, reaching out with his wing to brush my side with it. “It’s good to know you’re the only one immune to my charms.”

I gave him an incredulous look, raising my brows up as high as they went. “‘Immune’?” I asked, then relaxed my face into a half-smile. “What happened to ‘lightning and summer wine’? You do plenty well with your non-incubus merits, you know.”

Saker smiled at me, an expression that bordered on sappy, and wrapped his tail around my calf. “I’m glad you think so,” he said, his voice dropping into a lower register. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s been in a position to say something like that.”

“Or mean it, at least,” I said with a soft laugh. I ran the backs of my fingers down his wing, enjoying the physical contact almost as much as he did.

My familiar relaxed into the touch, his wing folding back down against his side as he started to purr, the sound quiet enough that it was barely at the edge of my hearing.

“You must have had a nice drowse,” I said, smiling down at him as I stroked the warm skin of his wing.

“Mmm,” Saker said through his purr, then inhaled and looked up at me with a fond expression. “It was a better

rouse.”

I barked out a laugh at that. “Alright, poet,” I said. “Let’s get you up. Hungry enough to eat yet, or should we do the rest of your bandages first?”

Before replying, Saker yawned like a cat, ears going back, eye closing, and jaw opening to an astonishing degree. Several ells of black tongue unfurled and curled up before he snapped his mouth shut, making a few little pleased *myep myep* sounds as he resettled everything. I started giggling, helpless to stop myself, while said cat gave me a puzzled look. This, of course, only made me laugh harder, until I had to slide down the edge of the bed to sit on the floor, laughing until I cried, and holding Saker’s tail so he’d stop flicking it in my face.

“Raaaiiiiiin,” he caterwauled, “Raaaaaaaaiiin.”

I realized he’d been calling my name for a while. “Whaaaaat,” I called back to him, imitating his voice, as I tried to get myself under control.

“Stop laaaaaaughing,” Saker replied, which only started it all up again.

At last I managed to stop, but not before I was breathless and with aching ribs. I released Saker, who immediately wrapped his tail around my face, making me splutter as I tried to spit hair out of my mouth. This only managed to get more hair in my mouth, and I was forced to drag his tail away from my face so I could talk without getting a mouthful of black fur.

“It has been a long fucking day,” I said, my voice light with humor. “Food or bandages, kitty-cat?”

“Baaaaandages,” he called, in that same sing-song voice.

I held up one finger above the bed, wagging it at him. “Don’t get me started again,” I warned him, grinning, then heaved myself to my feet, brushing off my pants.

Saker’s wounds were healing nicely. The arrow-wounds were closing cleanly, and though the claw-slashes were swollen, they didn’t look infected. I cleaned his skin next to the wounds, hopefully helping to keep him from getting any rashes or itching, and replaced the bandages with new ones.

I drew him into conversation about poetry as I tended to him, mostly asking leading questions and letting him ramble about different authors and poems. He recited a few of his shorter favorites, and I commented when I recognized names. I was hardly well-versed in abyssal poets, but along with T’shaelah I did know a couple of the more famous ones, and Saker seemed shyly delighted every time I had something to say.

I helped him to and from the privy, and then we laughed our way through him trying everything on the tasting tray. He ate it all, though sometimes with strange faces. Snake and eel were not favorites, but he loved the songbird and pheasant and was intrigued by the bear. None of the meat on the Material Plane was familiar to him; while people did import food between planes, it was an expensive process mostly restricted to delicacies or fancy alcohol. Though mages tended to make

good money, Saker admitted that he mostly gave his away. He was cagey about why or to whom, so I let the topic drop, not interested in forcing anything.

We did take the time to write out a list of what he could eat for Marin. A lot of was as I'd guessed; he was a carnivore by nature, and needed a mostly-raw whole-animal diet. Some of that had to be roughage, too; he said he was happy to eat small animals skin-on—fur, feathers, and all. Despite my polite face he must have picked up on my visceral disgust through our bond, and offered that whole grain or fibrous plants worked, too. There were also some nutrients that were more common in abyssal meat than mortal – sulfur and copper being major ones – so he'd need supplements of some kind.

It came out, too, that he couldn't taste sugar of any kind—sweet just wasn't a flavor he could ever experience. Of course, I then had him use my sense of taste while I ate my candied petals, and got to laugh myself sick at the series of expressions on his face: confusion, horror, and traumatized disgust, all in a row. It was like watching someone bite into a fancy soap, expecting a confection.

Saker was worn out again by the time we finished food, so I collected my work supplies and the dishes we'd accumulated, moving them to the study, then got him settled back into bed. A few lascivious comments later and he was falling asleep, with the sort of clinginess of a tired child who didn't want to be alone. It was far too early for me to go to bed, especially with an hours-long nap under my belt, but I stayed and sang lullabies to my familiar until he was fast asleep, then

untangled my fingers from his and went back out into my world.

22

THINKING TOO MUCH

RAIN

Keeping busy was a long-running habit to keep myself from obsessing over the things that I couldn't change. I brought the dishes down to the kitchen, though Marin shooed me away from the sink before I started washing them. She was well-used to my nervous tics after a decade of dealing with me, so she sat down with me and walked through the list Saker and I had put together, then took me into food storage to walk me through the various things we had available, which to my surprise actually included a significant selection of abyssal meats.

Thinking about how he'd reacted to the various things we'd put on his plate this evening, I suggested to Marin that she peruse some of the abyssal import catalogs for small birds, especially whole. I didn't mind the cost in the short term; unlike Saker, I had a tendency to hoard my money, and when I spent it I usually went for luxuries like good food. In the long run, I could buy direct from people on the Abyssal Plane and

do the summoning myself, but for now, money could take the place of setting up those sorts of contacts.

Even after all that, I had enough nervous energy to burn off that I decided to spend the rest of the evening reading about the four animals Saker shared forms with. It was a toss-up if any of the information would actually tell me anything about him, of course. Natures were tricky things to pin down, and though sapient creatures with non-sapient forms pulled from a grab-bag of animal instincts and traits, they were also still people, and thus complicated and prone to individuality. That would especially be true with a demon. I was more used to the mortal world, but material power leaned into stability, and mortal shapeshifters were more closely linked to their animal forms than any other flavor of shapeshifter.

Still, though, it gave me somewhere to start with him, and maybe I'd recognize things as they came up. At the very least, the act of doing research gave me a sense of control over a situation I had pretty much no control over, and that helped keep me from freaking out about it.

Linsang turned out to be nocturnal, tree-dwelling cats. They looked something like a small leopard that someone had stretched like taffy, with long necks, flexible backs, and elegant tails. Unlike Saker, linsang tended to be shy and solitary, living alone in the deep forest and denning in hollow trees. They were hunters, though, which given my summons I knew Saker also had to be, with a voracious appetite for small mammals and birds.

I remembered some things about krocutex from Fulgrim's *Bestiary*, but it didn't hurt to look them up again. They were gorgeous dragons with a mammalian appearance, wearing fur instead of scales and often depicted wreathed in a corona of flame. The larger, more powerful females led their social groups, which worked like an extended clan more than a pack of strangers, and they were intensely monogamous. One author compared them to swans, describing how individuals almost never re-mated if their pair-bond died, and how some even died of sorrow.

The thought made me uncomfortable—even though we weren't mates, Saker would easily outlive me, and I didn't want him to spend the rest of his likely very long life pining for me. I was human, with a human lifespan. Mourning your beloved for a thousand years sounded very tragic and romantic in poetry, but in real life it seemed like an awful fate for someone.

I moved on, leaving krocutex behind for simpler grounds.

Cats, of course, were cats: curious, clever, and sociable animals, with a penchant for mischief and getting where they weren't wanted. In feral colonies, the toms were randy and aggressive, roaming between social groups, while the queens tended to form close-knit societies and share their duties together. I'd asked for a cat, so I had reason to hope that Saker's nature lay more closely aligned to cats than anything else. Cats were adaptable and independent creatures, along with their other winning traits. Surely a cat would be able to

shake off even a half-century of connection, and live his life after mine.

I growled at myself for dwelling on the grim future and shoved aside the book, returning to Fulgrim to go look at handsome illustrations of echnumon. I loved the little creatures. They were so playful and fun, bringing a brightness into the room while they poked around through alchemical equipment and devoured the sorts of poisons that could fell titans, like gleeful children shoving candy into their mouths. Saker seemed playful, too, with an easy smile and beautiful laugh.

I rested my fingers on a picture of an echnumon holding a scorpion in its mouth, remembering my franticness as I tried and failed to sedate Saker with the oral medication. He was so much more than I'd anticipated, in a thousand ways, but I'd always been able to shift and find new places to stand. The tidal wave of displacement was starting to ebb, and being able to actually interact with him was helping so much.

Marin had been right, as she so often was right. Obsessing about Saker while he'd been unconscious hadn't done me any favors, and obsessing about him now, while he slept the sleep of the exhausted, probably wasn't helping me, either.

With a sigh, I closed the book and went about re-shelving everything I'd pulled in the past four days, finishing after midnight and going up to the Spirekeeper's suite to sit and stare moodily out across the landscape. The stars twinkled, diamonds settled in their velvet bed, but the sight of them had

long since lost its comfort. I remembered the feel of their power, blasting through me like cold lightning, a bolt of impossible light blazing through me from Tarandrus to Jace, leaving me nothing but a mindless conduit swept away by the power of the Starry Host. I had power – so much power – and I was insignificant compared to even a single star. Against the fey force of the full night sky, I was less than nothing.

Sometimes it felt nice to know that the universe was so much grander than Spires and sorcerers. The stars and shadows were ancient and unfathomable powers, as much greater than even the strongest of mages as leviathans were to the fishing sloops drifting across the surface of the ocean. People had worshiped them, once. Some still did. But I'd spoken to the stars, and they called me a friend.

I'd saved a constellation from the void, and I would be remembered until the stars themselves died. But everything dies, even stars, and one day even the night sky would be dark.

I sighed and turned away from the window. Dwelling on the past wouldn't help me any more than dwelling on the future would. The world was now: the demon sleeping with his soul twined around mine, a woman outside time trying to remember how to be human, a minotaur working late into the night, a gardener resting beneath the waves of a lake with the elemental who loved her. It was the vast spreading distance of the Material Plane all around me, a world full of people who didn't even know they depended on me. Sleep beckoned, and I chose to answer, falling into dreams of flight and endless light.

23

PAPERWORK

RAIN

There were things that had to be done before I went to my quarterly meeting with the Triumvirate, even though I was still unable to channel any sort of power. All of it boiled down to paperwork, an endless task necessary for keeping the wheels of bureaucracy turning. Nobody actually liked doing the stuff, but even I enjoyed the outcomes, relying on things like the sorcerer records or the reports from the Monitors to do my job. The price of up-to-date ley-maps and mage censuses was being diligent to do my part, so I might as well deal with it.

I spent the next day mostly in bed with Saker, putting together a thorough description of what had happened with details from the both of us. He sounded ashamed when he described how he'd hooked onto my summoning spell, but I was honestly pretty impressed. Even with my strength and the abyssal power of the Tsirisma Confluence involved, he had to be very sensitive to magic to have even been able to detect the touch of my spell while in the midst of battle.

It was kind of fun to talk about it all, even, describing my side of a familiar-calling to a fascinated Saker, along with the aftermath of fixing his wounds. He got very quiet when I talked about healing his wings, then suggested that I write down the lullabies that I'd used as part of my report. After all, he said, even a single powerful spell could carve a pattern in the ley worth following, and wings like his were difficult to repair in the best of circumstances.

We included everything we could think of, and I took it to the library to transcribe into the Spire records. Reciting the whole event, from my emotional state to the dramatic light-show of the spell to the brutality of saving Saker's life, left me feeling shaky from the impossibility of it all. The confluence of events that had led to Saker and I being soul-bonded felt like something out of an epic tale from the beginning of the world, not the sort of thing that could actually happen to someone. Yet here I was, with an incubus sorcerer as a familiar, one who didn't begrudge me for his fate.

Was it simply randomness, a momentary alignment of our lives that changed everything for us forever? Or was it the hands of the gods bringing us together for reasons neither of us would ever be able to fathom?

I supposed it didn't matter. All that ought to matter so far as the Spire records were concerned was that it hadn't been something we'd done on purpose, and that trying to force something like this would be a fool's errand. I left a strongly-worded conclusion to that effect in the book, then shelved it and pulled out the sorcerer records.

Nobody was likely to read my ongoing records for Barixeor Spire; even people like Rillian, who had far too much interest in my life, weren't pulling down the records to check up on me with any regularity. Honestly, they were unlikely to be read until someone learned that I had Saker as my familiar, at which point all hell would break loose and I'd be unable to escape the pointed interest.

The sorcerer records were used often, though, and I wasn't prepared for every mage and half-cocked historian to descend upon me, so I kept my documentation of Saker to a minimum. Since he was living in Barixeor Spire with me, I couldn't exactly put in a one-liner, but I listed him as an abyssal demon with a ley impact of 7.14, named his forms and provided a physical description of his incubus shape, and finished by saying, *"As a krocutex dragon, Saker possesses a strong affinity for fire and his innate power burn-off is hot flame. He is a talented war-mage who served as a mercenary in the Achaean-Valmari War."*

That would be enough to pass muster, and nobody had any reason for further scrutiny. I was one of the two mages tasked with handling the aftermath of the fall of Tarandrus, and I was the one using abyssal power for it (hence being Barixeor's Spirekeeper); summoning an abyssal sorcerer as an assistant, even a war-mage, wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

Probably I could have gotten away with informing the Oculus in person when we met in a few days, but there were protocols for notifying the Monitors about long-term visitors, and I might as well not spend any of my goodwill with Vanya,

so I diligently followed the rules. Like every Spire, Barixeor possessed a series of mailboxes, a luxury I greatly appreciated. They were breadbox-sized objects with entangled ley to their compatriot boxes, allowing anything placed inside to be teleported to the other side. When the Spires had been built, they'd been equipped with a mailbox for every other Spire; they also had connections to a variety of other useful locations, including the Monitor Hub.

I wrote up a brief report for the Monitors, repeating all the information I'd put in the sorcerer records and adding some other relevant information—that I'd been the one to summon Saker, that he would be remaining on the Material Plane for the foreseeable future, and that I'd yoked us together so that my mage-oaths would compel me to hold him to them. It was all true, though somewhat misleading, but it would keep the Monitors off my back, and I thought the Oculus would be tickled when she found out I'd yoked Saker by making him my familiar.

The next couple days fell into an easy pattern. In the morning, I would help Saker through his morning ablutions and get him settled back in bed with something to do—mostly reading, though he also asked for some notebooks to write in, which I gave him. Then I'd leave him to his own devices for a couple hours, more for my sake than for his, and go work in the forge on pieces for sale. I didn't ask if he was actually reading the journals I'd brought down that first day, not really wanting to discuss anything in them, but I did bring the rest of

them down and leave them on his bedside table for him, and they did shift positions from day to day.

Once I showered off the sweat and soot, I'd join my familiar for lunch, then work on my Blackwings research while he slept next to me. Saker, if anything, got more cuddly as the days passed, and my constant sense of his presence and emotions and the way physical contact soothed him combined to make me feel completely comfortable while he slept halfway on top of me. We still only barely knew each other, but he felt like my close friend, and I found myself almost painfully grateful to the soul-bond for that gift every time he woke, blinking his sleep-hazed golden eyes up at me with a look of adoring relief on his face.

I could never have borne that look from a stranger. But from a friend? Someone whose longings and fears soaked into me like honey, whose warmth and touch felt like they belonged to me? That I could survive. I could even enjoy it, as long as I could flash him a grin and slip away from adoration to casual companionship in a heartbeat. I liked that Saker's life with me was so much better than his old one that to discover it wasn't a dream filled him with that kind of happiness, time after time. As a child, I'd helped bees out of troughs and carried spiders outside before my mother could see them, and I'd never outgrown those impulses. Being a rescuer was a part of who I was.

Usually he woke up sometime in the mid-afternoon, and since he was confined to bed, we had to figure out a variety of sedentary activities to do together. Sometimes we discussed

my research or spellcrafting, but more often we played boardgames. The incubus liked strategy games, and once I taught him how to play the war-game taq, proceeded to trounce me in three matches out of four. I managed to keep my edge over him with card and dicing games—Saker’s grasp on interpersonal strategy was phenomenal, but he didn’t have a great head for probabilities and math.

Marin concocted different dinners for him each night, so that we could refine his palate when it came to mortal meats, and I did his bandages in the evening before putting him to bed. He needed to sleep a lot, and by seven or eight in the evening he was usually fast asleep, and stayed asleep until late in the morning. Though he didn’t ask it of me, I always stayed with him in the evenings as he faded, brushing his hair for him with his head in my lap. Saker fell asleep with an ease I wouldn’t have expected, as if my presence chased away every shadow.

The night before I had to go give my report to the Triumvirate, Saker had restless dreams, enough that they pulled the both of us from sleep, our hearts pounding. I wasn’t sure if we shared dreams or only the feelings of those dreams, but mine had been full of blood and flame, and I knew his had to be equally as bad. I’d always crawled into bed with my sister Sunny when I’d had nightmares as a child, and though I was long past those days, the impulse remained, and I decided to give into it.

When I stepped into the bedroom on 52 Sky, Saker pushed himself up, looking towards me. “Rain,” he said, his voice

quavering with relief.

“Hey,” I said softly, coming over. I sat on the bed next to him, looking down at the shape of his face in the darkness. It felt so foolish to be here, sitting next to a man I’d known for only a few days to seek out comfort like a child, but I still asked, “Nightmares?”

“Memories.” Saker hesitated – I felt him hesitate – then reached up to touch my face with his warm fingers. “Could you stay with me?”

He could have been asking for himself, or he could have been asking for me. I didn’t know, and I decided not to care. I wanted to chase away the pain, and whatever comforted one of us comforted the both of us. Touching Saker felt like basking in the sun, as if every care could drift away from the heat of his body radiating into mine.

“Yes, please,” I said in a small voice, then clambered over him and got under the covers. Stupid, this was stupid, what the hell was I even doing—

Saker tugged me against his body with his wing and arm, so that I curled up against his side with my head on his shoulder and my arm across his chest. He covered my fingers with his hand, then turned his face and pressed a warm kiss against my forehead. It was as if he cast a spell on me, all of the fear and shakiness falling away to be replaced with a feeling of being *safe*, as if I’d crawled into my sister’s bed after all, instead of that of an incubus.

I started crying, unable to help it, the tears falling out of my eyes silently as I choked back the sobs, wanting so badly to possess that protection from the world—from the scars the world had left on me, deep inside my soul. But there's no escaping yourself, no matter how far and fast you run. The things you are, the things you've done... they're always there with you.

He started singing to me, crooning an abyssal lullaby to me, one about silver rain washing away tears, and how in the shadows of the clouds the lights can find love. I'd come for the comfort I knew a familiar could give, and Saker gave it to me without hesitation, answering my loneliness with the warmth of his company. The sound of his voice and the comfort of his touch washed away even the memory of nightmares, and I fell asleep again in his arms.

24

LULLABIES

SAKER

I would never have expected Rain Leyweaver to be troubled by nightmares. All the stories I'd heard about her had painted her as some awesome force of nature, a woman who rescued stars and read the ley like a favorite book. She was famous, implacable, someone to be admired from afar instead of spoken to like a companion.

She treated me like a beloved friend, giving me things I'd never once had in my life, letting me sleep next to her and spending each day by my side. For the first time since I'd come into my power, I had a friend, and I didn't know how to have such a thing. I was an *incubus*. Cubari had families, but mine had thrown me away. They had lovers, but not from any emotional connection. They didn't have friends, not the way others did. And yet Rain treated me like one, as if I might know what to do or how to answer that casual affection.

She came to me, in the dark of the night, my remembered pain infesting her dreams, and wanted the comfort of my touch.

I didn't know how to comfort someone, but I remembered what it had been like growing up under the priests of Xazan, and how I'd soothed creatures in pain then. To compare this incredible woman to a dog who'd been abandoned by her family, or a broken-legged kitten in need of care, was a laughable thing. But when she started crying the sort of silent tears I remembered from so many years of weeping where no one could find me, I could do nothing else but try.

I sang to her as I stroked her hair, the way I'd sung to so many lost and frightened animals. I sang the first thing that came to mind, a lullaby I'd learned as a boy, sung from a mother to her children while I sat on the windowsill in the evenings, a stray black kitten not worth scaring off.

*When the cold rain falls, don't cry
Silver carries tears away*

*When the dark clouds come, don't weep
Silver puts the world to sleep*

*When the shadows grow, don't fear
Silver brings our lovers near*

*See the gray beneath the clouds?
See the bright lights coming out?*

Smell the dust between the rain

Silver draws us close again

Rain fell asleep, her tears on my skin, and I sang it again, as much for myself as her. Answering tears burned at the corners of my eyes, but I didn't let them fall. She'd already done so much for me. The least I could do in return was to be someone she could come to without fearing that I would beg for more.

I drowsed off and on for the next few hours, until the daylight streamed in through the windows and Rain started shifting. She had a moment of confusion as she woke, her sense of displacement drifting into me, and I closed my eyes as the pressure of her waking mind grew, relaxing into the sensation. Rain was a forest fire of power, a blaze wrapped around me and spreading out from inside of me, as if I was nothing more than a copse of trees being consumed in the flame.

She could have overwhelmed me, taking hold of everything I was and wielding me like a tool, but she never did. I never even got the sense that she considered such a thing, as if my will was a sacrosanct thing, even after I'd given her my whole self so that I might live. Rain had total command over me, and yet she didn't even ask to use it, let alone do so. She treated me as if I was a friend and guest, instead of something she possessed. I didn't know how to respond to that, except by pretending I knew how to be such a creature.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” I said, putting a bit of a flirtatious purr into the words. “Looks like you’re the sleepy one today.” My tail flicked automatically, sweeping across her bare leg where it still rested between mine. I turned my attention away from her body, but not soon enough. Her sense of touch hovered in my awareness, like a halo of sensation around my own skin. I was used to feeling magic like the touch of warmth, but feeling the heat of my body soaking into hers and the soft press of my fur and skin against her strong thigh...

It sent desire like lightning through me, heat pooling in my groin and shimmering along my skin. My body temperature rose, arousal drawing me closer to my krocutex flame, but Rain didn’t seem to notice, as comfortable with that heat playing on her skin as she’d been asleep next to me.

“I usually don’t sleep at all after nightmares,” she admitted, covering a yawn with one hand. “I’m kind of shocked I did.”

I dragged myself away from desire, leaning into the calming sensation of her sleepy contentedness before my emotions could seep through the mental blocks she had in place to keep from feeling them. “Well, I’m very good in bed,” I said, the joke falling off my tongue without thinking.

Rain seemed more comfortable with my habitual flirtation than she had been at first, because all she did was smirk and flick me on the nose like a naughty kitten. “I can’t imagine people usually do much sleeping when they get into bed with

you,” she said with the lilt of a tease. “Seems like you’d have an entirely different skillset.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.” I flashed her a smile, then flicked my tail against her leg in a deliberate bid for attention. “Ready for the morning, or do you want to stay in bed with me all day?” It was a foolish desire, but I asked anyway. Rain already spent far more time with me than she needed to; I would be willing to bet that lying in bed with an incubus plastered to one’s side wasn’t exactly an excellent way to get research done, and she’d said that she wasn’t even working on any of her actual tasks.

She opened her mouth to reply, something I was sure would be bright and teasing, but then she caught herself, and her face fell. “Shit, it’s the fifteenth.” Rain rolled off of me with a groan, leaving my skin feeling her absence in a chilly after-image. “Ishkaia’s tits, I’ve got to go deal with the fucking Tri.”

“The Tri?” I asked, curious and a little concerned. Had I gotten her into trouble?

“Euch.” Rain dragged out the sound of disgust, then shook her head before turning her face to look over at me. “The Triumvirate—the Archmage, Oculus, and Mage-Seneschal. They’re the center of mage governance on Material. The Archmage oversees the University and the Spires, the Oculus oversees the Monitors, and the Mage-Seneschal oversees the Dragonvault and the Wardens.”

She put her thumbs and index fingers together in a triangle and said, as if reciting, “The three members of the Triumvirate

represent the three keys of magedom: Knowledge, Ley, and Governance. Without them, mages are no more than monsters, et cetera, et cetera, blah blah blah.” Then she shrugged and made a rueful face. “I can drop a book or three in your lap if you’re interested in mortal mage politics, but mostly the takeaway is that the Tri are sort of like the abyssal Council of Shadows, except without, you know, the shadows. Mortal elementals don’t have anything on the abyssal shadows, so mortal mages rule themselves.”

My eyebrows drew together as she spoke. While I’d learned the four common planar tongues, as most mages in Abyssal did, I hadn’t bothered with learning anything about the histories or politics of mages in other planes. I’d never had any intention of leaving Abyssal, but now that I was here in Material, I supposed I ought to develop an interest.

“I wouldn’t mind the reading,” I said after a moment. “Is this about... me?” I tried not to cringe away as I asked, but my traitorous tail curled around her foot, and my voice went more wavering than I’d hoped.

Rain blinked at that, then flushed, her embarrassment skimming across me with a shivery sensation. “Oh, no, not at all. They, um, don’t even know about you.” Her blush darkened, making her fawn skin go ruddy. “I don’t know how I want to announce to the world that I have a sorcerer as a familiar, so I’ve just been keeping that little nuance a secret.”

“Nuance?” I asked, giving her a rakish smile as I relaxed. “That’s one way to put it.”

“Gods, don’t remind me,” she groaned, looking back up at the ceiling and putting her hands over her flaming cheeks. “We can only hope that the Archmage will simply keel over when he finds out. It’ll make things easier.”

I felt the warmth of her blush on my palms and traced a circle across my skin with one claw. I thought that Rain was getting better at keeping me blocked out of her senses, but the reverse certainly wasn’t true, and I liked it that way. She gave me the constant comfort of her presence, and I had no intention of asking her to change that. “Then I’m assuming you don’t want me to go with you?”

“Yeah, not so much.” Rain laughed, a tense sound, and shook her head. “You’re not really up for traveling yet, and even if you were, you can’t change shapes until those stitches are all out. Incubus lust is not exactly what I’d like to bring into the room when I’m talking to the Triumvirate.”

Knee-jerk shame hit me, followed by the answering shield of indifference. I drew down that barrier, though, letting my unhappiness show on my face. Rain had called for a familiar, and I’d answered. She deserved the openness she would have gotten from a cat. “I can’t help what I am,” I said in a quiet voice, the tip of my tail flicking in distress and my shoulders hunching forward. “Please believe me when I say that I have no intention of making myself a problem for you. I know me being an incubus makes your life difficult. I’ll be a cat for you as soon as I can.”

She rolled onto her side again, lowering her hands and meeting my eyes. With one hand, she stroked my hair back from my face, then started rubbing my ear between her fingers. “There’s nothing wrong with what you are,” Rain said as I started purring from the comfort of that touch. “All I meant is that I need to deal with them without any complications, and everything to do with you is going to take their attention away from the conversation I need to have with them.”

“Mm...kay,” I got out through the purr, more mangled than I’d hoped but still a recognizable word. The way Rain kept touching me, though, overrode any desire to talk, sending blissful relaxation through my whole body.

I didn’t think I’d purred as much in the past decade as I had the past five days. If it hadn’t felt so good to do, I thought I would have been overwhelmed by embarrassment at the fact that I couldn’t stop doing it. If we weren’t actively talking – and sometimes when we were – and she gave me active physical affection, I started purring before I even had a chance to think about it. But despite that obvious sign of how much I craved that contact and Rain’s fear of permanence, she didn’t stop giving it to me.

As embarrassing as it was, maybe she would let me curl up on her lap as a cat when I had my body back. The very thought made me purr louder, my mouth parting and hands flexing as if I might knead biscuits on her while still in the shape of an incubus.

Her other hand found my face, and then she was rubbing both my ears with her fingers pressed at the bases, a smile hovering on her face.

She knew what she was doing, so I gave up trying to be quiet and let myself respond to the touches, purring like a thunderstorm with my hands pressing against the bed in alternating rhythm. When she took her hands away from my ears, I was a panting mess, a state of being I didn't know how to deal with then it wasn't associated with sex. I never felt like this – full of dragonfire and pleasure – without sex being involved, and part of me wanted to scrabble towards making that pleasure sexual instead of learning how to accept platonic affection. But she wasn't sure she wanted that, so I wouldn't try to get it from her.

I opened my eyes to look at her instead, my mouth open and breath coming hard, and found her giving me a somewhat baffled half-smile. “Hnng?”

Ah. Well. That was not a very put-together response.

Rain giggled, covering up her smile with one hand. “You really are a cat, aren't you?”

I swallowed, trying to pull myself together and collect some form of dignity. “I said I was,” I managed to say, getting my foolish body to stop its hopeful purr. “Or don't you trust your summoning abilities, *ledaji*?”

She huffed out a laugh at that, then pushed herself up and stretched. “As if I'd ever doubt my summoning abilities,” she said with a grin. “I'm the best dowser in the world. I might be

the best dowser the world has ever known. You just don't *look* very much like a cat."

"Wait and see," I said, wiggling down into a more comfortable position in the bed. "Sometimes I look exactly like a cat."

"I'm looking forward to it," she said, then chewed on her cheek. "Mind if I get someone else to help you this morning? I've got to get prepped and out of here pretty soon."

"I don't mind, as long as they won't be upset about my aura," I said, though disappointment stung beneath my keel. I pushed it aside. Rain had a life that didn't involve me, and despite her attention for me, I needed to remember that she was only being kind. When I was healed, I had no guarantee that she'd want me to always be by her side. She'd called for a cat to hunt the mice in Barixeor – of which there were certainly many, gauging by the fact that I'd already seen two creeping about my bedroom in the past few days – and a mouser was vastly different from a companion like me.

"Bashen's a power null—he's my man-of-all-work. Your aura won't work on him, so don't be surprised by that." Rain flashed me a smile, then clambered out of bed. She was only wearing a thin nightshirt, the peaks of her nipples catching the cotton, and her thighs bare halfway down.

I kept my eyes off of her body and put my fingers into the position of a meditative stifle for a moment to keep my attraction to her or my hunger from escaping. "Thank you for the warning." I smiled back at her, pushing myself up on my

elbows so I could see her without craning my neck. “Good luck with your meeting.”

“Gods, I’ll need it,” she said with a sigh. “Hopefully I’ll be back tonight, but no guarantees.”

“Travel safe,” I said, getting a salute in response. Then Rain was out the door, and I was alone with my thoughts.

Except I wasn’t alone, and the loneliness that had haunted me for so long didn’t settle against my throat. Rain and I shared a soul, now, and all I had to do was to relax into our soul-bond to chase off solitude. She would always be with me, no matter how far apart our bodies were. I would never be alone again.

25

SERVANTHOOD

SAKER

I didn't have to wait long for Bashen to arrive. The minotaur entered the room only a few minutes after Rain left, ducking through the human-height doorway before standing back up in the high-ceilinged room. I examined him with curiosity, having never seen a minotaur before, and he stood and let me do it.

The minotaur stood easily two heads taller than I did, but he didn't look lanky or stretched-out. He was solidly built, a wall of muscle proportional to his height. Strong hands bearing two hoof-tipped fingers and a thumb matched the large hooves he stood on, and a bovine nose with a brass ring in it was paired with two bull's horns that had been cut and capped with brass. Bashen had shaggy rust-colored fur, enough that I suspected he'd be comfortable without clothing, but he dressed like a human man, in loose pants and a vest over a laced shirt.

"You must be Bashen," I said, trying not to look as nervous as I felt, though I couldn't keep the tip of my tail from twitching back and forth. Rain hadn't been exaggerating when

she'd called him a power null; the magical energy in the room slid past him as if he wasn't there, a cold spot in my awareness. Injured and bed-ridden, my magic was the only thing that could protect me, and spells wouldn't touch him at all.

"I am," he said. He tilted his head back, looking down at me from under a shaggy mop of hair. "And you're the sorcerer who forced yourself onto Magus Leyweaver."

The words hit me with almost physical force, and I jerked backwards, my ears pinning flat to the side of my head and a defensive growl starting in my chest. He made it sound like *rape*, as if I'd been the one with power. From the almost eager aggression in his body posture and the way his nostrils flared and ears shifted, I knew he meant the implication, and that my reaction to it mattered a great deal.

"If that's how you see it, nothing I can say will change your mind," I said, forcing myself to relax away from the responsive anger. "Yes, I answered her call, when I knew I wasn't what she was looking for. She didn't banish me, and now I'm her familiar."

He stepped forward, the heavy sound of his hoof on the floor enough to make my fur poof out, as if I might scare away such a dangerous creature by appearing slightly larger.

Predators frighten because of their silence and sharp teeth, but our wild counterparts live on the knife-edge of survival, where a failed hunt might mean death. We don't have energy to waste on reckless violence. It's the large herbivores who

will gut you without hesitation. Their next meal is guaranteed; what care have they for spending a little energy and ire? How many more men have been killed by cattle than cats?

“If you were anything other than her familiar, I wouldn’t hesitate to rid the Spire of you,” the minotaur said, snorting at me with the same angry intent as a bull. He came closer, another half-stomp of a footfall.

I leaned away from his approach, my ears flattening again and dragonfire heating. When I exhaled a panting breath, a curl of flame lit the air in front of my mouth.

The minotaur snorted again, a derisive sound. “You don’t frighten me, demon.” He took another step towards me. “You’re nothing worth being frightened of, and you don’t belong here.”

“Why do you care anything about it?” I snapped, fear sharpening my words. “You’re only her servant.”

He tossed his head back and laughed, a low sound full of scorn. “You stupid man,” he said, with the same casual attitude as a cruel owner cuffing a whining dog. “Do you think all those who take silver for service have the morals of a sellsword?” The minotaur reached the bed, looming over me, and planted his hoof-like hands on either side of me. “My mistress is a woman worth honoring. Do you know how many people like her look at me and think that I’m an animal?”

The minotaur leaned down, his eyes narrowed and horns tilted towards my face. “She has only ever treated me like a friend. If anyone were to raise their hand against me, she

would step between us with no hesitation. Rain is the best thing this world has ever given me, and you don't deserve her." He snorted again. "*Parasite.*"

He meant to intimidate me, and it worked—until his nearness at last overcame the cold of his power nullification, and I felt the thing that bound us together warm against my skin. *Not me*, I realized as he spat the last word at me. *Her.*

In a daze, I lifted my hand between us, passing it through the faint ley connection that ran between Bashen and Rain, feeling the heat of it as my fingers crossed that line. "Love," I said, my brow furrowing. No, that wasn't quite right. I curled my fingers through the pattern again, stopping with it radiating against my palm, as if it transfixed my hand. "Devotion."

The minotaur regarded me with a cold expression in his soil-brown eyes, then stood, looking down at me with hauteur. "I don't expect you to know anything about it, incubus."

"I don't," I said, the sorrow of that clutching at me with frozen fingers. "But I don't..." I paused, then licked my lips. "I don't have to know what it's like to be loved to recognize it." My voice came out hoarser than I liked, and I glanced away, not wanting to meet his eyes. I didn't know what he'd see in my face, and I didn't like not knowing.

He watched me for a while, then shook his head. "She has won my devotion ten thousand times over," he said. "I would rid her of you if I could, but you're protected by one thing only."

“Because hurting me would hurt her,” I said, the bitterness poisoning my voice.

“No,” he said, drawing a shocked look from me. The minotaur looked back, impassive. “I would hurt her if I knew it would save her. Sometimes pain is necessary.” His tail flicked. “No, what saves you is that you *are* her. Your soul is bound to hers, and your power yoked by her. You belong to my mistress utterly, and you will live the rest of your life in penance for what you’ve done.”

I looked up at him, uncomfortable, frightened, and slick with guilt. I could do nothing about any of them except for what he’d already said, and live the rest of my life in devoted service to the woman who’d saved my life. “Then why bother menacing me?” I asked unhappily. “What possible good have you done?”

“I wanted to ensure we have an understanding,” he answered. “I despise you, but it doesn’t matter. I will serve Rain, and as long as you’re an extension of her will and power, I will extend that care to you.”

“If you’re going to do that, then perhaps you’d help me to the privy so I don’t piss the bed,” I said in a bored voice belied by my standing-up fur and flicking tail.

The minotaur made a grunting sound and tossed back the sheets, baring my naked, battered body. When I moved to sit up – not expecting any tender care from the man who had made his opinion of me so very clear – he stooped and picked me up in a bridal carry, moving with restrained strength.

I hissed, an automatic reaction, my body stiffening and tail bottle-brushing.

“Stop fussing,” he rumbled, turning and carrying me towards the bathing-room. “I’m not limping you across the room, and I care nothing for your dignity.”

“I don’t like getting surprised like that,” I growled back, snatching at my control and forcing the tension out of my body, down to getting most of my fur smoothed again.

“Ask me if I care.”

I didn’t bother. The minotaur set me down on the toilet like a toddler, shut the door, and waited outside the privy for me. Pique made me want to take my sweet time and leave him waiting there for as long as possible, but I decided not to make his opinion of me worse, if it were even possible. I did what was necessary, knocked on the wall, and suffered the indignity of being carried back to bed and set up with fluffed pillows to read.

Bashen left without a farewell, not that I expected one. I had been taken care of summarily: biological needs dealt with, food supplied, and set in a position that wouldn’t discomfort the woman who possessed his unconditional loyalty. As little as I liked his treatment of me, in his position I wasn’t sure I would feel differently. Rain hadn’t wanted someone like me, and I’d known it when I’d flung myself into her spell. I’d complicated her life, cost her power, and reopened old wounds. If I were a loyal servant, would I also hate the person who had done that to her?

Hating myself would be nothing new, but I didn't think wallowing in such emotions would be comfortable for the woman whose soul I shared. I closed my eyes, lacing my fingers into a meditative stifle to suppress the feelings. I took slow breaths, settling my emotions into a regimented calm so that she wouldn't be troubled by them when my power wore away the blocks she had placed on our soul-bond.

Rain had told me that I didn't need to be a mortal cat for her, but I knew it was what she had wanted, and that she was uncomfortable with me as I was. I could do nothing about that for now, so I would try to be someone she could be comfortable with. If I was careful, I could go perhaps fourteen or fifteen more days before I had to feed my incubus hunger, which would give us at least a little bit of time to get to know each other. Perhaps it would be enough time to find the shape of what would feel like friendship for her, and I could learn how to fit into that role.

And if not... well, when the last of the stitches was out, there were many mice in Barixeor Spire, and in the end, what was I but a predator? Even an incubus is only another kind of predator of men. I was made to kill, and I would kill for her.

26

MERRHENYA SPIRE

RAIN

Portaling between Spires was awful, if convenient, and it was even more awful with my ability to channel power only just waking up. I had to pause, panting, on the other side in Merrhenya Spire, bracing myself with my hands on my knees as I tried not to puke. The back of my neck prickled, as if someone was watching me from behind, and only after whipping around to see who it might be did I realize the feeling came from Saker's attention on me.

He must be feeling the nausea, I realized guiltily, turning my attention inwards to build up my mental blocks between the two of us, paying careful attention to how our physical senses intertwined. The process gave me dislocating flashes of his senses: glimpses of the bedroom and Bashen overlaid across my vision, the scent of hay and antiseptic demanding attention, heat rippling across my skin in intricate patterns.

The last were his mage-senses, I realized. The thought was interesting enough that I managed to unhook from my familiar's body to finish blocking him out, then grinned. Oh, it

would be fascinating to compare mage-senses whenever we got to working together. I'd never met anyone before who sensed power as touch.

Given how touch-oriented he was in general, though, if anyone was going to have mage-senses like that, it would be Saker.

Nobody came to fetch me, but I didn't expect them to. Merrhenya Spire was smack dab in the middle of the University, and as part of his attempt to improve the image of mages, Rillian had opened parts of the Spire to the public from dawn until dusk. There were quarter-hourly tours given to curious tourists, bringing them through places in Merrhenya that had been set up to appear as if they were in actual use. I'd actually gone on one of the tours a few years prior out of grim fascination, and been appalled at the play the Archmage had put on for everyone. Rillian even had warlocks doing artifice and alchemical work behind protective barriers like trained dogs.

As a price to the whole rigamarole, mages mostly avoided the public floors during the daytime, which included the portal rooms. I took a moment to focus on my mage-sight, trying to figure out where the Triumvirate was holding court so that I could get out of the way of the general public. It was like looking through fogged glasses, an experience that left me nervous and even more uncomfortable than before, but the presence of the Archmage wasn't exactly easy to miss.

A gaggle of tourists appeared in the transport ring, led by a chipper-looking young man who beamed when he caught sight of me. I gave him a polite smile in return as he herded the tourists off of the transport ring and started regaling them with information.

“Well, folks, we’ve certainly got a treat today! For those of you who don’t recognize her from your favorite mage reports, that’s the sorcerer Rain Leyweaver—”

Cue gasps.

“The Starsworn?!”

“Omigosh, she’s the one that found the Tomb of Ankaiyra!”

“Magus Leyweaver! Will you sign my Spire map?”

“Yes, that’s right—and remember, no autographs! Magus Leyweaver is a busy woman, after all.” The tour guide gave me a heavy wink. “Now, if you’ll recall your recent history, Leyweaver rescued the constellation Tarandrus in a heroic feat of valor only ten years ago, on the twenty-third of Galrune—”

Yeah. I got out of there.

Discovering that a strange sorcerer from the Abyssal Plane could recognize me had been surprising and unsettling, but getting recognized by a gaggle of mage-fanatics wasn’t all that shocking. As little as I approved of the practice, people ate up the various mage reports that got published, ranging from legitimate magical news to openly tawdry speculation about the private lives of mages. With only fifty-three sorcerers on the plane – fifty-four with Saker – the flashier of us often

became household names among those interested in such things.

It would be weird to find any mortal with a passing interest in mages who didn't know who Jace was, or Rillian. I was up there, too, but only for the ones who read news instead of speculation. I avoided the celebrity when I could, but some people did their best to keep themselves in the public eye; Dastan Soulforge, for example, was something of a public heartthrob, and his glitzy romances were always in mage reports. It was really no surprise that the Archmage loved him so much.

A middle-aged woman sat just inside the entrance to the material room at an imposing desk. She looked like she'd tried to dress like her younger, more attractive sister, without any idea of why people found her attractive. Her hair had been tortured into a series of braids that pulled at her skin, and the cut of her clothing didn't match the shape of her body, making her look like she'd borrowed it from someone unkind. She gave me a stern look as I stepped into the room, clinging to the notebook in her hands like a life raft.

The power wrapped around her was Rillian's, barely responding to her presence, as if she was a mere repeater for his magical strength. A warlock, then, and a new one.

"Rain Leyweaver, here for my appointment for the eleventh hour," I said, keeping my voice gentle and giving her a friendly smile. There was no reason to take out any of my stress or irritation on one of the Archmage's warlocks,

especially one who hadn't had a chance to see any other side of him besides the pleasant sage he pretended to be. "I'm a little early."

She opened her notebook and made a mark with a pen, all in the careful way of someone unused to the task. "The Triumvirate are still in their previous meeting, Magus Leyweaver," she said, meeting my eyes with surprising fortitude. "Please take a seat in the waiting area. Do you want anything for refreshment?"

I looked where she pointed, then took a seat on one of the fancy, uncomfortable chairs. I guessed Rillian didn't want people to get cozy while waiting on him; where's the fun in that?

"No, thank you, magus," I said, giving her the honorific, though most mages accorded warlocks no more status than witches.

Her mouth parted for a moment, her face going soft with happiness, before she put her shoulders back and beamed at me. "Very well, Magus Leyweaver. Let me know if you change your mind."

"I hope not to be here that long," I replied, crossing my ankles and slouching back in the chair. "But thanks again."

The warlock did things that looked busy but I suspected weren't actually useful while I waited. I understood the lure of magic; what child hadn't dreamed of manifesting? Many sorcerers kept warlocks, tying some of their power to an otherwise normal person and letting them act like magic-users

themselves. Some positions, like being the Eye of a Monitor station, required mages to make warlocks of their underlings, but more did so simply to have willing minions. A mage could take their power away from a warlock who didn't do as they liked, and there were always more people who craved the chance to channel power.

I'd never tried making a warlock. Before Tarandrus, I'd been too excited about having adventures of my own. Afterwards... I sighed, disliking the direction of my own thoughts. After the fall of Tarandrus, I'd chosen to be alone. And now I never would be again.

The door opened, and Dastan Soulforge strode out.

If I'd been able to go invisible, I would have done so without hesitation. As it was, I froze in some lizard-like hope that he would walk right on past me without noticing me, as if another mage might miss a sorcerer of my caliber.

He didn't walk past me, of course. He stopped and turned towards me with the smile of a fox entering a chicken coop, the teardrop earring in his left ear swinging and his long golden hair catching the light. "Rain, what a pleasant surprise," he said in his lyrical baritone voice, those amber eyes that were such favorites of the mage reports as beautiful as they'd ever been drawn. "I've been hoping for a chance to talk to you."

That handsome face hid behind it a monster, the kind of person who would peel apart the memories of living creatures for his constructs. He'd done to willing victims over and over

what the void had done to me, tearing out pieces of their life for the most tawdry of rewards. Gold, sex, the chance to be part of one of Soulforge's famous *constructions*... the things people would sell their souls for sickened me, but not as much as the man who offered such recompenses without any remorse.

I stood as if I had all the time in the world, stretching with a yawn before wiggling my hips from side to side, as if getting ready to exercise. "I'm afraid I'm terribly busy, Dastan," I said with sickly sweetness, batting my eyelashes at him. "Saving the world, and all, you know. No time to chat."

"I'm sure you have a few moments," he replied, stepping closer with his stance strong. Dastan leaned closer to me, the sort of looming posture predatory men so often take. "We ought to come to an agreement."

"Later," I promised, not intending to keep it. I'd avoid Dastan to my dying breath.

He stepped closer, but behind him the warlock cleared her throat. His eyebrows pulled together, an expression of puzzlement crossing his face, as if he couldn't comprehend how someone had gathered the courage to interrupt him.

I took advantage of the moment to duck past him, mouthing "thank you" at the warlock playing secretary for Rillian before stepping into the room beyond, closing the door behind me. Even Dastan wouldn't barge in on the Triumvirate simply to corner me.

THE TRIUMVIRATE

RAIN

I hadn't been in this particular meeting room for a while, and Rillian had certainly upgraded it. Each member of the Tri had a wing-backed chair behind a gleaming, polished desk made of what looked like granite, with the symbol of their office inlaid in gold on the front of the desk.

To the left, Oculus Vanya Mireborn leaned on her elbows, her wiry gray hair pulled into a bun and her lined, nut-brown skin etched with glowing sigils. The gleaming eye on her forehead flicked in different directions, looking at nothing anyone else could see, matching the vertical golden eye on the front of her desk.

To the right, behind the golden scale marked on the front of his slab of monolithic granite, the new Mage-Seneschal, Kieran Nighteye, slouched against one arm of his chair. He was a lanky, shockingly beautiful young man whose ferocious intelligence had won him the position at only twenty-six and magician rank, and this was my first time meeting him in person. He smiled at me with hooded eyes, a knowing

expression; behind him, his shadow shifted like a rousing panther, sitting up at attention.

The Archmage sat in the center position, the crossed feather-and-key of his office catching the light. Unlike the other two members of the Triumvirate, there was nothing obviously magical about Archmagus Rillian Whitescale. He was a plain man with an angular, vulpine face, his silver hair worn in a long queue and his age showing in wrinkles and spots on his pale skin. His clothing matched the popular image of a mage, a long robe over a full-sleeved white shirt, but he had an X inked in black on the knuckle of his right index finger, a remnant of a rebellious youth.

“Good morning, Oculus, Mage-Seneschal,” I said, putting my hand over my heart and inclining bows towards each of them. I turned to Rillian, meeting his eyes for a cold moment, then gave him the same polite gesture. “Archmagus.”

“And a good morning to you, too, Magus Leyweaver,” Vanya said, her smoke-roughened voice warm. “How’s your new companion settling in?”

Fear spiked for a moment, that she might know about my familiar—but, no, I’d told the Monitors that Saker was there, and given a reasonable explanation why. I flashed her a smile, walking over and taking my position behind the fourth desk in the room. “He’s doing well, Oculus,” I said, keeping my tone easy. “Material is very different from his home, of course, but he appreciates the opportunity to work outside of his typical discipline.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” she replied, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “Please send us the invoices for his services, as appropriate.”

“Of course.” I hid my surprise at the offer, but then, as far as anyone in this room knew, I’d hired Saker to help with catching the falling firmament. Expecting me to pay for that out of my own pocket would be a bit ridiculous.

Rillian cleared his throat, and I turned my attention back towards him, holding onto my pleasant expression by sheer force of will under the haughty gaze of the Archmage. “Let’s skip further pleasantries, shall we, and hear Magus Leyweaver’s report.”

I stayed standing, lacing my fingers in front of me, and held Rillian’s eyes, refusing to let him intimidate me. He was second only to Jace in power on the Material Plane, and he’d held his stranglehold on the position of Archmage for the past thirty-five years, but he wouldn’t have it forever. Even the Archmage was only a man.

“In the past quarter, Jace and I captured eight total meteors of significant size across two events. The first capture occurred only twenty-three days after the capture in the previous quarter, and the second occurred eight days ago. We anticipate an additional event in approximately a month, over the southern ice cap.” I took a deep breath, looking between the three of them. “Unfortunately, these falls are following the pattern of the past two years. Meteor events are increasing in

frequency and severity, and it's unclear to what extent that may continue to escalate.”

Despite his lazy position, the Mage-Seneschal's eyes were sharp as he regarded me. Vanya held her position of interest, even her runic eye looking at me. Rillian looked annoyed, as if I'd personally offended him by daring to suggest things were getting worse.

I met that irritated glare with my own flint-hard eyes. “Given the increasing rate and complexity of the events, capture of the firmament has also increased in difficulty. The most recent capture nearly failed, due in part to external interference. I have acquired the services of an abyssal war-mage sorcerer to prevent such interference from occurring again.” I did not mention that the interference had been a mouse. It was in the written report, but I really didn't want to deal with the Archmage's response to that little fact in person.

“The archduke of Ibexen had a number of strong words with me yesterday over not being informed about the capture,” the Mage-Seneschal said, his mellow voice carrying a lilt that sounded like amusement. “I've given him the appropriate reassurances, but in the future, it may be wise to warn the leaders of populated areas in advance of a capture.”

My jaw clenched. “Even for me, it's difficult to pinpoint the exact location where a piece of firmament will cross into the Material Plane in advance of the event,” I said, trying to hang onto my polite voice. “This is especially true for larger meteors, which warp the fabric of the plane as they sink into

an approach. Unless I travel in person to each location and douse for days or weeks, that's an impossible task—and I'll remind you that I'm needed as the summoner at the capture location, so I *can't* be present at the crossover location.”

One corner of his mouth flipped up into a smile. “You seem distressed, magus.”

“I am,” I said, deciding to go with honesty. “Not with you, Mage-Seneschal, but with the situation. Things are becoming increasingly unstable, and I can't honestly say that they won't get significantly worse. Jace and I are only two people. If we could contract some celestial mages for assistance—”

“Unacceptable,” the Archmage said, his voice tight.

Nighteye turned his head towards the Archmage, raising one elegant black brow. “Your reasoning, Archmagus Whitescale?”

Rillian looked as if he'd bitten into a rotten lemon. “This entire troubled saga began because of lax interaction with other planes,” he said, with the ponderous voice of one delivering an unassailable truth. “Magus Leyweaver put the entire Material Plane in danger for the sake of her friends in Celestial, and let us not forget her involvement in the inception of that danger. It's her *responsibility* to—”

“You *dare*—” I snapped, rage making my skin go cold and my power rise, the shadows in the room going stark as light streamed off of my skin.

“Enough.” Vanya’s sharp voice cut across the room with command.

I locked down my power, embarrassed at the childish display. I rarely let my emotions get the better of me, but the Archmage always brought out my worst traits.

She shoved herself to her feet, her expression hard. “You forget yourself, Rillian. Regardless of your feelings towards intervention or Leyweaver, the destruction of the Celestial Plane might have led to the unraveling of the universe and the death of everyone in it. Magus Leyweaver isn’t responsible for the actions of anyone else, and her service is a grace to us. Knowing someone who does something reprehensible doesn’t make anyone guilty by association.”

A political smile twitched itself onto the Archmage’s face, like watching a corpse come back to life. “Nevertheless, *Vanya*,” he said, emphasizing her name to hammer home the rudeness of such familiarity in a formal meeting. “Prostrating ourselves to hire celestial mages to deal with our troubles would put us in a position of extreme weakness. We’re lucky the Starry Host didn’t invoke the Accords after the fall of Tarandrus. If we go begging for help, they very well might.”

The Starry Host didn’t give two shits about the Interplanar Accords, but I didn’t bother saying it. Anyone with half a brain would be able to divine that, and the Archmage routed everything I said straight to the garbage heap anyway.

“All of you already know that the Archmage and I clash on many topics, but I would still like to apologize for my display

of temper,” I said, holding myself to calm with meditative breathing. “It has been a trying year for me, and my endurance isn’t infinite. I have no intention of letting the world suffer out of pique, but I do want to remind you that I’m not compelled to spend the rest of my life catching meteors. Jace and I are doing this because we’re good people, not because we have to.”

The Mage-Seneschal laughed softly and started walking a gleaming silver coin over his knuckles. “An unpleasant reminder to all of us, I’m certain,” he said, giving me a deep nod. “People so easily get used to the generosity of others and demand it never ceases, and we’re only human. The Triumvirate is deeply grateful for your continued assistance, and we have no intention of holding your feet to the flames. Isn’t that right, Archmagus?”

Rillian’s careful expression spasmed. Oh, he must have *hated* it when the last Mage-Seneschal had retired, and Nighteye won the position. “All of us have a duty to our plane, and to the gods,” he said in an oily voice. “But it’s Noetan Misen who judges our souls, not our fellow man. If you wish to abandon your duties and surrender Barixeor Spire, we cannot force you to do otherwise.”

“I’m not abandoning anything,” I said, the smile on my face as forced as the one on his. “I’m asking for assurances of resources, if I need them.”

“Resources beyond that of an abyssal confluence and the Spire that controls it?” he said, making a scoffing sound.

“How could you possibly need more?”

Still standing, the Oculus clucked her tongue, a disapproving sound.

Nighteye tapped one finger on his desk, drawing my attention. “The Archmage has given you the resources at his disposal, and the Monitors supply you with all the information they can. Tell me what else you need, and I’ll see to it that you have it. What can the Mage-Seneschal do for you?”

I thought fast, not having expected such an open-ended offer. The previous Mage-Seneschal had been as crusty as Rillian, but Kieran Nighteye seemed like he was cut from a different cloth.

“Honestly?” I said after a moment, watching that silver coin walk across his long fingers. “Money. If something goes sideways, or needs my immediate attention in some dramatic way, I might not have the gold on hand to deal with it effectively. Being able to draw on your resources at will could save lives.”

“Then the Dragonvault is yours,” he said, his mouth curling into a catlike smile as Rillian made a choking sound. “I reserve the right to require you to pay the Vault back if your expenditures are found to be frivolous, so be meticulous in your documentation, Magus Leyweaver.” The Mage-Seneschal stood, his shadow remaining motionless, and looked over at Vanya with a sly expression. “I trust you’ve submitted your full written report?”

I was... gobsmacked. Full access to the gold of the Dragonvault? Never in my life would I have expected such an open hand—and, given what I knew about Kieran Nighteye, I knew he must have thought through a thousand contingencies before I'd even set foot in the room. There would almost certainly be some sort of tit-for-tat he wanted in the future, but for now, I'd accept the generosity without making a scene.

“Yes, Mage-Seneschal,” I said, the words mechanical. “A copy has been sent to each of your personal secretaries, with the agreed-upon mage-lock.”

“Excellent,” he said, looking like a cat who'd gotten into the cream. “Then I suggest we conclude this meeting.”

“Agreed,” Vanya said before Rillian could get a word in edgewise. “Have a good day, Magus Leyweaver.”

28

CORNERED

RAIN

I made my escape with alacrity, bowing and zipping out of the room and into the central chamber of Merrhenya Spire, flashing the warlock a warm smile as I went past. Last quarter I'd ended up trapped in an interminable debate about the specifics of the containment I was using for the firmament in Barixeor, which had been granted an intermission before being continued late into the night. Nothing had come of it, of course; building the necessary structures on the five ruined abyssal Spires "could rouse the public's fears of a second Spire War" and "would require far too many resources to maintain," and looping in Dastan's bitter rival, Kera Ashfall, who possessed the only other standing abyssal Spire, "seemed unwise, given her emotionality."

Or so the Archmage said, of course, and the former Mage-Seneschal had supported him almost unconditionally in his every desire. But now Liam Ironheart was retired and off tending his vegetable patch (or whatever retired mages did), and Kieran Nighteye seemed to have no trouble standing up to

Rillian. I'd gotten the impression he liked it, even, like a crow yanking on the tail of an eagle.

Maybe today I'd get back in time for lunch. That would be nice—

The transport ring didn't respond to my voice, and dread sank into my bones. The only person who could lock down a Spire was its keeper, which meant...

"A moment of your time, Magus Leyweaver." Rillian's stern voice cut through the room, the words stated with the certainty that they would be obeyed. Given that he'd trapped me in Merrhenya, he'd guaranteed that.

I turned towards him, not bothering to put a smile on my face. "What can I do for you, Archmagus? Did you have a question about my report? I assure you, everything is in the written one."

He held up a rolled piece of parchment. "No, no, nothing like that," he said, his voice dismissive. "You've made yourself very clear, and I'm sure you'll enjoy that magician's favor. Young men are always so enthralled by women." Rillian shook his head, a sympathetic expression on his sharp features, as if he pitied the Mage-Seneschal for his championship of my work. "No, this is about Barixeor Spire. It's come to my attention that you've been misusing its resources, and it is my duty to follow-up with you. If you will...?" he asked, gesturing to one of the other three doors.

Yeah, no thanks. Being trapped alone with the Archmage seemed like a bad idea. "Here is fine," I said, crossing my

arms over my chest and narrowing my eyes. “Since I’ve been doing no such thing, I’d appreciate hearing the accusation, and once you have my assurances that I’m being a responsible Spirekeeper, I’m ready to leave.”

Rillian’s chin came up, his jaw clenching. He despised me; well, the feeling was mutual. I had no intention of giving him anything more than I had to, and even that would be grudging.

“All the Spires are intended for the use and research of all mages,” he said, voice and expression pinched with anger. “I’ve been informed that you’re denying access to Barixeor to legitimate researchers, which is in direct violation of your mandate as Spirekeeper. Furthermore—”

“Let me stop you right there, Archmagus Whitescale,” I said in my most pleasant voice, cutting him off at the start of his tirade. “I was given Barixeor Spire not as a Spirekeeper first, but as a critical resource to prevent the falling celestial firmament from harming or destroying our world. My first and most important mandate is capturing and containing the firmament, for which I require a world-class summoning circle on an abyssal confluence.”

The Archmage’s face reddened with his anger, the skin under his chin vibrating as he contained himself.

I gave him a pretty smile with no warmth behind it. “As I’ve just reported, those captures are becoming more difficult and more common. I’m certain you wouldn’t want to see people die because someone insisted on doing research at Barixeor Spire instead of Yineti,” I said, naming Ashfall’s Spire. “Since

Yineti's abyssal confluence is more powerful than Tsirisma Confluence, I can't imagine that any research would suffer from being located there. I can't afford having another sorcerer affecting the confluence right now."

It wasn't really true – Tsirisma was plenty powerful enough that I wouldn't suffer from having someone else there – but Rillian couldn't prove it, and I wasn't about to bend when it came to something as foul as soul vivisection. Dastan would never stoop to requesting anything from his rival Ashfall, and he would never abide working in a ruin, so as long as I held Barixeor he could only grind his teeth in frustration.

"Now I know you're lying," Rillian all but hissed. "You have a second sorcerer in that Spire right now! You—"

"Is Soulforge willing to have his power entirely yoked by mine?" I asked sweetly, cutting him off again. "Magus Saker agreed to be entirely under my control for as long as we were working together, which prevents any accidental interference in my work. If your golden boy is willing to accept the same, I'll strongly consider his proposal."

He said nothing, his face dark and full of fury, but I frankly didn't care. What the fuck was he going to do to me? Try to take away Barixeor? We both knew that wouldn't happen, and I wasn't doing anything illegal. I had all the power in this situation, and he hated me for it.

"If that's all, Archmagus, I would appreciate it if you unlocked the Spire for me." I held his gaze, letting my own

steel show through. “I’m a very busy woman, and I have work to do.”

“Were you coming to lunch, Rillian?” came the Mage-Seneschal’s voice. “I was hoping to discuss your proposal for the Spire stipends more informally.”

I looked past the Archmage to Nighteye, who wore a heavy-lidded expression of satisfaction. His shadow slid out from under him, stretching across the room as if the sun set behind him, until it rested beneath my feet. Five eyes opened in the face, one at a time, holes of light within the shadow.

I was profoundly grateful to be wearing pants, and decided never, ever to piss off the Mage-Seneschal. Only the best of documentation for every penny I spent from the Dragonvault, Tissit Kalar.

A naked expression of loathing slid across the Archmage’s face, dragging behind it a political smile. He turned towards the Mage-Seneschal and inclined his head. “Of course, Kieran. I was merely bringing a simple matter to Rain’s attention.” He turned back to me, his mouth smiling and his eyes full of his stymied wrath. “I will beseech the gods nightly to end this farce,” Rillian said in an oily voice. “We’ll all be better for it when Barixeor has a legitimate Spirekeeper once more.”

“Your care for me is appreciated, Archmagus,” I replied, with my own false smile. “I, too, yearn for the day when I can surrender Barixeor without endangering the mortal world. Enjoy your lunch.”

His upper lip twitched upwards towards a sneer, but the Archmage turned and stalked off towards Nighteye, vanishing into the room again. The Mage-Seneschal's shadow stayed with me for a heartbeat longer, empty eyes staring up at me, before they all blinked closed and it slithered after its master.

I shuddered. If I could have, I would have abandoned everything to do with magedom in a heartbeat. I loved the magic, but I hated all the rest of it—the politics, the backstabbing, the constant jockeying for position. Not for the first time, I wondered if the world would be better off without mages. We could do so much good, but we could do so, so much evil, too. People of all kinds were shades of gray; even I could (sometimes) admit that Rillian had done a lot of good in his life, and that he was as human as the rest of us.

I stood in the breach and stopped things that would kill thousands from even affecting their lives, but it had been another mage who'd torn open the sky. Jace moved rain across the face of the mortal world, preventing famines to save the lives of hundreds of thousands, but others stepped onto the battlefield and cut down soldiers like wheat. Was it worth it, in the end? Did we make the world better, or worse?

Perhaps mages were truly the gods' mistake, as Marin had said. But we were here, and I needed to do the best I could with the power I'd been given. That was all that mattered. Everyone answered to the gods, in the end.

Growling at myself for my melancholy, I took the transport circle down to the portal floor, my jaw clenching as I realized

Soulforge was waiting for me. I could see his power, the wellspring of it directly in front of the entangled ley-lines that would take me back to Barixeor and away from all of this. *Nothing for it, Rain*, I told myself, turning towards the abyssal room reluctantly. *We're almost home. Let's go.* Thus chastised, I cracked my neck, put my shoulders back, and strode into the room for the portals to the abyssal Spires as if I owned the place.

The Archmage's golden boy stood at parade rest in front of Barixeor's portal, his hands clasped behind his back and his legs in a strong stance, looking bored. Dastan always dressed as if he was a nobleman instead of a pig farmer's son, all brocade and gold-thread embroidery, with polished leather riding boots and jewelry better suited to a prince than a mage. His perfect corn-gold hair fell to his hips, pulled loosely back from his face into a horsetail, and instead of eyeglasses he wore an enchanted circlet. It wouldn't do for the heartthrob of the decade to look like a scholar, I supposed.

Through the room wove Dastan's ghost-ray familiar, a creature born from the echoes of thousands of deaths, an intangible shape of dust and memory wearing the shape of a manta ray that never stopped flying. I paused for a moment, watching it as it wound through the open space, a mournful reminder of forgotten souls. It had been born on a battlefield, beautiful and sorrowful, and Dastan brought it with him everywhere he went.

It turned and wheeled, a hypnotic sight, but I turned my eyes back to Dastan instead, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You gonna get out of my way, Soulforge?”

“We have something to discuss,” he said in his mellifluous voice. “I might even say that you’re the one in my way.”

“Already talked to Daddy Whitescale about it,” I said, mostly for the twitch of outrage it caused on his handsome face. “No can do. You’re going to have to make nice with Kera if you want an abyssal Spire for your... ‘experiments.’”

“Listen well to me, you stupid slut,” he said, his words like a lance. “My work will live on long after people stop telling stories about your little conquests. I’m making *progress* for humanity. You’re nothing more than a historian with a wing fetish.”

“Ouch,” I said, with a fake pout and a whine in my voice, though the words stung. “You’re such a meanie. Are you trying to bully me?” It wasn’t as if they were new accusations; the worst of the mage report rags even ran articles about me being pregnant by some monster or other when they didn’t have anything interesting to lie about. I’d have been lying if I said that I didn’t care – nobody likes being treated like a freak – but it bothered me a lot more that my friends and lovers got treated that way. People like Qavan and Saker weren’t animals, or monsters.

He lifted his lip into a sneer, one that he erased in a moment as a tour group appeared in the transport ring behind me. As a woman literally squealed in delight to catch sight of him, Dastan put on the charismatic presence that had made him such a favorite of the common man. “Don’t be on the wrong

side of history, Rain,” he said in a smooth tone. “You won’t be needed forever, and when you’re not...”

“Is that a threat?” I asked, not looking away from him despite the excited babble behind me.

“A friendly warning,” Dastan replied, smiling with teeth. He held up his hand as his ghost-ray floated by, running his fingers through its body and leaving drifting lines of mist in his wake. “I look forward to chatting again soon. Now, if I may, the public awaits.” He stepped forward directly at me without waiting for a response, making me get out of the way or get bowled over.

I decided I preferred escape to winning a power game and making a public scene, so I stepped out of the way and strode past him, my eyes focused on the archway that led to Barixeor.

29

HOME IS WHERE YOU HIDE

RAIN

Total relief hit me as I stepped back into Barixeor. A toddler could have knocked me over with an enthusiastic hug; my whole body wilted and shook, reacting as if I'd been in mortal danger instead of conducting my regular tasks at their appointed times. I made it to the door, the overwhelming comfort of being somewhere that I didn't have to watch my back making me want to barricade the doors so that I never had to leave again. For a few minutes, I simply stood there, my hand on the doorknob and my forehead pressed against the cool wood of the entrance to the central room, letting the Tsirisma Confluence wash over me.

It felt more comfortable than I remembered to lean into that abyssal power. The volcano's power wasn't inimical to my material strength, but I could always tell that it wasn't truly mine. Celyn had said my soul was now intertwined with fire, and feeling Tsirisma in its full force for the first time since I'd soul-bonded with Saker, I knew it was true. As the Spirekeeper, I could access the power of the confluence using

the spells that formed the heart of Barixeor, but now I could touch that volcanic power without the protection of the Spire.

Saker was abyssal, and beyond that, he was a krocutex dragon with a natural power burn-off of hot flame. My familiar was a fire-walker and fire-mage, and apparently that meant I was drifting in that direction, too.

Huh. That was kind of fun. Better than picking up a preference for raw meat or an overactive interest in seduction.

The thought made me pay attention to my demon, and a smile touched my mouth as I discovered him sleeping sprawled on pillows in a semi-upright position, his hand on his chest. He must have fallen asleep while doing something—maybe reading. It was enough to help me shake off the drooping exhausted feeling, drawing me through the door and up to 52 Sky to go check on him.

He didn't rouse as I stepped into the room, passed out with one wing hanging off the bed and his hand overtop one of my journals. A shivery, uncomfortable feeling settled in my throat, but I did my best to shake it off. I'd given him those journals so he could get to know me without me having to relive my life story, and it was foolish to feel as if my privacy had been somehow violated by Saker accepting that gift.

I walked over and sat on the bed next to him, looking down at his elegant face. In sleep, his mouth had parted enough that I could see the white of his teeth, and I suspected he was drooling a little where his face rested against the pillow. It felt so intimate to be looking at him in repose, and yet so natural,

as if I had every right to see him in such a vulnerable state. I supposed I did – he'd given himself to me as a familiar, after all – but he was still his own person, and mostly a stranger to me.

And yet, here I was, feeling at ease next to him. The very presence of the incubus brought me unexpected comfort, the firelight of his power wrapping around me and drifting through me as if it were my own, and the relaxation of his body a balm to my soul.

With a soft smile, I leaned forward and brushed some hair away from his face, tucking the silken black strands behind his pointed ear, then gently tugged the journal out from under the heavy weight of his hand. I glanced down at the book, curious about which one he'd been reading—

The whole world seemed to darken, my skin growing cold and sweat prickling under my arms and along the back of my neck. A distant ringing sound seemed to fill the room. I stared at the journal, my whole body feeling as if I'd been disconnected from myself. I made myself swallow, the motion painful, and closed my eyes, forcing the memories away. *This is Material, not Celestial. You're fine. You're safe. This is Barixeor. This is your home.*

“Rain?”

Saker's muzzy voice cut through my haze, and my eyes flew open again. He blinked up at me, golden eyes fuzzy with sleep, but with a line between his brows.

“Oh, um, I... I didn’t mean to wake you,” I stammered, my cheeks going tight and hot as my blush hit me.

“You’re... scared?” he asked, sounding confused.

“It’s—it’s just...” My mouth twitched towards sorrow, and I swallowed again through the thickness in my throat. “It’s only memories,” I made myself say, looking away.

He tugged at the book I hadn’t realized I was clenching tight, then took my hands away gently, his warm fingers slipping under mine and lifting them away from the leather of the book. When I looked at him, my brows together and the corners of my mouth trembling, he met my eyes with concern, then brushed his thumb across the year gilded on the cover.

“Tarandrus,” he said softly.

I hesitated, then nodded, the movement feeling as if I ground my bones together from the tension in my neck. I took the journal back from him, letting it fall open to the wrinkled pages where my tears had warped the paper.

Saker didn’t take his eyes off my face as he took the open book, then looked down, his fingertips coming to rest on the smudged ink of the childlike writing.

I didn’t need to read the words to know what they said. I’d read and re-read those pages in the months after I’d rescued Tarandrus, trying to understand the woman who’d written them. Almost dreamily, I recited the words as Saker turned through the pages.

“Black, black, black, black, black,” I said, watching his quiet expression as he touched the scrawled, overlapping words. Four pages were like that, nothing but that word and scribbles and blots of ink, followed by several pages that had been saturated with it, now wrinkled and fraying at the edges.

“Black is a color. These things are black.” Beneath those words, I’d drawn childish depictions of crows, the pupils of eyes, and strange, monstrous figures I couldn’t identify. “It’s not black. It’s—” And there the page had been ripped off, leaving nothingness behind.

“This is me,” I said, my voice holding steady. On the page was a crude drawing of a woman. She was full of holes, rough circles poked through the paper, and on the reverse side were mouths full of sharp teeth. “This is Tarandrus.” The shape of a deer ripped out of the paper, with antlers drawn on. “This is Jace.” Another woman, this one with lines radiating out from her belly. “He did this to us.”

The next pages were full of exacting ley diagrams, perfect replicas of the tear in the world that led to the void, down to every detail, one of the only clear memories I had of that night.

Saker turned the page, to a simple, smiling face, with its eyes crossed out in dried blood.

“All done,” I said, my voice sing-song. It was the last entry in the journal.

He went through the blank pages, one by one, then closed the book with slow care. Saker didn’t look up from it, the tip

of his tail flicking. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

He knew the answer already. I could feel it in the darkness between us, see it in the tension curving his spine and pulling his brows together.

“I try to leave as much of that in the past as I can.” I laid my hand over his. “I can’t leave everything behind, but I was...” I shook my head, then leaned forward and kissed his hair, as much for my comfort as his. “I wasn’t myself,” I finished quietly. “The price I paid was very, very high, and I’m still paying it. I don’t regret it, but it wasn’t an easy thing to survive.”

Saker stayed silent for a long time, looking down at the journal. At last he lifted his eyes, sorrow and pain behind his placid gaze. “It’s not like they say, is it?” he asked in a soft voice. “All those songs and stories about heroism or the glory of war. The bards aren’t the ones who come home with the reek of spilled bowels and burned flesh clinging to their skin. They don’t ever sing about how people sound as they’re torn apart. About the blood. The guts.” He looked away again, his ears tilting back for a moment with tension and his wings drawing down towards his body. Almost as if to himself, my familiar whispered, “I’m going to spend a long time in the Crucible.”

“Are you?” I asked, setting the journal to the side. When he didn’t answer, I touched his chin with my fingers, tilting his face towards mine. Those beautiful golden eyes met my gray, his deep uncertainty a dull haze within my soul. “Noetan Rai

purifies the wicked of evil, but I can't say I've felt any evil in you, only sorrow."

He didn't say anything, looking up at me with those big cat's eyes, his tail drifting down to brush against my ankle. Longing sang to me, the sort of yearning that begged for the comfort of kisses and touch, the soft pleading of a wounded heart.

When I'd first comforted him, sleeping alongside him, I'd known that Saker wanted comfort for its own sake. But now? He looked up into my face, heartbroken, and it was *me* he wanted to reach out to him, a desire whose denial would be a constant ache for the both of us, yet whose fulfillment terrified me far more than death.

"You belong in the Garden," I said, my voice hushed and sad. "It's a sad state of affairs that has you here with someone like me."

Saker reached up and touched two fingers against my jaw, his tail curling around my foot. "This could be my Garden," he said hesitantly. "I don't deserve it, but..."

I stood, too quickly, my heart hammering, and scraped at the loose hair brushing over my ear. "I'm no goddess, Saker." I made myself smile, then laugh, and shook my head. "Gods. Can you imagine? I'm far too frivolous for that."

"Hah!" He barked out the laugh, relaxing back with an easy expression belied by the feel of his soul against mine, all storm clouds and fog. "Many things might be said about you, Rain Leyweaver, but I doubt 'frivolous' is one of them."

“Ah, there you’d be surprised,” I said, accepting the easier conversation path with relief, stepping away from the things that haunted my memory. “More than one of my peers regards my hobby as a useless endeavor. I ought to be doing something useful, not finding useless old relics.”

“Like the Eye of Souls,” Saker said, sounding skeptical. “Only the most valuable object possessed by the ruler of the Iron City, which grants her the ability to see the souls of those who move around her once more.”

“Yep.” I flashed him a smile. “Though it’s not exactly soul-sight. She can do stuff like read auras and find names with it, but not see people’s memories.”

His mouth kicked up into a half-smile in return. “A valuable enough skill, I would think.”

“Mm.” For a moment I focused, feeling with relief the movement of power through my channels, then called the token the Vicereine had given to me to my hand. It came to me as easily as breathing, everything returning to normal with that simple act of magic. I was myself again. I turned the iron coin over in my hand, the abyssal power evanescing off of it feeling comfortable instead of alien. It was heavier than it looked, as if I held lead instead of iron, and as warm as if it had been sitting in the sun.

When I looked up at Saker, I found him staring at the coin with wide eyes, his ears tilted forward and wings half-mantled. With a grin, I flipped the coin to him as if I flipped a tip to an urchin, and he caught it with a sharp movement.

“Rain,” he said carefully, looking at the coin in his hand. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Depends,” I replied with good cheer. “What do you think it is?”

Saker looked up at me again, eyes wide. “This is the token she gave you. The Vicereine.”

“Dead in the black, *ledaji*.” I laced my fingers behind my head and wagged my eyebrows at him. “You can hang on to it, if you want. I’m not really doing anything with it right now, and maybe it’ll feel nice to have a piece of Abyssal with you.”

“Not afraid I’ll gate to Abyssal and use it against my father?” he asked, a soft smile starting on his face as he closed his fingers around the coin.

“If that’s what your heart desires, it will be well-spent,” I said.

His brows drew together and his mouth parted, surprise and that dangerous longing trembling under my skin.

I shrugged, trying to escape those feelings, and not knowing how to do such a thing. He felt what he felt, and I had no control over that. I could only comfort myself with the fact that anything he did to me, he would feel, too. I could command him, if I needed to—but it was better not to go down that path. I knew all too well how easily people could forget that those they could command were human. “I don’t have any use for it,” I said lamely, looking away. “Better gift than a pot of orchids, at least. You don’t have to water iron.”

“The orchids are beautiful,” Saker said, looking at me like he might never look away. But perhaps he felt my unease, because he smiled, a quiet expression, then looked down at the coin, running the pad of his thumb across the sigil for the Iron City stamped into the metal. “I’ll keep it safe for you until you want it again,” he said in a musing sort of tone. “A gift like this shouldn’t be spent on vengeance.”

“It’s not as sweet as people imagine.” I flashed him a smile as he glanced back up. “But that’s neither here nor there. Since you’re up, want to get your bandages changed? Your ley’s looking a lot better, and I think those drains can come out.”

The incubus tilted his ears, the sort of searching expression an animal makes when it hears something at the edge of its range that it’s not sure it likes, but Saker accepted the change in conversation topic with the same smoothness that he slipped away from his past. “I will be happy to have them out,” he said, flipping the covers back to bare his naked body and bending his left knee to give me access to the bandages on his thigh. “What would you like me to chatter about while you tend me today?”

With a laugh, I pulled over the chair and took a seat, summoning a pair of medical shears to my hand to cut through the bandaging. “Well, I’m healed enough to do some spellcasting again,” I replied cheerfully, letting the joy of being able to handle power cover over the relief. “That means I’ll finally be up to cleaning up the truly grand mess left behind by summoning you, and I can bring your stuff here, if

you'd like. Why don't you tell me about what I'm looking for before I try dowsing?"

"Oh!" Saker's ears came forward, his eyes lighting up and a smile brightening his face. "I didn't realize you could do that. I was going to leave everything for dead."

I finished cutting through his thigh bandage and gently unwrapped his leg, focusing my mage-sight on the flow of energy through his body. He wasn't healed – not by a long shot – but the wounds were closing well, and his power had begun running in its usual channels once more.

With care, I apported the drains from his leg to my hand rather than pulling them out, leaving the flesh undisturbed. Saker made a yip of surprise at the sudden cessation of pressure, his thigh muscles tensing, and I grinned at him, holding up the drains. "I'm the best dowser in living memory, and possibly the best in history," I reminded him with a shrug. "It probably has something to do with growing up in the Barrens, but I can summon anything from pretty much anywhere, as long as I can find it."

"The Barrens?" he asked, relaxing.

"Oh, I suppose you wouldn't know." I kept working on his leg, moving the objects I needed between the table and my hand with magic, rather than getting up or reaching. Each casual use of power eased the tension I'd been carrying with me since the night I'd called Saker, the way that every step taken after being bed-bound feels like coming alive. "During the Spire Wars, six hundred-ish years ago, some regions of the

Material Plane got so depleted of power that they still haven't recovered. The Barrens is the biggest by far; it stretches several hundred miles in every direction away from Lyria Spire. Nobody there even has knacks."

I smoothed ointment over his wound, then started re-wrapping his thigh while he held it bent. I'd mostly mastered keeping my mind on the tasks of tending Saker rather than paying any sort of attention to the very desirable body I touched, but it was hard not to admire. He had the sort of legs that were made to be stared at, powerful muscle under sleek indigo skin, with those pale freckles dusting the outsides of his thighs and the dark fur that covered his groin curling down into the crease where his leg met his hips. Even the scars wouldn't detract, coming in cornflower blue and smooth.

Saker started purring, a soft sound, and I glanced up to find him smiling fondly at me, his golden eyes soft and his wings relaxed. When he didn't say anything, I only shook my head and went back to my task, letting him enjoy the physical attention.

30

RECOVERY

RAIN

I spent the rest of the evening with Saker. Even knowing that the comfort of his presence might be coming entirely from his desire to be near me, sitting in bed with my familiar working on my Blackwings research soothed my frazzled nerves, and I had nothing else I needed to be doing. There was no helping the soul-bond, so I might as well enjoy the good things it had to offer—when I was able to accept them, at least. As amazing as sex with Saker would have felt, that sort of connection was far too dangerous for me to contemplate it with anything other than blank terror.

He fell asleep not long after dinner, curled up next to me like a companion animal, and I spent a while petting him as if he really was my cat. Saker's long hair could have been silk, smooth and straight, and the narrow mane of fur that ran down his spine to his black-furred tail was soft and dense. Unlike a cat, he seemed to have no reticence with being touched anywhere, and even asleep I could brush out the long plume of his tail or run my fingers along the planes of his wings.

Such things led to dangerous thoughts, however, and I made myself stop, leaving him alone in his bed and starting on the tasks that I'd let wait until I'd recovered from handling raw magic. Mages often had comfortable favorites as far as regions of spellcasting went, and I was no different. My skill at summoning and sending meant that I could turn it to tasks that weren't directly associated with summons. So, while I could have found and used some cleaning spells to deal with the truly appalling amount of blood, ash, and shattered obsidian my familiar-calling had left behind, I just used summoning to get the job done.

Summoning all of Saker's blood would have killed him, but summoning all of his blood that had cooled to room temperature left me with a clean floor and a bowl full of gross whitish flakes of dried blood. A heap of ash joined the blood; the obsidian swords, however, had been heavily enchanted and had happily soaked up the abyssal power of the confluence while resting on my floor, and dealing with them via simple summoning would have been a huge pain.

So, obviously, I summoned a fiend from Abyssal, gave it free reign of the top floor of the Spire, and traded it the obsidian shards and the power they contained for the task of collecting them all. Thirty minutes later, I had a clean summoning circle again, and the fiend returned home wealthy.

In the morning, I used Saker's description of where he'd been living on Abyssal to narrow down my search parameters, then dowsed for the rest of the things he owned using my bowl of dried blood as a guide to the places he'd touched. He'd

given me permission, and I knew he was excited to have his possessions again, but I didn't think he'd realized what I might find.

His blood had been spilled on dozens of battlefields. I found the twisted wreckage of armies, burned so thoroughly that all that had been left behind was slagged armor and crumbling fragments of bones. Creatures like Dastan's ghost-ray drifted above the cold slaughter, things with the shape of eels and rays made of the echoes of so many fallen souls. My power brought me to rooms designed for transactional sex, the beds where he'd fucked hundreds of strangers who wanted him for his aura and were happy to trade up their lust and the risk of an incubus losing control and eating part of their wellspring. I found hospital wards and charnel pits, bedrooms and bawdy-houses. I saw his life, and it broke my heart, a parade of death and empty connections, with nothing bright or beautiful.

At last, I found the place Saker had been living—a place I hesitated to call his home. The search took me hours, because the lonely, decrepit, two-story stone tower had been little more than a repository for the things he'd owned and a place to sleep. In his absence, creatures of all kinds had moved in, burrowing into his shabby furniture and gnawing at what little food he had stored.

I could have delayed bringing things over, or spread it out, but I couldn't bear to leave the remnants of his grim life there for a single day longer. I emptied that abandoned, half-ruined building of everything that could be salvaged, bringing the trunks and crates Saker had stored his possessions into the

Material Plane. He hadn't been homeless, exactly, but when he'd told me he hadn't had a home in Abyssal, Saker hadn't been lying.

Whatever had caused him to choose to live in such a place eluded me. He'd surely had the income for better, rather than living with ratty cloth hung over glassless windows and all his belongings stored away. It seemed like the sort of setting for someone to punish themselves, like a self-flagellating monk sleeping in a stone cell and eating only gruel. But if he hated killing so much, why be a mercenary? Why do it again, and again, and again? There were so many paths open to sorcerers. He could have become anything.

A mystery, and probably one of a thousand. But Saker didn't seem that interested in revisiting his past, and I certainly wasn't about to do such a thing, so the mystery would have to remain a mystery for now. There would be plenty of time to solve them in the future.

Bashen helped me haul everything into Saker's rooms, which truly meant that he hauled all of it into the transport ring and then into 52 Sky. Saker went stiff the moment Bash walked into the room hauling a chest, his frisson of fear tingling along my spine and making my palms prickle with sweat. When I looked over at him in surprise, he flashed me a smile that in no way hid the way his tail had bottle-brushed or calmed the anxiety shivering along the soul-bond.

Neither the minotaur nor the incubus deigned to let me in on why my familiar had any reason to be afraid of Bash, so I

chalked it up to a war-mage facing someone he'd be unable to fight with magic and left them to it. Bashen wouldn't do anything to harm Saker, and I didn't want to get between whatever male posturing they were going to get up to.

Instead, I took care of various other things that had built up over the past week and change. I was mostly administrative stuff, but I also got around to responding to letters from friends and family, arranging a summoning with an elven scholar for some help with translations, and preparing for the next set of observations on my experimental studies. When I at last joined Saker for dinner, he was wearing clothing and reading a slender book titled with a language I didn't recognize—surely something Abyssal. Both sights pleased me; I wanted Saker to feel at home for both our sakes, and having his things would hopefully help dissipate some of the displacement.

The days fell back into a comfortable rhythm. When Saker or I woke from restless dreams, I finished out the night in bed with him, which helped us both fall back asleep, and woke before he had a chance to nuzzle me in the morning. I'd help him through morning ablutions – a task that required less and less help each day, as he healed – then started the day. We ate our meals together and spent a great deal of time in the same room, either talking or working on our own projects; as the only other person in Barixeor who could spend time around Saker without lusting after him, Bashen occasionally joined us for dinner or games.

The friendly companionship helped smooth the sharp edges of my unease. Saker's disarming gentleness and humor went a long way towards building friendship between us, and the way he never pushed on anything helped me control my anxiety over being bound to him. In that context, even the flirtation was fun. No matter his interest or habits, Saker didn't step across lines I set down, and every instance of respect gave me another reason to relax.

Nine days after he woke, I removed most of his stitches, which gave him the ability to walk around without assistance, and to take showers. As he'd anticipated, Saker didn't need to be keyed to the Spire to move through it, but I did it anyway and gave him a little pamphlet with the names of the floors and what resided on each one.

I didn't bar him from the three floors that formed the Spirekeeper's private residence, at least not exactly. I asked him not to go there without my permission, unless it was an emergency, and he agreed with the sort of grave response that told me he wouldn't break his word. Saker was my familiar, and he would always know where I was and what I was doing, but despite my growing comfort with him, he was still another person. I couldn't stomach the thought of him having free access to my sanctum.

I kept other privacies for myself, too, and he maintained the same distance. I only pleased myself while he slept, and didn't ask about his dreams; if Saker touched himself, he didn't do it when I was awake. The restraint surprised me at first, but with every day his desire to please me – for my

affection, praise, and even love – became more apparent. Maybe it wasn't worth it to risk asking permission again.

On the eleventh day, I summoned the stitches out of the four slashes across his thigh and from the bottom half of the wound on his stomach, then declared him healed. Saker seemed delighted (and who wouldn't be?), went and luxuriated in the bath for nearly two hours before emerging, then asked for a grand tour of the Spire.

With no reason not to and an eager incubus giving me a bright smile, I agreed. We went down each level, starting from the 68 Sky summoning circle down to the storage rooms on 2 Sky, then from the 28 Deep summoning circle up to the ground floor on 1 Sky. He didn't have any particular desire to go experience the timeless storage, and thank the gods for that, but I did open each door so he could see what was inside. Saker's elation at finding the three floors dedicated to physical training – in dance, combat, and magic – would have made the whole trip worth it, and that was only the beginning of his joy.

He was fascinated by the work rooms and entranced by the armory, spending almost an hour prowling through it and trying out the balance and reach of various weapons. When I told him that he could have anything he found there that he desired, Saker was so astonished that he just stared at me, his usually animated tail falling flat on the floor. He had a similar reaction in the forges when I mentioned that I'd be happy to make him any mage-tools he wanted, and his response made me flush with warmth in a way I hadn't anticipated.

We didn't spend a lot of time on the Deep floors. Many were barren – kept devoid of life, objects, and even dust – to prevent any leakage from the libraries and mage-rooms for the baneful magics. Saker refused to even set foot in the library for books on lich-magic and soul-drinking, and I didn't fault him for it. The books themselves had power laced through them, and the things they described were often horrific. Soul-drinkers couldn't help what they were, though the use of that power was usually monstrous, but lich-magic was, as far as I was concerned, a pollution of the soul. Saker's sire used both; I thought he didn't want the reminder of where he'd come from.

At last I took him up to 1 Sky, and we said hello to Marin (who kept her composure better now that she knew what she was going to face) before heading outside. It was a beautiful day, a few days past the autumn equinox, and the skies were a vivid, clear blue. I caught sight of Safira, who was pulling out the finished pea plants next to a horse-shaped Celyn, who ate them with apparent gusto. I waved; Celyn whickered in response, making me grin.

“Would you like to meet Safira and Celyn?” I asked. “Celyn's the water-horse eating the peas. He's friendly to us; he's even carried me twice for emergencies.”

Saker looked over at me, eyes wide. The sunlight served him well, kissing his dark skin, and I liked the way he dressed, in an assortment of shirts, skirts, and robes that worked with his wings and tail. Today he wore a deep gray wraparound skirt pleated in the back that fell just below his knees and an

undyed cotton shirt with loose sleeves. Even in a burlap smock he would have been stunning, and as an incubus he could have worn literal garbage and been desirable to most, but I enjoyed looking at him in the casual garb of a working mage.

“An elemental let you ride him?” Saker asked, sounding impressed.

“Not for free,” I said, grinning. I liked the admiration, especially from a sorcerer like him. “The first time he traded me for cleansing the lake of a disease that was causing the fish to get sores and die, which was a bitch and a half to do. The second time he asked that I buy him any one thing for sale in Melton that was within my power to purchase and which he could carry along with me.”

Saker made a doubtful sound at that, and I laughed.

“Yeah, me, too,” I said, “But there was a chimera rampaging near the town, and I am not that great at gating. I spent the whole trip fretting about having to buy something horrible, and he ended up asking for a rose, which he gave to an old woman doing laundry in the river. I think he was fucking with me.”

“Huh,” Saker said, and started towards the duo, who were both staring at us.

Safira had been warned about my incubus, both by me and by Marin, and Celyn was no colt, but an incubus was still an incubus, and both were entranced by their first look at him. By the time we made it down the garden path, Safira had pulled herself together enough to start pulling up pea-plants again,

and the water-horse was again eating the uprooted plants while watching Saker with avid interest, both ears forward.

“Safira, Celyn, lovely to see you,” I said as we approached. “I’d like you to meet my familiar, Saker.”

Saker gave both of them a bow, stretching his wings out and down as he did, before standing back up.

Safira stared at him for longer than was reasonable for responding, before blurting out, “I’m Safira. I do the garden.” She flung out her hand and pointed at Celyn, who snorted and shied sideways. “Celyn is eating the peas.”

I struggled to keep my laughter off my face, and Saker’s amusement coiled through our soul-bond, though his face stayed in an expression of interest.

“Safira, it is lovely to meet the keeper of these beautiful grounds, though you outshine them all,” he said.

Safira’s dark skin rouged. Next to her, Celyn pawed the ground, clearly ready for his share of the compliments.

Saker turned his eyes to the water-horse. “And Celyn, I am delighted to meet you, as well. I will have to take Rain to task for failing to tell me that the lake’s guardian is so magnificent. I would have come outside sooner if I had known I might meet the two of you.”

My lips twitched as Celyn tossed his head, trying not to laugh.

Saker gave the duo another bow. “I can see, though, that the two of you are hard at work, and I don’t wish to disrupt your

day. Rain has promised to show me the rest of the island, and I will hold her to it. I hope to see you again soon.” His tail swished, and he turned and slid his arm through mine, offering the duo a brilliant smile before heading down another of the paths towards the shore.

31

SHAPESHIFTER

RAIN

I shook with silent laughter as we headed towards the shore, with Saker radiating smugness at my side. He slid his hand along my arm and laced his fingers with mine so that we were walking hand-in-hand. I looked up at him in surprise, and he didn't look back, in the sort of way that said he knew I was looking and didn't want to have to face that. And he felt... insecure, like he was afraid I might tell him "no." I was confused, and I knew my face showed it, but Saker didn't look, so I just turned back to our path as we turned to walk along the shore, still holding his hand.

We walked like that for a little while, in silence. His breathlessness tightened my chest, a little like exhilaration and a little like fear, and eventually I hip-checked him, making him stagger a little and look over at me.

"What's going on over there?" I asked, making a playful face up at him. "You feel like a girl out on her first date."

Saker ducked his chin, looking embarrassed for a moment, before he turned and regarded me, with a small smile playing

on his features. “You like me,” he said. “It feels nice.”

I laughed a little, swinging our linked hands as we walked along the shore of the island. “Yes, *ledaji*, I like you,” I said. “You’re very likable. But you do realize that Safira, or Celyn, or both, are going to follow you around like lovesick ducklings now, yes?”

Saker laughed, and stretched his wings. “They will forget about me, soon enough,” he said, sounding very sure. “They have the peas to think of.” He paused, and then looked back over at me. “You didn’t tell me she was his lover.”

I looked back over at him, a smile spreading across my face. “You can pick up on that, huh?”

He shrugged his wings. “I’m cubari. We can tell a lot about someone by the taste of their lust. They were interested in me, yes, but their hearts belong to each other.”

“Huh,” I said, feeling a bit unsettled by that information. I didn’t know what he might get from the taste of my lust, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “Well, yeah, she’s his consort. Has been for about eight years now.”

I led Saker down one branch of the trail, heading for the more rugged part of the island. The path snaked away from the shoreline, heading up the bluff on a steady slope, with a few earthen stairs here and there. Trees grew along the trail, mostly pines, with little creatures darting along branches or popping up on logs to watch us. Saker followed their activity with sharp little movements of his head and ears, his tail flicking eagerly behind him.

The sight made me smile. I'd asked for a hunter, and apparently I'd gotten one.

In time, we made it out of the copse of woods to the opposite side of the island from Safira's gardens, with the peak of the island and the endless rising height of the Spire between us and them. This area was wilder: a rocky bluff with a steep descent down to the lake, with wild blueberry bushes growing around the stones, along with stunted pines. One large, flat section of basalt stretched out to the cliff, smoothed by time and mostly bare, with a few divots filled with soil and small forbs.

Saker let his hand slip out of mine and walked towards the edge of the bluff, the wind tugging at the long plume of his tail and teasing small hairs away from his braid. He looked back at me, saw me looking at him, and smiled. "Would you like to see the rest of me?"

"The rest of you?" I echoed, tilting my head in confusion. It wasn't as if I hadn't seen him naked before.

"Krocutex, echnumon, linsang, cat," he listed, his smile broadening.

Understanding dawned. "Ah!" I said. "Sure, why not?" I walked over to a log next to the flat and settled down on it. "Are you as handsome a cat as you are a demon?"

Saker ducked his head, one ear flicking. "You'll have to tell me," he said, sounding shy, then started shrugging out of his clothing. The shirt took longer – it had buttons at the back of his neck and at his side – but he got both shirt and skirt off and

tossed them over a patch of blueberry bushes before giving himself a shake like a dog, starting with his head and running down his body to the tip of his tail. Then Saker undid the clasp of his hair and set it on top of his clothes. His long tail swung a few times, before he turned towards me and dropped forwards.

The transformation was smooth and fast. One moment, he stood before me as a night-skinned demon, and the next he pranced on all fours as a black-furred creature the size of a ferret. He was about two feet long, with short legs, a densely-furred tail, a lithe body, and a mongoose's long neck and pointed face. His rounded ears moved as he looked around. Though echnumon had brown or red eyes with round pupils, Saker still possessed his golden slit-pupiled eyes, strange and beautiful in the face of an echnumon. He looked at me with intelligence before bounding over in a ferret's run and darting up my leg.

I laughed, startled at his speed, and scratched him behind the ears in the way echnumon liked to be petted. He made a chattering sound, sheer joy radiating into me like the heat of the midsummer sun. It must have been nice to have his body back—more than nice. Incredible. My familiar jumped onto my shoulder, pressing his cold nose into my ear before sneezing and licking my neck with rapid little motions, as vigorous as the kitchen-cat cleaning one of her kittens. Then Saker leapt down again, vaulting off my knee and landing as a cat.

And such a cat he was, large and built along powerful lines with black, medium-length fur. His long tail plumed out into a black flag, and he held it straight up in the air with a cat's jaunty pride. Saker stretched forward, his claws flexing against the stone, then arched his back and sauntered over towards me. He pushed himself against my leg in the way of cats, rubbing his cheek against me and purring like a landslide. I petted him again, rubbing behind his ears and running my hand down his back to scratch the base of his tail, grinning at him.

Saker looked up at me with those yellow eyes and gave me a slow blink, which I returned. He looked just like a mortal cat, save for the indigo nose. My familiar yawned, wide and sudden, showing off his black tongue, then twined around my legs again, making little *prraw? prrow?* noises.

"Very handsome indeed," I informed him. "The prince of cats."

He made another cat sound before bounding back onto the flat. This time he leapt into the air and landed as a krocutex, forceful and dangerous, and I inhaled at the sight. Saker had been cute as an echnumon and handsome as a cat. He was magnificent as a dragon.

His krocutex stood taller than his incubus form at the shoulder, maybe coming in at seven feet. The weight of his neck hung from the high point of his shoulders, the hyena-like head powerful, with rounded ears and a pair of horns that looked much like the ones he wore as an incubus curling up from his head. Saker had a thick mane running down his spine,

which he lifted as he let out a ululating cry, lowering his head towards the ground and spreading his massive wings as he did. He took a few steps, circling towards me, then snorted, orange flame curling from his nostrils. The sweep of coarse black hair along his stiff, horizontal tail caught the light as he moved.

This time I went to him, standing and walking over with wide eyes. I ran my hands down the pelt of his neck, feeling the powerful muscle. The same scars he wore as an incubus he wore in all his forms, but they were more obvious as a dragon, with his shorter fur. I touched his wing, and Saker lowered it for me, letting me feel the leather of his wing-membranes and the hard arcs of his ribs. His elation sang through me, and I couldn't stop touching him. Dragon, he was as much a dragon as a cat—how the *fuck* had I gotten so lucky?

Saker made a low rumbling sound, and I turned back to look at his face. His rounded ears tilted towards me, and I smiled at him, helpless and stunned.

“Please tell me I’ll get to ride you like this once you’re flight safe,” I said.

Saker barked out what had to be a laugh. He crouched for me.

I hesitated. “No flying?”

He voiced something that sounded like *rouh-rheh-rrouhr*, which I decided I’d take as a yes. I grabbed the thick hair of his mane and vaulted up, getting onto my knees on his back. It took a moment to figure out how I could do this, and I ended

up settling into a crouch, my shins resting on his wing-shoulders as I held onto his mane.

The krocutex – *my* krocutex – stood up, and I moved with him as if we did this all the time. Saker walked at first, making a circle around the flat, maybe so that I could get used to him, or so he could get used to my weight. Then he turned to face up the trail, his tail swishing behind him. His muscles bunched underneath me, and I settled my weight down onto him with automatic ease, anticipating his movement. He leapt forwards into a bounding run, like a sighthound loosed after a hare, the wind tearing at me and the thud of his feet combining with the pounding of my heart into a chorus of war drums.

He took me along the bluff at a dead run, until the trail veered back down into the trees, every strike of his feet against the ground a declaration of freedom and wildness. I'd ridden a water-horse before; I knew what it was to sit astride a force of nature. But riding Saker was better, wilder, a more ecstatic triumph than harnessing an avalanche or steering a gale. We were one creature, nothing more than movement and power. If we could have run forever, I would never have grown tired of it.

But the open bluff came to an end, and Saker slowed to a trot, then a stop, and crouched again. I dismounted, as he seemed to want me to; as soon as my feet hit the ground, Saker jumped past me, towards the trees. He slipped from krocutex into linsang as he did, landing with precise grace on a tree branch and turning to look at me with his yellow eyes. Liquid, he slunk along the branch, his long body suited for the trees,

then paused, as elegant as a sculpture. Something flitted in the branches above him, and he darted into the canopy, moving in a black blur.

A few moments later, he leapt back down to a tree branch in sight of me, a small greenish-yellow bird in his mouth. I watched him as he ate it, bite by neat bite, feathers and all, and wasn't as grossed-out as I had expected to be by watching him eat an animal whole. Saker lifted his face to look at me again with a single yellow feather stuck in his whiskers, his long tail dropping down behind the branch, the tip curling up.

“Shall I give you the ride back?” I asked.

He looked at me; I thought I could feel him considering. After a moment, Saker wound his way down the tree and trotted over to me with an easy lope, far more like a wild animal than a tame cat. I crouched down to pick him up, but he leapt up onto my shoulder, landing with the same clean precision, his claws hooking my shirt but not my skin. He settled, his lanky body fitting across the span of my shoulders and his tail falling down to my waist, then turned his head and licked me on the ear with his rough cat-tongue.

I got up and started walking back up the path. We hadn't gone very far, but it was still a walk of some minutes for me to get back to where Saker had left his clothing. The whole time, Saker's long neck stayed up, looking around, and I remembered that linsang were solitary creatures. Depending on how much instinct he had in each form, it was likely that of his forms, he was the least comfortable as linsang. Still, he

wasn't tense, and his happiness radiated into me like the heat from a fireplace.

I held out my arm once we were back on the flat, offering him a way down. Saker jumped off of it, landing on two feet in a crouch. He looked up and over his shoulder at me, with an expression so eager for approval that I had to smile at him as he stood. I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist, laying my head against the mane that ran down his spine. He started purring almost as soon as I touched him, covering my hands with his and leaning back against me.

"You're glorious, Saker," I said, and meant it. "I'm really glad you're feeling better." I gave him a squeeze and let him go.

He turned to me, then sank to his knees and took my hands in his. His tail curved in an arc around the back of my legs, black fur pooling on the dark stone, and Saker looked up at me with a soft smile that bordered on adoring.

It was too much, too close to devotion. I couldn't deal with that—couldn't face what it meant, couldn't remember, couldn't go back. Terror flapped against the cage I'd build for it, like moth blundering blindly into a lamp.

"Was I worth the trouble, *ledaji*?" he asked. "Can I be more than a regret?"

I tugged at his hands, and he got up, still looking at me with that expectant look.

“You were never a regret, silly,” I told him, struggling for lighthearted instead of intense, needing to get away from his yearning and my fear. “A huge pain in my ass, maybe, but not a regret,” I added, making myself smirk to take any sting out of the words.

Saker let me brush away his seriousness, sticking out his tongue at me in childish protest before letting go of my hands and turning to grab his clothes. I laced my fingers behind my head and turned away from him to give him privacy. Well, he was an incubus. It was really to give myself privacy and time to gather myself, stepping back from the precipice. I looked out over the smooth blue water of the lake and out to the forested rim of the caldera until Saker came up behind me and laid his hands on my shoulder.

“Shall we?”

I looked over my shoulder to see him smiling at me, and smiled in return, putting away my turmoil and choosing happiness instead. He offered me his hand again with a shy expression, with the sort of hesitance that told me he halfway expected to be denied. I took it again, lacing my fingers through his warm ones and leading him back along the path, showing him my island.

A spur off the main path led to an ancient shrine to the creator-god Yeles, one that predated the Spire by at least a thousand years. Celyn didn't remember who had built it, but then, the water-horse hadn't spent that much energy focusing on the humans on his shores until Safira had come to Barixeor.

Whoever had built it, now it held the offerings each of the Spirekeepers had left to the god. The newest gift gleamed in the dappled light of the glade, a flamberge sword enchanted against rust and wear. It had been the first thing I'd forged here at Barixeor, heated in the fires of the volcano and quenched in the water of the lake.

Saker stopped at it for a contemplative moment, touching his fingers to the stone before lifting his hand and incanting a short spell. A wire-wrapped stone pendant appeared in his hand, something abyssal I'd brought with his things. My familiar laid it on the altar next to the sword with a gesture of respect, then looked back at me.

I tilted my head with a questioning expression, curious as to what he'd chosen to leave for the god.

One corner of his mouth tugged back. "I am not good at making things," he said, anguish lying buried deep beneath the words. "I was made for destruction. But I do try," he finished softly, his tail curling around his legs.

This time I held out my hand to him, and Saker took it. I drew him away from the shrine and back into the sunlight, searching for the right words to say.

"I can teach you forging, if you'd like," I offered at last.

He looked over at me with a raw expression. Saker was wary and wounded, but life hadn't managed to crush the hope out of him. There was a gentle creature behind the crass jokes and war magic, someone who only needed space to grow, like a plant trapped beneath a paving stone.

“Or glass-forging, if you think you’d like that better,” I added, thinking it might be nice to do something with no association with war. “There’s more to fire than destruction.”

Saker stopped walking, tugging me to a halt so that I turned to face him. He watched me with an expression I couldn’t place, almost warily, as if I might leap at him and bite him.

“My teachers told me that my manifestation was a sign that I was meant for slaughter,” he said. He sounded tentative, in the way of someone repeating what they thought was truth to an authority figure who disagreed. “I have proven very good at it.”

“That whole ‘manifestation is the revelation of destiny’ mumbo-jumbo is lazy bullshit,” I replied, my brows drawing together. “We manifest in ways that reflect our natures, sure. I called light, you called fire. Some mages lean towards gravity, or music, or whatever else. But it’s the manifestation triggers that determine the manifestation, not the nature of the mage.”

Saker didn’t look like he believed me, his jaw set and tail flicking from side to side like an unhappy cat.

I shook his arm. “I know you’ve got a clever mind behind that pretty face, so use it,” I said. “Do you honestly think that if my extreme emotion had been joy instead of terror that I’d have impaled someone with starlight?”

He looked away, his ears pinning back and tail lashing, but he didn’t take his hand out of mine.

I barrelled on. “Saker, I’ve met mages who manifested in all sorts of ways. People who filled the sky with beauty out of love and joy, people who changed the landscape and the weather with their yearning and sorrow, and people who killed and maimed in fear and pain. They all went on to do all sorts of things, most of which had nothing to do with the first moments of their life as a mage.”

Saker stared resolutely off into the distance.

I flattened my mouth at him again. “Look, I don’t know how they do it in Abyssal, but you’re in Material now. You don’t have to keep following the road that was laid for you, if you don’t like it.”

“Alright,” he said, still looking away.

I paused, my mouth already open to keep lecturing him, and I snapped it shut. I looked at Saker’s face, which was unreadable. Even his emotions in our soul-bond were muddy and muted.

“Alright?” I repeated.

My familiar looked at me, eyes calm, and squeezed my hand. “Yes,” Saker said. “Alright. I would like to try something different than war magic. I don’t know if I will be good at it, but...” His voice trailed off, and he shrugged. “I will try.”

I tugged him back into motion, heading around the island as the trail drifted back down towards the shore. “Everyone is terrible when they start new things,” I said, with as much

cheerfulness as I could muster. “Takes a lot of practice to get good at anything, and a lot of truly garbage products of your hard work along the way.”

“Mm,” was all he said by way of reply, and we continued on our way in silence again.

Saker started relaxing up as we walked, though, and when he went back to watching the little animals like a cat watching a fly just out of reach, I felt myself relaxing again, too. I hadn’t even realized I’d been tense, and I wasn’t sure how much of it was mine and how much of it had come from the demon at my side.

32

HUNGER

RAIN

E ventually, we came around the bend back to the gardens. Celyn had vanished, but Safira still labored in the distance, so I led Saker up one of the radiating spokes that wandered down from the Spire instead of completing the loop. Getting a surprise incubus twice in a day was asking a lot from my gardener.

When we finally reached the entrance to Barixeor, it was several hours after noon and I was hungry enough to devour an ox. Marin wasn't in the kitchen, but there were two trays set out for us, the enchanted lids on the plates keeping our food at a proper temperature. I dropped Saker's hand and lifted my hands to the ceiling in supplication.

"Oh, thank fuck," I said. "I'm starving."

"About that," Saker said, sounding embarrassed. "I'm... getting very hungry."

I lowered my hands and turned back to look at him; he was rubbing the back of his neck, looking away. It took a moment

for what he was saying to register, but when it did, my cheeks flushed and the rest of my blood rushed to my groin. There's two ways to feed an incubus, and only one of them involves food.

Saker gave me a little half-smile, looking flustered. "Little tastes aren't enough for me."

"Oh," I said, my brain failing to supply any clever response.

Saker stepped forward and ran his hands down my ribs to settle on my hips, his thumbs sweeping down to press against the join of my legs. I could feel him trembling with want, his control slipping at the taste of my desire. His eyes gleamed, his long black lashes gilded as he drank in my lust.

"This is very nice, but it's not enough to keep me fed." Saker paused, swallowing audibly, and his voice dropped in pitch as he asked, "Am I friend enough to be your lover, Rain?"

The question was like ice water on my desire. Ishkaia's tits. Forever, it all circled back to forever. He was everything I enjoyed in a partner, but I was going to spend forever with him. Giving him that power over me, letting him into my heart and baring all the broken places... it was so dangerous. So much could go wrong. So much pain lurked in the shadows of that road. Something in me sparked with panic, and Saker drew back, looking defeated.

"That's answer enough, *ledaji*," he said. "But I'm going to need something, and soon. I have no intention of seducing any of your staff, let alone Celyn, and..." Saker trailed off and

exhaled sharply. “Sex is best. Orgasms. It’s difficult to get enough ambient lust unless I’m in a room full of people for hours, and... I don’t like doing that to people.” He looked away, his tail flicking with what looked like discomfort. “I don’t need to eat like that every day, but more often is better for me. It’s been too long already, but I didn’t want to... push you.”

I sighed and stepped next to him, wrapping my arm around his waist. Saker went stiff with surprise, the heat of his body returning my embrace.

“Starving yourself is no solution,” I said. I braced myself and asked, “Did you get enough, that one morning?” I didn’t think I needed to clarify.

“Yes,” Saker said, his voice guttural. His tail swished behind us.

“Okay,” I said, and stepped away from him, dropping down into the chair and taking the lid off of my food—a generous slice of spinach quiche with a side of sausage. “Let me shovel some food into my mouth, and then I’ll go up to my room and you’ll go up to yours, and... we’ll see how it goes.”

“Are you sure?” He was looking down at me with a complicated expression, his brows lifted and pulled together, his jaw tight, and his lips parted.

I couldn’t parse everything roiling between us, but now that I knew to look for it, I could identify his hunger, something more feral than lust. Even though he hadn’t said it, I knew that a starved incubus would be very, very dangerous. Saker had

tight control, but any creature pushed deep enough into desperation can become deadly. I didn't want to test that control—and I didn't want him to suffer, either.

“Yeah, I fucking suck at gates,” I said, keeping my tone lighthearted and not thinking about what it meant to pleasure myself with Saker listening in, even while my body was quickening at the thought of getting to experience that double-body orgasm again. “Besides, can you imagine what sort of reputation I'd get if I started importing one-night-stands on a daily basis?”

Saker's face struggled into a smile. He sat down and stared at me for another heartbeat before turning to his own food.

I all but inhaled my food, less because I was anxious to get upstairs and lay hands on myself and more because I hadn't eaten in six hours and had been hiking around the island. Across from me, Saker ate with the same quick, neat bites I'd seen him use to devour a bird in a tree. Marin walked in at one point, gave Saker's back a wide-eyed stare, and then walked back out without saying anything. A tiny smile curled the corners of his mouth, and he resettled his wings before continuing to eat.

I finished before Saker, but as soon as I set down my fork, he put his down, looking up at me with something like reckless need.

“Not going to finish?” I asked, getting up, though I knew the answer.

“It’s not what I’m hungry for,” my incubus said, his voice strained.

Saker watched me like a predator, and I was reminded of what it had been like to be desired by a falcon-knight. My skin tingled, heated desire warming my chest and neck. His eyes were gleaming again, with that sunlight glow, and I gave him a little nod. He stood with sudden motion, knocking the chair over, and his hunger coiled through me. There was a part of me that very much wanted to see what he would do if I took him to my bedroom: his rapt attention promised an afternoon as wild as any unseele revel. But I stepped back, and he held himself in place as I walked out of the kitchen and to the transport ring, though I could feel his eyes against me as I went.

I swallowed as I stepped into my bedroom, my emotions roiling from the want and need pouring off of Saker. I kicked off my shoes and shimmied out of my pants and breeks, moving quickly. Saker was under his own control, but it was asking a lot of him to make him take his time now that I had offered to feed him, like setting a bloody haunch in front of a hungry dragon and expecting him to be uninterested.

I scrambled onto bed as Saker got to his room, and fumbled in the drawer of my bedside table. My hand closed around a silk bag with a hard shape inside it – good enough – and I dumped the glass phallus out of the bag with shaking hands, feeling as I did Saker throwing off his own clothing, not even making it to his bed before he fell to his knees and started stroking himself.

Holy *fuck* did that feel good.

I was soaking wet, and from whose lust didn't really matter at the moment. I lined up the glass shaft with my entrance and slid it into myself with a moan, the fingers of my other hand going straight between my legs to circle on my sensitive peak. The glass was cool and smooth, and the head of the phallus pushed against my channel in a ring of pleasure. I started pumping it in and out of myself, matching the pace of Saker's hand without even thinking about it. He collapsed forward, bracing himself with one hand on the floor, moaning, the vibration of that sound translating to my throat.

My fingers pressed down on myself, pushing the tender nerves down against my pubic bone, and pleasure sang up into me. The shaft of glass inside me filled and stretched me, giving me something to clench down around, hard and slick. I tilted my hips up, making the head of the phallus rub against the top of my channel, along the sensitive flesh that begged for touch. It all felt good, exquisite, and I cast for something to hook my mind on.

It was too hard, not to think about Saker when I could feel him pleasuring himself – and I didn't think he'd mind me fantasizing about him – so I just did it. I thought about what it would be like to have his beautiful face between my legs, dedicated to my pleasure. The phallus became his hot fingers, pressing up inside me, and my fingers were his tongue, wet and clever. The heat of my arousal flushing my skin would be from his hot panting breath, and I'd wrap my hands around his horns and hold him there. He'd like it, he'd like it, that incubus

who was moaning and sending his pleasure burning through me with every stroke of his strong hands, he'd *like* it—oh gods it felt so good, so fucking good, fuck fuck *fuck fuck FUCK*—

My body came off the bed as I orgasmed, arcing up around the radiant ecstasy that erupted from my core. I tensed in waves, like the rhythm of an earthquake, and below me I could feel Saker ejaculating, the sweet pressure of come rushing through him also racing through me with the white-hot force of lightning. I fell back to the bed, panting, feeling his wings tremble and his body tense with aftershocks of pleasure.

I lay there and breathed until my heart rate came down and Saker pushed himself off the floor. His hunger still coiled inside us; not sated, only pacified. A wicked smile spread across my face.

“Alright, incubus,” I said to my room. “Let’s have a little fun.” And I spoke the word that made the phallus buzz with vibration inside me.

Several hours and many orgasms later, I leaned in the doorway to Saker’s bedroom, smirking at him. My familiar was lying sprawled in the direct middle of his bed, spread-eagled. He’d cleaned up the physical evidence and put on a rose-pink satin bathrobe, but apparently that had been all he was willing to do, because he’d been lying in this position for twenty minutes before I’d come downstairs.

“Feeling better?” I asked in an arch tone.

Saker flopped his head over to look at me. I grinned at his expression. He looked like a cat in the sun, without a care in

the world.

“Can I come in?”

He nodded, closing his luminous eyes. I strolled over and hopped up onto the bed; Saker grabbed my hand and tugged me towards him, and I went. I sprawled down on top of him, drawing a sigh of contentment from my familiar.

I felt rather pleased, myself. “You know, if you’d told me earlier, I’d have kept you fed,” I said. “I’m a big fan of eating.”

“Mmm,” Saker replied, “But this was so nice.” His voice came slow and lazy, the ease of his emotions reflected in the cadence of his words.

I gave him a little flick on the nose. My incubus did not so much as twitch.

“Well, don’t expect a multi-hour marathon every time, *ledaji*,” I said with good humor. “Most of the time I’m happy with one before bed, and sometimes another in the morning or afternoon.”

He cracked an eye to look at me. “Oh?” he asked.

Probably curious about why I hadn’t been getting myself off for all this time. A stab of guilt struck me at the thought, since I’d been confining my orgasms to his sleep—I hadn’t realized he’d been getting that starved. I should have been paying more attention.

“You’ve been sleeping, during,” I said, shamefaced. “I’m sorry for that. I’ll take better care of you from now on.”

Saker patted my arm before letting his hand flop back to the bed, closing his eye again. “I forgive you,” he said. “I would forgive you anything, right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” I replied, kicking my legs up and swinging them back and forth, feeling a little playful. “What if I bit you really really hard?”

“I’d like it,” Saker said in that same lazy drawl. “I kiss Xair.”

“Oh, *do* you?” I said, delighted at the admission. “I’m more of a Helena girl, myself.”

“Mmm,” he said again. “I can do that for you, too, if you want.”

I giggled and walked my fingers up his chest. “You’re moon-drunk, darling.”

“Lust-drunk,” he said, in a happy sigh. Saker reached up and wrapped an arm around my waist, the weight of it sinking against my lower back. “Thank you, Rain,” Saker said, and I could tell how much he meant it. “I know I’m not what you wanted, but you have been my unwarranted salvation, and you may have all of me, for as long as I live.”

I stared down at his contented face, free of tension. He wasn’t lying, and I felt a frisson of something – exhilaration? fear? – fluttering in my chest.

“Now I know you’re drunk,” I said, brushing the hair back from his face, trying to keep the mood light.

Saker leaned into the touch, his mouth opening a little and his brows coming together in an expression of tactile pleasure. He opened his eyes, molten gold slit with endless black, and looked up at me with an expression of utter devotion.

“Kiss me, *ledaji*,” Saker said, his voice dreamy. “I’m already yours forever. What’s a little more?” He wasn’t hiding behind anything anymore, sated and sleepy, and that satiation had quieted his fear and unhappiness until all that was left was the endless yearning of his wounded heart.

I shrunk back, afraid to answer that want. He felt like this now, but what about forever? How could I ever trust that things would stay good—trust that *he* would stay good? I’d walked that road before, and found the answers there to my sorrow.

His face shuttered. Saker closed his eyes and turned his head away. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice tight with hurt. “Please forget I said anything.”

“Saker...” I started.

He cut me off with a shake of his head. His eyes opened, but he looked at the wall, instead of at me. Behind me, I could hear his tail, moving in a slow rhythm. Flick. Flick. Flick.

“We both know I want things from you that you don’t want to give,” he said, but there was no heat in his voice, only resignation and the death of dreams.

I had no comfort to give him. I knew he wasn’t only talking about sex, even though he didn’t say the words. I’d known for

a long time now.

Saker looked up at me. “Thank you for the meal,” he said, his voice soft. “Can I... be alone for a while?”

“Okay,” I replied, my voice just as soft. “Of course.” I hated this—hated being in this position, hated that he wanted what I was terrified to give, hated that he could look at me with his heart in his eyes and ask me to kiss him. I got up off of Saker and off his bed, and walked to the door. I paused in the doorway and turned back to him. “You know how to find me, if you need anything,” I said. He didn’t answer, so I shut the door and went up to the library to work.

33

PENANCE

SAKER

I tried to be a man instead of an incubus or a killer, and I didn't know how. Once I allowed emotion into my life, it grew outside any of my control, a riotous jungle full of vibrant life. Every moment spent in Rain's company, even the ones where she cared for and cleaned me like a newborn kitten, filled me with effervescent joy, as if happiness sparkled underneath my skin. It had been so long since I'd felt such things, and I had only the understanding of a child.

How did people do this? I'd listened as they talked about flirting, trading tips about how to make small talk or attract and hold someone's attention, but I'd never had the opportunity to try such things before. Desire remained mysterious to me. Since I'd manifested, the interest of others had always come tainted by the touch of my lust aura, and that lack of trustworthiness combined with my own reticence meant that I didn't even have experience with feeling my own desire. For so long, I'd relied on the nature of a linsang to survive, leaning into that solitary hunter for survival. Yet I was

so much more than a lonely wildcat, and now those things bloomed unfettered.

Was this what the poets wrote about? When I was alone, I anticipated Rain's return as eagerly as a hound waiting at his master's door, as if waiting to hear her coming up the walkway. In her presence, I only rarely took my focus off of her, even when reading or writing. I'd accumulated dozens of poems in my notebooks, none of which were worth speaking aloud, and all of which I felt certain would send Rain recoiling if she read them, let alone if I tried to declaim them to her as a way to show her my heart.

We shared a soul. She could peer into the secret places of my heart if she chose, and instead she kept the doors closed. I wouldn't force on her the knowledge of the things she didn't want to face. But I couldn't escape my heritage, and when Rain offered to feed me with her own pleasure, everything in me aligned in the pursuit of that singular desire.

I was an incubus. In the time since I'd come into my power, I'd had sex with thousands of people, their names and faces blurring together. I'd fucked nobility in palaces and paupers in cheap rooms meant for trysts. My body had made me the centerpiece of orgies, left me near-feral while bound and used, and brought my partners ecstasy beyond their wildest dreams.

None of it compared to having Rain's desire focused on me, pouring into me, making me the one lost in pleasure instead of the instigator. She had me for hours, indulging in the kind of sex she could view as nothing more than masturbation, even

with the bond between us unfettered. It didn't matter to me that in the physical realm we were in separate rooms, or that our hands only touched our own bodies. As she pleased herself, she brought me to orgasm with the press of her fingers and feel of the shaft she drove into herself, and every answering stroke of my hand and desperate moan belonged to her as much as to me.

But it changed nothing for her. It didn't matter that I belonged to her utterly and would forever, or that she could take control of my body and power if madness ever seized me and I tried to harm her or others. She wanted her own life, and always would. I should have known better.

If this was my fate, I finally understood the agony with which poets penned the grief of unrequited love. I wanted to be the person fate had stolen from me, become someone valuable for her, but Rain didn't want that. She never had.

I knew what she wanted. She'd asked the universe for it: a cat who hunted mice, the sort of companion who slunk through the tower instead of purring in her lap. I'd promised her I could be that for her, and I would keep that promise instead of trying to stand on two feet next to her.

I started that evening. The great spells that formed the core of the Spire meant that mice and cats alike could get anywhere in it that they wanted with very little effort. For most creatures, the patterns in the ley moved around them without ever affecting them, but vermin and their hunters could walk through walls on the paths the ley-lines carved. Working

through Barixeor Spire floor-by-floor wouldn't be effective; the mice could simply move out of my way like a flock of birds avoiding a hawk in the sky. That wasn't to say that a divide-and-conquer approach wouldn't work—merely that those divisions couldn't be based on stone walls.

With that in mind, I spent the evening prowling through heights and depths of the Spire again, this time on four feet instead of two, learning the lay of the ley. Though my whiskers twitched forward whenever I caught a glimpse of a mouse, I left them unmolested for the night. A hungry predator might need to catch the first meal he could, but I was well-fed and clever. A wise predator learns the patterns of his prey, so he can capture them with ease.

I didn't go back to my bed as the sun rose. I didn't think I could bear it. Instead I found a warm spot in one of the workshops and curled up, hidden from the sun by a cupboard door.

Some foolish part of me wanted Rain to come find me, to pick me up from my bed of towels and cradle me in her arms as she carried me to a real bed. I'd never before wanted such a thing. Solitude meant safety—a time when I could be certain no one would harm me or be harmed by me. Like an upset cat, I often retreated in the face of conflict, and any approach into my sanctum only made me uneasy. But I wouldn't run if she came. Even if she was angry, I didn't think I'd run. I wanted her to want me near her, no matter how difficult it was.

But she didn't want that, and she didn't come. I told myself it was better that way. The time alone would give me time to settle, and I could learn how to be the familiar she wanted instead of the familiar she'd gotten. Bashen had called this my penance, and perhaps it was. I deserved the Crucible, for the lives I'd taken and the things I'd done, and I deserved to suffer.

Rain's voice, soft and sad, saying, "*You deserve to be in the Garden.*"

No. This was the life I'd chosen instead of death. I'd known what it was when I'd chosen it. It didn't matter that Rain could be my Garden if she wanted. She didn't, and I wouldn't chase that from her.

Resolutely, I got up and started hunting. Three of my forms were excellent for the task, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. As an echnumon, I could fit into small holes and dart quickly, but my eyesight was weak and I wasn't very good at climbing. In the shape of a cat, I had excellent eyesight and could leap, but my size meant I needed to wait for mice to come out of their safe places. And as a linsang... well. Darkness meant nothing to a creature of the night, and no high place was safe from a wildcat who loved the trees.

Even focused on catching mice, I couldn't escape Rain's presence. Perhaps it would have been easier if I could have, allowing me to truly become the creature she'd asked for. It was one of the great dangers of shapeshifting, to become so lost in the animal instincts of a form that you never came out

again, but I suspected it was one I'd never need to hedge against again. Her soul twined with mine like an affectionate cat until it was hard to discern the edges. Rain was inescapable, and the constant, casual presence of my mage soothed the hurt and rejection in a way mere words never could have.

But, gods, even the neverending brush of her soul against mine couldn't have done for me what her pleasure did. Sated on mice and with days to go before I truly hungered for lust again, I didn't expect Rain to feel as if she needed to feed me. With her fear and my longing, I couldn't imagine that she wanted to. But in the evening, as she got ready for bed, Rain lay down on her bed, naked and wet from the shower, and ran her hands down her body.

"Saker, come to bed," she whispered, and I felt the words as if she'd said them with her lips brushing mine.

Excitement shivered down my spine, desire blooming across my skin. I stepped down a ley-line, slipping from a storeroom to a bedroom in moments. It wasn't mine, but it wasn't anyone else's either, and that was good enough. Feeling inexplicably tearful, I leapt onto the bed and into my incubus form, accepting what she offered with a gratefulness that threatened to break my heart.

Without planning on it, I fell into the same position she lay in, running one hand up my chest to caress my nipple and the other between my legs. My shaft stiffened as her fingers circled her sensitive nerves, sliding out of its sheath against

my palm. I almost didn't care for my own pleasure, lost in Rain as she dropped all the barriers between us. Her desire spread against my tongue, as sweet as honeyed wine and as sharp as lightning. I could feel the slickness of that desire against her fingertips, and with a groan I licked my own slick off my fingertips, desperate for the taste of her body.

Rain threw her head back, her spine arching as she slid a phallus inside herself. My whole body clenched down around the phantom sensation with her, every worry falling away in the face of the sheer perfection of being pleased by my mage. My stroking hand matched with the press of her fingertips, the redoubled sensations building on each other faster than any solitary climb towards orgasm. It forbade all thought, leaving me a moaning wreck as I made love to my hand the way I wanted to make love to her, rolling my hips with steady intent and losing myself in her pleasure.

I could feel her moans in my chest. Her pleasure heated my skin and her strong fingers touched me with demand, driving me towards ecstasy with relentless, beautiful command. I tried to hold back, greedy for every heartbeat of time spent like this, but it was an impossible task. Everything gathered into a silvery ball of tension inside me, every sense forgotten save for the perfection of that anticipation. *Amalikti, amalikti*, it was so good, so incredibly good—

My back bowed off the bed as the strain turned into soaring pleasure, a hoarse cry of ecstasy torn from my throat as heat surged through me in waves. My come pumped out of me in white ropes, striking me on the bare chest and sliding down

my skin. I whimpered with the release, falling back onto the bed as the aftershocks shivered through me. Bliss spread out from my core, every muscle relaxing as Rain and I lay together, separated by stone and silence and yet never apart.

“Thank you,” I murmured, not knowing if she heard me or not.

Idly, I ran my fingers through the semen on my chest, then shook my head and focused, dowsing carefully for one of the towels in the bureau. To my surprise, I found it with ease, and when I called it came to my hand with less focus than I’d anticipated. But then I laughed, moving to clean myself as I realized the obvious answer. My mage was a summoner, and a familiar could call on his mage’s power if she allowed it. Rain had done nothing to hinder my access to her, and so it should be no surprise that her ease at summoning would bleed into me.

She’d said that we could do incredible things together. She wanted to fly with me when I finished healing. She said we could become friends. I knew that Rain had meant those things, too, her intent on folding me into her life clear despite her discomfort with my presence. I’d thought that I’d broken everything with the rampant emotion I had no hope of controlling, but Rain wasn’t putting distance between us. She’d invited me to share her pleasure again, and I hadn’t felt any hesitation in it.

Rain was only giving me the space I’d asked for. I couldn’t have the things from her that I wanted, but I could still be with

her. I could still have a friend, and we could still share ecstasy with each other. Maybe there was a place where I could stand at her side, not on four feet but two.

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I tried to readjust my image of the future. Everything felt murky and unsettled, the uncertainty uncomfortable. But there were things I knew she wanted that I could give her. I could hunt mice for her, and I could show her the skies. I could be more than a burden and a hungry mouth to her.

I'll be worthy of you, I thought, opening my eyes again to look up at where she moved through the Spire, her power warm on my face. *I can be someone you can be proud of having. I'll be someone worth keeping.*

34

GRAVITATIONAL ANOMALIES

RAIN

Saker didn't come to me, and I was determined not to force anything on him. I couldn't turn off my awareness of where he was or the position of his body, but I tried not to obsess about it or him, throwing myself into work and preparation for the next meteor capture. If he wanted to avoid me, the least I could do was give him the same courtesy in return, so I stayed out of his way as much as possible. It wasn't difficult, really; I took my meals in my suite, brought my books to my private study, and otherwise pretty much lived in one of the workrooms.

Avoidance only went so far, though, when Saker needed to eat sexual energy and I was not only the only available source, but intrinsically linked to him. His pleasure was mine, and mine was his, a connection that dissolved every barrier between us and left me feeling raw and naked afterwards, wanting to have a lover curled around me telling me sweet nothings. Every evening, we fell into paradise together,

coming together in lust and the glory of ecstasy, everything falling away in the face of that pleasure.

It was impossible not to think about him while I touched myself. I was as much Saker as myself in those moments of time, the sensations thrilling across our bodies belonging to both of us. With my hands on my body and my soul twined around his, I dreamed of his mouth and hands and the hard heat of his shaft, feeling the shape of his powerful body and remembering the purr of his voice, imagining what it would be like to say “yes.”

I wondered, sometimes, what he thought of when he touched himself each evening, with my hands on my body and my pleasure blending with his. I wondered if I wanted to know.

It never stopped being spectacular.

Finally, ten days after he'd looked into my eyes and asked me to kiss him, I saw Saker again. I'd gone to the library to pick up my mail and gotten distracted by one of the catalogs, a quarterly sending from a rare-book collector that often had interesting manuscripts. Standing halfway to the door, my mail under one arm and the catalog open to a set of first edition novels from an author I admired, I realized with a start that Saker had joined me in the library.

Before I'd caught my thoughts or remembered to leave him be, I turned towards the wellspring of his power with a spark of hope. Perhaps I was being forgiven. Maybe everything

could go back to normal, and we could start being friends again—

A black cat stepped into the gap between the stacks, the limp form of a mouse in his mouth. He looked at me, his luminous eyes vibrant against the darkness of his fur, the moment seeming to stretch towards eternity, as if I might fall into his gaze and never return to the mortal realm. Then Saker blinked, breaking the connection, and turned away, bounding up the stairs and out of view.

After that momentary interaction, I started paying closer attention to my mice sightings and to where Saker spent his time. It became very obvious very fast that he spent a lot of time hunting for me, a fact that made my heart ache. He'd told me more than once that he would be a cat for me if I wanted it, and he was doing exactly that. Saker was so eager to please—so willing to do whatever it was that would win him my affection. I wished our situation was different. Gods, I wished that *I* was different, and that the scars on my heart weren't so aligned with the desires of his.

He'd suffered so much already. Saker didn't deserve to be dealt my pain in return for his devotion.

Over time, Saker stopped being as strict about staying away from me, and I tried to match his level of ships-in-the-night interaction, no longer hiding in my suite and workrooms. I got sightings of him from time to time, little glimpses of my familiar flitting through the Spire. Saker wound through the many objects in Barixeor as an echnumon following scent-

trails, stalked along ley-lines as a tomcat, and slunk through the night in his lanky linsang shape.

I didn't receive the cat-gift of mouse entrails by my door, for which I was deeply grateful, but the mouse population continued to plunge, and the ones that remained were far less bold. As the next meteors drew close, I decided to do my part as Spirekeeper and went through the entire Spire to assess the state of the various vermin-wards, then spent three days ward-smithing. By the appointed day, I felt confident that no mice would dare enter my summoning circle, both because there weren't enough to need to explore it and because the wards were working at peak form.

Somewhere along the way, I started hoping that Saker would be interested in catching meteors with me, both because I itched to know what it would be like to spellcast with a soul-bonded sorcerer and because I thought an abyssal war-mage would be a spectacular asset when it came to re-routing missiles on the fly. But he hadn't spent more than sixty seconds in my presence at a time since he'd asked to be alone, and for all of those brief appearances Saker had been on all fours. I wouldn't break my silent vow not to force him to interact with me over something as selfish as wanting help I didn't need.

Alone, I drew the lines for the spell. I could draw them from memory now, but habit held sway, and I used the prepared summoning diagram to measure each line, triple-checking everything before taking my place in the charcoal lines. The black silk over my eyes calmed my nerves, the coolness of the

smooth cloth part of the ritual after all these years. I settled into the meditative state of a mage casting a spell and began reciting the incantation.

The clean light of my power burn-off illuminated the room, the only light aside from the starlight of the sky over the North Pole. Jace's power resolved in my circle, present with me and yet remaining in the circle of Skailaris Spire, our locations overlapped in a way that only the ley entanglement of the Spires made possible.

"Tikaani Glacier," I said, the words coming out with a sleepy lilt, as if I were on the edge of a dream. "Over the tributary that makes up the western front leg, near the moraine. Do you see it?"

"I do," Jace said, her warm voice curling around me. Her power shifted, brilliant blue-white light flowing through the world to form auroras that swept across the sky. "Um, Kazi? I think something's wrong with it?"

I examined it more closely, looking at the rippling patterns of light with my mage-sight and following the center spindle of the celestial power. My brows drew together beneath the silk protecting my eyes. "Two large meteors." I spoke slowly, telling her what I read in the ley. "One small one, a little too large for the station to capture. A... a lot of pebbles. Fuck." I focused, watching the power swirl and grow, settling into its final shape before the broken pieces of the firmament crossed into Material. "What the fuck? It's like someone dumped a shipload of gravel in with them."

“The gravity’s all wrong,” she replied, a frown in her voice. “The two central meteors have enough to pull the third with them, and a bunch of the shatter around them, but not... not like this? There shouldn’t have been enough nearby...”

“They’re not going to come through,” I said, realizing it suddenly. “It’s not snapping into place. Tissit Kalar, fucking look at that.” I felt alternately cold, then hot, nausea starting to roil in my gut. “Gods and monsters, Shana, what in the Crucible of hell is going on?”

Jace didn’t answer immediately, her power curling along the celestial patterns in the sky like frost growing on a window pane. “Something’s on the other side,” she murmured.

“Yeah, no shit!” I moved my hands through the stately shapes of a spell meant to focus the mage-senses on a specific location. “There’s three meteors and fuckton of gravel dragging the gods-damned Celestial Plane within kissing distance of us! You want to punch through?”

“Not on your life,” she said, still sounding faraway, her focus on the receding power instead of me. “Something... *caught* them. Something really... big.”

If we hadn’t been friends for so long – if I didn’t know Jace better than myself – I wouldn’t have known that the pauses in her words meant fear instead of contemplation. But Jace was my best friend, and had been for more than a decade. Whatever she could feel, reaching through the void into the Celestial Plane, it scared her in a way she hadn’t even been when we’d faced the void together.

We'd been so young, then. So bold, with the brash certainty of immortality only those who've never been badly hurt possess. We knew how to fear now.

"Celestial sorcerer?" I hazarded, though nothing like that would scare Jace. There weren't any other sorcerers on her level. There hadn't been in more than a thousand years.

"No," Jace replied slowly. "I..." She took a deep breath, then drew her power away from the celestial power dissipating like fog on a summer morning. "I... think I should go check it out. In Celestial."

"You know what's going on."

The delicate tracery of her power shifted into a defensive position, forming a lattice of impenetrable strength around her soul. Deep inside her wellspring, starlight blazed, cold and pure and unceasing. Light, filling the broken places, shining out from her like the seed of a star.

"I don't *know* anything," she said, that defensiveness coming out in the sharp retort. "I'm not going to make proclamations without making sure my hunch is right."

"Okay," I said gently. "Okay, Shana. I trust you." We'd been through too much together for me to do anything else but believe that she knew what she was talking about, and that she'd tell me what I needed to know before disaster fell. We were worn from the past year, that was all. It weighed on the both of us, not knowing, and always fearing the worst.

Two women, standing against the death of our world. The stars might not be mages, but it didn't really matter. Their natures were to be light in the darkness, carrying deathless cold with them everywhere they went. The stars didn't need to be able to wield power the way a sorcerer did to bring the Material Plane to its knees. All they needed to do was to come here and fill our world with the starlight and ice they bore in their very souls. Even Jace couldn't battle the entire Starry Host.

"It shouldn't take too long." Jace sounded worried again, her fear making the fragile frost-marks of her energy shatter and shift, caught in the starlight tangled with her soul. "I'll let you know as soon as I'm sure. I promise."

"I trust you, Shana," I said again, using the nickname she'd let me give her all those years ago. "You're in a good spot for a celestial gate."

I almost heard her smile, relaxing as I let her keep her secrets. "I'm always in a good spot for a celestial gate," she replied, halfway to a joke.

Ever since we'd rescued Tarandrus, Jace's affinity for celestial magic had grown more powerful, with no end in sight. Sideways jokes were as close as she ever got to acknowledging it, and I smiled for her, as if I didn't know how much it terrified her. "Bring me a souvenir, eh?" I asked, trying to match her jovial tone. "All this celestial firmament simply isn't doing it for me anymore."

“You’ve got it, Kazi. One tourist-trap mug, coming right up.”

“Perfect,” I replied, smiling for real. “Travel safe, sweetheart.”

“Always do,” she said, sounding distracted again, and turned her attention back to the sky.

35

DON'T KILL THE MESSENGER

RAIN

I spent the next several days poring over the daily reports from the Monitors, as well as obsessively auditing the near-constant rain of shatter that got captured by the gravity spells Jace had cast a decade ago over every Spire, Monitor station, and Vault. Whatever Jace's "something" was, it had been affecting things for a while now—going back at least three or four years, once I finished graphing out the fall rate of differently-sized shatter. It had increased slowly, something pushing it towards us, and now was sharply decreasing, and had been for the past fortnight or so.

The Oculus sent me a query about it four days after I'd talked with Jace. I told her we were looking into it, and received no further reply.

One rainy autumn day soon after, I was sitting at the kitchen table peeling one of the new apple varieties I'd gotten as a sideways thank-you to Celyn for his advice (a dwarf sugarsnap, which was exactly as crisp and sweet as advertised), and heard the tone that announced that someone

who wasn't keyed to the Spire had touched its door. Visitors weren't that common at Barixeor, let alone unexpected ones; given that the Spire was located on an island in a lake defended by a water-horse, and a multi-day trip from the nearest town of significant size, this usually meant that a messenger had arrived.

I got up to investigate, leaving my mostly-peeled apple on the plate. All the mages I communicated with on any sort of regular schedule had access to a mailbox, and the non-mages I corresponded with all sent me letters via the Dragonvault rather than expensive magical messengers, so messengers of any kind were pretty unusual. Interest perked, I swung open one of the double doors and looked outside.

Nothing stood at eye-level, and I suffered a moment of baffled confusion before something metallic clicked at my feet. I looked down, startled, and caught sight of my visitor.

A simulacra construct stood on the stoop, one made in the shape of a small bat-winged draconid built out of bone, metal wire, and silk. Simulacra as a whole didn't bother me, but I recognized Dastan's handiwork in an instant, the ragged fragments of souls stitched together with power. The spellwork driving its behavior had once been parts of living creatures, vivisected out of them for raw materials. I didn't care how surgical the precision was, nor how humane the process. The very act horrified me, filling me with visceral disgust.

Souls were *sacred*. To mar them, *brutalize* them, was an act so vile I struggled to make my peace with the existence of

things like the simulacrum standing at my feet, looking up at me with birdlike intelligence in its glinting gemstone eyes. To destroy it would be to free the scraps of soul that formed its behavioral program—and to destroy it would be to kill the creature it had become.

Raindrops slid around it in a dome, and it held a rolled piece of vellum in the jaws of its skull. It was innocent of what had made it, a simple creature obeying its master. Breaking it served no purpose, and won me no friends. I could abide its existence for now. Maybe, one day far in the future, when Rillian no longer ruled the Spires and those who cried their love for Dastan turned on him as public opinion so often did, such things could be put to rest. With my skin creeping at the presence of the thing and a polite expression on my face, I crouched and offered my hand to Dastan's messenger.

The simulacrum dropped the scroll in my hand, hopped backwards, and leapt into the air without waiting for a response. I watched its flight until it got lost in the misting rain, then let my emotions out, snarling and clenching my fist around the missive. I stood and slammed the door, then stalked back into the kitchen.

Saker was sitting backwards in my chair, holding my peeled apple. He flashed me a beatific smile and bit into it, taking a full half off and crunching it with apparent satisfaction. His long tail lay curled on the ground, and he smirked at me as he chewed my apple. My *expensive* apple.

I stared, aghast, as he tossed the other half of the apple into his mouth, with a light of challenge in his eyes.

“You can’t even taste that!” I said, appalled.

Saker just laid his arms over the back of the chair and rested his head on his arms, still with that self-satisfied smile curling his mouth and slanting his brows. “You’re in a mood, *ledaji*,” he purred at me. His tail flicked, in the manner of a cat waiting for someone to get close enough to swipe at.

”*I’m in a mood?*”

He just smiled, satisfied, waiting for me to make my move.

I hissed in exasperation and stalked past him, tossing the crumpled vellum at him as I went. Saker caught it in one hand and watched me go past. I dropped into the chair across the table from him, leaned over and swiped the plate, then grabbed another of *my* apples from the air and set about peeling it. Saker rotated his chair so he was facing me and uncrumpled the vellum while I grumbled and peeled my second apple.

”*I’ve given you a reasonable amount of time to calm your infamous temper after our last conversation, and am offering you the chance to rectify your blatant disregard for the purpose of the Spire in which you’ve squatted?*” Saker read, adding a question to the sentence.

I twisted my face up in disgust and made my hand move like a talking mouth.

He snorted and went back to the missive, his voice taking on a tone of disbelief. ”*Though your feminine emotionality*

has blinded you to the logical outcomes of a difficult choice, the ramifications of my studies will have undeniable benefits“?”

I rolled my eyes and finished peeling my apple, my heart pounding with rage I didn't dare give shape.

“Dastan Soulforge is a lazy prick who doesn't have the patience to build his own instructions for simulacra,” I said. “He peels apart living souls, takes the bits he wants, and stitches them together into ‘useful shapes,’” I continued, doing air quotes and letting my disgust show through. “He's been at me forever, and I'm not having it.” I bit into my apple, crunching my anger into it.

Saker tossed the crumpled vellum onto the table. I glared at it as if I could light it on fire with my anger. The asshole had even written it in glyphic Tissiten, as if it was some sacred mage-text.

“What does he want with Barixeor?” Saker asked. “Surely there are other places he can dissect souls.”

I bared my teeth in a snarl. “Fucker killed a succubus four months ago. Brain-dead, I mean; his body's still alive, and his soul and wellspring are intact. I don't know the circumstances, and frankly, I don't care. He bought the demon's body from his nest and is determined to vivisect what's left.” I tore off another bite of my apple and chewed it with vicious intent. “Of course, if he tries it anywhere but an abyssal confluence, his... *‘subject will expire before all relevant information is collected,’*” I quoted, in a nasal voice that didn't sound

anything like the handsome, athletic Dastan, but that made me feel better.

Saker stared at me, his eyes narrow and expression flat.

“He’s got two options, if he doesn’t want to build his own facilities,” I continued, and held up two fingers. “There’s Yineti Spire, out in the Great Mother Desert. Of course, Yineti is kept by Kera Ashfall, and Dastan and Kera have been at each other’s throats for the past twenty-five years.” I grinned, sharp as a knife. “The two are within kissing-distance in ley impact, and manifested less than five months apart from each other. Dastan would cut off his prick before he asked her for help.” I lowered my index finger, leaving my middle up. “And there’s Barixeor, who is giving him exactly this much help.” I mimed ramming my middle finger up his ass, then dropped my hand and took another bite out of my apple.

Saker tilted his head. “Only two abyssal Spires?”

I huffed out something that tried to be a laugh. “There were seven before the Spire Wars,” I said, “Seven for each plane. But it turns out that it’s a lot easier to destroy Spires sitting on top of active volcanoes than anywhere else. All it takes is a big boom, and the tower falls down.”

Saker barked a laugh, and I let a reluctant half-smile lift the corner of my mouth. I finished my apple while he watched, even eating the core. It really was a good variety; I hoped Celyn enjoyed them.

Saker picked up the vellum and regarded it with a murky expression. I leaned back in my chair, crossing my ankles and

folding my arms over my chest.

“Are you going to send him a response?” he asked.

“I guess I have to,” I said, my lip curling up in disgust. “Anything less and he’ll have the Archmage crawling up my asshole again. If you have any polite ways to say ‘up yours,’ I’d love to hear them. I’m running out.”

“Barixeor Spire will take your proposal under consideration,” Saker said, his words clipped. “Given the magnitude of your work, all care must be taken to ensure proper understanding of the ramifications before granting approval.” With sudden, sharp motion, he balled up the vellum in one hand and squeezed. Light and heat blazed from between his fingers, and when he opened his hand, powdered white ashes fell to the table. His eyes flicked up to mine, yellow and heated. “Come flying with me,” he said. “Let the cold air sweep this filth away.”

Saker saw – or felt – my hesitation, and took a deep breath, relaxing away from what I realized was a towering rage matching my own. He stretched out his wings, showing me the smooth motion and unmarked leather of his membranes.

“It won’t hurt me,” he said, his gaze direct. “You took good care of my wings.” Saker hesitated, then added, “I remember what happened to me. There were pieces missing, Rain. I should never have been able to fly again.” He shivered. “You’re a better healer than you think.”

I looked down at my hands. “My sometimes-lover Qavan is a quarter swamp-dragon,” I said. “He’s got wings, among

other things.” Tail, scales, sharp teeth... I clenched my fists and looked back up at Saker. “I think he would kill himself if he lost the sky. A little extra burnout is nothing compared to being crippled like that. I wouldn’t have forgiven myself if I’d left you flightless.” I relaxed a little, and tried on a smile. “So I did my best.”

“It worked, *ledaji*,” Saker said. He folded his wings back and stood up, holding his hand out to me. “You gave me back the sky. Let me share it with you.”

It was irresistible. I had always been jealous of Qavan; how could I say no? I got out of my chair and took his hand.

“It’s raining,” I warned.

He looked down at me with light in his eyes, something wickedly joyful. “Are you afraid of a little wet, magus?”

I grinned back. “You’re just going to go through a lot of towels when we get back,” I said, as he drew me out of the kitchen and towards Barixeor’s exit.

“That’s what they’re for,” Saker said. “There’s something on the work-table in the leather-working room on 45 Sky; grab it for me?”

He started undressing, and I paused to dowse; it was a lot easier to apport items that I’d handled before and knew the location of, but Saker had handled it, and that proved to be just as good. I pulled the bundle to me and ended up with a jumble of crimson leather straps in my arms. My brow furrowed, and I

looked up at Saker, who smiled at me, looking expectant. I looked down at the straps, then up again with a dawning smile.

“You made riding straps for me?” I asked, almost breathless with the flush of excitement. That was—it was incredible. One comment all those days ago, and he’d taken the time to design and make something for me, so we could fly together. “Saker, this is amazing. Thank you, so much.” I hoped he could feel how astonished I was—how happy. I’d thought he’d been angry at me, but he’d only been... resetting. Settling. Finding a place he could live, and a way to be by my side without being my lover.

He walked over, chucking me under the chin.

“Think of how embarrassed I would be if you fell, *ledaji*,” Saker said, still smiling. “Besides, we’ll both be more comfortable this way. Think you can puzzle them out?”

I shook them out, shifting my grip until I found the padded collar for his neck, and held it up with a broad smile.

“Good,” he said, and became a dragon for me.

36

MOTION & EMOTION

RAIN

It took a few minutes to harness him, but Saker stayed patient as I figured it out, standing rock-steady as I clambered over him to get everything in place. The broad collar went around the base of his neck, and a second padded loop ran in front of his wings and behind his forelegs. Another pair of straps went on either side of his hind legs, cinching around his belly and tail to anchor the wide, padded leather band that ran along his back. Saker had included a hip-harness for me, rather like a climbing-harness, which I wiggled into. He'd guessed my size well, probably thanks to his natural sense of my body, and I found myself grateful for that connection rather than nervous.

Once everything was buckled, Saker crouched for me to mount. I swung up onto his back, fitting my knees and feet into the braces for them, so that his wings didn't have to fight my weight, and clipped my harness to his in three places. Saker turned towards the doors, and I threw them open with a gesture, carrying my will on lines of power. He let out that

same ululating cry he had the last time he'd carried me on his back. It was all the warning I got before he lowered his head and charged out into the rain.

I gripped the handholds and moved with him as he bounded forwards and launched himself into the sky. Wide wings beat the air, throwing rain up and against me as he powered skywards, the drops cold and wonderful. I whooped, the rain stinging my face and my braid whipping behind me. Saker voiced the territorial cry of the krocutex, a soaring, wailing sound that rang through the caldera, the sound of it making my blood rise with feral joy. He caught a gust of wind, snapping to the side and riding it higher, and I couldn't stop laughing, that wild delight racing through my veins.

We wheeled through the cold rain, Saker surging higher and higher, tumbling between winds. It was magnificent—overwhelming—transcendent. I could feel how he would move and moved with him, better-matched than the best horse and rider. We were like one creature: wind-tossed, rain-lashed, filled with joy.

High above even the Spire, Saker tossed himself into a blast of wind and rain, letting it roll him. For one heart-stopping moment, we hung in the air—and then we were falling, diving, wings tucked and our hair and tail war-banners behind us. I pressed myself closer to Saker's back, reveling in the reckless exultation as we dropped towards the Spire. He twisted as it speared up towards us, so that we spiraled down through the power racing up it, against the movement of the confluence. The ground flew at us impossibly fast, but Saker flung out his

wings and the force of the air dragging against him threw us once more into the sky.

He took us back up, making a high loop around the caldera lake. We swooped down low enough to the surface of the lake that Celyn leapt up onto the water to join us, galloping in our shadow while he screamed a jubilant whinny. Saker responded with another eerie howl, the two sounds mixing in discordant harmony, goosebumps rising on my arms as I sang with them. He beat his wings again, carrying us back into the sky, leaving the water-horse dancing with the rain beneath us.

I should have gotten cold, soaked to the bone and with fingers of cold wind snatching at me, but my dragon's heat wrapped around me, and I was warm in his summer.

At last Saker dropped back towards the island, backwinging to a neat landing near the shore. He snorted, jets of flame lighting the air for a moment, and trotted us back to the entrance of Barixeor. The doors were still wide open, and he ducked inside before shaking himself, rattling my teeth and sending water in every direction.

I unhooked myself and vaulted down, unbuckling the harness and dragging it off of him. As soon as he was free of the straps, Saker reared back onto two feet, sweeping me into his arms and spinning me around. I laughed, still overcome with joy, letting my demon catch me. Saker held me against his warm chest, his face dropping to mine until his mouth was a hair's-breadth from mine, both of us panting with exertion and excitement.

He caught himself and made a face before kissing me on the cheek, then released me, stepping back. “How was that?” he asked, his broad smile wider than any human’s, and showing a great deal of pointed teeth.

I did a pirouette, spinning around on foot before planting both on the floor again and flinging my hands into the air. “Amazing!” I crowed. “Ishkaia’s tits, Saker, you are Pehrren’s avatar in the skies.”

“The god of skies and storms?” he said, laughing. “That might be too much praise.”

“Well-deserved,” I said, and dropped my hands. “Gods, Saker, how can I ever thank you?”

“I can feel every bit of your happiness, *ledaji*, and that is enough for me,” Saker said, and sauntered over. There was a wicked expression on his face as he leaned down and added in a playful tone, “But if you truly want to find out what it’s like to ride an avatar of the gods, I wouldn’t say no.”

I punched him on the shoulder, feeling playful instead of unsettled, the laughter in his soul lifting me away from my comfortable fears. He laughed, biting his lower lip for a moment before dropping into a fighting crouch and throwing a few feinting jabs at me. I accepted the challenge with delight. I danced away and snapped out a kick at him, yelping as he swept under and caught my calf in his elbow, backing up to make me hop to keep up.

“Oh?” he taunted. “You want to spar with a war-mage?”

“Give it back!” I said, laughing as he gave me a look of pure mischief and tossed my leg up into the air to throw me on my ass. I squeaked again, but I wasn’t a dancer for nothing, and I cartwheeled backwards away from him, dropping into my own fighting crouch.

Saker had a delighted smile painted across his face, one with a good deal of admiration in it, and his tail wove behind him as he leaned forward, balancing with his wings. He kicked the harness to the side and started circling, every movement as smooth as a panther’s stalk. I followed suit, very much enjoying the expression of glee that warred with his predatory gaze. Saker darted forward at me, and he was *fast*—way faster than he had any right to be. I managed to skid away, ducking under a strike, but I could tell as I did that he’d let me get away from him.

“Kitty-cat,” I said in a sing-song voice. “Are you playing with your food?”

In response, Saker voiced that dangerous snarl of his. My body responded to it like a prey animal, my heart racing and my skin prickling with sweat, even as I felt his predator’s focus settle on me. He danced at me again, holding his speed in check so that I stood a fighting chance. As I stepped away from a kick, I swept my arms down and to the side, calling a quarterstaff from the armory moments before I swung past him, connecting with his foot and sweeping it out from under him.

Saker twisted in the air, landing on all fours, and his head snapped up to me. He grinned at me, that unsettling too-wide smile on his not-quite-human face, and huffed out flame with every breath. I spun the quarterstaff, circling around him as he stood, his wings mantled and his tail held out for balance. My familiar feinted towards me, enough that I swung the staff to block, then whipped at my undefended side with his claws curled.

I leapt up and out of the way, giving the movement more strength than it should have with a thrust of power, but I didn't count on Saker's shapeshifting. He surged up into his krocutex shape, batting me out of the air with one huge forefoot like a cat catching a cricket. I only had enough time to drop the quarterstaff and land well, smacking the ground and rolling away as Saker came back down at me as an incubus again. I didn't see the blow, feeling it coming as he moved, but he was as fast as a wildcat, and even knowing where he was, I couldn't get out of the way in time.

He flung himself at me and dropped onto my back, pinning me to the ground with his body, growling in my ear. I shivered, making Saker laugh, a dark chuckle that promised all sorts of wicked things.

“Good try, mouse,” he said, punctuating it with a sharp nip on the back of my neck.

I made a little squeak, playing my part.

He growled again, his dragon's heat soaking into my body. “Didn't you ever learn that it's dangerous to tease a dragon?”

I wiggled my hips under him and felt his focus narrow, like watching a cat's pupils blow wide when it caught sight of prey. "Nobody ever taught me any manners," I said, trying to sound mournful. "It's a curse, really." I bucked up against him as if I had any chance of dislodging him, the naughty mouse teasing her captor.

His hands on my wrists tightened to manacles, and he drove his hips down to pin me against the ground. Saker panted out through his teeth, his breath hot against me, then surged down and bit me on the back of the neck.

I gasped an inhale, my body arching up against his taut form, and he shuddered against me, his teeth tightening against my skin. Gods help me, I whimpered, both from the pleasure of his teeth on me and the tight-wire thrill of fear from being held down by a predator who could kill me if he wanted to. Fucking Crucible of hell, falcon-knights and star-beasts paled by comparison. Saker breathed hard, his flame-hot breath licking against my skin, and instead of chasing the incubus, I grabbed hold of my control, making myself lie still and calm so he could find his.

It took several minutes before Saker managed to let go of me, pushing himself up onto all fours over my back, still breathing hard. He growled, a sound as much of embarrassment as anger, none of it directed at me. "*Shaix.*"

"You okay?" I asked, still keeping my breathing meditative and my body relaxed.

"Give me a moment," Saker said, his voice rough.

I did, staying motionless until Saker managed to heave himself off of me, rolling to his back and covering his face with his hands. I looked over at him, resting my face on the back of one hand as I watched him breathe with slow care. At last he dragged his hands down and looked back at me. There was still some feral light left in his eyes, and I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Got a little overwrought?” I asked.

He snorted out a breath at me. “Usually I’m better about it, but I’m still a predator.”

“Oh, believe me, I am profoundly aware of that fact now,” I said with a laugh. “Is sparring a no-no, then?”

Saker rolled onto his side and smiled at me, his dripping tail curling up before splatting back onto the floor. “Only when you mix it with that sort of temptation, *ledaji*,” he said. “If I get you pinned in a fight and you act aroused, every animal instinct in me is going to want to hold you down and take you to mate.”

I smirked at that. “Who says I wasn’t aroused?”

He rolled back onto his wings with a groan, covering his face again. “Don’t say things like that,” he said, his voice going rough again. “You don’t know how good it is to have your neck in my teeth and your hips under mine.”

I laughed at that, though I was feeling flushed and rather libidinous at the moment, myself. “You really do kiss Xair, don’t you?” The god of fucking and war was often depicted as

a grasscat, one of the great leonine beasts from the prairies, famous both for its ability to take down prey much larger than itself and for its mating scream. I supposed that it made sense that my own cat was similar, given that he was cat and incubus both. I pushed myself up, and offered him a hand.

Saker peeked up at me through his fingers before sighing and grabbing my hand, letting me help heave him to his feet. “Yes,” he said, not meeting my eyes.

I tapped him on the cheek, drawing a sidelong look from him. “Nothing wrong with that, *ledaji*,” I told him. “Helena and Xair are married for a reason. Sometimes a good fuck is better than making sultry love, and the combination can be irresistible.”

One corner of his mouth pulled up, though he looked a little bashful. I blew him a kiss, hoping my casual attitude would soothe him, then wandered over to the wet heap of the harness and squiggled out of my own. I hauled it all into my arms and turned back to Saker, who had managed to get back into his own clothes, though his wet fur was already soaking through it.

“I can take care of that,” Saker offered.

“Rider takes care of the tack,” I said with a smile, and paused, hoping that this might mean that Saker would want to spend time with me again. I’d missed him more than I wanted to admit. “Would you be interested in dinner and taq tonight?”

He tilted his head, his ears leaning forward. “You’re eager to be defeated again so soon?” he asked, dark amusement

lacing his voice.

“Maybe. You gonna bite me again?” I retorted.

Saker growled, his wings flexing and tail waving.

“Maybe cards then,” I said with a grin. “Wouldn’t want you to get too... stimulated.”

He made a low whining noise, feral desire and pleading warring on his face. I was pretty bad at not teasing dangerous predators, as it turned out. I blew him another kiss, still feeling light and playful, my spirits brightened by the gift of his presence.

“Well, you know how to find me, *ledaji*,” I said. I sauntered over to the transport ring, with Saker watching me from the middle of the room. I couldn’t resist one parting taunt. “I’m at your mercy. Forty-five Sky,” I said with a wink, watching his claws flex as the spell carried me away.

37

DINNER CONVERSATION

RAIN

After returning the quarterstaff to the armory and changing out of my wet clothing, I took my time with the harness, getting it dried and refreshed with mink oil. I spent the entire process feeling warm and happy, glowing with pleasure from the flight. Saker had done it for no other reason than to please me, the sort of gift I couldn't have hoped to refuse. He'd made me riding straps so we could fly together not just once, but many times. I remembered seeing him as a krocutex for the first time, in all his glory. Whatever difficulties we'd have to deal with, it was worth it to have him by my side. My dragon. My incubus. My familiar. Even with everything else, gods, I was lucky to have him.

Once it was taken care of, I laid it out across the table so that none of it would get folded in an awkward way. It should be easy enough to make a hobby-horse for it, and there was space in the armory for such a thing. It was no masterwork, but it was solidly made, without any weak spots, and he must have designed it himself—a krocutex was not a typical mount.

I wasn't sure how much of it was spellwork and how much was hand-done, but it left me impressed. He might claim not to be good at making things, but he had done a good job with the harness. I had a feeling he'd be an artist at the forge once he learned the basics.

I finished well into the evening, but I still took the time to put together a response for Dastan. With sharp anger, I leaned on the political double-speak Saker had suggested, writing it in the script used for commerce – basic Common, the language used by everyday people – as a pointed insult. I had no intention of dignifying his request by treating it as magically significant. If I'd wanted to be polite, I would have summoned a messenger and dignified Dastan with its arrival, but I didn't much care for going through those particular motions. Instead, I teleported the missive to his secretary's desk, dropped a copy into the Merrhenya Spire mailbox for the Archmage, and in a burst of wicked inspiration drafted a letter for Kera Ashfall suggesting she *offer* Yineti Spire for his experiment, just for the extra salt in the wound.

Saker was still in his room, but I held out hope that he might still join me for dinner if I went somewhere I might conceivably be eating a meal at a table instead of off a desk or workbench, and went down to one of the public floors to mix and drink some sort of cocktail. I spent about an hour waiting, growing increasingly despondent, before Marin appeared in the doorway.

I looked up from my solitaire card game. “Everything alright?”

She smiled, looking relieved for some reason. “I was going to ask the same, magus,” she said. “It’s not like you to miss dinner.”

A fleeting expression crossed my face, though I wasn’t sure if it was hurt at getting stood up by Saker or the comfort of being missed.

“Magus Saker hasn’t eaten yet, either,” she said, sounding sympathetic. I wondered what my face had given away. “I was hoping to find one of you, in case something was amiss.”

My brows pulled together. I’d been working on giving Saker more privacy, and getting better at it, but I eased up on the constant mental effort and paid a little more attention to him. He lay naked on his bed, curled up on his side, his fingers laced together in a position I recognized as a meditative stifle used to help control the emotions. He breathed in a slow rhythm that felt very careful.

Tissit Kalar. Saker had iron control over his instincts. That much had been plain from the fact that he’d kept his hunger leashed for so long without me noticing, and that he hadn’t even taken all my lust that first orgasm after, let alone any other energy. For him to lose it enough to bite me like that and hold me down for minutes should have been something of a clue that we’d trespassed very far inside that control.

Meditative stifles only paused emotion. They didn’t erase it, and unless you were able to ease out of it on your own, everything flooded back when you stopped putting power into

them. Saker had probably been lying like that this whole time so that I wouldn't have to deal with his emotions or desire.

“Thank you, Marin,” I said. “I'll go check in on Saker. Would you be so kind as to bring the trays up to the dining room?”

“Of course, magus,” she replied, sketching a bow towards me before leaving.

I tossed back the rest of my cocktail before getting up and heading up to my bedroom, muttering about familiars who were too self-sacrificing for their own good. His emotions, already muted from the stifle, seemed to cringe away from my irritation. I paused and took a moment to breathe, letting the irritation dissipate. There was no reason to get angry at Saker. I should be grateful to him for not pushing on the topic of sex. He didn't want to ask for more than I wanted to give, and that was thoughtful and kind. It settled me enough that I exhaled and flopped onto my bed. I could feel his heartbeat picking up as I did, despite his control, and closed my eyes.

It took a few moments for me to corral my emotions enough to be able to get into the mood, so to speak, but once I was there it seemed reasonable to flick my memories back not all that many hours, to Saker on my back with my neck in his teeth. I slid my hand into my pants, recalling the tension in his body and the heat of his breath, and started making slow circles with my fingers, touching myself. Below me, Saker shuddered, moving his hands out of the stifle and leaning into our soul-bond with relief.

I imagined what it might have been like as he slid his fingers into his sheath, if we'd been doing it on purpose—if both of us had been naked, instead of just him. He hardened and the length of him started sliding out of his sheath, and as the pleasure pooled in me and ran trembling fingers along my belly and breasts, I thought of what it might have been like to have him rocking his hips against me, the slick heat of that shaft sliding against my skin as he ground down along my cleft. I slipped a hand under my shirt and raked my nails hard across my sensitive skin for him, remembering the times he'd told me he kissed Xair, and he threw back his head with a groan I felt in my chest.

My hips tilted up, moving with Saker's hands as I pressed down harder on myself, and I imagined what it would be like for him to take me with animal ferocity. The suddenness of him inside me, and the deep radiating pleasure from having him slam into the depths of me. I dug my nails into my breast and pinched my nipple until it hurt, moving my fingers with sharp hard pressure, sending jolts of white pleasure through me. He could be mine, *was* mine, anything I dreamed of as we chased our pleasure becoming part of who we were together.

Saker whimpered, biting down on his own arm as his hand jerked up and down along his shaft. I bared my teeth and panted, driving us towards the aching pleasure that spread through my groin. I might have worshiped at Helena's altar, but I knew how to court Xair.

I pushed down against my sensitive nerves until it was almost painful, the throb of my pulse between my legs getting

overwhelmed by the tension of my muscles as I pressed down against myself, my toes pointing and back arching. His hand closed tighter on himself, and he dug his claws into his upper arm as his teeth pressed into his skin. I imagined that it was my neck in those teeth, my skin under his claws, that he was thrusting hard not into his hand but into me, with bruising force. My nails bit deep into my thigh, my hips, my breasts, and even that sharp pain felt good, good, so good—

I bit down on my lip as I reached that soaring, infinite moment of rising pleasure, and we crashed into ecstasy together.

Saker snarled as he came and I cried out, curling around the flood of heat in waves of tension and release, my core clenching as Saker painted his stomach with his come. I relaxed, breathing hard, still making slow circles with my fingers as I brought us down, the little sharp bursts of pleasure tensing my body in aftershocks. For a minute or two I lay there alongside Saker, both of us simply breathing, with our respective hands still on ourselves. I felt his eyes open, felt the raw expression on his face, as if he could look up through the stone to see me, and drew my focus back into myself so I could rebuild the barriers between us.

Fifteen minutes later, when I was (relatively) composed and back down on 25 Sky, trying not to wolf down my food like a starving animal, Saker came down. I looked up at him and smiled, trying to be reassuring. He stood in the doorway dressed in a simple robe, his tail swishing from side to side

and his wings a little flared, with a tense expression on his face.

“Dinner?” I asked, gesturing at the other tray, which I’d set across the table from me.

He hesitated for a heartbeat or two, then walked over and took the seat. Saker looked at the covered dish for a long moment, his wings pulled tight to his body. At last, he lifted the lid off to reveal a whole seared fish.

“Thank you,” he said, looking somewhere past my ear as he started cutting. “You didn’t have to... do it like that.”

“Did it help?”

Saker dropped his eyes to his plate – not that he’d been meeting mine before – and nodded.

“Then why wouldn’t I?” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t realize sooner. If you’re ever in a position again where you’d like to get off, tell me, okay?”

He ducked his chin a little lower, but nodded again. My familiar started eating, and in our soul-bond it felt like he was embarrassed—even ashamed.

“Saker, *ledaji*, your body is yours, and if you want to pleasure it, you’re welcome to,” I said, meaning every word. “It seems like we’re pretty much stuck with the mutual orgasms, so I’d appreciate a heads-up beforehand, but you get just as much a right to have one as I do.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, finally looking up at me. I heard his tail sweeping across the floor. “I don’t...” He trailed off,

then set his utensils down and looked straight at me. Saker took a deep breath, then said, “I’ve never used my aura to lure anyone into sex. I can’t help having it, and, yes, boosting lust means that I get better meals out of my partners, but...” He clenched his jaw. “I enjoy the lust, but I don’t even like that someone might fuck me because of my aura, when they wouldn’t otherwise. I very much don’t like the idea of you having to have orgasms because of me.”

I met his gaze and held it. “Will you respect it if I say ‘no’?” I didn’t really need the answer, but I thought it would help him to have it laid out like that.

His nostrils flared, his jaw tensed, and his ears pinned back; his surge of outrage burned in my chest.

“That’s more than enough of an answer for me, *ledaji*,” I said with a smile. “Let me rephrase: If you’d like to get off, please ask. Okay?”

His mouth twitched towards a smile, and he nodded. “Alright,” Saker said. He took a deep breath, and let it out through his nose. “Alright. I’ll ask next time.”

I gave him a nod in return, then paused. “Would you like me to do the same? You said most days is better for you, and we talked about it, but I can check with you every time if you want.”

Saker shook his head. “I appreciate the thought, but I really do need it.” He rubbed his knuckles against his neck. “Maybe if you would like to at a different time, so I’m not caught out?”

He offered me a half-smile. “And I will tell you if I need a night off.”

That made me laugh; he smiled back, looking bemused.

“You make it sound like a chore!” I said, still laughing a little.

His smile grew into a broad smirk. “Sometimes it *is* a chore,” he said. “Don’t you ever have days when you’re eating to survive, instead of enjoying your meals?”

“Well, yes,” I said, smiling. “Can’t say I’ve ever felt that way about *orgasms*, but then again, I don’t need ‘em to live.” I propped my head up on one hand and looked at him. “I guess it’s not all good, being an incubus.”

“Oh, some of it is *very* good,” Saker said, and curled his long, forked tongue out as he ran one hand across his chest.

I wrinkled my nose at him. Ridiculous incubus.

“But, yes, there are downsides.” His eyes looked shadowed as he settled back into eating.

I regretted my flippant comment. Even with what few details I knew about his manifestation, I suspected that being an incubus carried with it not a little bit of trauma. Most people who manifested during sexual or romantic moments didn’t burn down neighborhoods—more like painting the sky with light or making everything around them bloom. I thought, again, that it must have been very bad.

“I suppose there’s downsides to everything,” I replied. I cast about for a way to steer the conversation away from things

Saker might not want to think about at the moment. Sorcery was probably right out, which was unfortunate, as mage-work was pretty much my entire life. Then I grinned. “Maybe not being rich,” I said. “That seems good across the board.”

Saker was startled into a bark of laughter. “Even when your familiar eats your fancy imported apples?” he crooned at me.

“Especially then,” I said, pointing my fork at him. “I can afford to feed you things you’re eating only to annoy me.”

He voiced another little quiet laugh at that. “Well, I *am* a cat,” he said, demurring.

I grinned. “As long as you’re not knocking down glassware out of boredom or eating the expensive plants in the greenhouse, I’m happy.”

Saker smirked, looking incredibly satisfied.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Or the birds in the greenhouse.”

His smirk stretched into a grin. “Who says I’m not doing those things?”

I scrunched up my face at him, which made him laugh.

“You’re impossible,” I said, rolling my eyes and going back to my food.

“A veritable miracle,” he agreed in a placid tone.

I almost choked on my food, which only made him laugh again. I chugged some water to clear my throat and pointed

my fork at him again. “Wicked man! You’re trouble,” I said, trying (and failing) to keep the levity off my face.

He just settled into his chair and smirked, an arch expression on his face. “How do you propose to punish me?” Saker asked, his voice deepening into sultry flirtation. “Are you going to give me a spanking? I’ll let you.”

I closed my eyes with an expression halfway through a grimace and laughter. “Gods, I set myself up for that one, didn’t I?”

“You’re something like an easy mark, *ledaji*,” he said, dropping the voice and leaning forward on his elbows.

I shook my head at him, unable to keep the smile off my face. “You’re a lot of fun, Saker,” I said. “I’m really glad you decided to stay.”

He froze, his playful expression wiped away. He looked... poleaxed, as if I’d run him through with a sword. I stared at him. Saker swallowed, then took a shallow breath. The sudden tension eased a little ways out of him, and he looked down at his food, his shoulders hunching down. I heard his tail moving as he wrapped it around the base of the chair.

“Saker?” I asked, a little hesitant.

He exhaled, a shaky sound. “I’m doing okay?” he asked, his voice small.

I looked at him with concern. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to do anything,” I said. “You can just exist, if you want. Go

flying, read books, explore, spend our money on apples and songbirds, whatever you want.”

Saker’s eyes flew up halfway through, and his shock and yearning seeped into me through our bond. “Our? Our money?” he said, barely above a whisper.

My eyebrows came together, and I frowned. “Saker, you’re my familiar,” I said. “Everything I own is yours, too.”

He shuddered, dropping his face into his hands. He was in agony, his emotions dragging at me.

I got up and walked over to him, then grabbed his wrist and gave him a little tug. “C’mon,” I said. “Come here.”

Saker looked up at me, tormented, and I towed him towards the gaming-room. He followed, I think less because he wanted to and more because I was telling him to, and I pulled him down onto an overstuffed couch with me, wrapping my arms around him and spooning him. My familiar shuddered, but I could feel his body relaxing from the contact, even though his emotions were still in turmoil. I stroked my fingers down his arm for a few minutes while we lay there. After a while, with slow motions, as if he was giving me time to pull away, Saker slid his hand into mine.

I wove my fingers through his and held him like that, giving him time to settle.

My poor incubus. The wounds on his heart were worse than mine, deeper and more grievous. I hoped... I didn’t know quite what I hoped for, except that I wanted to see him happy

and healed. Perhaps I could even help in that endeavor. It seemed like a worthy one.

38

RIHHADIZA

RAIN

“**W**hat’s wrong, *ledaji*?” I asked at last. “What did I say?”

His jaw clenched, and I rubbed my nose against his neck. He smelled delicious, as usual, musky and with a halo of smoke, as if he had been fire-walking, but this wasn’t the time to dwell on that.

“Nobody has wanted to keep me before,” he said, the words thick and full of pain.

My heart ached for him. I didn’t even have a frame of reference for that kind of pain. I’d grown up loved, with a family who thought the world of me. Those first years at the hermitage had been awful, but I’d made friends and had lovers as I’d gotten older. I’d chosen to be alone. I brushed my lips against his neck in a gentle kiss.

“Then they’re fools,” I said. “You’re worth wanting.”

Saker shivered, curling up a little, as if he might tuck himself into a fetal position. If there’d been room on the couch, maybe he would have.

“Saker...” I took a breath, and sighed it out. “*Ledaji*, you don’t have to prove your worth to me.” I squeezed his hand. “I know the value of the gift you gave me. That you stayed is an honor.”

Saker shivered again. I rubbed my nose along his neck for a little bit of comfort.

When he didn’t say anything, I continued, “It seems to me that you’ve had a shit life thus far, but you have a lot of life ahead of you, and it doesn’t have to stay the way it’s been. I hope I can be something of a... turning point for you, I guess. I want you to have a good life.”

“Are you going to rescue me like Tarandrus?” he asked, his voice rough.

My chest went tight and cold. “Maybe not quite like that,” I said, forcing the words out through the tension, trying to sound calm despite the remembered fear of that night. “But if you want to get rescued, I’ll give it a shot.”

Saker leaned back against me, relaxing into the contact. I pushed the memories away, letting myself enjoy his presence and the feel of him against me.

I recollected myself to the present, and then added, injecting a little humor into my voice, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m profoundly grateful for your campaign against the insufferable mice. But you don’t have to eat them for me to like you.”

“They taste nice,” Saker replied.

I screwed up my face. “Gross, *ledaji*.”

He chuckled, and ran his thumb against the side of my hand. “I could leave them on your pillow, if you prefer?”

“Nooooo,” I moaned. “I take it back. Please eat them. I beg you.”

Saker hummed, low and amused. “I could make you beg for something else,” he said, in his low purr of a voice.

“No doubt,” I said, with a good bit of humor. “I imagine you’ve been the cause of a lot of begging.”

He laughed, then turned his head and rubbed his cheek on the top of my head. “Would you like to finish dinner?” Saker asked. “And then have me hand you another overwhelming defeat at taq?”

“Can’t think of anything better,” I said, smiling, glad that he’d eased away from that choking sorrow. It had been a long time since I’d had anyone to take care of, and I found that it made me happy to have Saker lean on me, and to help carry him through his sorrows. Maybe that should have frightened me, but it felt nice, and I chose not to rouse the fear.

Saker rolled off the couch and helped pull me off the couch before wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me flush against his stomach, sending a flash of pleasure through me.

“Nothing at all?” he asked, his eyes gleaming as he smirked down at me.

I flicked him on the nose and his black tongue darted out to lick my fingers, making me jerk my hand back and laugh. Saker released me and sauntered back into the dining room,

his tail swaying behind him, and with a roll of my eyes at his shenanigans, I followed.

We didn't have a lot of dinner left to eat, and it was a late dinner for both of us, so it wasn't long before we were setting up taq in the gaming-room. As promised, Saker served me another humiliating defeat. It wasn't like I was awful at taq – just middling – but Saker had both an excellent mind for tactics and always seemed to be able to figure out what moves I would make several steps before I made them. It was a bit embarrassing to lose with such consistency, but I thought I was actually improving at the game because of it, which I supposed was nice.

Afterwards, with a great deal of trepidation, Saker asked if I'd be interested in listening to him read *Rihhadiza*, one of the epics from the fae Solar Court, about the exploits and adventures of the titular Rihhadiza, one of the glories of the Lightning Court. Intrigued – and wanting to encourage Saker for trying to connect with me – I agreed. He fetched it while I mixed myself a second cocktail, and we settled onto a couch together to read.

Saker proved to be excellent at recitation, and before long, forgot to be self-conscious about it. He ended up getting off of the couch, stalking around the room as he filled the room with the melodious lilting words in Ethereal, gesturing with hands, wings, and tail as he moved. It brought the story to life, and I ended up sitting on the edge of the couch, watching him with an astonished smile as he recited the poem.

He swept us through the beginning of the tale, from the birth of the fully-formed Rihhadiza from lightning striking open a boulder in a high meadow, through her birth-visions and to her first battle when, new and naked, she was set upon by a wild hunt.

As Saker got to the confrontation between Rihhadiza and the antlered lord of the hunt, he paused and looked at me. For one yearning moment, my familiar stared into my face, before turning back to the text, his heart pounding in my chest.

*“The hounds bayed and circled and did not bite,
The skull-mares gnashed their teeth and did not
strike,
And with ash-branch her sword and sky her
armor,
Wild Rihhadiza flew at oak-tall Karnalaeal.*

*“His white dagger was Blood-drinker,
Pale tooth stolen from the Harrower:
It had never failed to strike true
To the marrow and the crimson heart.*

*“Her white blood was fallen lightning,
Radiant light gifted from the storms:
It wrapped around the glacier-stone of her bones
And turned away the blade of Karnalaeal.”*

Saker sank to his knees in front of me as the hunt-lord was struck from his mount and defeated by the furious, naked Rihhadiza with nothing but a stick. With a smile, he placed my foot on his chest as he read,

*“She wore his necklace of rowan-berries on her skin
Turning enchantment and baring his scarred face.
Rihhadiza pressed her heel against his naked heart
And Karnalaeal knew himself to be conquered.*

*“I claim your hounds and I claim your mares,
I claim your weapons and I claim your armor,
I claim your blood and I claim your devotion,
You who would have taken me as prey.”*

He looked up at me and shut the book with a snap.

“Our circumstances are a little different,” I said, grinning, as he leaned forward and planted a kiss on my shin before getting back up and sliding onto the couch next to me.

Saker flopped down onto my lap, looking up at me with a happy smile. “Yes,” he said. “I would never be so foolish as to try to prey on you.”

“Says the man who just this very evening slaughtered me at taq, yet again.” I started rubbing his scalp.

Saker's eyes slitted with pleasure as he started purring, the vibration visible in his throat. "Mhmm," he responded, the sound rolling with the sound of his purr.

I'd noticed that he couldn't seem to talk very well when he was purring, which I supposed made sense, but he looked so content that I wasn't going to stop giving him a head-rub so that he could banter. Saker lay there purring as I massaged his head, even pushing my fingers behind his ears and down to the base of the neck. As I continued, his purring got softer and softer, until it stopped and his breathing came deep and even. My lips twitched. He moved a little – a very little – when I stopped moving my hands, a slight lean of his head to the side. He was otherwise still, his head a heavy weight in my lap.

"*Ledaji*," I said, keeping my voice soft, as I rubbed my fingers against his shoulder. "Wake up, *ledaji*."

Saker made a soft sound and remained asleep.

"Come on," I said, smiling down at him. I ran the backs of my fingers along his cheek. "You'll wake up stiff if you sleep here."

He cracked his eyes and looked up at me.

"There you go," I said, in that lilting voice people often use to talk to sleepy dogs and children. "Wakey-wakey."

Saker groaned and buried his face against my stomach. I tugged on his ear and he flicked it at me.

"Even if you can sleep there, I can't," I told him. "I'm not sleeping sitting up with you drooling on my lap."

The tip of his tail flicked. “M not drooling,” Saker said, his voice muffled against me.

“You will be,” I said cheerfully. “You drool in your sleep.”

He shot up, looking indignant. “I do not!”

I jumped up, brushing the wrinkles off of my lap. He made a face of mock-annoyance at me.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, darling,” I said. “You kinda do.”

Saker gave me pleading eyes.

I wrinkled my nose, grinning, and held my thumb and forefinger close together. “Just a little bit. It’s cute.”

“Hmph,” he said, sounding disgruntled. “Well, you talk in your sleep.” He said it like this was some sort of trump card.

“Oh, I’m aware of that,” I said with a laugh. “I sleepwalk, too. Once, I sat straight up in the dead of night, looked at my sister, and said ‘Mommy has the kitchen-knife. You’re going to be so pretty!’, laughed, and then went back to sleep.”

Saker made a sound that was halfway between horror and laughter, his eyebrows pulled up and together and his teeth showing.

I grinned at him. “As you might imagine, she did not get much sleep that night.”

“That seems only reasonable,” he said, and pushed himself up off the couch. “Even with the risk of threats of mutilation, though, it’s nice when you sleep next to me.”

I smiled and offered him my arm, which he took, and walked with him back to the dining room to stack our dishes and trays so I could take them downstairs again.

“Cubari almost never sleep alone, right?” I asked.

He looked away as I let go of him and started tidying up. “I did,” he said. “I always left after having sex with someone, so that they could wake up without being in my aura.”

I paused and looked over at him. “No long-term lovers?”

He shrugged his wings and looked back over. “Repeat partners, yes, but people who want to have sex with me have difficulty wanting anything else around me,” Saker said. A half-smile tugged at his mouth. “I like that you can.”

I set the last plate on the stacked trays and looked at him again. “Did you not have any friends at all?” I asked. It had been bothering me. “I know they’re not loose on the ground, but there’s people like Bash, and there’s people who aren’t even aesthetically attracted to men, or who aren’t interested in sex of any kind.”

Something like pain crossed Saker’s face, and it started bleeding into me, like a ragged wound.

“I slaughtered armies for a living,” he said, his voice flippant, looking at me with something akin to challenge. “Was I supposed to drip blood on their kitchen tables?”

“Yes, you were,” I said, my eyes narrowing.

He flinched, turning away from me.

I tilted my head to the side as I regarded him. “That’s the whole point of friends, you know,” I added, in a gentler tone of voice. “Compassion and companionship.”

“Well, I didn’t have any,” Saker said, a little bit of growl in it. His tail lashed behind him.

“Well, you do now,” I replied, picking up the tray.

His eyes snapped back over to me.

I met his eyes; he was the one to look away, shuffling his wings. “Goodnight, *ledaji*,” I said, with a little bit of a sigh. “Will you read me more *Rihhadiza* soon?”

My familiar looked back up, and I thought that it was hope I felt curling into me.

“You want me to?” he asked.

“Well, I have to know what happens next,” I said, smiling. “And you’re a fucking fantastic reader.”

Saker smiled like the breaking dawn, his shoulders relaxing and ears tilting forwards. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“It’s a date,” I said.

He gripped the back of a chair, his tail curling around one of his legs. “Okay,” he said, soft and eager.

A quivery feeling shivered through me, gathering under my breastbone. I wasn’t sure which one of us it came from, and I didn’t think it mattered. We shared a soul; happiness for one of us was happiness for both of us. I smiled once more, and felt him watching me as I left.

39

ANOTHER MESSENGER

RAIN

Things seemed to settle together better between us in the next weeks. We didn't spend all our time with each other, but we did spend a lot of it together. As I'd promised, I started teaching Saker how to work in the forges, starting with the basics of glassblowing. I was no master, having focused on metalsmithing for making tools, but I knew enough to get myself in trouble, at least. Saker approached glassblowing with a steady determination that I found admirable; even when he dropped things or objects shattered in the annealer, he never lost his temper. He did tend towards despair when things came out ugly or lopsided, but praise from me seemed to go a long way, and I made sure to have an open hand with it.

We went flying together almost every other day. Saker needed to build up stamina again after his long recovery, so we didn't spend too long in the air at first, but he loved flying and I loved flying with him. He didn't take me every time he went out; I accepted a couple commissions for winter solstice gifts that I needed to work on, including a very fun pair of silver

dowsing-rods that visualized ethereal power as color visible to the naked eye.

With a little encouragement from me, he even went out on a three-day exploration of the local area. When he returned, Saker poured enthusiastic stories into my ears about the things he'd found and the animals he'd eaten, as much of an animated chatterbox as Qavan ever was.

While he was gone, I took the chance to make my own winter solstice gift for Saker – a mold for glassblowing, enchanted to always remain symmetrical but to be moldable by his hands, so he could shape it into anything he desired. I also started putting out feelers via the Dragonvault to try to find an incubus-immune glassblower who would be willing to live and work at Barixeor for a year contract, so that Saker could have a teacher who knew more than I did. Barixeor was in the middle of fucking nowhere, but I could offer a good salary, top-quality materials, and food and housing. If there were any mage-glassblowers out there who fit the bill, I could exchange some power, too.

It made me feel all glittery and floaty to do nice things for Saker, in anticipation of his happiness. Sitting on the gift would have been impossible for me if he'd already been doing a lot of molding; only the fact that I'd started Saker out on simple blowing let me tuck it under my bed instead of plopping it directly into his hands. I left the screening of applicants to the Dragonvault to help still my itchy fingers. The people who worked there managing the commerce side of magedom were better equipped for it than me, anyhow, and if I

didn't have every detail of the search on the tip of my tongue I'd be less likely to blab it.

Saker started using the combat training rooms, working with some of the weapons from the armory. He was Xair incarnate with whip and shield, and when he didn't take it for himself, I made a formal gift to him of the barbed whip he lusted after. For my reward, I got to see him perform a full war magic pattern dance with it, full of flame and booming whip cracks that on a battlefield would have blown eardrums and shattered spells. Saker ended it on one knee in front of me, shield up and whip wrapped around my neck, his magic keeping it from harming me while he panted, his eyes gleaming with my desire.

If he'd been anyone else, I'd have taken him on the fucking combat-room floor. I got off to that for *weeks*.

While we didn't spar again, he started teaching me some of the basic forms with blades. Sometimes I caught him watching me with that yearning expression as I moved, which I pretended not to notice. I wasn't an idiot. I knew he wanted my love, in more ways than physical, but as long as I didn't acknowledge it, Saker wasn't pushing, and I chose to leave it there. I did enjoy the swordwork, which was different enough from dancing to require focus, and yet had enough in common with other ways of moving the body that I didn't come out too badly.

In the evenings, Saker continued reciting *Rihhadiza* to me. About a week in, he got to a part of the epic where Rihhadiza

steals the wings from the raven-knight who had swallowed the sun, and I leapt out of my seat with a shriek that made him throw out his wings and laugh with delight. My clever cat had remembered that the poem contained a story similar to what I had been researching for Blackwings, and had chosen it for that reason. I'd never read the damn thing, being more a fan of mournful love poetry than legendary adventures. Having another avenue for my research was one hell of a gift.

We kept reading it afterwards. I enjoyed the story, but I enjoyed feeling Saker's cares falling away as he got swept up in it even more.

I kept coming downstairs to sleep next to him after he had nightmares. Saker seemed pathetically grateful for it, which I found heartbreaking. He was *cubari*, the sort of creature who usually sleeps curled up with family or lovers, and he'd never slept beside someone through the night since he'd come into his power. If the intimacy hadn't terrified me, I would have given that to him, the peace and comfort of falling asleep beside someone. Maybe one day I could.

It wasn't really surprising to me that he had nightmares—I'd have been more concerned if he *hadn't* had them, given that he had been a war-mage. I had one of my own, a vicious one about the Fallen Star. When I clawed my way out of it Saker was outside my door with his hands pressed to it, full of such agony for me that I threw myself into his arms and let him carry me down to his bed. In the darkness, he told me stories about princesses who got happy endings until I fell asleep with my demon wrapped around me.

Once I caught him pacing in the transport room on the main floor of my suite, holding something small. He flared with panic when he saw me and crumpled whatever-it-was in one hand, and fled as soon as I stepped out of the transport ring. I didn't see him for two days after that; when he reappeared with a glass vase full of long, gnarled red-barked branches, I accepted the peace offering and didn't ask him what he'd been doing there. I had a feeling I wouldn't have liked the answer, anyway.

Though I spent a lot of time with Saker and working on personal projects, I didn't neglect my duties. I couldn't do anything to help Jace, except being ready to move on the drop of a hat, so I put together my dowsing kit and a chest of travel gear, just in case. When I received the daily report from the Hub on the changes in the ley-map, I pored over every detail, comparing the shift in celestial power across the plane. My impressions from my last attempt at meteor-catching and the research I'd done afterwards matched up to the continued patterns across Material: the press of the broken celestial firmament against the plane was easing.

Unsurprisingly, the Archmage snatched at the possibility that the threat had passed, and sent a flurry of increasingly demanding letters followed by a very demanding messenger. The messenger arrived on a crisp autumn day, one of those perfect blue-sky days where the combination of the sun's warmth and the chill of the air inspire motion and vigor. So, of course, I was deep in the bowels of Barixeor, working on a

sword-cane for Jace made out of the star-iron firmament we'd captured together.

A tone sang in my mind, one of the notifications available to the staff, so they could summon the Spirekeeper from wherever she was hiding rather than hunting for her through hundreds of rooms. None of my staff were inclined to misuse it, so I got to a stopping point and headed upstairs, searching for Marin.

I found her making careful notations in a record-book, perched on a stool at one of the counters. "Hey, Marin," I said, leaning against the doorway. "You called?"

She didn't look up from her work. "There's a messenger for you in the garden," she said, sounding distracted. "I thought you might like to speak with it before inviting it into the Spire."

I groaned. "Khemet's blessing if it's fucking Dastan again," I growled, turning on my heel to stalk out into the garden. "I'm running out of ways to say 'over my dead body.'"

The autumn sunlight fell clear and clean into the garden, which Safira was preparing for the cold of winter. Squash and pumpkins grew in vivid splashes of color, and in the herbal garden, asters and chrysanthemums rioted. Standing by the shore, apparently deep in conversation with a horse-shaped Celyn, was a heron standing as tall as my collarbone, feathered in iron-gray tipped with iridescent black. It was not a common animal, with enough power to qualify as a hedgewitch. The messenger, no doubt, and not a simulacrum, thank the gods.

I walked over, and Celyn whickered at me as I lifted my hand in greeting. The water-horse ducked his head to the heron in something akin to a bow, then turned and trotted across the surface of the water, towards the outer shore.

I gave the heron a formal bow, realizing as I did that the damn thing was a *warlock*, and one of Rillian's. It must have been one of the more clever creations of the mages at the University. "Honored guest, do you have a message for me?"

The heron made a hoarse *gruhn-gruhn* sound, and extended its neck towards me. I held out a hand and it dropped what looked like a black pearl into my hand. The thing was heavier than it looked, and material fey energy evanesced off of it.

"Is it alright if I listen out here?"

The heron dipped its dagger-like beak in what looked like a nod, so I touched the pearl to my forehead, in the place sages often called the third eye. Sound bloomed in my memory, the Archmage managing to sound both disgusted and annoyed in his recording.

Leyweaver, this has gone on long enough. Oculus Mireborn has informed me that the celestial pressure has dissipated, and it's obvious to me that the aftermath of your actions in the Celestial Plane has concluded at last. Your task as intermediary between the Starry Host and the Material Plane is complete. If you will not take up

your proper role as a Spirekeeper, I will be forced to remove you from Barixeor Spire and grant it to a sorcerer more suited to the task.

I forced myself to smile, for the sake of the poor intelligent beast forced to play go-between. Then I held the pearl in the palm of my hand, focusing on the lines of the spell within it. As I did, it levitated off of my hand, rotating in the air. Instead of overwriting the message, I found the end of the recording and added some of my own.

Mage-Seneschal Nigtheye, I have received the prior message and wanted to ensure that you were part of the conversation. I believe Archmagus Whitescale misunderstood the situation. He's correct in stating that the celestial pressure is currently at a lull, but unfortunately Magus Songdog and I believe that this is due to a temporary gravitational anomaly in the Celestial Plane. She is currently investigating.

If something drastic were to happen, and I'm removed from Barixeor, I won't be able to stop it. Since you're in charge of the protection of Material, I'm asking you to intercede in this decision on behalf of the whole plane. When Magus Songdog returns from the Celestial Plane

the Triumvirate will be the first to know.

Gods be with you, Rain Leyweaver

Then I returned my attention to the heron with another bow. The creature regarded me with beady black eyes, its head tilted towards the side.

“Are you commanded to return directly to the Archmage?” I asked.

It shook its head, an oddly human expression on a bird.

“I’d like you to take this to the Mage-Seneschal, then.” I smiled at it, trying to look calm instead of like I wanted to scream. “Do you want any refreshment before you leave?”

The heron roused its feathers, then settled them and shook its head again.

“Very well.”

I lowered my hand to the height of the heron’s head. It plucked the hovering pearl out of the air, then stepped back, waiting. I drew the finding sigil for the Mage-Seneschal in front of it, putting a little power into the symbol, then blew on the glowing lines. It drifted away from me and settled onto the messenger, a tracery of light appearing on it in my mage-sight.

It bowed to me; I returned the gesture. Then it launched into the air, heavy wing-beats making a breeze that tugged at my hair and lifted dust off the ground. I watched it for a moment

before shaking my head and heading back indoors, feeling unsettled.

I could feel Saker lounging high above me in the library, and on a whim went up to chat with him instead of going back to work. I poked my head in the room and grinned when I saw my familiar. He had draped himself over a reading couch in a ridiculous position—knees over the back of the couch, tail flopped to the side and hanging off the arm, back bent so his head and arms were dangling off the front, and his wings splayed to either side. His hands rested on the ground, and he walked a coin over the fingers of his left hand. Saker had enchanted one of my journals to hang in the air in front of his face, and while I watched, flicked one finger without lifting his hand to turn the page.

“You look comfy,” I said.

He looked over and his mouth spread in a languorous smile, a heart-stopping expression even upside-down. “Rain,” he said, saying my name like it was the best thing he’d ever heard. “Did you come to say hello?”

I went over and plopped myself onto the couch, dropping my legs across his lap. “Palate cleanser,” I said. “I just had to deal with a nasty message from Rillian and thought I’d chase the taste off with a little sweetness.”

Saker curled his body up off of the ground, catching the book as he sat up and closing it in one clean motion. He draped himself along my thighs, kicking his legs to the side and lacing his fingers together to rest his chin on them. “And

I'm your sweetness?" he asked with a little teasing smirk, his tail starting to flick.

"Sweetness and spice," I replied, giggling as he flicked his tongue out in a lascivious gesture. "What're you—"

"—*DONE!*" snapped Jace's voice, sharp and clear as ice.

40

STAR-IRON AND ICE

RAIN

The sting came out of nowhere, loud enough that I yelped and jumped. *Saker* jumped, too, practically flinging himself off of the couch to land on all fours, his eyes wide and every inch of fur sticking straight up. His tail slashed through the air, wings mantling, and for a moment the only thing I could sense from him was pure animalistic defensive instincts, as if he might attack anything that appeared in the room.

“Saker—” I started, trying to sound soothing and instead sounding frightened.

It snapped him out of it, the overpowering awareness of the world recoiling away from me as Saker’s thinking mind came back to the fore. He shook his head slightly, then pushed himself up from the floor, shuffling his wings. “*Imi*, Rain,” he said, using the Abyssal Common version of “um.” “What was... that?”

“Um.” I rubbed at my face. “That was Jace. She stung us.”

The fur on his tail started poofing out again. “Jace?” he asked, sounding incredulous. “Jace *Songdog*?”

“Don’t sound so shocked,” I said. “You’re reading my journals. You know we’ve been working together for a long fucking time.” I swung my legs off the couch, the adrenaline rush of hearing Jace yelling in my soul making my muscles tremble. I fisted my hands, trying to make my fingers stop shaking. “Give me a second.”

I closed my eyes, focusing on the connection between us, planning on stinging her back for clarification. But... “Ishkaia’s *tits!*” I snapped. “That woman’s still in fucking *Celestial*. Tissit Kalar, I’m going to have to fucking *summon* her.”

Saker caught my arm as I stalked past him. “Wait,” he said, then cringed back as I looked sharply over at him. “Please... Can you tell me what’s going on?”

My cheeks warmed with embarrassment. All these weeks together, and I hadn’t bothered to tell him about my primary purpose in Barixeor. “Yeah, c’mon,” I said. “You’re going to hate it, though.”

He followed me out of the library and into the transport ring. “I don’t mind hating it,” he said, his voice soft. “I’m your familiar. I’m supposed to help you.” Saker ducked his chin, his own nervous embarrassment joining mine in a raging blush on my face and neck. “I... I want to help you.”

I laced my fingers through his, the warmth of his hand a gentle comfort against mine. He looked into my eyes with a

searching expression, his fingers closing against the back of my hand.

“I could use the help,” I admitted, flashing a smile at him I didn’t feel. “I don’t know what stories have made it to Abyssal about the fall of Tarandrus, but I can tell you that they’re not true.” I closed my eyes and inhaled, settling myself into a spellcaster’s calm before meeting Saker’s gaze again. “Tarandrus didn’t fall by some cosmic accident. It was cast down. And the story didn’t end with a rescue.”

Saker’s brows drew together, concern settling over his beautiful features. “What did it end with?”

My mouth struggled against the smile I tried to make, the corners of my mouth trembling. “It didn’t.” I lifted my left hand and unlocked the depths of the Spire. “Celestial Storage Three.”

The room around us blurred as the transport ring took us deep into the heart of the volcano, but it didn’t resolve into walls and doors. Instead, the space around us opened into the full width of the Spire, without walls or support. But then, we weren’t in the Spire anymore, or even the Deeps. Not really.

Massive boulders slumbered like giants, some stacked and others looming in solitary splendor. Sarcophagi made of stone rested atop each other. Carvings crawled over some of them, telling tales of lives they would never hold. Others could have been solid blocks of stone, save for the seam at the top. All of it lay entombed by ice, the white of hoarfrost shrouding the oldest of the meteors and powdering the floor like fallen snow.

It stopped at the ring of gold inlaid in the floor as if cut by a knife, bound by the implacable force of a volcano.

Celestial and Abyssal are complements and enemies, two halves in perfect balance for eternity. The Tsirisma Confluence that flowed over Barixeor Spire was volcanic, a thing of heat and passion and daylight. Deep in its belly, a piece of the sky lay buried, cold and quiet night.

“Ever since that night, pieces of the celestial firmament have been breaking into the mortal realm,” I said, my voice hushed in the eerie silence of the room. “It has nothing to do with Material, though we’ll suffer if they strike the earth without being caught. But they’re loose, and without the Celestial Plane to anchor them, they’re plunging towards Abyssal. I don’t really know how to explain it, but it’s like they want to meet the abyssal magma, and... un-form, I guess. Become something new.”

Saker’s fingers tightened on my hand, enough that it hurt where his dulled claws dug into my skin. “Where are we?” he asked, the words strained. But then, he was an abyssal creature, and we were surrounded by celestial firmament.

“This is the heart of the Tsirisma Confluence.” I looked over at him, dragging my eyes away from the frozen tomb of the night sky. “We’re deep beneath the Spire, in the molten core of the volcano. It took fourteen sorcerers to coax the spells of Barixeor to grow this deep, and one of them was Jace.” I shook my head and returned my gaze to the star-iron stones. “They’re... content here. I can’t describe it any better. But

they're surrounded by abyssal power, and it gives them enough balance to stop trying to seek out destruction."

"How much is there?" Saker swallowed, the sound audible, and shuffled his wings. "You called this Celestial Storage Three."

"Two other rooms like this," I confirmed. "We filled the first one in a little over two years. The second took nearly seven. But this..." I gestured at the almost half-full room. "This is just from the past year. It was getting faster, and then it... stopped. Jace was trying to figure out why, and I'm guessing she succeeded."

"Then maybe we should summon her," he said, sounding like he couldn't be any less enthused about the possibility.

"Yeah." I took a steadying breath, then extracted my hand from Saker's. There were reddened dents in the back, and I decided not to mention it. He probably already knew. "I'd strongly suggest not following me out there."

He made the cross sign for fourfold Noetan with two fingers as a warding gesture. "I'm not sure I could, even if you wanted me to," Saker said quietly. "My nature is too strongly abyssal to be able to withstand that much celestial power for long."

"I'll be quick," I promised, turning to face the sarcophagi. I took another slow breath, letting it out through my nose. "Nothing to it."

The air went from comfortable to frigid the moment I stepped across the gold barrier. The Celestial Plane itself was

tolerable for humans, no colder than a deep winter night, but the broken firmament seemed to have no regulation. The air was so cold that it stung, the force of it shocking my body. I had to close my eyes to keep them from freezing as I summoned a pebble out of one of the sarcophagi into my hand, and all but leapt back across the circle the moment I had it.

Saker wrapped himself around me as I started violently shivering, my teeth chattering and limbs shaking. His body temperature spiked, hot enough that it really *should* have burned me, but apparently his heat tolerance was leaking, because it felt like stepping into a sauna at the end of a long day.

“Don’t do that again,” he said. Even with his emotions leashed and my mental blocks in place, my chest tightened and sweat prickled along my spine and under my arms, automatic responses to his fear. “Not without protection.”

“Can’t do spellwork across the barrier, not unless I punched through with Barixeor, and that would be very stupid.” My body stopped shivering a few moments later, still feeling quivery but at least not shaking from the aftershock of the cold, and I leaned my head back against his chest. “It wasn’t that cold last time I did it.”

“You weren’t soul-bonded to a krocutex the last time you did it.” Saker pressed a kiss to my hair, then leaned his cheek against my head for a moment before releasing me. “Did you get what you needed?”

I held up the pebble, then dropped it into my pocket. “Yeah, we’re good to go. Let’s go draw up a diagram.” I offered my arm; when he draped his tail over it, I took us up to my workspace. Like most mages, I kept everything I ever wrote, which included every summoning diagram I ever used or found interesting enough to make a copy of.

Interplanar summonings weren’t my specialty, but I’d done enough of them that I had a reputable collection, and I flipped through the sheaves for a few minutes to find a good starting point for a call while Saker examined my half-drawn diagrams on the slate-topped tables and walls. When I found a promising one, I took it over to one of the massive tables, pinning down the corners with decorative glass paperweights.

Saker hopped up onto the table to lie on his stomach as he examined it, propping his head up with one hand. He stretched one wing while I traced the dominant pattern with my finger, his tail whisking from side to side.

I looked over at him with a raised eyebrow. “Not boring you, am I?”

He made a little *mrrp* sound before tapping on the summoner’s dias. “There’s nowhere for a familiar, and the secondary position isn’t meant for a participant,” Saker said. “I’d break the pattern, even if I sat on your shoulder.”

I frowned at the diagram. He was right. “Well, that’s annoying,” I said. “I don’t actually have any familiar-ready summon patterns. I never really put much thought into

working with one. I was kind of going more for a pet,” I added, glancing at him sidelong.

“Hah!” Saker laughed, a short bark. “You can pet me if you like, *ledaji*,” he said, giving the endearment a bit of a sultry tone.

I flicked him on the ear and he blew me a kiss.

“A lot of war-mages have familiars in Abyssal, actually,” he said, rolling onto his side to look at me. “I thought about calling one, but I felt that I was much too young to be making such a marriage.” He smirked at me. “It was lucky for me that I was afraid of deep water.”

“How old *are* you?” I asked, tilting my head to the side. “You never said.”

Saker wrinkled his nose. “*Imi...*” he said, clearly thinking. “Getting close to thirty-six *rigizi*, so...” Saker squinted one eye, doing the math—the Abyssal calendar was based on the gestational period, since they didn’t have a sun, only endless light. “Twenty-seven and a half of your years?” he hazarded.

I laughed in disbelief. Thousand-year lifespan, and I got him when he was younger than me. “Twenty-seven? Really?”

He hunched his shoulders, looking back down at the summon pattern, his tail flicking.

I got a handle on my surprise. “I’m sorry, I just assumed you were a lot older.”

His wings came up higher as he ducked his head down, clearly embarrassed.

I leaned over and gripped his chin, lifting his face to look at me. “It’s not a bad thing, darling,” I said as he watched me with those big golden eyes. “Jace was only fifteen when we rescued Tarandrus, and I was twenty-six when I finally found the Eye of Souls. But you said you manifested at twenty-two, and five years isn’t a long time to train before being on the battlefield.”

“Twenty-two *rigizi*,” Saker corrected, relaxing.

I let him go and stood back up. My turn to do math. “Seventeen years?” I asked. Still pretty late for a sorcerer’s manifestation, but not as late... and a lot more reasonable age for a gorgeous demon to be having sex for the first time, even one raised by ascetic priests.

He shrugged, looking back down at the diagram.

“Well, alright, kitten,” I said, trying to tease him. “How well do you know familiar-spells?”

Saker gave me a pleading expression. “Don’t call me ‘kitten’,” he groaned, rolling back onto his stomach. “That’s never been a kind name for me, and I’m surely not that much younger than you.”

“I’m thirty-two,” I admitted, relenting. “That’s... ech... forty-two-ish, to you.”

He flicked a wing out to smack me on the arm, making me jump and laugh. “You see?” Saker said. “You’re hardly a matriarch.”

“Thank Lyris,” I said. “I’ll keep my looks a little longer yet.”

“Rain,” he said in an odd voice, pushing himself up so he was on eye level with me, his tail curling up. “Time will steal nothing from you.” My familiar reached out and ran his fingers down my face, from temple to jaw. “You will be as beautiful clad in starlight and traced with ley as the first time I saw your moon-shadow eyes.”

I stood there, transfixed by the look on his face. I was frozen in place, staring; I made myself laugh and looked down, ducking away from his touch. My pulse raced, and a flush heated my cheeks. “Incubus,” I said, trying to play it off.

“If you wish,” Saker replied.

I felt his eyes on me for another long moment, as if I was standing in the summer sun, before he dropped his gaze back to the summoning diagram.

“If you can make a copy of this, I can modify it to accommodate a familiar who is also a sorcerer,” he said. “It’s an unusual situation, but I’ve done enough paired work that I know the ley-patterns for connections well.”

I seized on the distraction. “That’s easy enough.”

I walked over to where I kept the blank parchment for Barixeor’s summoning diagrams, marked with the diameter of the summoning room, with the seven-ring summoning circle already drawn. The diagram I’d pulled for calling Jace wasn’t one I’d ever used in Barixeor before, so I snagged a stack of

brass circles before walking back over to the table, where Saker lay with his chin propped up on both hands. I set the blank diagram down next to the other – there was barely enough room, with Saker taking up most of the table – and started sorting through the brass circles to find ones that would match the size of the central summoning circle on each of the diagrams.

Saker helped; he had a good eye for spatial dimensions and picked out the correct size for the original diagram on his second try, then watched with an expression of amusement as I proceeded to try the exact same circle four times out of ten. At last, he flicked through the rings, grabbed one, and dropped it into my hand. It fit exactly to the blank diagram, and I gave him an over-dramatic frown. He just smirked and kicked up his legs like a girl at the beach.

I sighed and touched the two rings, then incanted a simple spell for transferring the marks to the blank diagram. The lines appeared on the new diagram, clean and black, as near a thing to a perfect replica of the old diagram as magic could produce. I pushed the brass circles off the parchments and picked up the original diagram, returning it to its sheave, obsessively tidy about my working space. When I turned back, Saker was stacking the circles back on their pole with neat motions, not even looking at the markings on them. I watched for a moment; when I went over to help he batted my hand away.

“Oh, c’mon,” I said with a laugh. “I didn’t give that awful of a showing.”

Saker flicked his wings in response and didn't look up from his task, stacking the last handful with a series of clinks before looking up at me with a triumphant grin. He'd gotten all of them right on the first try. Show-off.

41

--

SUMMONING DIAGRAMS

RAIN

I squinched up my nose and moved the stack to the side, sliding the copy of the diagram towards Saker before summoning and setting diagramming tools on top of it.

His tail flicked. “Can I see the focus?”

He held out his hand as I fished out the pebble and plunked it into his palm. I could see the wave of revulsion pass through his body, his skin tensing and fur raising. My familiar gave me the long-suffering look of someone whose dog had just dropped a slime-covered rotting leather toy in their hand before turning his attention to the diagram, rolling the small piece of the celestial firmament between two fingers as he focused on it.

I started laughing at his obvious distaste, unable to keep from giggling at the exaggerated frown on his face. “Is it really that awful?”

“Rain, I’m *abyssal*,” he whined, setting the stone down on the central dot of the summoning diagram. “How would *you*

feel if someone dropped an *ethereal* token in your hand?”

“Fine, probably,” I said, trying to get my levity under control. “I drink faery wine and I spent a season in Australis Court once, as the inamorata of an elven falcon-knight.”

Saker’s brows went up. “Huh,” he said. “I never imagined mortals spent much time around faeries. Celestials and abyssals certainly don’t get along.”

I shrugged. “The divergence between Celestial and Abyssal is a lot bigger than Ethereal and Material,” I said. “Mortals can live just fine in the faery realm, though the easiest way for a mortal to spend any significant length of time in Ethereal is with a protector.” At his raised brows, I shrugged again. “I needed to spend a season there to dowse for the Eye of Souls, and Ajnilihaam offered to hide me under his wings in return for me wearing his feathers for the spring season. He got status from having a sorcerer-mate, I got another pin on my map.” I leaned my hip against the table and smiled, thinking about that wild spring. “Match made by Xair, as it turned out.”

“You loved him?” Saker asked, sounding hesitant.

I shook my head and looked back at him. “No,” I said. “At least not in any permanent way.” I traced a shape on the table—the sigil that represented the falcon-knights. “It was... intense, I suppose. He was devoted to me, and the fae don’t do anything by halves. As long as I wore his feathers, I was his mate, and we shared everything. But Australis is an unseelie court, and Ajnilihaam was no different from the rest of them.

Their passions are as unpredictable as the winter sea, and as wild and dangerous.” I pursed my lips and sighed.

“Even as young as I was, I knew I didn’t want to be with him forever,” I said. “He was too feral, too inhuman. There’s an excitement in that risk, in the fact that one day he might have looked at me and decided to kill me, but that sort of adrenaline desire can only last so long before it turns to dread.”

Saker’s tail swished through the air, slow and sedate, his feelings muddy between us.

I raised an eyebrow at him. When he didn’t say anything, I asked, “What made you think I did?”

His wings lifted in a shrug, and he looked back down at the diagram. “It doesn’t seem like you to trade your body or your submission.”

He sounded nonchalant, but something that felt close to despair lay in the bond between us like the shadow of a mountain. I laid my head down on the diagram, forcing him to look at me. His yellow eyes went flat, his face wearing the set expression of someone resigned to their unhappiness.

“I didn’t, *ledaji*,” I said. “All he bargained for was that I would wear his feathers in my hair, and do so openly. Aside from a few revels where we were expected to be seen together, I didn’t even need to speak to him, let alone have sex with him. I chose to, because he was beautiful and alien, and because I was young and in love with adventure and the intense devotion of a faery mate was exhilarating. No one had

ever loved me before, and I didn't know enough to know the difference."

Saker sighed and lowered his head to brush his nose against mine. I smiled up at him, and for a moment his pupils widened and his mouth dipped towards mine, before he pushed himself back up, looking away. His tail flipped up, then down, in a sweeping motion. I watched him for a moment before getting back up and turning to the diagram.

"For what it's worth, I don't think there's anything wrong with people trading their bodies, or their obedience," I offered. "Servants give their obedience for coin and soldiers their bodies, and nobody complains. As long as the exchange is made without coercion, prostitution is no different."

He made a sharp little sound, not looking at me.

I examined him, my eyebrows pulling together. "Is this about being an incubus?" I asked. "Or a mercenary?"

His claws dug into his arm, deep enough that I could feel the dull pain in my own muscle. Saker didn't say anything, as he so often didn't.

"We don't have to talk about it," I said, though I wanted to. "You can just show me how you'd integrate a familiar."

"I don't understand desire," Saker said, his voice clipped. He kept his eyes downcast.

I blinked, surprised. He was an incubus; everything about him catered to desire.

He picked up the eraser and started clearing the lines around the summoner's dias on the diagram, sweeping the carved jade across the parchment and dissolving the lines. "I walk through the world, and everyone who might desire me, does. I could bathe in sewage and treat people like worms, and they would still desire me." Saker started marking new lines on the diagram, with neat, precise motions. He moved like the diagram had personally offended him, sharp and dangerous. His tail slashed through the air. "They wouldn't fuck me, but they'd desire me." He stopped with the animal stillness of a predator, flicking his eyes up to capture mine. "But not you."

My heart hammered, as if I'd met a chimera in the woods. I'd forgotten that Saker was as much a dragon as a cat, and that incubi were another kind of predator of men. I remembered it now.

His shoulders slumped, and he turned back to the diagram, his movements more measured. "I don't mean to frighten you," he said, his voice soft. "Cubari are raised with the expectation that people will see them first as a sex object and only later as a person, if at all. Most of them revel in that." Saker paused to double-check some measurements, erased a section, and started on it again. He inhaled through his nose and blew it out, some of the tension leaving his body. "But I wasn't raised cubari."

"I thought maybe not," I ventured.

The corner of his mouth tugged back, then relaxed. I reached out my hand to touch him, but paused at the last

second, not sure if it would be welcome. He flinched down, and I sighed, then lowered my hand to his wing and stroked it. Saker relaxed into the touch, as he always did, and I stepped over and hopped up onto the table next to him, moving to run my hand over his shoulder and down the side of his back. It gave us both so much relief to be in physical contact, a craving for affectionate touch that must have come from both sides. His tail came around me, and I pulled it over my lap, running my fingers through his fur. My poor demon.

“You’re the first person since I manifested who could ever want to make love with me on my own merits,” Saker said, so quietly I almost didn’t make out the words. A little louder, he said, “It’s hard for me to hear of you being casual with your body. I know it’s not fair, but my first thoughts will always be, why him? And why not me? Because I don’t understand what makes someone desire one person and not another.”

I kept touching him with the same even motion, though this was far too close to discussions of love and romance for me to be at all comfortable. Any time I thought about having sex with Saker, I always came back to the knowledge that he was mine forever. There was no going back from anything. When summer came, I couldn’t take the feathers from my hair and step back into my life with nothing but memories.

Saker made a few more changes to the summoner’s dias, then rotated the parchment and started making modifications on the opposite side of the circle.

“You know why, though,” I said, running my fingers along the ribs of his wing.

“I do,” Saker said. “And I don’t fault you for it.” His hands stilled, and he set down the drafting tools before turning to look at me, brushing his fingers along my leg. “It would help me if you would tell me how you’d like to be loved.”

I froze, my whole body tensing, and stared at him with the horrified fascination a mouse gives a snake. I couldn’t— We couldn’t—

He blew out a sigh through his nose and whacked me on the side of my head with his wing.

“Ow!” My hand flew to my head and I glared at Saker.

He glared right back. “I don’t mean *sex*,” he snapped, flipping to exasperation. “*Or* romance! You’ve been very clear that you’re not going to have sex with me, and if I stray the least bit towards romantic, you cut me at the heel.” Saker pushed himself up onto his side and shoved my hand against his heart. “But you are *in me*. It’s impossible for me not to care! And, in case you forgot, I’m *incubus*. *Bik gehani*, Rain, the only ways I’ve had to interact with people for my entire adult life is to fuck them or kill them, and those are nearly the same thing for cubari!”

His tail whipped off my lap, lashing, his wings held mantled over him. My glare had devolved into a wide-eyed stare as his raw frustration flooded me, scorching in its anger. Saker kept that hot yellow gaze on me for another heartbeat, then groaned

and released my hand, flopping onto the table like an unhappy cat, his tail still lashing.

I didn't try to touch him this time. I wasn't willing to get claws in my hand for my trouble.

He turned his attention to the diagram and returned to measuring and making small changes. "It would be *nice*," he said, his voice still sharp, "If you would tell me what you want from me, so that I can stop floundering."

I slid off the table and leaned against it. "I'm sorry," I said. "Fuck." I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes. Of course he had no idea how to do anything else besides flirt and fuck. It's not like he'd have met many people who would want anything else from him. Saker didn't have a family to learn how to be an adult with, or some network of friends without any interest in men waiting for him.

"Can't we just... be friends? I've been enjoying our time together." I dropped my hands and turned to look at him, and he glanced up at me. "I'd like you to be my friend."

"I don't know how to be a friend," Saker said, his voice bitter, focusing on the diagram. He measured a few things, double-checked an arc with the compass, and made another small mark. My familiar set the tools aside and slid the summoning diagram towards me, then looked up. Softly, he said, "I forgot how to be a friend a long time ago, and I never learned how to be a lover. All I know is how to be a mercenary and a whore."

I leaned forward, lifting his chin with one finger, and very gently pressed my mouth to his. I didn't know quite why I did it, but it broke the dense despair that had been sinking its talons back into Saker, and that seemed well-worth the way my pulse picked up and my mouth tingled from the contact. His shock rolled through me, and I met his golden eyes with my gray ones, trying to let him feel my affection and compassion.

"*Ledaji*," I said, "You give yourself too little credit. You're funny and playful. I like you, and I enjoy your company. There's no friendship examination for you to pass or fail, and we've got decades to get it right. We'll figure out what works for us, and it doesn't have to look like what works for other people. I send Qavan poisonous plants for his gardens. Jace drags me into horrific danger and sends interesting projects my way. My sister Sunny and I send each other drawings and letters." I paused. "I'd prefer no more horrific danger, but if that's what does it for you, I'll pony up."

I flashed him a smile and brushed my thumb across his parted mouth, then let him go, looking down at the diagram. I traced the lines with my fingers, seeing the way he'd modified the ley flow. It was a beautiful piece of work, done in such a way that a direct channel existed between the two summoner daises, but with two separate paths for the energy to flow out along. And he'd done it while emotional and holding a conversation with me, as if it was just some simple thing to throw together.

“And apparently you’re brilliant, as well,” I said, touching the balancing changes on the other side of the diagram. Precise and elegant, as if he’d spent years practicing sorcerer-familiar summoning spells. “This is really impressive, Saker.” I looked back up at him.

He was still staring at me with the same stunned expression.

“Saker?”

He blinked, possibly for the first time since I’d kissed him, and closed his mouth. “You—” he started, hoarse.

I cocked a brow.

He swallowed. “Please don’t kiss me again, Rain,” Saker said in a small voice, even while his desire for me to do exactly that beat against me. To lean down and kiss him, again, and again, and again—

I flamed red, blushing, shame thudding into my chest. I looked at the floor, the skin of my face hot and tight.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You’re right.” Part of me wanted to defend myself—to argue. *You’re always teasing me! You kiss my neck and my hands and bring your lips within a hair’s-breadth of mine! You like it when I touch you, when I tempt you, I know you do!* But this was different, and I knew it was different. It was one thing to tease with sex, and dance around the boundaries we were both respecting. It was another to offer a promise of love that I was mortally terrified of following through.

“*Make love with me,*” he’d said. Not have sex with. Not fuck. Not any of the myriad euphemisms for sex that I’m sure he knew. Saker had gotten all chances of the kind of love he wanted stolen from him by his birthright, and then thrust into maybe the only situation where it was possible again. It was beyond cruel to dangle that in front of him, or to use it as a goad or reward. I didn’t know what I wanted, but we were together forever. It would be worse – so much worse – to try to love him like that, and fail, than to never try at all. I looked back up at him, at my wounded demon, so full of want and pain, and felt gutted.

“I shouldn’t have done it, and I won’t again,” I said. “I wanted—” I clamped my mouth shut over the excuses and shook my head. “It doesn’t matter,” I said, more to myself than to him. “I’m just sorry.”

Saker nodded after a moment. “Okay,” he said, and cleared his throat. The pain rolled off of him as he turned it aside, accepting my apology. “Do you... still want to try this?” Saker asked, tapping the diagram. “I based the changes on some war magic spells for familiars where you split your power equally, so you’d have to boost me.”

What he left unsaid was, *this will leave us wide open to each other. And maybe, do you still want to feel what’s in my soul?*

I took a breath and held out my hand, palm up, to let him make the decision. He looked at my hand, then up at me, and laid his in mine, his touch as light and delicate as the kiss of a

snowflake. I closed my fingers around his palm, smiling as his long fingers wrapped around my hand, warm and strong.

42

BALANCED SPELLCASTING

RAIN

“Ready to be an eight-seven-five?” I asked.

Saker looked at me with soft eyes and the hint of a smile, letting the hurt slide away like he so easily seemed to do, and swung himself off the table, using my hand to lever some of his weight before letting go.

“I’m completely unprepared,” he said. “But that seems to be working out for me thus far.”

I laughed – it seemed like the thing to do – and rolled up the summoning diagram, tucking the pebble back in my pocket before heading over to the room with the stairs up to the summoning circle. Saker followed me at a saunter, stretching his wings and lacing his fingers behind his head, his tail lifted up and swaying as he walked. I’d gotten used to the sense of knowing where he was in space after all, like he’d become part of my body. I no longer wondered about how Glitter and Wexford had kept their timing in perfect synchrony across thousands of miles or between planes. Of course they had. It

would have been harder not to, like trying to walk with a different rhythm than the person beside you.

Dancing with Saker would be extraordinary.

I shoved the thought away, as deep as I could get it, and focused on collecting the things we'd need for the summoning spell. Chalk. Charcoal, for Saker's abyssal power. Abonos – ancient bog-wood – to connect to the celestial focus, and to Jace herself. And, of course, the long fold-out measuring rod and the string compass, for measuring the marks for the spell. As I collected the materials, Saker went through my shelves of ointments until he found one he liked, which turned out to be one for friendship and affection.

Saker dipped his thumb into the ointment and rubbed it from my hairline down to the tip of my nose, then brushed his thumb over the lids of both my eyes. I remembered making this one, sitting in the sun with my sister on the small lawn kept clipped by the old four-horned goat. Apple blossoms plucked from the trees in the little orchard my great-grandmother had planted, for life and love; little baskets of bee-pollen from the hives my mother tended, for happiness and camaraderie; meadowsweet and wild rose from the meadows and brambles, for affection.

I smiled up into Saker's face, relaxing into the peace I'd poured into the spell-ointment on that long-ago afternoon. "What made you pick this one?" I asked, looking at him with what was probably a sappy smile, the comfort of home and joy of companionship settling into me.

He ducked his chin, not answering; one of his ears flicked. Behind him, his tail snaked from side to side in what seemed a little like embarrassment. I took the ointment from him and anointed him the same way he had me, adding another long stroke down his throat, over the pale blue scar just above his collarbone. For one long moment I rested my fingertips against his pulse in the notch at the base of his neck, then dropped my hand.

“You said Jace was your friend,” Saker said at last. His throat worked, his tail curling around one of his legs.

“And?” I took my eyes off of him and replaced the lid of the ointment, walking it over to the shelves. I could feel him watching me, his face turned towards my back, but I paused in front of the shelves, giving him space away from my gaze.

“It felt happy,” he said at last. Saker relaxed into our soul-bond, deciding to take off a little more armor. To step a little deeper into the water. “I haven’t been happy in a long time. I...” Wistfulness laced through his words, as if he was thinking back to what few cherished moments he might have had. “I would like to be happy.”

I turned back to him, and found him watching me in a way I didn’t want to identify. Something drew me towards him, though, even with the trembling of my fear deep in the recesses of my soul. I could almost hear the bees droning and my sister’s laughter—an idyllic moment, plucked from memory and wrapped around us. I hooked my arm under the handle of the basket of supplies and offered my other to Saker.

This time, he put his hand on my arm, his thumb stroking down the inside of my elbow.

“I’d like that, too,” I said. “You deserve it.”

“Do I?” he asked, letting go of me to walk behind me. Saker kept his voice light, so I took my cue from that.

“Oh, definitely. Putting up with me surely endears you to Noetan,” I assured him, naming the four-aspected deity whose realm was balance and the judgment of souls.

Saker snorted a laugh at that, something close enough to amusement that a smile tugged up one corner of my mouth. He ought to have joy in full measure. I would give him what little I could, and leave the rest up to the gods.

The setup for the summoning call was fairly complicated, but unlike my lazy ass, Saker had been a war-mage, and could set up even elaborate spells under immense time pressures. He did at least three-quarters of the work, though he left all the celestial channel-marks to me, and we got the complex circle set up in less than an hour, triple-check included. Saker put away the materials while I placed the celestial pebble in the little divot at the center of the circle as our focus.

I took my spot on the primary summoner’s dias, taking a comfortable stance and falling into meditative calm with the ease of decades of practice. *Jace*, I thought to myself, reminding my heart of who she was, from the sound of her voice to the curling light of her vast power. *Celestial*. Beautiful darkness lit by living things, stars and constellations

gleaming in the distance. Endless, astonishing night, the breath of winter and the lovely pale forms of the things that loved it.

After a few minutes, Saker joined me in the diagram, settling his shoulders and holding his tail up off the ground in an arc. I looked at him with my mage-senses, breathing alongside him. I could see the light of power all around us: the thick flow of magic wrapping around the Spire and meeting over our heads, the sedate eddy of ley in the rings of the summoning circle, the thin misty haze of fey hanging over everything, the great well of power inside me and the one within Saker, and the deep channels that connected us together like a strait between two vast seas.

When he settled into his senses, they overlaid mine. For me, power was light, in all its shades and brilliances. For Saker, power was heat, and he sensed it around him not as sight, but with an innate knowledge of its distance and the feel of warmth against his skin.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, and I knew he could see the world as I did, too.

“Fire-walker,” I said, for the first time feeling that I might understand dragons. I felt his smile, the spread of his ribs as he inhaled, the beat of his heart deep in his powerful chest.

“Alright,” Saker said, his voice soft and eager. “I’m ready.”

We swept our hands up in unison, the left upraised and the right held over it like a flame. I looked inside myself and took down all the walls between us, like brushing away a cobweb, and Saker flooded into me.

We inhaled together, our hearts finding a rhythm and beating in synchrony. My wings flexed; my nostrils flared and I tilted my head back, letting the weight of my braided hair bare my neck. I smelled flowers and felt the cold stone beneath my feet. I saw the open spread of the summoning diagram in front of me, and I saw myself from the back: my head leaning back, my long mahogany hair bound in a neat braid, the heat of my body highlighting where my clothing touched my skin and curling in the air around me. My lips parted and my lips curled up in a smile, and minutely I started being able to pick out which pieces belonged to Rain and which pieces belonged to Saker.

We were harrowed and intoxicated and frightened and falling together, and the cliff was high and the water was deep. Warm on our faces lay the memory of love in the spring. I moved my-Rain's hands in slow arcs to place my palms forward towards the circle, and I moved my-Saker's hands down and out to face the ley-channels of our spell, and then I reached into those great seas of power, and poured the greater into the lesser.

My shoulders went back as my body stiffened, wings spreading and the fur down my back and tail standing out, as power I had never imagined filled my soul with incandescent light. Saker, he was Saker, and I was Rain, two people and one soul. A grin stretched my face as I reveled in the feel of the power flowing out of me into him with the delight of a child knocking down a dam in a stream.

“Rain,” he breathed, the sound full of wonder.

I opened my mouth and breathed in his pleasure. It felt so good, so achingly good, to be filled with that power like fire, and it felt good, too, to be the one stoking that flame. The flow slowed, and stilled, and then we were a balanced pair, twin suns of radiant light and searing heat. We paused together, inhaling, and with a wild grin on my face and an expression of open-mouthed delight on his, we swept our hands out to the sides and flooded the summoning diagram with our power.

It raced out of us like lightning, burning-bright, and the ley-channels of the spell blazed like battlefire. For a moment, everything was as bright as the noonday sun, and then in the blink of an eye night fell, and the summoning spell became mere embers simmering in the intricate channels on the floor.

43

THE VERY BIG ROCK

RAIN

I dropped my chin and smiled with relief as Jace's image resolved in the summoning circle. Her worrying message apparently hadn't meant that she was in deadly danger, because she'd been waiting for me, perched on a chair made entirely of snow, one bare foot swinging in the air and the other tucked under her. Snowflakes dusted her shoulders like diamond dust and clung to the long twists of her black hair. Glowing motes drifted around her and gilded her dark skin. The warm light highlighted the curves of her round face, the sloping line of her chin, her soft shoulders, and her delicate, dimpled hands.

She wore a simple peasant-style dress, off-the-shoulder ruffles in a rose-pink that suited her burnished sepia complexion, and as it draped over the rolling hills of her body and spread over her heavy thighs, it darkened in an ombre to a handsome red-violet. Her carved wooden cane leaned against the arm of the chair, ice clinging to the base of it.

Behind me, Saker stared, his eyes wide, with the feel of someone trying to decide if it would be better to flee, or to stay very, very still and hope that they were not noticed.

“I can’t believe you fucking stung me from Celestial,” I said by way of greeting. “When’d you figure out you could do that?”

She shrugged one shoulder, the corner of her mouth tugging back. “Today. It didn’t hurt to try, and I’m glad it worked. You’re faster at summoning than I am at gating by a long shot.”

“And...?”

“We’ve got a problem, Kazi,” Jace said, her voice serious. Then she smiled, a beautiful expression on her soft face. “Though I can’t believe you had to call on help for a tiny little summoning. Who’s the beauty with the lamplight eyes?”

Said beauty froze with the perfect stillness of a cat caught out stalking by a lantern-light, moments before it bolted off into the darkness again at a careening gallop. I held a hand back over my shoulder and wiggled my fingers at Saker, who crept forward along the narrow path in the spell-lines as if Jace might bite him. His fascinated terror provided an interesting counterpart to my casual enjoyment of the moment, Jace’s problem notwithstanding.

“Jace, meet Saker,” I said. “Saker, Jace.”

He put his hand in mine, and with a little pressure he leapt onto my shoulder as a cat, draping himself over me and

digging his claws into my skin rather more than I found comfortable. All the fur down his back stuck straight up, his tail hunched and bottle-brushed in classic cat fright. I reached up and petted him like he was a regular cat, scritching him behind the ears and letting him rub his face against my cheek and wrist. It helped; I could feel him settling with the distraction of being territorial about his mage.

“Saker, darling, not going to say hello?” I asked.

He stuck his head out from under my hand and announced, “*Mmrroup!*”

Jace dissolved into laughter, and I couldn't help but follow, despite the fact that I was as much freaked out as delighted. Saker started chewing on my finger, so I scrummeled him on the neck and chest, obeying the silent directive. He made another cat sound and settled lower on my shoulder, his fur still sticking up but his claws not digging quite as deep of holes in my chest and shoulder. I left my hand on his shoulders.

“Tissit *Velos*, are you dating a *cat*?” she managed to get out, while pressing a hand to her shaking chest.

“Oh, sweetheart, way worse,” I said with a wink. “Saker's my familiar.”

Her jaw dropped and her eyes sparkled. “No shit!” Jace shrieked. “How the *fuck* did you pull that off, you bitch!!”

I smirked, waggling my eyebrows at her, glad for the distraction. My glee with the situation and Jace's disarming

humanity brought Saker around to wary amusement, though his body stayed unconvinced and we remained with our fur in a black corona.

“Ishkaia’s tits, Jace, I have fucking missed you,” I said. “I lost my shit after our near-miss, and summoned a cat familiar to deal with the problem. I figured it would take care of the mice in a permanent sort of way and light the Archmage’s hair on fire at the same time, so it seemed like a win-win. Saker answered, on account of being in the process of getting very killed at the time.” I kept my tone light, but Saker and I both tensed, his phantom pain and terror thrilling along my skin. I turned my face and nuzzled his neck, and he managed to unhook his very sharp nails from under my collarbone.

“Noetan Sela had her hand on you,” Jace said, all levity gone.

Saker lifted his head, his ears going forward. I had the sensation of something slotting into place, or of finding ground underfoot when sliding down a scree slope, and Saker was all at once not quite so afraid.

Noetan Sela, the goddess-aspect of Noetan, who kept the Garden where wounded souls went after death to be succored, who held the weeping and gentled the frightened. I felt a yawning terror – too much, that was too much – and Saker butted his head against my cheek with a loud “*prraw!*” It startled my mouth into smiling.

Jace shook her head at me and held up her hands in defeat. “Okay, okay, tiss, I know that poacher-light stare,” she said.

“Forget it.”

“I’m not gods-touched,” I said, making a face. “I’m just muddling along like everyone else.” It wasn’t why I was afraid. I fucking knew it, and Saker knew it, and Jace knew it.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jace said. It was an old argument – Why do you want to be alone so badly? Well, why do you want to let someone fuck up your life so badly? – and neither of us had found a winning blow yet. “Well, you’re one lucky bitch, Kazi, and if you haven’t figured that out yet, I hope Saker beats it into your thick skull.”

He warbled a yowl at her, earning him a sidelong look from me, with a wry twist of my mouth. His body heat soaked into my shoulder, and though none of that hair was going down, he was relaxing into something like comfort on my shoulder.

“I’m also not an idiot, Jace,” I said, looking back over to her.

Saker’s embarrassment and discomfort curled through me, an unhappiness borne both from Jace’s regard and the thought that he should force me to feel anything. I didn’t deserve to be treated like that, I wasn’t worth that sort of regard—I started petting him again, on his neck and shoulders. My fingers knew where to go, like scratching an itch or rubbing a sore muscle, and the relief of affectionate touch relaxed my shoulders as much as his.

I spoke as much to Saker as to Jace. “I couldn’t have asked for a better twist of fate. He’s the best thing that’s happened to me since I manifested.”

He tensed, his claws flexing until they dug into my skin again. I let the pain wash through me, ignoring it. I knew Saker could feel everything I did: that I believed the words, that I still floundered from the capsizing of my life, that I was afraid of what it meant to have him tied to me, that I didn't know if I could ever give him the things he wanted. And I could feel everything he felt: that he hated himself, that he was equal parts desperate for and sure he didn't deserve my affection, that he yearned for absolution with the anguish of a dying man.

“Well, good,” Jace said. She shifted, swinging her clubbed foot out from under herself and tucking her other leg up. “Did you tell Saker about the fall of Tarandrus?”

“Only the echoes of it,” I replied, drifting away from humor back into the calm that would help protect me from my memories. “I showed him some of what we've caught, and used a pebble as the summoning focus.”

She nodded, biting her lip. “Saker, that night... we always knew we hadn't captured all the shattered firmament, even with what was... lost.” Jace looked up from the ground at me again, her face set with determination. “Most of it is the size of stardust and meteorites, like what Rain showed you. We thought all of it was.”

I leaned forward onto the balls of my feet, adrenaline surging, watching Jace as she wrapped her arms around herself. I knew what she was remembering, because I had been there, too. The endless wound in the world. The gaping void.

Dissolution. Saker's back arched, feeding off my remembrance of stark terror.

“What do you mean, ‘thought’?” I asked, the hair on my arms standing up alongside Saker's fur.

“I fucked up, Kazi,” she said, looking away again. “I don't know how I missed it. But there's a piece over a half-mile wide, and it's... slipping. All the stars can feel it moving.”

Quiet cold calm settled over me at the words. Fear still prickled my skin and held my chest in a vise, but there was time for fear, and there was time for action. “Tell me.”

Jace set her jaw and rested her hands on her thighs. “Seventy-three days,” she said. “We have a little time. It will enter the Material Plane two hundred miles off the Seaglyph Coast and streak north-northwest to strike the interior, if it doesn't explode in the atmosphere. Either would be... catastrophic.”

I winced; even that felt like an understatement. An impact that large would plunge the entire plane into an endless winter for years. Millions would die.

I did the mental calculations, calling on my memory of the ley maps from the Monitors. “That's a dead spot for the Monitor stations,” I said slowly, realizing it. “Your gravity capture spells cover that area, but not the Monitor sensors.”

She nodded, a tight motion, her lips pressed together.

“Have you contacted the Tri?”

“You first, Kazi. Why bother? You and I are the only Material Plane sorcerers that any of the Host will allow to interfere with the Celestial Plane since Tarandrus.” Jace sighed, rubbing at her face. “You know as well as I do that the stars don’t give a damn that a piece of the celestial firmament impacting the Material Plane could kill a quarter of life on the plane, especially not when it’s our fucking fault. If anyone else touches it, they’ll scour our plane with starlight.”

I clenched my teeth. The loss of life failure lead to would be horrific, but we had to use the power of a *Spire* to catch even the room-sized meteors. How could we possibly capture a meteor half a mile wide? But if we didn’t fix this, our world wouldn’t recover for thousands of years, if at all.

“How precise are your locations?” I asked, mind racing as I tried to envision a way out of this.

“Perfect in Celestial. I’ll give you everything I have, but you’ll need to match it up to echoes in Material by ship,” Jace said.

“Not a problem,” I replied.

Claws impaled my shoulder. Saker listened with abject horror, a low whining growl in his chest, and I was very, very glad we could burn off some of the terror that way.

“What do you want to do?”

Her foot bounced, a nervous tic. “We can’t stop it from falling, and even if you stood on the Pyraean Confluence in a summoning circle a mile wide, it’s not enough power to catch

it once it leaps across the void,” Jace said, naming the strongest abyssal confluence on the Material Plane, the site of a fallen Spire. “It’s already started slipping towards us, and it *will* cross through.”

“Give me some good news,” I said, my words coming out in a mechanical daze. “You wouldn’t be in a rush to talk to me if it was guaranteed destruction.”

“There’s worse,” she said quietly, her fingers digging into her upper arm. “Remember how I thought there was a gravitational pull on the meteors that didn’t fall?”

“How could I forget?” I asked through the tightness in my throat.

“Well, I wasn’t wrong.” Jace closed her eyes, taking a deep breath and stilling the movement of her foot, then looked up at me, her dark brown eyes serious. “I think this piece was pushing stones ahead of it as it shifted, like water in front of a boat’s prow, but once it reached the metaphysical boundary, it formed a dent in the fabric of Celestial,” she said, cupping her hands. “Everything else is sliding down that slope towards it, and when it crosses through, *everything* is coming with it. All the rest of it.”

Words fled me. I moved my mouth as if I might speak, but no sound came out. Catastrophic didn’t begin to cover the situation Jace described. It would be *extinction*.

“Rain,” she said, fear tightening the skin of her face as her eyes darted across my face. “We can’t slow it, and we can’t

catch it. But when it crosses, for one moment it will all be in the void, and motion and momentum won't mean anything."

"We could hold it in the void," I finished for her, catching her thought, icy memory chilling my veins and making my breath come in shallow bursts. My heart pounded against my ribs like a wild bird in a cage, as if it might thrash its way free. "One of us on each side, to hold it until it's dissolved."

"Yes." Her expression softened. "Can you do it?"

"I have to, don't I? There's no other options," I said, forcing a smile onto my face. It came out rather macabre, like the smile of a skull. "Why is it always horrific danger with you, Shana?"

She smiled, a tight knife-slash of an expression. "Just lucky, I guess," she said, then added, "You can portal to Cajahr. Qavan won't ask too many questions, and it'll be easier to get a ship with his weight behind it."

I watched as Jace set aside the horror of what it was we were going to have to do, her shoulders relaxing and her fingers unclenching. She smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress. I followed suit, settling down on my heels and taking a deep breath. Sorcerers controlled their emotions—their fear. I could control mine. Saker was showing enough terror for the both of us.

"Not the first time I've had to dowse in place for an oceanic capture," I said, keeping my voice level. "I'll need that information as soon as possible."

“I’ve got it here for you, Kazi,” Jace said, moving her hand to levitate a small copper orb. “It’s in the *beska*-pearl – our message-spell.” She turned her hand, settling the pearl so that it overlapped with the celestial pebble of my spell. When I ended the summoning, they’d switch positions—the firmament in Celestial, and Jace’s message remaining in my circle.

I nodded. “Okay. Is that everything?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s all.”

“Alright.” I looked at her for a long moment, and tried smiling again for her. “Kiss kiss, Shana, see you at the next gala,” I said, moving my head as if I was kissing her on the cheeks.

“Kiss kiss,” Jace said, doing the same. “See you then.”

I cut the spell, and my legs buckled as sunlight streamed down again. I hit the floor, hard; Saker leapt off my shoulder and skidded across the floor on all fours as a krocutex, his mane up as he panted flame. Suddenly needing the comfort of my well of strength, I grabbed for my power, and he gave it back to me in a rush that left my skin tingling and spots dancing in my eyes. Like a marionette dropped to the ground, I sprawled across the floor, my shoulder stinging from cat-claw holes and my tailbone screaming from my impact with the stone floor, and started putting back up the walls between me and Saker.

As I did so, he slunk across the floor to me, finally lying down on top of me as his usual incubus self, draped over my chest with his head on my right shoulder. I reached up and

petted the back of his head in an automatic gesture of comfort. The fur down his spine still stood up, and his flicking tail was poofed out, as well. He was also naked. Why was he naked?

“Why are you naked?” I asked, a second later, earning a snort.

“Because my clothes are on the floor, *ledaji*,” Saker said. “I jumped out of them onto your shoulder.”

“Oh,” I said. “Neat trick.”

We lay there for a little while more, and bit by bit, his hair started to lie back down again.

“So, are we going to talk about the existential threat?” Saker asked finally.

I made a face, not answering, and not wanting to do so at any point in the future. My familiar swiveled his head towards me with slow precision and looked at me without blinking.

“Which one?” I said, somewhat unnerved. “Jace, or the very big rock?”

His tail thwapped against the floor, but at least he blinked.

“The big rock,” he said. “Let’s start there.”

I took a deep breath, sorting my thoughts. “What’s the story about Tarandrus?” I asked. “The tale they tell?”

Saker’s tail curled up and dropped back down. Did it again. He settled closer against me, and fuck if the contact wasn’t calming for the both of us.

“There’s different ones,” my familiar said. “But what stays the same is that a great earthquake opened a gate and flung Tarandrus into the void, that you made a path to reach it and led it back out of the dark, and that together you and Jace anchored it back to the Celestial Plane so that the void couldn’t call it back.”

I nodded, then leaned my cheek against his forehead. “It was something like that,” I said. I really, really didn’t want to talk about it.

“Rain...” Saker nudged me with his nose.

I pulled my head away, turning to look at him.

“She said the firmament was *shattered*. That it was ‘our fault’. Tell me.”

I turned my face up to the sky, looking through the quartz panes at the scudding white clouds against the clean blue autumn air. “There’s six people on this plane who know the whole story,” I said. “Jace and I, because we were there. The Archmage, the former and current Mage-Seneschal, and the Oculus, because when the Starry Host barred the Material Plane from interfering with the Celestial Plane, we had to explain ourselves to someone. They’re the ones who decided what story to tell. I’ve stayed out of it.” I closed my eyes and took a shaky breath, soaking in the warmth of the sun and of the incubus lying across me. “I’ll tell you, because you’re my familiar, and you’re stuck in this with me. But I need you to swear on your power never to tell anyone else.”

“A mage-oath?” he asked, sounding surprised.

I exhaled. “Yeah.”

Saker brushed some clinging hair away from my face, then touched a bloody spot on my shirt. I winced at the sting, and he pushed himself up. Without his heat, the combination of the stone floor and my sweat-soaked clothing made for a clammy and uncomfortable rest.

“I swear, Rain,” he said. “On my power, I will never communicate to anyone what you tell me of the events of the rescue of Tarandrus, save to those who already know it or by your express permission.” Saker stood and held out his hand.

I took it, letting him help me to my feet.

“Let me clean those scratches while you tale-spin,” he said, leading me out of the summoning diagram and towards a past I didn’t want to remember.

44

--

THE FALL OF TARANDRUS

RAIN

I stopped at the top of the stairs, looking back at the complex whorls and lines of my spell. Saker didn't let go of my hand, and I didn't try to escape what I knew had to come, apportioning the pearl and Saker's clothes to me. Saker kissed me on the hair and took his clothing, sliding into the skirt and draping the shirt over his arm. Well, I supposed getting into a shirt was a hassle with wings and horns.

He headed down the stairs at a sedate pace with me following, dread building with each step. When we reached the infirmary, Saker picked me up and carried me into the room, then set me on the examination table. I peeled off my shirt and dropped it to the side while he got antiseptic and some cleaning pads out of a cupboard, every motion coiling anxiety tighter in my chest, my breathing becoming painful.

To try to stave off the bleakness of the memories, I swung my legs like a child and admired his strong back, putting off thinking about Tarandrus for a few seconds more. He flexed for me, spreading his wings to the side and rolling his

shoulders. Lightness spread through me, relaxation transferring to my body as Saker controlled his emotions for both of us. The tightness in my chest eased, my breath coming easier, and I accepted my familiar's kindness. His tail swayed through the air, and Saker cast a glance over his shoulder to see me looking back at him with gratefulness.

"Gorgeous," I said, as he turned and sauntered over with a distinct sway to his step.

Saker smirked at me. "All yours, as soon as you want it, princess," he said, in that flirtatious voice of his.

I chose to act on the flirtation rather than the fear, returning his smirk and leaning back on my hands.

But he must have felt the uneasiness, because he dropped the flirtatious air and started inspecting my punctures. "I'm sorry about this," Saker said. "I wasn't trying to hurt you."

I let out my breath and let the moment pass. "I know," I replied. "Jace has that effect on most people, and her news was not exactly trivial."

Saker wet a cotton pad with alcohol and started wiping at the dried blood with gentle hands. I looked at him and he glanced down into my eyes before turning back to his task. I pursed my lips and looked away. Yeah, I guessed I couldn't delay anymore.

"I was in the Mistros Hills when it happened," I started. "It was the second year of my hunt for the Eye of Souls. I'd started it as a project to see if echoes of power could be

detected after such a long time, for my sanction to practice as a sorcerer outside the University, but once I started, it seemed a waste not to follow-through.” I closed my eyes. “It was night, about an hour after midnight. I was setting up my detection array for when I believed the echo would pass through. Jace stung me.”

“‘The stars are screaming,’ she said. ‘Please help me.’” I opened my eyes again and looked at the ceiling.

Saker’s fingers moved with methodical precision across my skin, calm and gentle.

“That’s all she managed to get to me. She was fifteen, but she wasn’t ever a hysterical person, and she loved the stars even then. I knew that the University wouldn’t do anything; the Accords don’t really leave a lot of space for the planes to interfere with each other, and Archmagus Whitescale is very anti-interventionist.”

“He must not like you very much,” Saker said.

I laughed, a sharp sound. “Not in the least,” I confirmed. “I knew I’d lose the Eye of Souls for years if I left, but I took my dowsing tools and left everything else behind, and broke the disc to take me back to the University. We broke into Merrhenya Spire and took the portal to Lyria Spire. It’s in the Barrens, and unoccupied because the confluence is still exhausted, but I’m living proof that starlight can be called down in the Barrens, and Lyria is one of the celestial Spires.” I paused, remembering the first moment of standing in the long-abandoned Spire, seeing the deep ley-channels that begged to

be filled with magic, and the starlit power falling down all around us.

light falling soft upon a desperate land

“We used the circle at the top of the Spire to gate to the Celestial Plane, with just the sigil for it in the center of the circle and our sheer raw power.” My skin prickled at the memory, my pulse picking up. I almost didn’t notice Saker’s finger running down my arm in a soothing motion, caught by my memories. “I don’t know how to describe it. There was a tear in the world a hundred miles long, and all around its edges pieces of the world broke off, hanging in the air and falling into the abyss. The void is nothingness. No temperature, no color, no life. But there was a gleam of starlight, a trace like the path of a butterfly, and I heard Tarandrus screaming.”

hungry teeth tearing at the fabric of the world

“You went after it,” he prompted, when I fell silent.

“Yes,” I said.

“anchor me!”

and I plunge into the black

“I might be the only person alive who could have done it,” I continued. “I followed the path of Tarandrus as it was shattered into oblivion, and behind me Jace poured out power, a ribbon falling into nothingness after me. I found it there, fragmented and dying. But I have always known how to call down starlight.” I stared, unseeing, at the far wall, as Saker put ointment on my wounds. I saw Tarandrus, barely alive, and I

saw the pure brilliant light that I had called that night in the Barrens and then again in the void, which was the antithesis of power.

*tarandrus, broken, impaled with radiance
(like the fallen star, and not,
because you cannot hurt a star with starlight)*

“I poured light into Tarandrus and grabbed it as we fell. And then we were running up that slender line of power, and I was on the back of the crown star of Tarandrus.” I shook my head. “I remember when we plunged back out of the black into brilliance. Jace saw me astride Tarandrus in its form as a great starry stag. I just remember taking my first breath of air, and the way it felt like I had never breathed before, as I saw the sky for the first time. And still we ran.”

My hands were shaking. I clenched them in my lap, and Saker picked them up, pressing my fingers against the warm skin of his chest. I closed my eyes.

*running reckless across the sky
racing towards the end of the world*

“Tarandrus carried me to the far end of the mouth of the void, and I leaped to the ground and stopped it from yawning wider, holding it back with my fury and fear. By then it was more than a thousand miles long and fifty wide. I held it and Jace flung it back together, and I absorbed the shock of that force so that it wouldn’t rip back open. Nobody but her could have done it, and Tarandrus, who had tried to stop this, gave us the power of the stars to bind the world back together.”

light
light
LIGHT
and black

I could feel Saker looking at me, at the stillness of his body as he listened to the nightmare of that night. His pulse beat in time with mine. I opened my hands and pressed my palms against his heartbeat.

“Jace and I both collapsed as soon as we finished, as you might imagine,” I said, opening my eyes to look into his. “The rest of the Starry Host would have killed us for what happened to Tarandrus, but it spoke for us.” I was shaking again, as if I stood outside naked in high winter, great wracking shivers that made my muscles ache, my fear worse than the unfettered cold of the broken firmament. “It had nothing left, the shape of a constellation filled with starlight, but it remembered one thing.”

I made myself breathe, forcing my lungs to work, drawing the air in through my nostrils. “A human mage found a place where the Plane was weak, intending to break through to the void. Tarandrus tried to stop him, but even blinded and scoured by starlight, the mage succeeded, and tore the ground open beneath it.”

Silence fell between us, nothing but the sound of our breathing and the pounding of our hearts. I couldn't say it. Didn't want to relive it.

“Who?” Saker asked, so gently, and I found I could, after all, the horror sliding away to be replaced by yawning distance.

“His name was Lyon Cooper, and he was my betrothed,” I said, as if I was reading from a story. Everything felt so far away. Saker’s shock slammed into me like a hammer-blow, making my breath stutter. “He was a thaumaturge, brilliant, and fascinated with aberrations. I was so in love. When he asked me to marry him, I gave him the Fallen Star as my betrothal token.” Even looking into Saker’s eyes, it was Lyon I saw, my Lyon, who had tried to break the world.

I took a shuddering breath, forcing away the memory of his smiling sky-blue eyes. I refocused my gaze on Saker’s wide yellow ones, trying to anchor myself. “Do you know the material mage-oaths?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice distant. “The abyssal ones are much the same.”

I nodded, and looked down at my hands on Saker’s chest, at his dark indigo fingers splayed over mine. “*Never will I attempt to break the spirit of these laws, as I understand it,*” I quoted. “Except he didn’t try to do it. He made himself an aberration. They’re sometimes called ‘void-touched’, and it’s a true name. Aberrations are missing some connection to the world that others have; it’s why they each can do an impossible thing, and Lyon wanted to become extraordinary. But for him, it severed his connection to truth. No vows could hold him anymore, and he had no anchor to reality. He

started... experimenting. On people, on children, on infants. I found the notes later. The bodies.”

I clenched my jaw until my bones hurt. “He made love to me after peeling apart the souls of stolen babies. Kissed me, danced with me, made me promises of forever.”

I fell silent for a moment. Saker’s heart thudded under my fingers. His lungs kept mine moving.

“I am what I am,” I said, my voice dull. “I saw the traces of him in the ley when I dove into the thing he had opened, and I didn’t forget. When I woke up under the care of the stars, I followed him. I would have tracked him to the ends of the world. It wasn’t hard. He was beyond care. I wasn’t even the only one following him; he’d woken something that hungered for the Fallen Star. I felt it searching, once or twice.” I slumped down. “I told everyone that he’d been eaten by the void, that his own hubris had destroyed him. Even Jace. But it didn’t.” I looked up at Saker, who watched me with a level gaze, motionless.

“He told me that he wanted to free everyone. Told me how much he loved me, and what a gift I’d given him. How next time it would work, and that finally the whole world would be like him, freed of the shackles of the gods.” I exhaled. “It was so terribly easy,” I said, my voice dreamy, as I remembered. “Like a child breaking a toy. I decided to kill him, and then he was dead. Just a heap of meat on the ground.”

“Rain...” Saker said.

I smiled, a brittle thing. “Don’t,” I said. “I’ve thought through it a million times. It doesn’t matter that my power did it without my express command. I wanted to kill him, and I did.” My voice came out dull, the guilt worn and frayed, a shambling rag of an emotion.

“I threw his body into the void to be dissolved, like me and Jace and Tarandrus. I took the Fallen Star and I warded it against discovery, hiding it from anyone who might use it again. I put it on a chain and hung it around my neck and have never taken it off again,” I said, pulling my hand out from under his and touching the battered star-iron coin dangling around my neck. “Nobody had even known he had it, and I kept it that way. Nobody knows the part I played in making him.” I dropped my hand to my lap and stared at it.

“Jace isn’t quite human anymore,” I told him. “When I called starlight, I pulled it through her soul, and it filled the places in her that had been dissolved by the void. She can’t handle abyssal power without getting sick, and she can’t get cold anymore. Her body doesn’t even produce heat unless she enchants it to.” I flexed my hand, and took the other out of Saker’s grasp.

“I lost things, too,” I said. “Words. Memories. I forgot that I had a brother, and he hasn’t forgiven me for it.” I looked up at him, and there was sympathy on his face, compassion seeping into my soul. “My eyes used to be green—grass-green. I used to have freckles, and a birthmark, right here,” I added, touching my left cheekbone. “I didn’t know my name and I didn’t remember what the world looked like, even though I

knew what was in it. And it took me another four years to find the Eye of Souls.”

“So,” Saker said. “It wasn’t only Tarandrus you saved. It was the Celestial Plane.”

One side of my mouth went up in a half-smile. “Not the whole thing, surely, and Jace did most of the heavy lifting.”

He snorted his disbelief, which at least let me smile.

“But yes. That’s why, when the Host forbade the Material Plane from interfering with the Celestial Plane, in their fury over one of our mages nearly destroying a constellation and damaging the plane, Jace and I were named celestial mages. We’ve taken the celestial mage-oaths as well as the material ones.” I sighed, shrugging one shoulder. “The stars aren’t like us. Archons and star-beasts, sure, but the stars and constellations are unfathomably ancient, and they’ll be the same after our civilization has been replaced a thousand times over. No matter where it is, a piece of the celestial firmament will always be considered part of the Celestial Plane. They don’t care what it will do to the Material Plane. As far as the Host is concerned, we brought it on ourselves, and if a mortal mage does any more harm to the Celestial Plane, they’ll scour the mortal world until there’s nothing left.”

“Yes,” Saker said. “I understand why it has to be us.”

My heart fluttered at that—at the way he so casually threw himself in with my lot. He tilted his head. One ear flicked, as if chasing off a fly. I could tell that there was something more he wanted to know, and I looked away.

“Just ask,” I said. “You already know more than anyone else.”

He studied me for another long minute. “Rain, why did you kill him?”

45

CONFESSIONS

RAIN

The question poured ice into my veins, followed by a wave of hot shame that left my spine and palms prickling with sweat. My vision narrowed to a tunnel. My ears rang.

“He killed a lot of people, Saker. He tried to kill a constellation—he might have destroyed a *world*.” My fingers dug into my thighs as I spoke, anchoring me in the present day.

Saker was still watching me with that same level, thoughtful gaze. I couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t face the knowledge in his eyes. It’s impossible to lie to a familiar.

“You only knew about Tarandrus when you found him,” he said, his voice calm and reasonable, as if he was talking me down from the ledge of a tall building. “No one died. The world wasn’t destroyed. Why did you kill him?”

The ringing in my ears turned to roaring. I was falling, falling into nothing, and only the pain of my nails against my

flesh was keeping me from dissolution. But he was there with me, Saker, demon, incubus, tied to my soul, and I was flayed bare under his eyes.

“He was insane,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “A rabid animal. You can’t fix an aberration. He needed to be put down before he did something worse. It had to be done.” I swallowed. “I had to do it.”

He regarded me. His tail swished to the side, slow. Measured. “Did you?”

I glared at him. “Yes,” I snapped. “It needed to be done, and I’ve been doing penance for what I had to do ever since. Isn’t that enough?”

“Is that the truth, Rain?” Soft. Insistent. Relentless.

I shoved myself off the table, my hands fisting. I stalked over to him, and he looked down at me, implacable.

”*Ledaji*,” he said. “Why did you kill him?”

My hand swung. I slapped him across his beautiful fucking face, and he let me. He took the blow as tears poured down my face, falling from unblinking eyes. “This isn’t your world,” I hissed. “This isn’t your war, and I’m not yours. *You are mine.*”

He watched me, not reacting, the pain of my blow stinging my face. I felt his tail heavy behind him, and a deep well of sorrow, as deep as mine. Deeper.

“There’s nothing that you can tell me that would surprise me,” Saker said at last, his voice steady and his expression emotionless. “I’ve seen the words you wrote when your heart

and soul were broken. I share that soul, and I feel the pain you hate to acknowledge.” He took a deep breath, his lashes fluttering. “I know what it’s like to kill a lover, and to long for the absolution they can no longer give.”

My face slackened with confusion, my brows drawing together. His eyes were dark with despair. It filled him to the brim, overflowing from him into me, into well-plumbed depths. I remembered what I had felt, when we had been in that spell together—how much he hated himself. I wondered how much more of me he’d seen than I had thought he would.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said. I knew without asking that he was talking about the boy he’d loved, the one he’d been making love to when he’d manifested. I couldn’t imagine him calling anyone else his lover. “You didn’t know what you were.”

Saker watched me, his tail hanging still, lying on the ground. He tilted his head, a light of challenge in his eyes when he spoke. “I matured late,” Saker said. “Cubari do. His name was Besken, and we were in love. One night, he took me home, and I gave myself to him.” He stalked over, slow and dangerous. “Such a gift, yes? I rode him to completion, and when he came inside me, in the ecstasy of it I took everything from him. His lust, his life, and his soul.” His tail swayed, and he stepped close enough that I had to lean back. Saker planted his hands on either side of me, looming over me with his wings mantled.

“It turns out that I *am* my father’s son,” he said. “I drank Besken’s soul, and *that’s* what made me come, the fine wine of the one I loved filling me better than his body ever could. I’ve never done it again, and I never will, but that doesn’t matter much to him, does it?” Saker leaned forward until the side of his nose brushed mine.

I met him, stare for stare, cool against hot.

A fine tremor ran through him, shivering along my skin. “I came on his corpse, bleeding from the power, and then I realized what I had done, all the grief and horror and terrible pleasure of it, and my agony turned to *flame*. *Everyone* died, Rain. Fire fell from the sky for miles, and everything within a quarter-mile of me was incinerated to the ground. Every person, every animal. The stones cracked and the bones splintered. There was nothing left but ash when I finished screaming.”

He reached up and ran his fingers down my cheek, in a mockery of tenderness. “One thousand and sixty-three people died because I wanted to fuck my boyfriend.”

I leaned forward, pushing myself off the table into his space, and this time he backed up, his nostrils flaring. I walked at him, and he kept going backwards, his bravado crumbling and the pain and grief clawing their way to the fore. Saker hit the wall, his eyes bright and his face drawn. I’d promised not to kiss him, and so I didn’t, though at that moment I wanted to press myself against him and take him to the floor and make him forget.

Or maybe it was Saker that wanted it. It was hard to tell. We kept bleeding into each other, naked and raw.

“One thousand and sixty-three people died because your parents threw you out like *garbage*,” I said, my ferocity lacing my voice with heat. “Your sire knew what you were when he didn’t take your blood, and your mother knew, too. They *knew*, and they didn’t care.” I put my hand over his heart. “It wasn’t your fault, Saker,” I said, letting my voice fade into tenderness. He didn’t believe me, and for now, that didn’t matter. “You didn’t deserve it.”

I dropped my hand, letting my fingers trail down his chest before my hand fell to my side. I looked up at him, at the one who I could never lie to, and I thought, for just a moment, that perhaps it wouldn’t be too bad to be in the Garden together.

“I forgive you, Saker,” I said.

He jerked as if he’d been struck.

“I forgive you for Besken, who loved you,” I said, my voice soft, seeing the scene like it was my own memory: Saker, devastated, screaming out his agony as flame hit him like a hammer-blow. I knew the overwhelming power of manifestation, how the entire world shifted to mirror your soul. I understood how blinding it was, and how uncontrollable. “I forgive you for the men going about their days. I forgive you for the women, in their shops and homes. I forgive you for the children, and I forgive you for the babies in their cradles.”

He stared at me, staring like he hadn't expected me to ever shoulder his burdens with him, when he'd bared himself for me in the face of my anger.

"I forgive you for the elders. I forgive you for the animals, in all their kinds. I forgive you for the pain, and for the suffering, and for the mourning." I reached up and touched the loose hair falling along his face. "Saker, I forgive you for how much you have punished yourself."

His nostrils flared again, and he kept breathing like he was about to run. I laid my hand on his face, and I looked at him—really looked at him, with my mage-senses wide open. At the delicate tracery of his ley, at the fire of the sun at the heart of him, at the radiance of his power and how it twined with mine. The pale spangles of his skin were like stars, celestial-bright on the deep night skin of my demon. His name was written in his soul, and I could read the shape of it as I ran my gaze along his power.

I looked into his face, into those eyes that could not help but burn with light when he drank in power, and then I laid my face against his chest. His hand came up and he laced his fingers through mine, still resting against his face. The warmth of his body radiated into me, matched by the hesitant hope twining through him.

"He smiled at me," I said, my skin going cold as I faced the memory. "I loved him more than anything, and he'd taken that love and carved himself open with it, but in the end that didn't matter to me. I died in the void, and what came out was full of

holes, but I still remembered him.” I laughed, a bleak sound, tears starting to fall again. “I remembered *him*, when I didn’t even remember my name, and I had to find him. I had to know *why*.”

Saker shifted, pressing his cheek to my hair, his tail coming around to wrap around my legs. One warm thumb swept along my fingers.

“I found him so easily. He stood there smiling at what was left of me as he broke my heart, and I killed him for it,” I said, my body starting to tremble again, sobs locked in my throat. My jaw and throat ached, my hand sliding down to Saker’s shoulder and gripping him as if I might stop myself from falling. “He was *happy*. He was so happy.” I couldn’t say anything more, my whole body tense and shivering, the words trapped in my chest by the pain gripping me.

“Oh, Rain,” he said, full of compassion. “Gentle heart. You were so broken, and he dealt you a mortal wound. I understand. I forgive you for it.” Saker pressed his lips to my hair, then rubbed his cheek against me again. “I forgive you for all of it. No more penance, *ledaji*. No more punishment. You deserve to be free.”

I didn’t answer that. I didn’t know how to, leaning against his chest and weeping silently, wetting his dark skin with my tears.

He didn’t try to make me give an answer, simply holding me, stroking my hair. It felt nice to have his arms around me. Of all the stupid things, it made me feel safe, as if he could

protect me from everything difficult in my life: death, responsibility, and very big rocks alike.

By slow fractions, my tears slowed, the pain easing as I wept myself out. I didn't remember ever weeping for Lyon before. I remembered so little from those first months, and the scrawlings in my journal were almost incomprehensible, the handwriting jagged and grammar wrong. But I wept now, held by someone who understood my pain, and as my tears dried the burden I'd carried all those years eased.

Grief never vanishes. The edges grow blunt, and the space in which it is contained grows larger, but it always stays with us. But *guilt*? It's possible to be forgiven. It's even possible to forgive yourself. Leaning against my familiar's warm chest, I could imagine a world in which guilt no longer held me in its claws. I could almost see the road, as if the fire of my dragon might light the way through the dark for me.

You can see starlight in the void. Perhaps there is a light in every darkness, even that of the soul.

Eventually, Saker started purring, almost silent, the vibration of it against me making me smile.

"I love it when you do that," I told him.

"Mmm?" Saker replied, purring a little louder.

"Mmm indeed," I said. "The best thing about cats is the purring."

"Mmm," he said again, and kept holding on to me.

I snuggled into the warmth of his embrace, against the planes of his body. I liked it, the feel of his skin on mine. “You’re luxuriating,” I said, relaxed against him. Well, I was, too.

“Mhmm,” Saker said, sounding pleased.

He rolled his hips up against me without any real intent behind the motion, earning him an elbow to the chest. My familiar laughed, his purr fading, and let me go. I leaned back against him for a moment more, before sighing and standing on my own. I wobbled a little, and Saker steadied me.

“Let me clean up,” he suggested.

“You sure?” I asked, picturing the mess left behind by the summoning.

His fingers brushed against my shoulder. “Of course,” he said. “It’s a familiar’s job to help his mage.” Saker held up a hand when I turned and might have protested. “This has been worse for you than for me, *ledaji*,” he said, voice kind. “Jace Songdog is terrifying and broken pieces of the sky falling are terrifying, but this is your history. If we ever have to go to the Iron City, you can do the same for me.”

“Deal,” I said. “Come get me when you’re ready for dinner?”

He nodded, smiling at me, and I brushed my fingers against his chin before turning and heading out of the room, with love still warm on my face.

46

DANCING

RAIN

I went straight to the library, not wanting to delay any more than necessary to get started on my upcoming sea journey. Cajahr Spire being the closest to the event was a stroke of luck; not only was Cajahr's Spirekeeper none other than my sometimes-lover Qavan Vipereye, but it stood only an hour's ride from Vannport, one of the largest port cities on the entire Seaglyph Coast. I kept it short and sweet, not wanting to start a panic and knowing it wouldn't matter either way. Qavan wouldn't keep me waiting.

Dear Qavan,

It looks like the next meteor shower is going to occur off the Seaglyph Coast, outside of the resolution range of the Monitor stations. I'm going to need to dowse for it at sea, so can I portal into Cajahr for a visit, pretty please? I can use all the time I can get to dowse so it would be a

short visit on the front-end, but maybe longer on the back? It would be great if I could come in the next day or two to get a ship from Vannport – please let me know what works for you. xx Rain

P.S. I've got a surprise for you – you're going to love it!

With any luck, he'd read it before the day was out and have an answer for me shortly thereafter, and Saker and I could get moving. I expected to spend a day or two finding a ship that could be hired out for nine weeks and had a deck big enough for the sort of spellwork that would be necessary, and then at least another day for the ship to get stocked up and ready to ship out, so time would be of the essence. It was going to be expensive, too, but with the gold of the Dragonvault at my disposal, that troubled me less than it might have otherwise.

I sent off short notes to each of the Triumvirate, indicating that I would send a personalized message the next day, then hauled my exhausted self up to my suite to wash off the sweat. A long, scorchingly hot shower left me feeling a little less raw, and I decided to put on clothing worthy of dinner instead of shrugging into comfy pajamas.

I hesitated in front of my wardrobe, chewing on my lip as I tried to decide what to put on. Pretty much all of the time, I dressed in simple pants and a comfortable shirt, which was only practical for a working mage. I only ever dressed up for social occasions, during which I went all-out, but I did manage

to have some clothes in the middle which almost never got worn. But after talking to Jace and telling Saker about Tarandrus... and about Lyon... I wanted to feel nice. To look pretty.

I refused to examine why being pretty might be desirable and instead dug through one of my chests where I kept my extra clothing, looking for something presentable. A few minutes later, I looked at myself in the mirror. The bronze silk shirt had a modest neckline, but the two overlapping panels of fabric that formed the bodice emphasized my curves and clung to my skin. The cropped length showed my lower belly, with a notch that framed my navel before dropping to the sides and coming up again in the back. Low-slung black calfskin pants followed the lines of my legs, and a fine gold belly chain with dangling gold drops hung above it. I added a gold collar necklace under which I tucked the Fallen Star's prison, and a large onyx pendant on a braided gold chain to rest between my breasts.

The effect was a little bit exotic, as if I belonged in the canyon palaces of Xervai instead of the drab northern forests surrounding Barixeor, which lifted my spirits a little. It had been a long time since I'd been able to escape my exile, and even though I wouldn't be going anywhere tonight, wearing something that reminded me that I could help me feel a little less trapped.

The little book on my vanity held a variety of cantrips for doing hair – there were zillions of such books, since almost all mages tended to grow their hair long – and I used one that did

my hair up in a variant of a chignon. I looked through my jewel-box until I found some earrings that would work, and slipped on a gold ear-cuff in the shape of a trumpet-vine, enjoying the adornment. Fully dressed, I went and looked at myself in the mirror again, making faces at myself. Even all these years later, I still sometimes expected to be sun-kissed and summery, instead of gray-eyed and with unmarked skin. But I looked nice, and the gold looked good against the smooth fawn of my skin.

Thus attired and still un-fetched by Saker, I headed down to the dance floors. Foolish, maybe, given that I had dressed up, but I loved to dance and an entire floor of Barixeor was dedicated to the art. Dancing could be used in spellwork, of course; many ritual spells used movements of the body to move energy, and it was a good way to strengthen the body. But, like the rooms for combat training, I suspected that the dance rooms were included more for pleasure than practicality. They were certainly a solace to me, a place where I could go and lose myself in movement when there was too much to think about.

The vivid colors of the sunset painted the sky beyond the quartz windows, but the caress of the sun still warmed the wooden floors, and the comfort of the room soaking into me. I took off my sandals and slipped on some leather soles, then slotted some of the etched metal cards that contained songs into the clockwork orchestra before stepping out into the center of the room and settling into a relaxed stance.

”*Arkisei*,” I said. *Begin*. The sound of one of the stately court dances filled the room, and I stepped into motion.

I lost myself in the music and the movement, all of my focus taken up by the smooth motion of my muscles and the stretch of my tendons. I closed my eyes and moved across the floor, seeing only the light of power all around me. The great endless whirlwind of the confluence became my walls, and the soft haze of fey energy that was the heat of the sun and the memory of a forest became my floor, even as it, too, was swept into the sky by the inexorable draw of Barixeor. And I was a shifting filigree of light, every sweep of my body sending lines of light arcing and swaying through the world, in drifting ribbons and solar flares.

I knew when Saker stepped into the room. I couldn’t not have, as the auroras in my mage-sight shifted. I would always know where he was; would always be able to feel his power as keenly as mine. It was comfortable, only right, like knowing where my hands were. He watched, and I let myself continue to live moment-to-moment, where all that mattered was motion and light and joy, and swept the fiery blaze of his power into the dance. I felt him lean into that spectral touch with as much pleasure as if I had run my hands down his body, his eyes closing and lips parting as he breathed out.

The song drew to a close and I turned towards him, opening my eyes with power falling around me like the silk of a dress, holding out my hand. Saker stepped out onto the sun-warm floor, a look on his face that looked something like

bewilderment and something like worship, and swept me into motion with the rising song.

I didn't know the steps, and it didn't matter. We stepped across the floor as lightly as deer, one of his hands on my back and the other holding mine. I laid my arm along his and he whirled me through the music, the tracery of our power aligning into seamless radiance.

I'd been wrong. Dancing with Saker wasn't just extraordinary. It was incomparable. Our bodies moved together as one, as if we had done this every moment of every day for our entire lives. Every spin, every lift, every turn and every leap came to us smooth and easy, so easy, as easy as breathing. It felt only natural to relax into the moment, to let the joy and passion well up in me and through me. The heat of power wrapped around my skin, the shift of the air pressing against my wings and the weight of my tail curling behind me. The strength of my body answered my command, and the wind of our passage swept against my bare skin, swinging the gems hanging from my ears.

He never took his eyes off of me.

The melody slowed into languorous emotion, and we slid towards each other until we were pressed together from knee to collarbone, our hips locked and his thigh between mine. We moved like lovers, in slow turns and languid ripples of motion, our power clinging to our skin and trailing from our passage like calligraphy ink. Saker leaned forward until his cheek pressed against mine, my arm slipping around his neck as his

hand slid up my bare arms. He dipped me back, leaning over me, his tail curling soft around my leg. He pulled me back to him, arms strong and hands adoring, and for that one dance, I let myself fall in love.

As the music came to a close, we slowed and stilled, standing together against the darkness of the night. We breathed in time with our chests touching. Saker's hand on my back rested under the edge of my shirt, his long fingers pressed against my skin, and his other hand cupped the back of my neck. I was wrapped around him in an embrace, my face against his shoulder and my mouth next to his neck, my nose and lips brushing his dark skin. Something in me longed to press my mouth down, to taste the salt and smoke that lay on him, and he responded to that desire, heat pooling in him as he leaned towards me, the inner corners of his brows pulling up and together as he closed his eyes.

I slid away from him, untangling my power from his and letting myself build back up the barriers between our souls. His body relaxed and pulled away from mine, until we stood separate again, hand in hand. Saker looked down at me with his heart in his eyes, his mouth soft and touched with a smile, for this brief moment utterly relaxed and happy. I smiled back up at him, warm and carefree.

“Incubus,” I said, watching his smile spread into something satisfied. “You are a beautiful dancer.”

“Sorcerer,” he replied, and it was my turn to feel smug. “You move like the Goddess of Veils.”

“That sounds like a compliment, but I have no idea who that is,” I said, smiling.

Saker laughed and let go of my hands. “Yetedene is one of the four patron deities of the cubari,” Saker said, his tail swishing. “It is she who draws the eye, who created longing and who gave us irresistible motion.” He reached out to touch my jaw. “Can I look at you, Rain?” My confusion must have shown on my face, because he smiled down at me. “You’ve dressed so enticingly, and I want to admire you,” Saker said. “But I won’t stare if you don’t want me to.”

“Oh,” I said, blushing. “Um. Yes, you can look. I didn’t dress like this so that you wouldn’t look.”

Saker hummed, his heated gaze sliding down my body. I felt it as if he touched me, a gossamer brush along my skin. His eyes traced the line of my throat, following the chain of my necklace down to the shadow between my breasts, my breath picking up and nipples hardening at the weight of his golden eyes on me. Tingling pleasure followed his gaze as it caressed my curves, sliding along the line of the silk to my bare shoulders and down my body to the skin of my midriff. One hand flexed as if he imagined touching me as he followed the line of the belly chain.

My pulse pounded between my legs, responsive desire heating me. I wanted to be touched, wanted the warmth of his hands wrapped around my hips. If I dared to admit it, I’d wanted it from the first time he’d looked at me with desire, and I knew he’d never stopped wanting me.

Saker stepped to the side, circling me, and I followed him with my eyes, tilting my face towards him as his eyes swept down my muscular legs and back up to the curve of my ass. He inhaled, and I bit off a soft sound as he tilted his head and licked his lips, his eyes locked on my skin. I pressed my thighs together as his eyes trailed up my spine, and back down again, sending a pulse of aching tension through me.

“Can I touch you, Rain?” he asked, his voice low. Fire, we were playing with fire, but *fuck* it felt good.

“Yes,” I said, the words coming out breathy.

He sighed out his pleasure, his breath skimming along my neck. His fingertips brushed against my waist like the kiss of silk against my skin, and I looked forward again as he settled the heat of his hands against me, his thumbs sliding down to press into the dimples of my hips. Saker leaned forward, until his mouth was next to my ear, and I had to hold back a whimper as he spoke.

“This is my favorite part of a woman,” he said into my ear, his breath hot and his lips brushing my skin. “You could not have dressed better to torment me than if you’d plucked the knowledge from my fantasies.”

A tiny sound escaped me. He shuddered in response, and *fuck*, with the uniting of our desires every block I had between us to keep our senses separate dissolved, and Saker flooded into me. Doubled, our senses demanded attention: tension tightening his skin, heat flushing across my chest, and the pressure of his erection throbbing to the paired beat of our

hearts. My sex clenched as his shaft flexed against his clothing with an ache that was almost unbearable. Saker's fingers tightened against me, claws pressing into my skin.

"I'm going to be thinking about what it would be like to have the long expanse of your back in front of me for *days, ledaji*," Saker said, his voice full of desire. He leaned his nose against me and inhaled. "I would very much like to spend a little while with the thought before dinner, if you don't mind."

I swallowed. "Tell me," I said before I could think not to. What the *fuck* was I doing?

He went still, only his heart thudding, then took a shaky breath. "Tell you?" he asked, sounding like he couldn't believe what I'd said.

Hell, *I* couldn't believe that I'd said it. I closed my eyes, breathing hard. It felt good, so good, to have Saker's hands on me, and to have his pure want pulsing through me. He wanted to be buried inside me and loved by me, and I couldn't give him that, not yet (not yet?), but everything felt liquid and hot and there was a very big rock that might kill us all.

Fuck it, I decided, and threw caution to the winds. "Tell me," I said again, leaning my face against his. "Tell me what you'll be thinking about, as you lie there with your hand wrapped around yourself."

Saker made a low sound, swaying closer. But not touching. Not yet. Not until I told him he could, even if that meant he was denied forever.

“Rain, you will be the death of me,” Saker said, his voice half-moan. He rolled his thumbs in slow circles against my skin.

I had to fight to stay standing rather than melting into the desire of him.

“I will be thinking of how you would look, bent over on my bed, your face against my sheets and your legs spread for me. Imagining what it would be like to taste you like that, my hands wrapped around your thighs. If you’d be as wet for me as I am for you. What—*ah!*” he cried, as our bodies tensed in parallel with identical pleasure, his words coming faster, “—what it would be like to be inside you, having you like that, *amalikti*, Rain, *tammet ifele’alehu*,” he finished, panting. *Gods, Rain, I want you so badly.*

I leaned back against him, rolling my body down along the hard planes of his body and wrapping one arm around to slide my fingers into his thick hair. Saker let out a shuddering groan as I pressed my hips against his, his body trembling with restrained need. His want lay like a line of fire against me, and he was tense, so tense, fingers digging into my hips, struggling not to move as desire blazed between us. It exhilarated me to have him captivated, an incubus on my leash.

I rocked my hips against him, sending a bolt of pleasure through us, and rested my head back against his shoulder. “Move, Saker,” I said, giving him permission and command in one word, and reveled in it as he moaned against me and did, his arms sliding around me to press his body against my back

and my hips against his, grinding his hard length against me. I closed my eyes and enjoyed him, letting myself feel what he was feeling, the sweetness of the press of his body against mine and the desperate wanton lust of it all.

My incubus thrust against me, slowly at first, and then with climbing, reckless need. Everything slipped away but the building tension as we spiraled higher and higher, me breathing as hard as him as he fanned his wings and dug his claws into the floor to brace himself. I moved against him, yearning for the pleasure that hung just out of reach, leaning forward so I could increase my pressure against him.

”*Ledaji,*” he gasped against my hair. “*Inidakh’om tifeleijalehi?*” *Darling, do you want me to stop?*

And he would, I knew—he would stop and he would go dunk himself in ice water if I said yes, because he never would step across any line I laid in front of him. Safe, gods, he was *safe*, and if I wanted to have him I *could*—

I smiled, a hungry expression, and pulled him harder against me. Saker whimpered, and in Abyssal I told him, “No, darling, I want you to beg.”

And, gods and goddesses, he did, the Abyssal words tumbling out of his mouth one after another – *please, goddess, let me come, it feels so good, please, I’ll be good, please let me come for you, I’m yours, I’m yours, let me come, I’ll do anything for you* – flooding me with want and need. My desperation matched his own, so I wrapped my hands around

his arms and pressed up against him, losing myself in the feel of his shaft grinding against my hips.

”*Nulinyi*,” I demanded, *come for me*, and he fucking did, driving himself against me with a wordless cry. Ecstasy crashed through us, a wave breaking over us, my body coming untouched as his orgasm surged out of him, the hard heat of him jerking against me. I clung to him as I shook with pleasure, and somehow he kept us from collapsing to the floor.

For a few panting breaths we stood there, swaying, sweating and breathing hard, clinging to each other. Saker buckled first, letting go of me and sinking to the ground on his back. I sprawled down next to him, smiling as he flopped his tail over my legs. Ever the cubarus, always wanting touch.

We lay there for a while, catching our breaths and pulling ourselves more into our own bodies. I looked over at him; he stayed staring at the ceiling with a dazed expression.

“‘Goddess?’” I asked.

He made a face. “Shut up.”

I smirked. “You’ll be goooooood?” I said, in a sing-song voice.

Saker groaned and draped an arm over his face. “Shut uuup,” he said again, dragging out the second word, though I could see him smiling.

“Kinda cute that you forgot how to speak Common,” I added, lacing my fingers through his. I rested our hands on the ground between us.

Saker took his arm off his face and turned his head towards me with a shy expression. “It was my first time having sex on the Material Plane,” he said. “I was overcome.”

“Is that what that was?” I asked, smiling.

He smiled back, uncertain, still with the hesitant expression in his eyes. He looked... soft. Vulnerable. “Wasn’t it?” he said. “Given that we both orgasmed from something we were doing together, I didn’t think there was much question.”

I laughed, earning myself a bewildered look from my familiar. “Most people in this country don’t consider it sex until someone’s penetrated, and by something other than fingers or a tongue,” I explained.

He made a disgusted noise. “That’s ridiculous.”

I laughed again, which only made him frown.

“Well, it is,” he said, sounding almost petulant.

“I’m not disagreeing, *ledaji*,” I said. “I make it a point not to argue with experts,” I added with a wink, and grinned at him.

Saker smiled, slow and broad. Gods, he looked happy—relaxed and a little disbelieving in his good luck. I hoped I never did anything to take that away from him.

“I don’t know that this was much of a display of my expertise,” he said, squeezing my hand. “Not that I’m not complaining.” Saker paused, then ducked his chin, that shyness on his face again. “What made you change your mind?”

A corner of my mouth tugged back. “It’s not all the way changed,” I started.

“I wouldn’t have assumed,” he said. “I only meant... why this time? Why tonight?”

I rolled onto my side and reached over, brushing some hair away from his face. Saker closed his eyes, inhaling, and I remembered him saying, “*I don’t understand desire,*” and “*tell me what you want from me.*” I thought for a moment, resting my hand on Saker’s neck.

“A lot of reasons,” I said. “Doing that summons with you... it’s hard to be afraid that you’re going to hurt me when I’ve just had your soul laid bare in front of me.”

He looked down, his shoulders tensing.

I stroked his neck. “You’re gentle and loving, under that armor you wear. You’d cut off your own hand before lifting it against me.”

Saker’s yellow eyes flew back up to mine, wide and worried, as if I might have seen something he’d rather not have shown. Maybe I had.

I lifted our linked hands and pressed a kiss to his fingers. “We’ve had a lot thrown at us today, which always has a way of shaking things up,” I continued. “Then, revisiting what happened with Tarandrus, and...” I closed my eyes and took a breath, my throat suddenly tight and my body prickling with tension.

“And with Lyon,” Saker offered.

I nodded. I took a few more meditative breaths, until the agony of those memories settled again. “Yes,” I said. “You shared your wounds with me, too. We stepped a little deeper into the water. I...” I shook my head. “I wanted something nice, for me, and maybe for you, too. So I put on something pretty.”

”*Ledaji*, you are far beyond pretty,” he said, as if he couldn’t help saying it. “You are captivating.”

I smiled at him, and he kept looking at me in the way that a moth watches the flame.

“You did seem captivated,” I said. “And I liked that, too.” I traced the line of the scar on his throat. “And there’s a very big rock that might kill us in a couple months, so I decided to give us something we both wanted tonight. I hope that’s okay.”

Saker rolled onto his side, taking my other hand in his. “I’ll be sure to thank Jace for the horrific danger, the next time I find myself in her alarming presence,” he assured me, with an earnest expression that made me laugh. He squeezed my hands and looked at me, his gaze direct.

“Rain, there are some things I can’t give you anymore, unless you want everything from me,” Saker said. “And because you’ve moved your lines, we will need to talk about mine. But this is something I can give, and you can have me like this anytime you want.”

I nodded. He’d already told me that, after all, and I knew why. It wouldn’t be fair or kind to him to ask for anything that meant love for him.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s talk over dinner?”

“As you like,” he said with a smile. “I’ll go change my clothes, if you’ll get the food?”

I flashed a grin at him. “Should I change, too?”

“I would beg you not to,” Saker replied, with no trace of levity.

I smirked. He smiled, a little, and heaved himself up. I followed him up and sauntered towards the door, and Saker made a low sound of desire, following behind.

I glanced over my shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “Hot already?”

”*Ledaji*, I’m incubus,” he said, meeting my eyes with a smirk. “I don’t have a cooldown like human men.”

Both my brows went up as his smirk grew into a smug smile. “Huh,” I said, walking into the transport ring. “The three-day orgies make a little more sense now.”

Saker’s eyes were wide when I turned to look at him, and I could see him wanting to ask if I’d been involved in said orgies. I grinned and wiggled my fingers at him in a goodbye as I said, “One Sky.”

47

SOMETHING LIKE A DATE

RAIN

I strolled into the kitchen feeling very pleased with myself. Marin did a double-take when I walked in, her eyes going round. I smirked at her, cocking one brow.

“Well, magus!” she said. “You look like you’ve been having an enjoyable evening.”

“Do I?” I asked, glancing down at my clothing. None of it looked disreputably rumpled.

She reached over, grabbed a shiny copper pan, and held it up for me with a wry expression by way of answer. I walked forwards to peer at my reflection and fought back a laugh. My hair was no longer coiffed, the chignon falling down and my hair mussed on the side where Saker’s face had been pressed against me.

“Ah,” I said. A little thrill ran down my spine, remembering the desperate way Saker had thrust against me, the needy sounds he’d made. Fuck, I really loved sex. I really especially loved having men want me with that kind of unbridled desire.

I would leave some perfume on Helena's altar tonight. "Well, he *is* an incubus," I said, reaching back and starting to take the pins out of my hair.

Marin laughed and put the pan back, then went into the second kitchen. She returned as I finished shaking out my long hair, and stood patiently while I held the pins in my hand and recited the cantrip to redo my chignon.

I turned to her and she held out the tray with dinner; I went over and took it. "Thank you, Marin."

She smiled. "If I might be so bold, I'm glad to see you taking a little bit of happiness for yourself, magus."

I smiled back. "Me, too," I said, and meant it.

She bowed and I wished her goodnight before heading up to one of the private dining rooms. I wasn't really sure where the evening was going to end – the options were pretty diametrically opposed, being either grim planning for saving the world or grinding like teenagers – but either way, given that our dinner conversation was going to be sexual, I didn't want anyone to accidentally walk in on us.

I set the tray on the table and started setting everything out for us: Saker's meal of a whole seared game hen with a side of deviled quail eggs, mine of some of yesterday's leftover roast with speargrass and fried potatoes, a chocolate-and-berry confection sized for two that would be entirely consumed by me, and our various utensils. I filled two water glasses from the pitcher and set them in their places at the table, fussing with them so that the etchings faced the same way.

Then, because Saker still hadn't appeared, I went into the gaming-room to see what sort of interesting alcoholic beverages had been stocked on this floor, or if I'd need to go down to the wine cellar to find something to pair with the meal. I found mostly hard liquor, which wasn't quite what I had in mind, but there were a couple bottles of wine. I dithered between a bottle of faery grasswine (so called for the color and not the taste, thank the gods; it was a nice variety that had an acidic finish over broad floral notes) and a mellow, oaky red varietal from the western coast, near the Mistros Range, before remembering that Saker couldn't taste sweet and thus would very much not enjoy the grasswine. Red it was.

I was pouring out our glasses when he came down to the dining room, and focused on finishing my task without dripping wine on the table before looking up. Saker stood in the doorway, with that little uncertain smile on his face, and I just stood there and stared at him.

He wore something that must have been designed with wings in mind. White silk wrapped around his waist, up to the base of his wing-membranes, and two more pieces came up and crossed his chest, meeting behind his neck. It left a triangle of skin bare, from right above his navel to the bottom of his sternum, and surely his back, as well. A skirt of heavy fawn cloth edged in a darker gold fell a little below his knees, wrapping around to the front of his legs and stopping there, with a second panel of angled cloth in crimson-and-gold damask falling down in front of him, fringed with ermine-tails, leaving two long slits up the front of his thighs. He wore a

collar of rubies and diamonds, and a matching septum ring. On his left ankle rested a diamond anklet, with ruby drops falling along it.

“Oh,” I said, stupidly, and set the wine down on the table. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him.

Saker was beautiful. There was no other word for it. He was stunningly beautiful, heart-achingly beautiful, from the tips of those gleaming black horns down to his star-dusted feet. The silk clung to him like a second skin, gleaming in the light of the lamps, emphasizing the deep violet-blue of his skin and matching the platinum spangles across his shoulders. His black hair drank the light, loose and draped over his shoulders like a waterfall of ink. He walked towards me, his long powerful legs sliding through those slits, dark and smooth and I was staring, really, really staring.

I managed to drag my eyes off Saker’s naked thighs and past the muscle of his chest and all the way up to his face, where he was smiling at me with something that looked like shy delight. I had no idea what he had to be shy about.

“Hi,” I said, also stupidly.

His answering smile shone as bright as the stars. “That’s the reaction I was hoping for,” Saker said, soft and gratified. “I must have done well enough.” He put his fingers under my chin and closed my mouth.

I couldn’t keep my eyes from flickering down his body again. Saker leaned a little towards me, and I looked back up into his golden eyes. His pupils were wide, like dark endless

wells, and his unfairly long black lashes made a dense fringe around them.

“I got dinner,” I said. I really wanted my speech centers to come back, but my eyes took up all the processing power my mind had to offer.

“Would you like to eat?” he asked, his tail swaying hypnotically behind him—oh, blessed Helena, I was staring at his body again.

I made my eyes go back to his face, and found him still smiling with that pleased expression. I had no idea what my face was doing. Probably something stunned.

“Or should I go change my clothes?” Saker added after a moment, his voice taking on the lilt of a tease.

“I would beg you not to,” I said, the words rolling off my tongue before I’d managed to process them.

He hummed at that, low and satisfied, still looking at me. I moved over to my chair and dropped into it like I’d been hamstrung, and Saker slid into his with predatory grace. I stared at my meal without really seeing it, then back over to him.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I asked.

“I felt under-dressed,” Saker said with a satisfied expression. “You are such a vision, and I was dressed like a common laborer. At least now we’re on more even footing.”

I showed him my helpless smile and started cutting my food to give my hands something to do. “I didn’t even realize you

had fancy clothes,” I said, starting to eat without tasting the food.

He laughed and started in on his meal, as well. “*Ledaji*, even war-mages like to look nice on occasion. I don’t need it for most people to like looking at me, but there are mirrors in Abyssal, too, you know.”

That made me smile, and I shook my head. “Saker, you don’t just look nice. You’re...” I hesitated, fishing for the right word. “Peerless,” I finished, looking back at him.

Saker had a strange hopeful light in his eyes, and through our soul-bond his aching desire for approval wrapped itself around my heart. He wanted so badly to be *liked* on his own merits, let alone loved. And, gorgeous though he was, it hadn’t been lust I’d been stupefied by. It had been him, the beauty that ran as deep as his broken heart. Wasn’t that just the most terrifying thing that had happened today?

“Truly?” he asked, his ears canted towards me.

“Truly,” I said, and leaned my head on my hand to look at him. “I wouldn’t lie to you even if I could.” I couldn’t stop smiling at him, a silly bewildered expression.

Saker smiled back, soft and almost timid, as if he wasn’t sure he was doing this right. He’d said he’d forgotten how to be a friend and never learned to be a lover. Maybe all of this was as strange to him as it was frightening to me.

“Thank you,” Saker said, ducking his chin, and went back to eating.

I watched him for a few moments, until he started crunching through the wing of the bird, bones and all, and turned back to my meal. We ate in relative silence (bone-eating not being all that quiet, after all), devoting our attention to the food. Marin was a good cook; she'd risen to the challenge of Saker's unusual palate with vigor and seemed to have no problem with making two entirely different meals for us, though I supposed she couldn't sleep even if she wanted to. The wine tasted nice with the roast, and Saker refilled our glasses when they got low.

Midway through our meal his tail curled around my ankle, an affectionate gesture. Saker fixed his eyes on his plate as I looked over at him. I could have said something teasing, or moved my foot to brush him off, but it felt nice and he was so unsure of his welcome. So, instead, I went back to my food without saying anything and left his tail there, his silk-soft fur brushing like a caress over the top of my foot. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him look up at me, my skin heating as I blushed under his eyes.

I decided not to think too hard about what we were doing—what this might mean. Of what it had meant when I'd thought, *not yet*.

“So,” I said, once we were down to the last few bites. I looked over at him, and poured a little more wine for myself. “Do you still want to talk about your lines?”

Saker ducked his chin and shuffled his wings. He traced a pattern on the table with one claw, his embarrassment coiling

through me.

I tilted my head, a little puzzled. “Everything alright, *ledaji?*”

“I’m incubus,” Saker said, not quite meeting my eyes. It sounded like an excuse, more than an explanation. “I’m... I’m not good at this.”

“Even incubi have things they like and don’t like,” I said.

“This isn’t about not liking,” he said, and looked up at me with those vulnerable soft eyes. “You know it isn’t.”

I looked down at my wine and swirled it, watching the legs of alcohol slide down the curve of the glass. I couldn’t meet those eyes without feeling guilt, ashamed of the person I’d become after losing Lyon. I wanted this, but I didn’t want to hurt him. I didn’t think I could bear it.

“I’m not going to be good at saying no,” Saker continued, the words dragging out of him. “You wanting me will blind me to anything else, even if it’s for reasons that will break me.”

My heart picked up, with that familiar knee-jerk fear. In answer, Saker’s tail curled a little tighter around my ankle, his own fear an echo of my own. I made myself stop, putting it away, and looked over at him again. I owed him that much.

“Okay,” I said. My voice came out scratchy, and I cleared my throat to try again. “Sweetheart, it’s okay,” I said. “I won’t toy with you, and I won’t test your self-control. If you want us to return to flirting and nothing more, I’ll do that. If you want us not to even hint to each other that we’re attracted to each

other, I'll do that, too." I swirled my wine again and took a sip, letting the flavors bloom on my tongue. "If there are things you would like to try, you can put them on the table, and if we do them, and you want to stop, you can take them off again. I won't be upset or pushy. You're your own person, and your body is your own."

"Even when you can slip inside my skin?" Saker asked, his head low, looking up at me.

"Especially then, Saker," I said. "You have no defense against me, which makes it even more important for me to respect your desires, no matter how slender the rebuff." I laid my hand out on the table, palm up. "I'd like to keep from crossing any more of your lines," I said, thinking of kissing him earlier. "So it would be good for me if you could tell me where they are."

"Okay," he said, echoing me. Saker hesitated, then lay his hand on top of mine, and our fingers curled around each other's palms. "How do you want me to do this?"

"Why don't you start with things that are hard 'no's?" I suggested. "And then we can talk about what is definitely 'yes'. And if there are things that are in-between, we won't slide into any of those things unless we've talked about them beforehand."

"Can we... do this differently?" Saker asked.

"Yeah, of course," I said, surprised. "It was just a suggestion."

“No, I mean...” He trailed off, then got up abruptly, his chair skidding backwards with a screech and his tail sliding off my leg, and tugged at my hand.

I stood, bemused, and followed as Saker headed into the gaming-room, towing me behind. He looked around in quick sharp movements of his head, then dropped my hand, stalked over to a reclining-couch, and plopped into it. My familiar swung his legs up onto the couch, spread apart, the front panel of his skirt falling between them and baring his inner thighs.

Saker looked up at me, a flustered expression in his eyes. “Please?”

“Alright,” I said, still with a puzzled smile curving my mouth and pulling my brows together. But I went over and sat down between his legs, then leaned back against his chest, one of my legs bent and the other lying straight alongside his. “Better?”

Saker draped one arm around my waist and sighed a deep breath. “Thank you,” he said. “Now I don’t have to look at you while I say embarrassing things.”

“Plus you get some cuddles,” I said, with a little bit of teasing in my voice.

Saker rubbed his nose against the back of my head. “That, too,” he agreed. “Okay.” Saker fell silent for a long moment, before taking another breath. Gathering his courage, I guessed. “I would like only one of us to be undressed at a time,” he said, and despite the tension in his voice his body was relaxed

against mine. “If one of us is naked, the other needs to be dressed from the waist down.”

I swept my foot against his calf for a little bit of comfort, listening in silence. I didn’t understand why an incubus would want only one kind of sex and not another, but it didn’t matter. Saker needed things, and I would give them. I understood wanting to defend one’s heart.

He swallowed. “And I—I don’t want you to taste me, or mark yourself with me. No kissing on the mouth, or putting our mouths on each other’s sex. If you—if my slick is on you, or my semen, you can’t taste it, or touch yourself with it.”

“Too territorial?” I asked.

His arm tightened around my waist. “Just don’t,” Saker said, his voice tense.

There was more behind those words. I could sense it lurking there, like a grasscat in the prairie tallgrass. But I didn’t try to prod further, letting him have his privacy. I rubbed my fingers on the back of his wrist, trying to ease him. “I won’t, *ledaji*,” I said. “I promise.”

Echoes of old pain lay dully within our soul-bond. Whatever had happened to him – and I knew many terrible things had – from the scars I could feel aching from this conversation, I could tell that even talking about it this much was a struggle for him. I wouldn’t make it harder by pushing him to explain. It had taken me a decade to tell anyone about Lyon, and we had our lifetimes ahead of us. My curiosity could wait.

He nodded against my hair, and I could tell he was making himself relax, with the same discipline any sorcerer had trained into them. “Don’t tell me you love me,” he said, the words sounding like he was forcing them out. “Or anything about me, or what we’re doing. I can’t hear you say that word when we’re like that.”

My familiar swallowed, and I slipped my fingers through his. He clung to them like a lifeline.

“Okay,” I said, my heart aching for him as I leaned my cheek against his chest. “What else?”

I hoped he wouldn’t offer me more than he could give with joy. I didn’t want him to get hurt because of the damage I carried deep inside my soul. He wanted my love, given of my own free will and with nothing but joy, and I couldn’t do that—not yet, and maybe not ever. Even this small step towards intimacy made fear quiver at the edges of my mind. But his relentless safety was letting me take that step, and I would do my best to give him the same freedom of trust.

If having things that meant passion and love instead of casual affection would hurt him, I wanted to hold that line with the same intensity with which I defended the Material Plane from the falling firmament. We would only share the things he wanted to share, and I would stay far, far away from the things he couldn’t do.

“No biting,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper as he shivered from the thought.

Cats of all kinds bit each other when they took their mates, and he'd done it on instinct to me after we'd flown together the first time; of course biting would be especially intimate for him, and even as intimate as words of love.

"You've bitten me before," I pointed out. "Is this all the time, or only during sex?"

"No biting during sex," Saker clarified. "Flirting is okay, but once sex is involved, please don't. Even if it's my hips pressed against yours."

I nodded. I did like teeth—but probably it would be safer for us for me to refrain from putting mine on him at all. I'd let him choose when it was okay for him to bite me.

"Anything else?" I asked, when he didn't continue.

"I don't think so," he said. "Not right now."

I rubbed my cheek against the bare skin of his shoulder, feeling him relax from it, and realized suddenly that I'd picked up the territorial instinct from the handsome cat I sprawled against. Now that was amusing. I hoped I didn't pick up a taste for mice.

"So tell me what you do want," I said, stepping away from compassion and towards desire. "What you'd like us to do together."

Saker stiffened, and his tail vibrated, long fur shushing across the floor. I peered over the side of the couch to regard said limb, and Saker hunched his shoulders down.

"Darling," I said, delighted. "What was that?"

“Nothing,” he said, too quickly.

I laughed. “Liar,” I said, and walked my fingers down his leg. “Cats only do that when they’re very excited.”

“I might get to have sex with you again,” Saker said, sounding reluctant to admit it. “Would you like that to be uninteresting?”

I laughed again, then leaned back against him. “I’m very charmed,” I said. “It’s nice to be appreciated.”

He made a small disgruntled sound and wiggled a little, settling us a little deeper into the couch. “What I want,” Saker said, as if tasting the words, and I had the sense again that he was gathering his courage before plunging off the cliff. “I want to be able to touch you,” he said, the words low and thick. “I’m good with my hands. I promise I could make you feel good.”

“Do you want me to touch you, too?” I asked.

His tail did the thing again, and I smiled, slow and wicked. His heartbeat started picking up, and I could hear his pulse pounding where my head lay against his chest.

“Yes,” he said, strained. “I can’t—we can’t at the same time, I won’t want to stop, but I want your hands on me. So badly,” he said, the last words shaky. Saker’s heat radiated against my back, his body temperature rising with his arousal, and his legs tensed, thighs flexing.

I thought about sliding my fingers over his skin, and refrained. Better to finish hearing his ‘yes’ before taking

advantage of it. But heat pooled between my legs and sang along my skin, and I exhaled a little at the pleasure.

“How?” I asked.

He made a little wanting sound, his other arm coming around me, pressing my shoulders back against the broad expanse of his chest. “You can put your fingers inside me,” Saker said, his face against my hair as he kept his breathing even, despite the desire burning in him. “I like that everywhere.” He took a breath. “You can—you can touch me anywhere you want. However you want.”

I ran my fingers along his forearm, feeling him shiver under my touch. “Would you like it if I stroked you with my hands?”

“Yes,” he said, voice tight.

I felt the pressure of his erection starting against my back, but I didn’t roll my hips against him, though I wanted to. I pretended that we were still having a calm conversation.

“Would you like it if I finger-fucked you while I did it?” I asked, as if I asked about the weather.

Saker sucked in a breath, his dulled claws digging into me. “Fuck,” he whispered, a word he’d picked up from me. “Yes.”

“What about if you were between my breasts? Would you like to have me like that?”

He shuddered, and something hot and victorious curled in my chest. I loved this—I *loved* this, turning the tables on my incubus, turning him into a needy mess.

“Yes,” Saker said, the words coming fast. “But if I’m on top of you like that, with your breath on me, I will want your mouth and your tongue and I can’t—” He cut himself off, panting.

I rubbed my cheek against his skin again. “Okay,” I said, “None of that, then. Do you like being on your back? On your knees?” I bit my lip, then added, “Tied up?”

“*Amilakh alikhlim*,” Saker whimpered against my hair, a plea to the gods, words that betrayed how overwhelmed he was, as if he body wasn’t already. He was hard and pressed along my lower back, and I could feel his pulse against me. “Yes.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“All of it, Rain, I like all of it,” he said, desperation in his voice. “There is nothing you could want to do to me that I wouldn’t like, I’m *incubus*, *yenamalikh*, put me out of my misery.”

There it was again—*my goddess*. I slid my hand along the bare skin of his inner thigh, hot and smooth and tense. He bit off a moan.

“If we’re near your boundaries, I need to be in charge, yes?” I asked, dragging my nails across his skin.

“Yes,” he managed to get out. “I can’t do it.”

I turned my head to look up at him. His mouth was open, the white tips of his canines bared, and his eyes were closed, his brows pulled together as he tried to keep himself together.

“Okay.” I leaned back, inhaling the smoke and musk scent of him. “Would you rather have me right now?” I asked. “Or would you rather I have you?”

“Rain,” he whimpered. “Please touch me.”

48

ON PURPOSE THIS TIME

RAIN

I ran my hands up his inner thighs, from his knees up towards his hips, slowing as I got closer to the join of his body. Biting my lip, I pressed down against him and slid my hands up until I felt the edge of his fur. The heat of his body felt wonderful against my hands, and I practically salivated at the chance to get to touch him like this. I'd been fantasizing about it for so long, and the reality didn't even hold a candle to my imagination.

Saker whined low in his throat as I ran my thumbs up the join of his legs. His shaft flexed against me, sending pleasure coiling through me, and I hummed with enjoyment for him to hear it, wanting him to know. I took a moment to luxuriate in the feel of his body against me, in the way that his arousal melded with my own. Then I pushed myself up, rolling over, and lifted his right leg to rest it on my left shoulder.

The cloth of his skirt slid down, pooling against his hips, baring the smooth dark skin of his powerful thigh. Fuck, he was gorgeous. I'd always seen it, always known it, but now I

could drink my fill of the sight of him. I ran my eyes and hands down that sleek thigh while Saker panted, his head thrown back and his hands digging into the couch. It felt so good to have him under my hands, and the soul-bond shared his senses with me, so that the skin of my thigh went tight and tingly as my hands passed over him. I let my fingers roam past his thigh, cupping his ass and sliding to the cleft of it, dragging my fingertips up through the short velvet fur on his sensitive skin.

He bucked his hips, and he started whispering, *please, please*. Slow, so slow, torturous for both of us, I moved my hand, running through his fur and slipping under the cloth of his clothing. My middle finger found where his fur had parted and the wet heat of his slit, my breath hitching as I touched him there. I rubbed along the base of it and Saker made small sounds in time to my motion.

I wanted to make him writhe with pleasure, and I wanted him to yearn for it the way I did. My incubus—my Saker.

I twisted my hand and pressed down like I had seen him do that first time, my finger pushing into him. The heat of his body wrapped around me, and I couldn't stop the soft sound of desire that escaped me as I panted with need. I kept going, the pad of my finger pushing against the hard base of him as I sank my finger down to the last knuckle, Saker letting out a long moan as I did. The slick shaft pressed against my palm, my other fingers pushing against the sides of him, pleasure radiating out through both of us from that contact.

I rocked my finger inside him, making his hips come up to push against me. Pressure coiled in my groin, and I slid a second finger into him with a tiny sound of pleasure. I'd fucked a lot of men with a lot of different anatomies, but all the experience in the world wouldn't have prepared me for this—for the way every touch took me apart alongside him, pleasure for one of us equal for the other.

Saker gasped and clawed at the couch, his head flung back and his chest heaving as he breathed.

“Good?” I asked, looking at his face. I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it. Wanted to hear his voice heavy with pleasure.

He panted, wanton, his hair getting mussed. “Yes!” he gasped out. “Please, more.”

“More inside you?” I asked, and started sliding my fingers in and out of him with long slow strokes. “Or more on you?” Torture—it was torture for him and it was torture for me, but I wanted to be memorable. I wanted him to be overwhelmed.

Memorable to an incubus. What lofty heights pride takes us to. But, gods, I wanted him to remember this for a thousand years.

Saker whined again, throwing his head back. One of his hands came up to his chest, and he started rubbing two fingers over one of his nipples. “Anything, Rain, please,” he begged.

I pushed the cloth over his hips and bared him to me. He wasn't shaped like a human. The head ended in a flat angle,

and the shaft directly below it was thicker and studded, designed for a woman's pleasure. Several more inches of smooth length led to a wide bulge at the base just above the entrance to his sheath, all of it solid jet-black like his tongue, gleaming and wet. A line of his slick desire fell from the tip like honey, dripping down onto my hand.

I kept touching him with those slow movements, spreading my fingers apart to push tighter against the sides of his sheath. "You're even more beautiful than I imagined," I told him, staring at him, my voice dropping into its lower registers. I exhaled and wrapped my other hand around him, my breathing hitching as my fingers kissed the wet heat of him.

Saker's hips bucked, the hard length of him sliding up through my hand, and he let out a sobbing sound of pleasure that sent heat running up my spine.

I stroked him in time with my other hand, long and slow, and decided to ask. "May I be in your body, too?"

"Always," came the answer, without hesitation, his voice thick with pleasure. "I'm always yours."

I shivered, feeling the fear rise, and shoved it down with all the gentleness of a housewife stomping a spider. Instead, I leaned into what was already in our soul-bond, letting myself feel what sometimes I couldn't help but feel. *Fuck*, it felt so good, my body going tense and gripping down on the phantom sensation of fingers inside me. Without even needing to think, I shifted the pressure of my hand and the slide of my fingers so

that I was touching Saker *just right*, so that every stroke built on that glittering pleasure inside of us.

My breath came hard, my core wet and slick with how much I wanted him, and it all paled beside what I was doing to Saker—compared to the shivering rising pressure inside of him, drawing him tighter and tighter, bringing us closer to ecstasy. One of his hands slid down, the vee between his thumb and fingers framing his slit, and he pressed down over my fingers as I slid in and out of him, increasing the pressure and making white fire sing along our nerves every time I plunged my fingers into him.

I added a third, and he cried out in wordless need, straining against me. Gods, I'd meant to draw this out, to make this long and sultry—but seeing him like this, *feeling* him like this, was too much of a lure for me to resist. It felt amazing for Saker to be touched by me, and I chased that feeling for us. I moved faster, held tighter, and he thrust up against me at the pace I set, with small desperate helpless movements.

Faster and faster, spiraling higher and higher, until Saker moaned without stopping, his whole body tense and trembling. I could feel what would do it, knew exactly how to get him off. I curled my fingers up against him as I fucked him, dragging them along the very base of him inside his sheath while I twisted my hand down along the shaft. *Holy fuck* he came *hard*, dragging me along with him into climax, white heat blazing through us as we came in pulsing waves, his shaft jerking against my hands.

I stroked us down from it, slowing and stopping, still holding him. He flexed against my fingers once more, and I looked up at him with my hunger raw on my face, panting.

He looked back at me as if he'd never taken his eyes away, his golden eyes glowing, his mouth open and panting. I did the best smirk I could while not closing my own and stroked him again, reminding him of all the things I could do to us. His eyes closed and his head fell back, and he groaned.

"Ledaji..." Saker moaned.

"Mm?"

"I... oh... I beg mercy," he said, still breathing hard.

"The mercy of stopping, or the mercy of making you come again?" I asked.

He rolled his hips, the hard wet heat of him sliding against my palm. "The—the first one," he said, sounding rather like he couldn't believe he was saying it.

"As you like," I said with a smile, letting go of him and pulling my fingers out of his sheath.

Saker moaned as I did, his hand curling over himself. I kissed the side of his knee and slid out from under his leg to give him a little time to recover, getting to my feet and strolling over to the sink at the wet bar to wash my hands, extremely pleased with myself.

When I finished drying off, Saker still lay sprawled across the couch, his skirt up around his hips and his hand over his groin. He looked at me with something like disorientation,

which, honestly, was pretty understandable. We'd flipped from me rejecting anything that approached sexual or romantic intimacy to me seducing him – twice – and, while the guardian of my heart quavered with anxiety about it, we'd had a pretty romantic evening.

I smiled at him, then remembered that I knew an incantation for exactly the situation of “fucked up my fancy clothes with impromptu sex,” so I walked over, lifted my hands, and chanted over him for a minute while he stared at me, bemused. He made a little sound of approval, though, when I moved my hands into the final position and all the wet stickiness dissolved.

Saker looked at his clean hand and wiggled his fingers, before dropping his leg and spreading his clothing over his lap again. “That is a good spell.”

“I would have thought you'd have a few such tricks yourself, given that you need sex to survive,” I said with a laugh. I plopped down on the couch to the side of him and leaned back across his chest.

“Only lust, *ledaji*,” Saker corrected, sounding amused. “Though, yes, it's easiest to get with sex.” He rubbed his nose against my scalp before planting a kiss on my hair. “But mostly I've been naked for it.”

“Yes, I suppose that makes sense,” I said. I let out a happy sigh and wriggled backwards a little bit so I could look up at him. “Want to know something terrible?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I suppose?”

My mouth curled up into a wicked little smile. “I’ve fantasized about you every time I’ve gotten off, ever since that first time I fed you.” I watched with interest as Saker’s eyes closed and his mouth opened into a raw sexual expression. His silvery shiver of pleasure washed down my body as he shuddered.

“Rain,” he said with a moan. “That is no mercy at all.”

My smile grew, smug and satisfied, and Saker looked down at me with pleading eyes. I wiggled my eyebrows at him in response, getting a low whining sound of protest in return, which made me laugh.

“Okay, okay,” I said, “I’ll be good.” I smirked. “Or is that your line?”

Saker stuck his tongue out at me in protest.

I grinned. “Actually, though. I have been known to be insatiable, but since you want mercy, what would you like to do instead?”

He ducked his chin, looking shy and hesitant. I dropped my teasing air, running the backs of my fingers against the bare skin of his shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“Can we do something... normal?” Saker asked. “I... Rain, this is wonderful, and I am so, so happy that we can... that you want to touch me like this, and be with me like this, but I’m... I’m just... overwhelmed,” he admitted, looking away.

His embarrassment quivered inside my chest, and I kept stroking his shoulder. “It’s a lot, *ledaji*,” I said. “Right?”

He nodded, still not looking at me.

I leaned my head against him. “It’s a lot for me, too,” I said, though when I felt his disbelief I laughed. “Saker, I’ve always leapt headfirst into things. I make split-second decisions and run with them, like calling familiars and rescuing constellations, and sort out the aftermath later. I’m still in the headlong stage, but we can slow down, if you want.”

“That would be nice,” he said, sounding almost relieved. Then he added, with not a little hesitation, “You won’t change your mind about me, will you?”

“No, I won’t,” I said, trying to be warm and reassuring, though that had never been a strength of mine. “I don’t know where we’ll land in the end, but I’m not going to look back on tonight and cringe. You’ve never been a regret, and that’s not going to change.”

“Okay,” Saker said, in a whisper. “That’s good.”

I leaned up and planted a kiss on his shoulder. “If you want normal, why don’t we finish out *Rihhadiza*?” I suggested. “You said there wasn’t that much left, right?”

“Okay,” he said again, in a more normal tone of voice. “I would like that.”

I smiled up at him and apported the book, handing it to him before getting up and taking my own seat. Saker smiled at me before opening up to where we’d stopped the night before, swinging his legs off of the couch and standing. He flared his

wings, his tail swinging, and took a strong stance, holding the book up in one hand.

“We left Rihhadiza as she stood in the great hall of the Lightning Court in challenge to Hallajul, who had yoked the wild fey creatures of Faery,” he said, and lifted his lip into a snarl.

*“Great tyrant of Lightning, who binds the wild
beasts,
Do you seek to lay your yoke upon my shoulders?
I, who laid waste to the mighty seelie rulers,
Who released the falcons and harried their
unseelie lords?*

*“Will you stand against me, O Hallajul,
You who bridled the great waters out of pride
,And who demanded the winds fall into your
hands?
Will you bare your teeth against wildness itself?’”*

Saker shifted his position, stepping into a dangerous crouch, his wings spreading back into a mantling cloak as he held one clawed hand out as if he might gut someone. His voice went guttural as he snapped out the response.

*“The glory of Faery stood, and the earth
trembled.
Ley shattered under his footsteps as spun-glass,*

*And the fey beasts bowed their heads in despair
As Hallajul laughed and raised his hands to grasp
the sun.*

*“They speak the name of Rihhadiza
As if you are a thing of fury and beautiful rage.
But I see only another wild boasting thing,
Who will fall before me as all the great powers
have.”*

My familiar brought us through the great battle between the two, full of lightning and magic, at times moving as if he was fighting and at others still and focused. I lost myself in the fury and wildness of it all, as Rihhadiza used Hallajul's attacks to break his hold on the creatures he had bound, one by one, until at last Hallajul broke through her defenses and ran her through with his silver spear. I'd seen depictions of the scene before, of a great warrior driving his spear through a wild-eyed, winged woman. I'd always thought it had been a scene of his triumph.

*“For one moment of victory, Rihhadiza hung,
impaled,
And Hallajul laughed, with only triumph in his
heart.
'You are nothing but another body for the flames,
You, who came with such boldness.' But
Rihhadiza smiled.*

*“Behind him, around him, above him, below him,
The creatures of lightning roused, their collars
struck
By the very power that had dared to chain them,
Their rage unbound and their souls set free.*

*“Hallajul tore his spear from Rihhadiza’s breast
As the wild fey leapt upon him with hungry jaws
And Rihhadiza, child of lightning and stone,
Called the white fire from her heart to sear his
bones.”*

Saker whirled, his voice ringing out into the room.

*“‘Never again will yoke be laid on my family,
Nor hand lifted against the wild things of power!
I say this, Rihhadiza, the glory of Faery,
And I will strike down all who touch me!’*

*“Rihhadiza fell as the lightning does,
With rage and power and an awful might,
And the great hall proud Hallajul had built
Shattered and burned, until nothing was left.”*

He stopped and looked up at me, breathing hard and with a wild light in his eyes. “This is where the oldest versions end,” he said. “There’s another few stanzas that were added later, if you want to hear them?”

I shook my head, my heart still racing from the fervor of the story. “No,” I said. “This is the perfect ending for a Lightning Court tale.” I leaned back against the couch as Saker closed the book. “How much do you think is true?” I asked. “The courts don’t always give fair depictions of each other, especially not two so different as Solar and Lightning, but it feels true. True-ish.”

Saker smiled and sat down next to me, draping an arm over my shoulder for me to snuggle against. “Who knows?” he said. “It was a long time ago. Will the stories they tell about you still be true in a thousand years? Ten?”

“They’re not true now,” I said with a laugh, leaning against him. “But they’re true-ish.”

Saker kissed me on the top of my head. “The stars will always remember you, and they will remember the truth,” he said. “How does it feel to be immortal?”

I snuggled a little closer against him. “Pretty much the same as being a regular mortal,” I replied. “Still get hungry, horny...” I covered a yawn with one hand, then smiled. “Sleepy.”

“Hmm,” Saker said. “Then perhaps you should get some sleep, *ledaji*.”

“I suppose,” I said, with another yawn. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

My familiar nuzzled my hair. “So was today,” he said. “All the more reason to sleep. I’ll take the dishes down.”

I smiled, sleepy and content. “Alright, *inati*,” I said, and was rewarded by his laughter. I got up and took one more long look at his beautiful self. “Goodnight, Saker.”

“Sleep well, *ledaji*,” he said.

I felt him watching me as I left for bed, and I liked having that soft gaze on me as I went.

49

HOPE

SAKER

I lay in bed, looking up and a little to the side towards where Rain slept. I liked always knowing where she was in space, and the comfort of never being alone. It almost didn't matter that I was the only one warming my bed; no matter how far away Rain was physically, when we were both asleep, we slept together. She often slept in strange positions, though she was never restless when sleeping next to me, my comfort in touch calming her alongside me. Tonight she sprawled out on her side, jack-knifed so that she took up easily enough space for two people, her arms straight in front of her and her feet sticking out from under her blankets.

So much had happened today, but I didn't feel tired. Still, I didn't want to give Rain restless dreams, so I lay there resting as she slept, drifting through the memories of the day. I'd only wanted her to give me some sort of path to walk on, so that I could love her in the way that she wanted. I'd been willing to accept that she would never love me the way I loved her. Why would she? She was strong and brave, and I was broken and

full of nightmares. But maybe she'd been broken, too, and knew about nightmares. Maybe she could look at me and see, not a ruined thing, but someone worth saving. Maybe I could become someone worth saving.

I remembered her saying, *I died in the void and what came out was full of holes. He broke my heart, and I killed him for it.*

Maybe even Rain needed saving. Maybe we were both falling, and maybe we could catch each other and dive into the deep water together.

I thought about the way she had looked at me, struck senseless, and not by lust. She had wanted me, not in the familiar way where we both found each other attractive, but where she wanted to hear me beg for her. I was only too happy to beg. If she wanted me on my knees for her, I would go without hesitation. If she wanted something from me, I would be helpless to resist... but I trusted her not to step too close to the things that would break me.

I brushed my fingers along my thigh and recalled the way she'd played with me, her joy at seeing me like that. I remembered her exultation in my wantonness and the way she looked at my body as if she might devour me, and shivered. No one had ever looked at me that way before. They'd looked at the incubus that way, of course, looked at my body and felt my aura and wanted to have me. But not at *me*, Saker, the man.

Rain had. She didn't see me as an incubus. She never would, or could. The woman to whom I owed everything looked at my soul and didn't find me wanting.

I thought about what it was like to fly with her and to read poetry to her, while she forgot to be afraid of what it meant to be married to me.

I looked up through the floors of the Spire, with the heat of her power warm against my face, and thought for the first time that maybe she could love me, too.

50

PREPARATIONS

RAIN

I snapped awake as soon as the morning light started seeping into my room, opening my eyes to full wakefulness. Saker was still passed out in bed. On occasion, he shifted forms in his sleep, and he must have last night, because when I woke up, he lay curled up into a tiny ball as an echnumon, buried under his sheets. He yawned in his sleep and tucked his head under his body, making me smile. Cute.

Since Saker and I had taken last evening to be together, today needed to be one of definitive action. I didn't regret the time spent with him, though. We'd had a hell of an afternoon, full of remembered fear and suffering, and the evening of affection, sex, and companionship had gone a long way towards salving those old wounds, at least for me. Without further ado, I stretched and rolled out of bed, tugging off my nightshirt and chucking it into the laundry bin, and started getting ready for the day.

Saker was still unconscious when I finished showering and getting dressed, though he'd rolled over onto his stomach and

back into his demon shape, so I put off breakfast and went to my study to see if Qavan had written me back. The mailbox was still empty, but Qavan loved his work and almost never took a day off; he more-or-less had to be pried out of his labs like escargot from a shell. I felt pretty confident that if he hadn't already read it, he'd get to it sometime this morning and answer by the afternoon, and Saker and I could get moving.

Only the Mage-Seneschal had written me back, a terse note in his slashing handwriting that reiterated that the Dragonvault was mine. I spent more than an hour putting together *beska*-pearls for each member of the Triumvirate, personalizing each of them but giving them all of the information I had about the danger. Only the Archmage could offer me help now, and though I didn't expect him to believe me or to give me the aid I wanted, I requested that as many sorcerers and thaumaturges as could be found be gated to me as a power source.

He wouldn't do it. I knew he wouldn't. Granting me a Spire was one thing; cashing in all of his accumulated political capital to demand every sorcerer and thaumaturge in the mortal realm crowd onto a ship in the middle of nowhere to be used as batteries was entirely different. Rillian wouldn't want to give me that sort of authority, or to concede that he'd been wrong about the cessation of the meteor falls, and he'd tell himself that it would only be logical to hedge his bets. After all, Jace was the most powerful sorcerer in the world. What could a thaumaturge even contribute?

I found Saker downstairs with Bashen when I came down for breakfast, both men somewhat tense and with the fur at the base of my familiar's tail standing up in defensiveness. Despite the dual postures of mutual dislike, the two were maintaining a polite discussion about furniture design for those that didn't fit the mortal standard. Saker looked back over his shoulder and smiled at me, his fur relaxing down the moment he realized I'd arrived, which made me smile at him, warmth suffusing my chest at the trust inherent in that relaxation.

Marin had vacated the premises, so I collected my own meal and joined the duo for the breakfast. I knew nothing about furniture design, but it seemed to be one of Bash's passions, and Saker had interesting things to say from his long suffering through trying to find furniture that could accommodate his anatomy.

Afterwards, Saker and I went upstairs to pull the information from the *beska*-pearl Jace had sent. The secret message-spell she and I had invented when she was a preteen was a silly thing, full of misspoken words and inside jokes, and Saker struggled not to laugh the entire time I cast it. The pearl melted onto the parchment I'd unrolled under it, spreading out into inked diagrams and words that gave all the information needed to mark where the very big rock had been located over the decade since it had been broken off of the firmament. Saker grimaced at the celestial ink, but dove in with me in translating the information into interplanar coordinates.

Once we'd mapped out Jace's information, we started brainstorming about making what we started calling a "void-trap" for the very big rock and its associated retinue. It wouldn't be possible to whip up the perfect spell over the course of a morning, of course, so we spent the time going through the library and my existing diagrams, pulling anything that looked like it might be useful and tucking them into trunks. Saker added a stack of blank notebooks and writing materials with foresight I appreciated—though I could summon anything I needed after the fact, having them on hand already would be better, since I wouldn't be able to use the power of the Spire's confluence and needed to save my strength.

I brought up lunch, and after we ate Saker pointed out that we had a double task: holding the firmament in the void, and catching the pieces that inevitably slipped our grip and fell. I stared at him for a minute, then flopped back against my chair.

"Tissit Kalar," I said. "There is no fucking way I could do that on my own." I raised my head back up to see Saker giving me a little eager smile. "Tissit Kalar," I said again. "Fuck. Holy fucking hell, Saker."

He grinned at me, unsettling and too-wide, his glee brightening my heart.

I flopped my face forwards into my hands. "Okay. Okay. Holy gods. Fuck. Okay." I took a deep breath and looked at him, shaking my head with an amazed expression. "I'll be

making sacrifices to Metien every gods-damned day. You're the gods-fucking lynchpin, *ledaji*."

Saker laughed, his wings flared and his tail snaking back and forth from his delight.

"Am I worth it now?" he asked, looking like he was attempting the impossible task of trying to school his expression into something akin to innocent curiosity.

"Oh my *fucking* gods, Saker," I said, getting up and going over to drop into his lap. "You say that as if I wasn't already fucking delighted to have you."

Saker wrapped his arms around me and bit me on the scalp.

"Ow!" I squealed, jerking forward.

He made a little *prraw!* noise and rubbed his face into my hair.

"Gods, you're such a fucking cat," I said, laughing now, as he bent down and nipped me on the back of the neck, following it up with a few quick licks before he slid his face next to mine.

"I'm *excited*," Saker said, rubbing his cheek against me with great vigor. "I'm *excited*, *ledaji*, you actually need me. It's good that I'm here. It's really good."

I didn't stop laughing, enjoying his excitement and pleasure.

"It's been really good the whole time, kitty-cat," I laughed, reaching up to pat the side of his head.

Saker turned his face and licked at me, then grabbed two of my fingers with his mouth. The instant he had them, his mood flipped, and he made a low whine as he sucked on them, pushing his tongue up against my fingers as he moved up and down along them, as if he was pleasuring me.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I moaned, my nipples and between my legs jolting with tingling pleasure.

Saker yanked his mouth off of me and put his face against my shoulder, breathing hard. “*Shaix*,” he panted, pressing his forehead against me.

I let out a helpless laugh. “‘Shit?’” I said. “Really?”

Saker whined and rubbed his face against the back of my shoulder. “Mmmnnn, I don’t like doing that,” he said, his voice still in that high, tight whine.

“Oh?” I asked, bemused. “I thought you liked fingers inside you everywhere.”

He whined again, and shivered. “Raaiiin,” Saker said, sounding as if he was protesting. “It’s not that.”

When he didn’t continue, I made a questioning noise.

He groaned. “It’s easier for me to get caught out by instincts when I’m excited, or, or, elated. The—the animal affection is fine, it helps... burn it off. But I’m—I’m incubus, too, and, *imi*, over-stimulated cubari, ah, fuck first and think later?”

I’d never heard him stammer so much; it was adorable.

Saker dropped his chin on my shoulder. “The, *imi*, animal affection *is* fine, right?”

I scrummelled him on the head, between his horns, earning a little noise of not-quite-pleasure from him. “The animal affection is delightful,” I said. “I’m a big fan of the not-quite-human, as you’ll see when you meet Qavan. Speaking of which, I should check and see if he’s written back.” I pecked a kiss on Saker’s temple before getting off his lap. “Be right back.”

I popped down to my study, to find that, indeed, Qavan had written back, a short little missive that only read, “*Lady, you’re welcome to come whenever you like—come today! I can’t wait to kiss your beautiful face again – xx*” I smiled, eager to see him again, then winced as I felt Saker moving around in the library. Ah, shit, okay. I’d have to talk to him about Qavan and figure out what he was okay with.

When I came back up to the library, Saker had picked up on my emotions, and looked up at me with big worried eyes. I put on a smile and walked over, sitting in the chair across from him.

“Um, okay,” I said, as he watched me with concern. “So, good news, Qavan is happy to have us, and we can go as soon as we’re packed. But, also, I’ve told you Qavan is my sometimes-lover, right?”

Saker nodded slowly, tension creeping into his body.

“How do you feel about that?”

“Do you... want to be his lover?” Saker asked.

I shrugged one shoulder. “I love having sex with him, yeah,” I said. “We’re good friends, and good in bed together. But if it’s going to bother you, I won’t.”

Saker looked away. His tail curled to one side, the tip flicking. “Will it make you happy?” he asked, his emotions gone quiet and murky between us.

“Probably?” I said. “Like I said, we’re good together. I enjoy him.”

Saker looked back at me with something like a smile turning up the corners of his mouth. “Then you should,” he said. “It’s your body, and you can share it with who you like.”

I watched him for a moment. I could force the issue – pull down the barriers and make him share what hid in his heart – but I was determined never to do that to him. Saker had the right to his privacy, as much as I could give.

“Alright,” I said, letting it lie. “You can leave your luggage in your room, and I’ll summon everything once we get to Cajahr. It’s probably best if you go as a cat, if you don’t mind?”

Saker shook his head.

“Okay. Well, let’s go pack. I’ll meet you in the portal room when I’m done.”

“Alright,” Saker said. “I’ll finish up here, and meet you there.”

His voice sounded calm and quiet, but I wasn't sure I should trust that. I nodded, though, and got up to pack as Saker turned back to the books to finish the job we'd started.

A few hours later, we met in the portal room. Saker finished packing first and sat waiting for me as I shoveled materials into chests, supplementing the dowsing tools I already had ready to go and trying to anticipate any possible needs for the void-trap. I also spent too long in the wine cellar, trying to decide what I would bring for Saker and I to share afterwards. I settled on an old, expensive bottle of coalberry wine—a rare vintage made from an abyssal plant that had been imported and modified to grow in mortal soil, and which was known for its smoky flavor with a savory finish. I thought maybe Saker would like it, and what were rare alcohols for besides celebrating with?

Saker sat naked and cross-legged on the floor as he waited for me, ready to transform into a cat. He looked up at me with a calm expression, but his emotions eddied between us, dull and turgid. I sighed and crouched next to him. I knew why he was upset.

“Saker, you can say no,” I said.

He looked away, his ears pinning back. “It’s your body,” he said. “You made me no promises. Having sex with me doesn’t mean that you can’t have sex with other people. You made it very clear that you don’t belong to me.” The last words came out clipped, and Saker winced and dropped his face into his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry. I know I don’t have

any rights over you, Rain. You are your own person.” Saker lowered his hands and looked back up at me, taking a deep breath. “I’ll be alright, *ledaji*,” my familiar said, smiling away his emotions. “Truly. I don’t expect or want you to stop having your own life because of me. Please do what makes you happy.”

“Okay, *ledaji*,” I said, though his words felt like a lie, and put my hand on his cheek. “If you say so.”

Saker leaned into it for a moment, closing his eyes and breathing. He turned his face and kissed my palm, then reached up and took my hand in his, looking over at me. “Are you ready?”

I put on a smile for him. “Are you?”

He smiled back, an expression that didn’t reach his eyes. In response, he shifted into his cat shape, answering with a little *mrauw* sound before jumping up onto my shoulder. I petted him, rubbing at the base of his tail until he started chewing on my ear. Then I stood and took a deep breath, eyeing the portal to Cajahr Spire.

“I fucking hate these things,” I muttered under my breath, and strode into it.

51

QAVAN VIPEREYE

RAIN

Gating was a pain in the ass, but at least gates affected the world instead of the body—walking through one was no different than walking through any other doorway, save for the fact that you were crossing a vast distance, or between planes. The Spire portals were... different. Gates were far too power-hungry to put up permanently, even if doing so wouldn't have strained the structure of the plane. The portals were less like doorways and more like the Spire mailboxes. They had been built by entangling the ley between each of the Spires, so that when you stepped into one you got ripped into your constituent parts for transportation and spat out, reconstituted, on the other side, conscious for the whole miserable process.

I probably should have warned Saker what was going to happen. Oops.

I strode in, so I strode out, but the in-between felt like being physically torn into a bunch of chunks in a painless sort of fashion, whirled around, then smooshed back together by an

unkind potter smacking globs of clay into a form. I was fairly sure that only the fact that I was grimly resigned to the whole thing kept Saker from losing it, but when we came out the other side, he turned to me with a feeling of great horror and outrage and began scolding me with hisses, snarls, and (thankfully clawless) smacks to the face.

“Sorry, I’m sorry!” I said, trying and failing to duck away from his paw. “It’s always like that!”

He yowled into my ear from less than an inch away and I yelped, clapping my hand over the offended organ, which was now ringing. Saker smacked me once more, right on the eye, then turned and started washing himself with force, his tail lashing through the air. I took my hand away from my face and grimaced at Saker with a whine. He ignored me in the pointed way that said that he was very cross with me.

“Good gods, Rain, is that a cat on your shoulder?” came Qavan’s bright voice.

I turned over to him with a delighted smile, feeling my worries fall away in his familiar, comfortable presence. He held his hands out to me as he strode into the room, his olive-green wings flaring out behind him and his face spreading in a delighted, sharp-toothed smile. I held my hands out to him in return and met him in the middle of the room; he clasped mine in his, his cool skin a contrast to the heat of Saker on my shoulder.

“Qavan!” I said. “Ishkaia’s tits, you really haven’t aged a day since I met you, have you?” I asked. The man still looked

like he was twenty, for all that he was in his late forties.

He pulled me forward and gave me a swift kiss on the mouth before stepping back. I grinned at him, at his familiar sharp-chinned brown face, with that line of green scales across his cheekbones and those gorgeous poison-green eyes.

“And you’re more beautiful every time I see you, of course,” he said. “Introduce me to your cat! I can’t believe you went and called a familiar, lady. And a cat! Did you do it just to give Rillian an apoplexy? Oh, please tell me you’re bringing it to the next gala.”

I laughed, delighted by his easy company. “His name is Saker, and yes, I’m planning on bringing him to the next gala, so do keep that mouth of yours closed about it!”

Qavan mimed stitching his mouth shut and turned his vivid gaze to Saker, who paused in cleaning himself to observe the other sorcerer. There were more than a few parallels between the two of them, physically: Qavan was also tall and lean, with wings, claws, and a tail. Of course, Qavan was reptilian, rather than feline, with scales on his wings and tail, greenish-tan wide belly-scales marching up his neck, and with much duller claws and a much plainer face than Saker possessed. I wondered how Saker felt about it.

“Gorgeous specimen! Abyssal, yes? Look at that blue nose, only way you can tell he’s not mortal. Can I pet him?” Before I could even open my mouth, Qavan was holding his hand out to Saker. “Can I pet you, handsome?” he asked.

I got the sense that Saker was punishing me as he sniffed Qavan's hand before offering his neck, purring like a hurricane as soon as Qavan started scratching.

“Oh, marvelous! Rain, you found a magnificent cat, you must tell me what you were searching for. It *was* a cat, wasn't it?”

“Yes, I was looking for a cat, though I wasn't calling for an abyssal specifically,” I said with a grin. “The fact that the Archmage will have an apoplexy when he sees him is a fringe benefit. Saker here is murder on the local mouse population.”

Qavan laughed at that, with obvious delight. “Ah, lady, I have sorely missed you this past, what, year? More?”

I shrugged the Saker-free shoulder, smiling.

He laughed again. “Who cares! Much too long, though. You will have to visit more often, or I will invade that wretched Barixeor Spire and roust you out of it. I've put you up in Thirty-two Sky for tonight, you remember, the one with the hideous tiger tapestry?”

I made a face and groaned. “No! Really?”

Qavan flashed me a toothy grin.

“Oh, you are cruel. That thing is baneful. One of these days it's going to slither off the weave and start hunting Sven. Where *is* Sven, by the way? I'm surprised I've not gotten bowled over yet.”

“She's going by Esva now,” Qavan said. “For the past few weeks or so.”

I made a curious sound.

“Well, you know wyrmlings!” he said cheerfully. “I’m surprised she kept Sven for so long, she was neutrois for, what? Eighteen months? I can’t wait to see what she picks next—it’ll be at least another decade before she settles, I think. She’s probably still out flying, though, she’s been able to for a couple months now.”

I nodded. On my shoulder, Saker kept purring up a storm, rubbing his face on Qavan and leaning into the petting. I reached up without thinking to add my hand to the fray; he swatted me, this time with claws. I yelped and stuck my finger in my mouth for a moment.

“Do you mind if Saker wanders?” I asked, examining my finger, which had only been grazed, after all.

“Not at all!” Qavan said, taking his hand away from petting said cat. “Your bold hunter is welcome to rid us of a few mice if he wishes, and I’ll have the cook set out a dish for him in the kitchen for dinner, unless he’d like to eat with us?”

I glanced at Saker, who gave a little hiss, and made an apologetic face at Qavan. “He’s pissed about the portal,” I said, by way of explanation. “But food in our room would be best, I think, if you don’t mind?”

My sometimes-lover shook his head, his light reddish hair flopping over. Unlike most sorcerers, his hair was short, cropped on the sides and longer on top. For Qavan, it was because his draconic heritage meant that his hair didn’t really

grow much longer, not due to a lack of talent or a desire to flaunt a countercultural bent.

“That’s fine, lady,” he said. “Saker, the Spire is yours.” Qavan swept into a bow.

Saker stretched before leaping down and sauntering towards the door. Qavan’s mouth dropped open, his eyes bugging out, and I grinned. Struck speechless for once in his life. He turned towards me as Saker vanished from the transport ring, so shocked that his wings hung limp.

“You—” he started, and turned to stare up overhead, where Saker had gone. Qavan looked back at me. “Rain, that cat is a *sorcerer*.”

I lifted my hands up in a shrug, my eyes dancing, and said, “Surprise!”

“Oh, you wicked thing!” he crowed, and slung his arm over my shoulders, steering me out of the portal room and up to a sitting-room. “What a delightful trick! You’re going to make all the snobs keel over when a Spirekeeper walks in with a cat, no matter how handsome, and then make the rest of us keel over when he gets out of your immediate well and we all can tell what he is!”

I smirked. That wasn’t all of it, of course, but it was still enough to knock most people on their asses.

“How’d you attract an abyssal with that much ley impact?” he asked, pointing me towards a couch and going over to dig

out something for us to sip on. “Have you been doing more abyssal work than the meteor-catching at Barixeor?”

“It was all luck, actually,” I said, as Qavan poured us each a little saltplum brandy into small, long-necked liquor glasses. “For both of us. I really was going for a mortal cat, though I hadn’t specified. I was sick to death of all the mice in Barixeor, and unlike you, I haven’t enough servants to keep them under control.”

Qavan handed me the glass, and I took a sip of the fiery liquor.

“So, not going out of your way to floor the world, hmm?” he asked, in a teasing voice, taking a seat next to me and putting his arm over my shoulder again. “Lady, you know that you’re going to get written into every book about familiars now, yes?”

“Yes, I’m aware,” I said with a laugh, sipping again at the brandy. “He was getting torn to pieces and I happened to call moments before he died, so he went for it, and I patched him up. He does do a great job with the mice, though.”

Qavan laughed again, and tugged at my earlobe. “There’s my practical Rain,” he said, voice fond. “Figuring out what you want, and hunting it down, no frills about it. You must have been terribly angry when you got a near-dead abyssal sorcerer-cat in your circle instead of a hale and healthy mortal one.”

I made a happy sigh and leaned my head against his strong arm. “Gods, you have no idea,” I replied, remembering those

first brutal moments. “Though it was more like leaping into action as soon as it happened, and getting pissy later. Would’ve fucking sucked if he’d died.”

“Ah, true enough, lady,” Qavan said, sipping his own brandy. “Well, I, for one, am delighted at your good luck, and can’t wait for the gala.” He lifted his glass towards me. “To happy twists of fate!”

I smiled and clinked my glass against his. “May they be ever so frequent,” I replied, and took a sip.

Qavan, never one to leave silence sitting there, filled it for a while, telling me about his experiments and about Esva’s adventures over the past year, while I asked questions and made appropriate noises. It was easy to be in his company, though I found myself longing for Saker’s quiet companionship from time to time. After a decade in Barixeor, I’d become used to long silences and time alone, and Qavan was an animated chatterbox even when it hadn’t been so long since he’d seen me.

We got interrupted a bit more than an hour into catching up when Esva burst into the room. She’d grown since I’d last seen her and now came up to about my hip at her shoulder, but she was still pudgy and stout, with mud-brown scales and with the same the tall fin running down her back and tail, which she frilled out as soon as she saw me, displaying its vivid orange-and-black pattern. Then, of course, we had to go outside so she could show me her flying, for which I heaped glowing praise upon her.

Saker kept himself out of the way, even when I went up to our room to summon our luggage into Cajahr. I didn't feel much from him, and it worried me somewhat. I'd expected him not to enjoy seeing me around my friends at first – especially given that Qavan was also my lover – because he didn't have much experience with having friends or lovers, let alone sharing them. But I couldn't tell if he was remote because he was shutting down, because he was putting his emotions away on purpose, or because I was better at keeping our barriers up, and I wasn't going to drop those barriers and force the issue if he wouldn't even come near me.

Even with my worry about Saker at the back of my mind, I enjoyed dinner a great deal. Qavan often ate with Cajahr's staff, and most of them were there, along with Esva, making for a lively dinner conversation over the excellent meal. Esva, being a swamp-dragon wyrmling, ate a diet similar to Saker's, though heavy on the fish; Qavan, at only a quarter swamp-dragon, ate what the rest of us did, though with a larger meat portion than the humans. Afterwards, Qavan and I retired up to his suite, working our way through a pot of herbal tisane while I gave him more details about what I'd need for a ship.

He had some good suggestions for me, and offered to go with me in a couple days to choose a ship. When I told him – with very real regret – that I really needed to leave as soon as possible in order to ensure that I had an accurate dowse, Qavan instead gave me a handful of names, as well as information about each of the captains and what expenditures and prices I should expect, especially if I wanted to leave the

next day. When we'd finished our tisane and our plans, the evening had grown late, and I leaned up against Qavan's slim body, enjoying the comfort of his presence.

Qavan ran his fingers down my arm, making me hum with pleasure. He laughed, and I smiled back over at him. He lifted my chin with his fingers and pressed his mouth against mine, and I kissed him back, pushing myself up off the couch so I could straddle him. Qavan moaned at that, vocal as ever, and slid his fingers up against my neck, kissing me again. I pressed up against him, shivering a little as he slid his hands down my arms before wrapping one around my waist, a cool pressure up against the heat of my body.

I kissed him harder, wanting to kiss and wanting to be kissed, and trying not to feel like something was wrong. Saker stayed in the back of my mind, his incubus hunger the solitary sensation I got from him as he skulked in our bedroom. I tensed a little, shoving it away, trying to focus on the lover in my arms. My mouth opened, Qavan's forked tongue running against mine, but I couldn't stop imagining Saker, what it would be like if I was kissing him like this.

Qavan's hands went to my face and he pulled me away from him, giving me a gentle, close-mouthed kiss before leaning back. "Lady, what's wrong?" he asked. "And don't try to say 'nothing.' I know what you're like when you're happy."

I wilted, sitting down onto his lap. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's just..."

Qavan's thumbs brushed my jaw. "Saker, yes?"

My eyes flew up to his, wide and surprised, but he only smiled.

“Rain, I’m not stupid, you know,” he chided. “He’s in the shape of a cat because it’s easier to explain a cat than a demon to most, but any abyssal of that ley impact qualifies as a demon. He’s sapient, yes?”

“Yeah,” I said, blushing. “It’s... complicated.”

“I can’t even imagine!” Qavan said. “And it can’t have been that long since the two of you soul-bonded, no?”

I shook my head. “Couple months.”

He kissed me again, chaste and affectionate. “Well, lady, you have two options, I think. The first one is that you stop pretending that he’s not going to be here with us, and invite him. He’s already going to get to know all of me intimately, you know I’m as much interested in men as women, and I suspect that having sex with the two of you together would drive you mad faster than anything else I could do to you, yes?”

I stared at him in shock, that the man it had taken three years for me to seduce would suggest such a thing.

Qavan gave me a wicked grin. “If the two of you aren’t there yet, then maybe you shouldn’t push it, and go downstairs and get some sleep, instead.”

“Yet?” I asked, smiling despite myself.

“Please,” Qavan said. “You’re soul-bonded, and he’s sapient and a sorcerer. There’s no way you can lock him out entirely,

and don't try to lie to me. Sooner or later, the two of you are going to try having sex, and then you're never going to want to stop."

I stuck out my tongue rather than try to deny it.

He lowered his hands from my face to my shoulders. "I'm not upset with you, lady," Qavan said. "I'm *happy* for you. What we have is wonderful, but we're friends first, and if it's too strange to have sex with me, that's fine."

"You promise?" I asked. "Still friends?"

"Always friends," he said, smiling. "You know that, Rain."

I made a face. "I know," I said, "But I kind of need to hear it, too."

He squeezed my shoulders, still smiling. "Well, we're still friends," Qavan said. "We'll always be friends, whether that includes kissing and bed-play or not." He chucked me under the chin with one hand. "Now, what are you going to do?"

"I should probably go talk to him," I admitted.

"An excellent choice," he said. "Good luck, lady. I'll come down to see you off in the morning."

"Thank you," I said, and got off his lap. "For everything."

"Of course," Qavan said. "Goodnight, Rain."

"Goodnight, Qavan," I replied, turning to head out. I paused at the door and looked back at my friend, who smiled at me with a fond expression. "He's echnumon, too," I told him,

smiling as Qavan's eyes lit up. "So the two of you might get along."

"Goodnight, Rain," he said again, though his eyes danced with amusement. "Stop stalling."

I grinned back, and headed down the Spire to find Saker.

52

CONFRONTATION

RAIN

Finding Saker proved to be deeply annoying. I wasn't familiar enough with Cajahr Spire to know where he was in it, so I had to oscillate up and down the Spire, determine whether Saker was above or below me, and try again. For his part, my familiar did not want to be found, and after he changed floors for the second time, I lost my temper. Fighting back the nausea, I plopped down in the middle of the transport ring and started dowsing, reading the spells of Cajahr Spire until I figured out what verbal key to use for the floor Saker had squirreled himself away on.

He hid, of all places, in a storage room full of hundreds of years of old furniture. To his credit, all the chairs and tables made a room dense with places for a cat-sized animal to fit, but it had a single access point, and I could trap him in it, assuming he didn't run away via ley-line. I went inside, catching sight of his eyes reflecting the light from the central room of the Spire. I closed the door and leaned against it, seeing Saker move in my mage-sight, though I heard nothing.

“No more running,” I said. “You lied to me, and I let you do it, even though I knew better. You said you’d be fine, and you’re not.” I crossed my arms.

Saker’s emotions were murky, but I could tell that he was angry, either at me kissing Qavan or at me hunting him down and trapping him here. Well, fucking *good*. The self-sacrificing, I’m-not-worthy bullshit was getting old. Angry meant he felt wronged, and that meant that he believed he could be wronged.

“You’re not fine with me having sex with other people. You’re not fine with me kissing other people, either. Do you want my loyalty? Is that it?” I glared into the darkness in his direction. “Well, you fucking have it, Saker. I have no interest in doing anything that’s going to hurt you, and I’m fucking pissed as hell that after I asked if it would, you told me to do it.”

No response. He didn’t even move, the pisser. I sat down on the floor in front of the door, leaning against it.

“It’s too bad you didn’t bother to spend any time with my friends. You’d have heard at least two stories about what a tenacious bitch I am. You can sit there in silence for as long as you fucking want, and I will still be sitting here, blocking your way out of this motherfucking room.” I narrowed my eyes. “So feel free to take your sweet time, *ledaji*. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

Saker didn’t come over, but I hadn’t expected him to. But he didn’t follow Cajahr’s ley-lines out of the room, either, which

I'd half-expected. He was willing to let this be a physical showdown, and I accepted the challenge. I let him sit there and stew, and I kept my promise. I cleaned and trimmed my nails with my belt-knife, then grabbed one of my fancy apples from Barixeor and ate it. The stone floor was uncomfortable, but I'd been in far less comfortable situations, so I just shifted positions whenever part of my body started going numb.

We were supposed to leave a little after sunrise, but I wasn't the only one in the room who could be a stubborn ass, and I pushed back my mental timetable by a day. If Saker didn't give in by sunrise, Qavan would be able to tell where I was in the Spire, and he was clever enough that he'd be able to guess that Saker and I were in a standoff, and wouldn't bother us. As little as I liked forcing the issue – I preferred to give him as much freedom as I could, knowing how much I'd despise being controlled – we couldn't afford to be at odds if we were going to do this together.

After a while, I stopped being angry and started thinking. Bit by bit, the night rolled into the witching hours, and while I was exhausted, I also knew that this was my best chance of resolving this within hours instead of weeks, so I stayed awake. He started moving in a restless pacing stride, so I countered it by sitting still, not fidgeting and only changing positions when I needed the blood flow to keep my legs from falling off.

Somewhere around three in the morning, as Saker paced and I watched the brightness of his energy move through the

room, I admitted, “Saker, you were the one that I wanted to be kissing.”

Whatever meditation Saker had been doing to keep me from getting a good sense of his emotions dropped, and his turmoil flooded into me with physical force. Shock, and desperate desire, and despair as endless as the seas. My heart thudded and my skin prickled with sweat from the strength of it. I took a deep breath, drawing idle shapes on the floor.

“I know you don’t want that sort of affection from me unless I can give you everything, and I respect that, but all-or-nothing isn’t the only way people work. Neither is loving only one other person. Qavan and I are friends. I care deeply about him, and he cares about me. When we’re together, we love each other.” That despair, so deep and so poisoning, still poured into me. I didn’t know how to heal that scar, or if I even could. “But, *ledaji*, you’re more important to me than even he is.”

Saker’s shock and disbelief again slammed into me, and I had to take a hitching breath before continuing. “He knows this and he’s happy for me. He and I are like... we’re like comets to each other. When we are near each other it’s beautiful, but it’s always temporary. We have our own paths, which intersect but never align.” I sighed, hoping he was listening to the words, and believing them.

“I think I’ve always been clear with you that what’s hard for me is that we’re forever. You’re with me for the rest of my life, no matter what happens between us or what I feel, and

that's hard for me to deal with," I continued. I paused, torn on if I should keep talking, but Saker was still listening, and I plunged on.

"I know you're in love with me, Saker," I said, his rising fear choking me. "Anyone could see it. And it's *okay*, darling, it's okay that you are. I know that it's hard, and miserable, and I wish that it wasn't. But I'm not going to stop wanting to have you alongside me because of it." I took a shuddering breath, his fear pricking along my skin. "It's scary for me, too, *ledaji*, but we belong to each other," I said, my voice soft, offering him a counter to the words he'd said before we'd come across the portal to Cajahr. "So can we please do this together?"

I watched the darkness where Saker sat. He didn't move or respond in any way, and my shoulders slumped. I'd hoped... but sometimes it took him days to deal with things, and he seemed to spend the time busy. This sort of confrontation couldn't be easy for him. Instead of trying to push more, I settled back into my position and returned to waiting as the night slipped towards dawn. Sleep didn't matter as much to me as fixing this. I could wait.

Sometime past four in the morning, Saker started moving. He crept – there was no other word for it – along the floor, winding through the furniture. Then he slunk towards me across the open space, a darker shadow in the shadowed room, his legs bent and his tail tucked underneath him. He stopped a few feet away from me, and even in the darkness I could see the tension in his body.

“Please?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Saker shuddered – I felt him shudder – and crept the last little distance to me. In the blink of an eye, he was an incubus and lying across my lap, his arms around my waist, trembling. I stroked his hair, his wings, his back, while he made soft sounds as he cried, his body tense and shivering. On instinct, I started singing a lullaby to him about the wind and the trees, and he shook harder, sobbing in my arms. I heard him whispering something, his voice choked and broken, over and over, and finally picked it out – *berapheris. I’m so sorry.*

“Oh, *ledaji*,” I said to him, tears starting to fall down my cheeks. “There’s nothing to forgive. Darling, darling, you’re alright. It’s okay.” I remembered the way he’d begged, telling me that he wanted to be good, and that he would do anything for me. “Saker, sweetheart, you’re good. You’re so good,” I said, feeling his arms tighten around me. “You’re a good familiar, and a good friend, and a good lover. And, *ledaji*, you’re mine, and I’m never giving you up. Please don’t cry.”

He looked up at me, his eyes wet, I couldn’t make out his expression in the darkness. I brushed my fingers across his cheek, finding his skin damp with tears. Saker pushed himself up and crawled onto my lap, wrapping his arms around me again and burying his face against my neck, his tears wetting my skin. I held him against me, making soft sounds of comfort to him, until at last the tension fell from his body and he rested against me instead of clinging to me. I rubbed my cheek against his head, then turned and kissed his hair.

Saker made a low sound. “You *are* tenacious,” he said in a murmur, startling me into laughter, having expected anything but that. I could feel his mouth turn up into a smile against my neck. Then he tightened his grip on me again, and said in a low voice. “And it’s not miserable. Loving you. It’s like basking in the sun.”

“Oh,” I said, stunned. I should have been afraid – I was always afraid – but what trembled in my chest didn’t feel like fear.

Saker rubbed his face against my neck, and we were silent for a few minutes, holding each other close. “We have to leave in three hours,” he said at last, his mouth against my skin. “Do you want to have some sleep before then?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That would be nice.”

I could feel him hesitating, wanting to ask something from me. I rested my lips against his hair. “Ask, *ledaji*.” Whatever it was, I would give it to him.

“Can you... carry me?” he asked, in a timid voice, hunching against me. “In your arms?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” I said, and a heartbeat later I had a cat curled against my shoulder. I moved my arms to support him and got up, heading out of the storage room and up to our bedroom for the night.

Saker stayed a cat, and I laid him on the bed before changing into a nightshirt and sliding into bed, lying on my back. He settled onto me, lying down my lap along my thighs.

I ran my hand down his back a few times, then closed my eyes and fell immediately asleep.

He woke me up about half an hour before we had to leave by washing my hand in the way of cats, with short licks of his rough tongue. I made some sort of *nng* noise and put my hand on his back as if I might pet him, though I didn't. My familiar stood, stretching his back, and walked out from under my heavy hand to look down into my face with his luminous eyes. I looked back at him through the minimum possible aperture, and he bumped my face with his head.

He wasn't hiding from me anymore. His uncertainty and hurt wound through me, bound together with a deep yearning for reassurance and affection.

"C'mere," I mumbled, and scooped him onto his side atop my chest.

Saker let himself be manhandled, and I nuzzled into the long, soft fur of his belly as I petted him with both hands. He started purring – it seemed less like because he was happy and more because it felt nice – and wiggled into a more comfortable position. One of his feet pressed against my face, and I turned and smooched him on his toe-beans, sending a wave of his amusement through me.

"There's my good familiar," I crooned to him, rubbing behind his ears.

He batted me on the cheek, in a gentle sort of way. I captured and kissed his paw again before gathering him into my arms and sitting up, lowering Saker to my lap. I was

fucking exhausted, but I could feel his tenuous hope as I kept touching him, a not-quite-trusting relief in being wanted and liked, and that was well worth being awake.

Struggling to keep my eyes open, I looked around the room, making a face when I caught sight of the dread tiger tapestry. Whoever had depicted the beast had maybe only ever had a tiger described to them, or perhaps only ever seen a pelt, because it looked as if a tiger-skin had become animated and started rippling down the forest floor, with too-long yellow teeth and baleful glass eyes.

“I guess we have to get up, huh?” I said, looking down at Saker.

”*Mrauw*,” he said, and shoved his head against my forearm.

“Reasonable,” I replied, and kept petting him.

53

ADVENTURES IN VANNPORT

RAIN

We made it downstairs only ten minutes after our scheduled departure time. Qavan waited outside, chatting with his driver, and looked over when I came down with Saker curled up in my arms. He gave me a knowing smile, then came over and kissed me on the cheek. I did the same, but with a tired smile, instead.

“Lady, this is Mallory,” Qavan said. “Mallory knows Vannport well, and will take you and Saker to one of the inns I like to get a room for the night. The innkeeper is Wade Porter, and he always has a few urchins around who are happy to play guide for copper.”

The iron-haired woman sitting in the front of the wagon lifted her hand in greeting, and I gave her a small bow in return. Then I grinned at Qavan; it was just like him to make sure everything was set up for me, and I appreciated his connections in Vannport.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to inject my tired voice with my real gratitude. “I appreciate all the help you’ve given us.”

Qavan laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. “Please!” he said. “As if I would do any less. Now let Saker go and summon your luggage, lady. Esva’s going to figure out you’re out here any moment now.”

I snorted, but set Saker down on the bed of the wagon. He trotted over to the front, hopping up next to Mallory, and started to wash his foot.

I shook back my sleeves and held out a hand to Qavan, who took it in his clawed one. Leaning on the power from Cajahr Spire that he fed into me, I called down each of our trunks from the guest room, with Qavan using an incantation as I did to manipulate them into position on the wagon. We had eleven of them, most of which were packed with magical supplies, though between us, Saker and I had four trunks of nothing but clothing.

Three were mine. Well, it was heading towards winter, and even in the south, it would be cold out on the big water.

One side benefit of coming through Cajahr: both the driver and the horses were used to the use of magic for loading materials, and stood by with calm boredom as we got everything placed. One of the horses even drowsed, eyes closed and head down. On the driver’s bench, Saker flopped onto his side, his blue-black hair gleaming in the sunlight.

Qavan helped me into the wagon once we were done, with a few more cheerful suggestions for the city before Mallory snapped the reins at her draft horses with a curt “*Git on!*”. We were still within sight of the base of the Spire when Esva came

barrelling out, Qavan laughing loud enough that I could hear him as she flung herself into the air and buzzed us.

“Bye, Esva!” I called up to her as she made another pass, diving down over us. The open shrubby scrub of the Seaglyph Coast gave her plenty of space to maneuver, and the horses were as stolid as they’d been for the magic. “See you in a couple months!”

“Bring me a fiiiiish!” she cried as she flew past.

I watched, hugely amused, as she kept zig-zagging over us, with a few words each time.

“I want—” “—a huge one—” “blue! Or red!” “Make sure —” “—it’s not too—” “—rotten!!”

I laughed and waved at her as she swept away, and cupped my hands around my mouth to yell after her, “I’ll do my best!”

Then I lay back on the padding that had been put in the wagon for that purpose, and took a little nap as we made our way to Vannport. I woke up when we pulled out of the sun into shadow. One of the few benefits of jumping into the void was that I no longer burned in the sun, so I didn’t have to worry about red cheeks from my hour-long nap. I didn’t tan, either—my skin was all the same smooth fawn color, which not a few lovers had cooed over, assuming that I must sunbathe naked.

Saker lay curled up on the pillow next to my neck, with his head up and ears shifting around as he kept track of the city. This had to be his first time in a mortal city, which was a fun enough thought to make me grin and sit up. Mallory had

gotten off her bench and chatted with a stout, round-faced woman, who might have been the cook or one of the innkeepers. The woman saw me as I sat up, and shook Mallory's hand before bustling over.

“Welcome, magus!” she said, in a rough contralto voice.

I smiled and vaulted out of the back of the wagon, sweeping into a deep bow for her, which left the woman with spots of color in her cheeks and dancing eyes. “Good morning to you, goodlady.”

The woman laughed and batted away the praise. “Ah, just as effusive as Magus Vipereye, you are,” she said. “I'm Kayla Porter. Wade's my husband and the innkeeper. Welcome to the Silver Mare, Magus Leyweaver. Any friend of the magus is a friend of ours.”

Saker gave me a little *prrrt!* of warning before leaping onto my shoulder, with enough force that I had to put my foot out to catch myself as his weight hit me. He was not a small cat.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Miz Porter,” I said. “I'm seeking a room for at least one night, and maybe several more, depending on how my business in Vannport goes. My cat is my familiar, and will behave quite as well as any other guest. What might you have available?”

Her eyes took on an avaricious gleam, for which I couldn't fault her. Sorcerers tended to be as wealthy as any of the great nobility, and while I dressed in plain clothing, it was all well-made.

“Well, magus, the finest room in our establishment is what Magus Vipereye usually stays in, but I’m afraid there’s a family staying there tonight. We could move them, if you’ve the desire,” she said. And the coin, of course. No family wealthy enough to rent the finest room in an inn of this size would be happy to shift, even for a sorcerer.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” I assured her, and got a little wise smile in return. “What else might you have available?”

“Well...” she started, and I settled in to haggle.

Some minutes later, we’d settled on a fair price for the second-best room in the inn, which had a featherbed and came with a bath and dinner, as well as a price for the porters for my eleven trunks. I’d even warned her about the trunks of books, which were heavy enough that it would take two men for certain. Both of us were pleased in the end; I paid her a little more than the room was worth, but not enough for either of us to think of me as a rube, and she threw in the use of her daughter as a guide for the day once she saw the good tips I handed the porters as they started to shift my objects.

The girl, a thirteen-year-old by name of Cheska, who had clever dark eyes and a pair of pigtail braids in curly black hair, knew the city like the back of her hand, and brought Saker and I through the roads and alleys with confidence. When I mentioned that neither of us had eaten, she took us on a detour over to a street-vendor hawking various kebabs. I bought three lamb kebabs for myself, each with a different sauce, and three dormice meatballs in a paper bowl for Saker. I also bought two

kebabs for Cheska, who took them with a grin and skipped off towards the docks with me trailing behind.

I had fun being in a city again. Mages weren't required to wear anything to indicate our power, but mages could always tell each other with their mage-senses, and while it was hard to accurately gauge ley impact without the array of detectors managed by the Monitors, you could still get a pretty close guess if you knew what you were doing. So I got to stroll through the streets without the average person knowing who I was, while the mages and witches in the city gave me wide-eyed stares, which I found a funny contrast.

A pickpocket gave me a try, only to discover that they couldn't move my purse, at which point I finally noticed him. Saker hissed at the boy, who jumped and scampered off into the street's crowd while I made a face. My purses were all enchanted to be unstealable, and I'd paid pretty coin for them. I was kind of sad the boy had even tried – most people with significant money had such things – so pickpocketing was really only worthwhile on those who didn't have a lot of spare coin to start with, and you had to be pretty desperate to steal from the working folk you lived near.

Saker spent the entire journey through the city looking around, his ears swiveling and whiskers pointed forward. A few blocks from the harbor, a loose terrier started following us, barking at Saker with high-pitched yaps of outrage. Saker glanced at the dog, made a sharp noise while batting the air, and bowled it over with a wind-blow. I almost choked on my last kebab, as my familiar settled back down onto my shoulder

and went back to observing. I'd had no idea that he could work magic in any of his non-demonic forms.

Cheska brought us down to the docks and gave us a tour of who was in harbor, leading us to each of the six ships that Qavan had suggested as possibilities for us to take a look at before deciding which of the captains to talk with first. Afterwards, leaning against a hitching-post in the shadow, I got Cheska's opinion on the captains and ships. Having once been a thirteen-year-old girl myself, I was well aware of what sponges such people could be, and Cheska must have done this sort of thing all the time to be so knowledgeable about the city itself.

She had some strong thoughts on two of them, mostly due to the way they treated anyone who wasn't paying, and told me that a third had been forced to pay a series of fines to the Harbormaster for smuggling in the past two months, so was hard-up for coin and might give me a good deal as a result. Saker added his commentary to the discussion with a series of cat noises, each more expressive than the last, all of which made Cheska giggle. We ended up deciding on slightly different order of visits than Qavan had suggested; I wasn't keen on bringing Saker as a cat onto a ship where he might get treated like an unwanted animal, even if he could defend himself.

I bought some hot tea at a little cafe looking out over the water and accepted a small fried dough-ball for Saker when the young man at the counter offered, and got Cheska a cookie, as well. Saker devoured his dough-ball with apparent

pleasure as we headed back to the first ship on our list, with Cheska catching every crumb of her cookie. I drank my tea in one draught as soon as I got it, much to the wide-eyed admiration of the shopkeeper. I only winked at him before handing the mug back, not letting him in on the secret that, ever since I'd soul-bonded Saker, his magical resistance to burns had seeped into me. Saker could handle red-hot metal, if he wanted to, while I could maybe weather boiling water at best, but it still made for a nice party trick.

The first captain on our list wouldn't be able to leave for at least another week due to necessary repairs, which he let us know after we'd all but shaken hands. That was frustrating, to say the least, but we left on good terms with him. I let him know only that we hoped to leave sooner, but that we'd return if we didn't find anything that suited us in the docks. The second ship ended up getting struck off when the captain wouldn't let us see the rooms and started making leading comments about damage reparations for magical issues and the risk of traveling with powerful mages.

By that time I was more than ready for lunch. I flipped Cheska two silvers for her assistance thus far and asked her to take us to a good local eatery. Her eyes lit up and she led us through the city at a fast walk that bordered on a jog. I had to put a hand up to help Saker balance on my shoulder, but he seemed to be having a grand time of it as we hurried through the streets. She brought us to a restaurant a few blocks from the harbor, whose cook proved to be a wide-eyed hedgewitch.

I waved at him with a grin, and he lifted his hand with a bewildered smile as one of the servers led us over to a table for two. She brought over a stool for Saker, onto which he jumped with a pleased *prreh!* for the young woman, who cooed over him and scratched behind his ears. His smug pleasure radiated into me as he turned and gave me a cat smile, whiskers coming forward.

We ordered off a short menu, and I nursed a hoppy beer while Cheska drank some fizzing water through a reed straw, her legs swinging. The server brought Saker a bowl of meat scraps and three fat locusts on a linen napkin while Cheska and I chatted about magic. I'd always found children delightful to be around, and was happy to play sorcerer for her. Like lots of children her age, the girl was entranced with the idea that she might end up manifesting soon and become a dragon-sorcerer, just like the Spirekeeper. Well, that last bit was probably particular to the children who encountered Qavan, but still.

I enjoyed the good food, though we had to watch (me with nausea, Cheska with horrified delight) Saker gnaw his way through three locusts with great glee and vigor. He even licked up the spiny locust leg that fell onto the table, crunching it under his sharp white teeth, and received much egging-on from Cheska and praise from the pretty server.

Maybe I didn't want to kiss Saker, after all. Bleaugh.

We didn't have any luck at all with the third ship, which had already scheduled a trip down the coast and wasn't interested

in delaying—at least not for any cost that I would have been willing to pursue. Despair nipped at my heels as we hiked back up the docks to the fourth ship on our list. I really didn't want to hire one of the two captains Cheska had disliked with such ferocity. But the ship was the sort of one I was looking for, with enough space on deck to mark two ley diagrams – one for my void-trap and one for Saker's meteor-redirection spell – and an alchemical engine that suggested decent speed not tied to the vagaries of the wind. We got lucky with the captain, to boot.

Qavan had told me Captain Ylana was a witch artificer, who also served as the ship's mechanic. He'd mentioned something about her being striking to look at, with snow-white hair and swan's-down on her shoulders, and I'd assumed she had some non-human blood. He hadn't mention that she was part-archon, though, her heritage not only showing in the soft white feathers that covered her shoulders to the nape of her neck but in her inhuman face, with a mask of visible bone from her crown of horns down to her cheekbones, a camel-like cleft to her upper lip, and an ungulate nose.

She took one look at me and smiled. “Magus Leyweaver,” she said. “What a pleasure to meet you. I've heard such tales about you.”

Captain Ylana bowed, and I returned the gesture. It didn't surprise me that she recognized me. Any celestial-blooded magic-user would almost certainly be familiar with my work and even my face, especially if they had any contact with their celestial forebearer or the Celestial Plane.

“Some of them may even be true,” I said with a grin. “Might I be so rude as to ask which clan you claim, captain?”

“Of course, magus, and none, actually,” she said with a laugh. “My great-grandmother did full emigration, and never told any of us the name of her former clan. She’s quite an adventurer and says that she likes being known for her deeds rather than her family.”

“Admirable woman,” I said.

That made the captain grin, because most mages did the same, myself included. Only a very few kept their given surnames, instead choosing – or being given – an epithet. In Celestial, they called me something that translated to “Stag-Lover”, and Tarandrus called me “Beloved Doe”; they called Jace “Worldhealer”. People appended names to us, too; I’d been called everything from “the Starsworn” to “Lightseeker.” I’d chosen “Leyweaver”, though, which had been a suggestion from one of my friends at the University.

The two of us went straight into negotiations. Captain Ylana, being a magic-user herself, understood a lot more about how sorcerers worked and had realistic expectations for the risks that spells would pose rather than stories. She knew of me, too, and that helped—my power burnoff of light was a lot less risky than some other kinds, and I was well-known for my abilities in manipulating energy.

After swearing her to secrecy in a non-magical kind of way, I also let her in on the secret that Saker was a demon sorcerer, since she’d figure it out as soon as he got away from a few feet

of me and left my immediate well of ley impact. The two of them shared a long look before each giving the other a nod, in what I supposed was an indication of making a truce with each other.

We struck a decent deal. It was still quite expensive, but I was paying for nine weeks of crew time and board, in addition to my own meals and rooms. I did make sure to get rooms, plural; accommodations in ships were never spacious, and I wanted Saker to get the ability to sleep as something other than a cat. It would also be more convenient for feeding him, if we didn't want to have sex on the floor every night. I hoped there'd be some sex, but it was nice to have the options, if we wanted them. Plus, we had really a lot of trunks to put places.

The captain also offered me the use of her dining room as an office during the day, if I needed a large table to lay out diagrams on. I showed my gratitude by offering to purchase the supplies to feed everyone on the ship a sweet dessert once a week, to which she agreed, with a warm smile. We shook hands and set everything to paper, with me giving her an immediate down payment in the platinum I'd been carrying in a flat pouch under my breastband. It looked quite dramatic, appearing in my hand, and grabbing something from two feet away took about as much energy as reaching over there to get it.

Since the banks were still open, for another silver I had Cheska take me over to the financial district of Vannport, which wasn't so much a district as it was a city block. But there were four different banks there, including a building for

the Dragonvault. I had a pleasant interaction with the warlock I ended up working with, who wrote up and authorized the transfer of funds to Captain Ylana. Of the remaining cost, she'd get half of the funds now, and the other half when we returned. It was odd to think that if we didn't succeed there'd be no returning at all.

Cheska brought us back to the Silver Mare as the sun started to set, Saker still on my shoulder. He and I needed to be mostly on top of each other while we were in Vannport, if we wanted to be sure to keep anyone from identifying him as my familiar. I knew it was silly, but I'd gotten attached to the idea of revealing him at the next Eclipse Gala, and it was nice to have something to look forward to after all of this. My familiar didn't seem to have much of a feeling about it one way or another, but he seemed happy to keep the secret with me until then. I thought that the fact that it necessitated him sleeping next to me didn't hurt.

At the inn, I took a hot bath in front of an admiring Saker, who went incubus again as soon as I locked the door for it and draped himself over the end of the tub to watch. I put on something of a show for him, rather than shoving my clothes off and scrubbing myself clean. Having his eyes on me like that, and his rapt attention, left me with a fluttering feeling in my chest and full of desire. Lying in the hot, soapy water, where he couldn't quite see my body, I got myself off in front of him, while he stroked himself and watched me with lustful, glowing eyes.

We ate early and went to bed right afterwards. The bed was excellent, though that might have been the three hours of sleep plus one hour of wagon-nap talking. Saker slept as a cat despite the wards he'd spun up for us, and I let myself imagine that it was because I was too tempting.

Even with paying extra for a quick departure, we had an entire day to kill, so we went to the market and wandered around together all day. I'd pulled out a hooded overrobe and belted it so that it couldn't fall back, and once I convinced Saker to try riding in the hood, he didn't come back out, unless it was to half-stand on my shoulder while we looked at objects and he meowed his opinions into my ear. I enjoyed carrying him around like that, and despite the distinct language barrier I could get the gist of his commentary.

I spent a little money here and there, mostly on snacks, but I also picked up a white pearl collar with large dangling teardrop pearls on fine chains because Saker couldn't hide his admiration of it, and a little velvet bag of mismatched local pearls that I thought might be useful for my void-trap. I really enjoyed giving him things, dancing around the edges of romance by telling myself that he was my familiar, so really it was his money anyway. The fizzing of his surprised pleasure through my veins was more than enough of a reward to lure me over the edge of my fears.

We spent most of the chilly evening up in our room in front of the fire. Saker tried on his new necklace with a great deal of shyness, which I found more than charming, pleased to compliment him on his beauty. That night, Saker slept as an

incubus, spooned around me, having asked for a night off from sex. I enjoyed the peace falling asleep snuggled up to him like lovers, rather than for comfort after nightmares. Maybe that should have frightened me more than it did, but being able to point out to my fear that we'd basically done this before with nothing bad happening helped more than I thought it would.

I slept well, with dreams I didn't remember, save for a sense of total contentment. I woke up with Saker still nestled against me, his wing over me like a blanket and his face nuzzled in my hair. When I yawned, he pressed a light kiss to my hair, making me smile, still happy and calm.

“Good morning, princess,” he said, his voice warm.

“Good morning, poet,” I replied, smiling. His happiness radiated into me, like the heat of the sun.

“I lift my face and yearn for summer rain. With a mournful voice and an outstretched hand, I beseech the sacred and the profane, to pour out life upon this thirsty land,” Saker quoted, obviously some piece of poetry.

I laughed and wiggled my way over to face him and his pleased smile. “Have you been collecting rain-related poetry to regale me with?” I asked with great amusement.

“Something like that,” Saker said, the corners of his eyes crinkling with good humor.

“Ridiculous creature,” I drawled, though I couldn't keep the smile off my face. “Ready to go to sea?”

He smirked. “Ready as I'll ever be.”

I groaned and shoved a pillow in his face, getting up to face the day to the sound of his delighted laughter.

54

DOWSING

RAIN

We boarded the ship shortly before noon, so we could sail with the tide. I'd been informed that it was named "Starsight." That seemed like an auspicious name for a sea journey meant to detect a piece of the home of the stars, and we could use all the luck we could get.

Saker stayed on my shoulder as I ran through the navigation with the captain. I didn't know the first thing about steering a ship, but I'd studied the ley-maps enough to make some guesses about where an increasing buildup of celestial power might be deforming the ley-lines, and I had a few places I wanted to dowse. We settled on one down the coast and more than two hundred miles offshore, so it would take a few days to get there. Hopefully, once we were in the general area we wouldn't need to travel more than thirty-six hours to get to the next dowsing location.

I'd been cursed with motion sickness my entire life, from the rotation of the ley transport in the Spires to the rocking motion of carriages. This did not translate well to ships, and I

started puking off the railing not long after the harbor disappeared over the horizon. Saker had to share the nausea, and after jumping down so as to punish me by vomiting on my boot, he wobbled his way over to his room. I felt him turn back into a demon behind the safety of the wooden walls and start sketching something out. I tuned him out to hang over the railing in misery, while the ship's crew either watched me with wide eyes or offered commentary, as their natures dictated.

Saker proved to be a man of action when he marched his way across the deck as a cat, spat a paper packet on my foot, and bit me on the ankle to make me pay attention to him. The packet proved to contain several smooth pills of anti-nausea medicine, wrapped in a note he'd written in bold Abyssal script that read "*IDIOT. I say this fondly. Why did you not pack seasickness medicine, darling? Eat these and stop making me taste my stomach.*" I laughed, a weak offering at best, and tossed the medicine back, dry swallowing the pills before folding the note and picking him up to hold him close to my chest.

It was a good thought, and one I'd failed to have because I'd been too busy thinking about spells to think about the practicalities of most everything else. Honestly, remembering to pack winter clothing and enough underthings for two months at sea had been a miracle. I needed to devote my energy to dowsing, and I didn't want to waste any power for summoning. But anti-nausea medicine was a welcome expense, and I felt more like a person and less like a wet, moldering dishrag by dinnertime.

The days went by faster than I'd expected. I hadn't taken a sea journey for several years, and I didn't seem to get tired of staring at the endless ocean, both under the sun and the night sky. I spent plenty of time working on the void-trap and meteor-redirection spells, of course, both on my own and with Saker. We ended up making a plan to gate the escaped meteors to the summoning circle of Lyria Spire in the Barrens, where they were unlikely to be disturbed or even detected. They couldn't stay there long, of course, but the Barrens could soak up the celestial power for long enough to keep them from trying to plow through Material and Ethereal into the Abyssal Plane.

Saker managed to befriend the entire crew at once when someone scared up a giant rat in the kitchen, and Saker intercepted it right as it darted into the cargo. The cook made a victory feast of the rat for my familiar, who ate it with a familiar gloating joy as I had to deal with his enjoyment of being the gruesome center of attention. Well, he *was* a predator, as he'd reminded me more than once.

Every day that passed increased my anxiety, because so much relied on being able to trigger the spell at the split-second when the firmament was in the void as it shifted from the Celestial Plane to the Material Plane. Only in the void, where neither speed nor momentum mattered, would we have the strength to hold it. If I failed to find the place where it would cross, it would mean the death of the world.

Saker took care of me when the rising terror threatened to consume me. He stayed calm and patient, doing various

helpful tasks to make me feel more like a human and less like a ball of stress and anxiety. He pulled me away from the railing when I tried to make the horizon come closer by glaring at it, made me eat my food, and took my mind off stress by giving me shoulder rubs and orgasms. I was pathetically grateful to have him there with me, even as a cat, enjoying the way our energy lay together and how he would wrap around my neck and purr for hours.

At last, after completing several full circuits around the general area where the very big rock would cross the planes, I found the celestial fey I'd been looking for. It hung motionless in the sky like a series of lenticular clouds, forming in front of the approaching firmament like waves before the prow of a ship. I tried to draw in my mind's eye where it pointed so I could follow it back to its origin point, but my spatial senses were not top-notch. I started growling to myself, pacing around on the deck, the crew keeping well away from me. Then I stopped, and smacked myself on the forehead a few times. Fucking hell, I kept forgetting that *I had Saker*. I was still so used to needing to do everything.

With a grin, I focused and stung him for the first time.
Darling, I need you on the deck.

Stinging him was way easier than stinging Jace, given that I could whip the message through our soul-bond instead of along a fragile ley-tie, though it still took a lot of focus. I felt Saker jump as the words hit him, and his head turned around with deliberate slowness until he stared at me through the

deck. I grinned and laced my fingers behind my head, enjoying the contrast of the wan sunlight and the cold wind.

My familiar did come once he managed to settle his fur back down. Couldn't let the crew see that he'd been surprised, I supposed.

I looked down at Saker, before pointing out the pattern in the sky. "Feel that?"

He tilted his head back and forth, then flopped on the ground, pulling himself this way and that. It looked ridiculous, as if he was trying to nap and couldn't get comfortable, but I could feel his focus. Since Saker felt power as heat, he must have been using his whole body to examine the energy collecting in the sky, which I found interesting. Like all mages, my mage-senses were a sphere around me, and I could "see" in every direction at once—but since Saker's mage-senses used his skin instead of imitating sight, he could interact with his observations of power by moving his body much better than I could.

After several minutes, Saker turned to me and gave me a crisp nod, a weird movement to see on a cat.

I looked back up at the gathering power. "Want to go for a fly?"

His ears and whiskers came all the way forward.

"While I might not have packed for the seasickness, I did manage to think that dowsing at altitude might be called for," I said with a grin. "I've got all the gear."

Saker got up and started prancing in place. I laughed, and went to get changed into something suitable for winter flying.

People are always curious about weird magical shit. The crew had gotten used to me dowsing, which wasn't all that interesting to watch in the first place, being mostly a setup of some weird metal shapes and then me standing there with dowsing rods, shifting them by tiny intervals. But my emergence out of the belowdecks in my flight gear, including a pair of riding-goggles and a hat that covered my ears, wearing a bright red harness and hauling a bundle of red straps... Well, that was interesting enough that almost a half-dozen of them gathered to observe as I met Saker on the open deck.

I looked down at him, and gave him a grave nod. Saker, with a flair for the dramatic, bounded to the bow and vaulted over the railing to run up the full length of the bowsprit before leaping off it. Everyone but me jerked forwards in an automatic response to someone going overboard—but then Saker was a krocutex, and he out-flew the ship's bow, great starry indigo wings clawing at the sky as he peeled away to the starboard side. He voiced his territorial cry as he circled the ship, spiraling up before folding his wings and diving, and landed in a thunder of wings in front of me, making my long hair toss behind me.

I grinned, enjoying the gasps and exclamations from our audience. “Show-off,” I said to him fondly.

In response, he voiced a series of barks, like laughter.

I harnessed him with the ease of practice and mounted, and Saker took us into the skies with one leap. I took down our barriers as I had when we'd done Jace's summon together. This time I did it in small steps, letting us sort out our pieces as we went, as Saker took us towards the collected fey energy. It was easier than it had been for the summoning, almost comfortable, the awareness of each other like a natural extension of our hearts. We moved together like one creature, and I let myself get lost in the motion.

He didn't enjoy being bathed with celestial power, but as we criss-crossed our way through the lenticular pattern of it, he stopped noticing it and helped me get aligned. I couldn't believe I hadn't tried dowsing with Saker helping before. He was so much better than I was with spatial dimensions, and when I shared my mage-sight with him, Saker could figure out what we were looking at much more quickly.

We oscillated towards our goal, until Saker dropped exactly the right amount, his head lifting and his tail dropping as he leaned to the left, and we hung in perfect alignment with the axis of the ripples of power building up in front of the very big rock. I locked it in, inscribing the exact orientation we'd been at and what point in space in the Material Plane into my memory, holding it there with ferocious focus.

Saker brought us down at a steep dive, backwinging at the last second to land heavily on the deck, wasting no time. I unclipped myself from him and dropped to the ground, snatching a drafting pencil from my room and writing everything on the boards of the ship before anything happened

to break my concentration. I double- and triple-checked the values, then checked again, just in case, before letting the mental spell end.

I whooped and Saker wailed, and then I jumped up and he turned into a cat and we danced around in circles, me waving the pencil in the air and him waving his tail. Not a few of the crew laughed at this, everyone who was awake having come onto the decks to watch Saker and I flying. I zipped down to my room and grabbed paper and an inkwell while Saker stood feline defense over the coordinates, then dashed back up and copied them onto the paper, using a spell to copy what I'd written on the deck onto each of the four sheets of paper.

It still took over a day to align all the dowsing values I'd taken over the previous weeks, a process that gave Saker a headache but that was like proverbial catnip to me. Once I had precise coordinates, I found Captain Ylana and told her our final destination. It lay several hundred miles away and around two hundred seventy offshore, somewhat further than Jace had guessed. But the approach of the chunk of celestial firmament was *already* warping the Material Plane, which explained why my dowsing had been so frustrating. The exact location of the very big rock's appearance kept shifting, and at an increasing rate.

But now that I had a single perfect read and had figured out that the entry point was in motion, I could go back through and apply a drift factor to all of my prior measurements and calculations. It let me determine where the entry point would be, and when exactly the building force would reach the

amount necessary to form a momentary, natural gate. Despite the distance, we'd still make it there four days before the event.

Saker perfected our ley diagrams for the spells. His spatial skills extended to an innate comprehension of the flow of power in ley-lines, which made him a brilliant spellcrafter who consistently produced elegant diagrams. We ended up overlapping our circles, giving each of us better access to each other's powers and skills. While I would be focusing on the void-trap and Saker on the meteor-redirection, he would wield my senses to dowse for the paths of the streaking pieces of firmament, and I would lean into his spatial comprehension to keep the void-trap secure in the face of potentially thousands of individual meteors.

In the evenings, I stood at the bow and stared into the distance towards the echo of Tarandrus, wondering if we could really do this. Saker never let me stay past midnight, coming and rubbing against my legs with plaintive cries until I followed him back to our rooms. Only once did he try to help my growing anxiety by putting our bedding on the floor and sleeping next to me in his incubus form. Spend enough time tormenting yourself with sex that didn't involve mating, apparently, and you might end up waking your partner up with a handjob from behind as you grind yourself against his tail, begging him to fuck you while dead asleep. As lovely as that had been for my dreams, though, the temptation had been brutal for Saker, and I spent the next four nights on my own.

55

COMFORT

RAIN

The night before the rockfall, I woke up in the early hours of the morning. It wasn't the sort of jolting awake or slow slog into wakefulness that bad dreams tended to cause. I simply became awake, opening my eyes without any sense of sleepiness. I lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling before determining I wouldn't be able to fall back to sleep and heading out onto deck with a cloak wrapped around myself. It was the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, and the cold of the clear night bit at me, but I went out to stand under the stars anyway.

I stood there in the winter cold and the starlight, surrounded by celestial power, and looked up at the place where a piece of the celestial firmament would fall like a pebble from a slingshot.

I must have stood there a long time, because when Saker came out I realized I'd been shivering long enough that my tense muscles hurt. He walked over, not as a cat, but as an incubus, but I was so cold and so frightened that I didn't care.

My familiar came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, raising his body temperature so that his heat chased away the winter. His summer wrapped around me on that darkest night and I melted against him, leaning into his embrace and closing my eyes. One tear tracked down my face as my shivering stopped, leaving only the tension.

“It’s going to be okay, *ledaji*,” Saker said, his head leaning against mine. “You’ll trap it, and I’ll catch the dust you shake loose. You’re going to do fine.”

Another tear fell, my chest and throat tight and painful. “It’s not that,” I said, somewhere around a whisper. I couldn’t say any more.

Saker pushed his cheek against me, and his tail wrapped around my right knee, tying my leg to his. “What is it?” he asked in a gentle voice.

I blinked away what more tears might try and fall, with only one or two escaping my eyes. “Saker,” I said in a tight voice that threatened to turn into a sob. “It’s a *void*-trap.” I felt understanding hit him, and his arms tightened around me.

”*Ledaji, ledaji*,” he murmured against my hair. “*Ledaji, dehina’ehhe*.” *Darling, you’re safe.*

More tears started spilling down my cheeks. “I might forget, Saker,” I said, almost choking on the words, my fingers digging into my arms. “I might forget *everything*.” I shook with the tension of not breaking down in the safety of his arms. “Saker, I might forget *you*.”

His heartbreak poured through me, but it wasn't heartbreak because of me. It was heartbreak *for* me, like the pain I was feeling was as much his pain as mine. Saker stroked my arms and my sides, shadowing me with his wings. I turned in his arms, so I could wrap my arms around his waist and cry against his skin.

"*Ledaji, dehina'ehhe,*" he said again, rubbing his nose down the part of my hair before kissing me on the scalp.

I gave in and started crying against him, silent tears while my shoulders shook and my throat clenched tight.

"Even if you forget, you will be alright," Saker said. "It doesn't matter if you forget me, *ledaji.*"

I shook my head, fast and hard, refusing to accept something like that.

He slid one hand up to pet my hair. "It doesn't," he insisted, in that same calm, gentle voice. "If you forget me, then you get to meet me all over again. You'll be awestruck that you're soul-bonded to a sorcerer, and I'll get to smile at you and give you my soul all over again."

I let out a sob, my fingers digging into his back, clinging to the safety and comfort of his arms.

Saker kissed my hair again. "I'll get to take you flying again for the first time, and feel you decide again that you want to touch me. You'll watch me switch shapes for the first time, and dance with me for the first time."

His surety started seeping into me, quenching the sparking fire of my fear. Saker believed every word, and he said it with an endless affection, as if there was no option but us stepping back into this place together.

“My Rain,” he said, and I pulled my attention back to his voice. “I’ll be here to call you back to me. Since that’s the worst thing that could happen, and that’s no worse than getting the gift of each other again, what happens will be fine.”

Saker felt so certain, and even though I knew he was pouring that emotion into me to help calm the stark terror that the void brought up in me, it worked. My weeping slowed, then stopped, until I was just sniffing.

“You’re using empathy,” I said without accusation.

Saker rubbed his face against the side of my head. “I’m only using what you gave to me.”

“It’s very nice of you,” I said. “You’ve really been—”

“—Sorry, Rain,” Saker interjected.

As one of the crew came up from belowdecks, Saker shifted back into his cat shape. I had to close my arms around him to keep his claws from hooking into my stomach, his robe falling over my arms. The crewman gave me a sharp look, in the way a squirrel watches a hawk, before heading over to the helm. The *Starsight* had an enchanted anchor, which could hold a ship still in open water, but apparently the captain was still sending people up to check... whatever it was people checked when they were at the helm. I had no fucking clue.

Saker let out a little yowl, and I rubbed his back while I carried us both belowdecks and to my room. He leapt down from my arms onto the floor as we entered, then turned and looked at me as I closed and locked the door. When I turned around, he stood on two feet and smiled at me.

“Hey, handsome,” I said.

His smile grew. “Hello, princess,” he said in reply.

I laughed, holding out his robe. Saker took it and belted it on without putting his arms through the sleeves, then stepped forward, taking one of my hands in his and touching my cheek with the other.

“Rain, I would like to touch you,” he said.

My body flipped into *yes* before he’d even finished the last word, which made his pupils dilate.

“Oh,” I breathed. “Okay. Please do that.”

Saker smiled, a happy smile with no hint of a leer, and pulled me towards him until I stepped into his arms, leaning against him. He ran his lips against the curve of my ear, his breath hot, and his hands slid down my back to cup my ass, pushing my hips against his and leaving glittering pleasure in his wake. I moaned, and I could feel the mirroring flush of warmth from Saker as he grew hard.

“I think I’ll know, *ledaji*, but if I get close to anything you don’t like, please tell me.”

I made some sort of *uh-huhn* response as his hands slipped up under my shirt and ran up the smooth curve of my back. I

slid my hands along his bare back, up against his mane in a way that made him shiver with pleasure and out across the pliable leather of his wings, then back down again. I knew the rules, and I respected them: my hands stayed above his waistband, with no teasing of my fingers sliding down under the cloth. But the rest of him was mine for the taking, and I touched him like I did when he was thrusting between my legs, with long, smooth motions, sometimes raking my nails against his skin and sometimes barely touching him.

Saker kissed my neck, then picked me up, with one strong arm under my hips and the other holding me against him. I wrapped my legs around his waist, locking my ankles together, and Saker carried me over to my bed – the thing was built into the wall of the ship, thank fuck, or everyone with a bordering room would have known what I was getting up to with him most nights – while stripping me of my shirt and breastband. It had not surprised me when I had learned how quickly Saker could get a woman's torso naked, and before he had gotten me the short distance to the room, my bare chest pressed against his. We both sighed out our pleasure at the contact, skin on skin.

He laid me out on my back on the bed, then took his sweet time taking off my shoes, pausing after each sock to kiss the bottom of my foot and run his hot mouth up to my toes, his eyes burning with our desire. I didn't try to rush him, though, just enjoying it. It was hours yet until dawn, but I didn't mind not getting much more sleep, not when Saker was finally taking advantage of being able to put his hands on all of me.

As Saker unlaced my pants, I ran my hands up my belly and up to my breasts, sliding my nipples between the middle and ring fingers as I cupped myself. He hummed, with an admiring tone, and slid my pants and breeks down with one smooth motion, pulling them over my knees and down to my ankles. I wiggled my hips to entice him, smiling at him with the sheer pleasure of having him here like this. My familiar grinned at me and got onto the bed with me, ducking his head under my locked ankles and sliding forwards, so that my hips were between his knees as he knelt, with my legs held up in the air.

Saker kissed my calf. I felt his urge to bite down and watched Saker open his mouth a little ways before he exhaled down my leg and put his hands on my thighs. His warm fingers focused my attention on the touch of his hands, and as he watched my face he ran his hands down my inner thigh, until his thumbs and forefingers pressed against the joins of my legs.

I didn't have to put on any kind of show. Saker's touch poured molten pleasure into me, pooling in my belly and between my legs. I moaned, my back arching and my hips tilting upwards with my head flung back, and heard Saker growl in return, soft and heavy with lust.

He slid his thumbs together and dragged them up along the soft skin below my sex and along the edges of my entrance. When I looked back down at him I saw his eyes locked between my legs, gleaming with golden light. Saker caught his lower lip between his teeth as he opened his grip on my thighs to slide one hand between my legs, his warm palm pressed

against my wetness. I whimpered from the touch, the heat of his hand radiating into me alongside his desire, and rocked my hips against his hand, the contact of his skin against me sending a corona of white-hot pleasure out into my body.

I heard him moaning something in Abyssal as he pressed the peak of my sex between two fingers and rocked his hand against me, but I was too busy being touched to try and translate. It was so good, so fucking good, the pleasure building into an ache for something inside me. Saker obliged, sliding two fingers into my channel, his claws smooth and filed blunt, and I knew he'd done it so that he could do exactly this. I moaned his name, trying to be quiet, and Saker made a groaning sound of pleasure, pressing his fingers up against the sweet spot inside me, giving me a feeling of such wonderful pressure that I almost came only from that.

Saker slid the thumb of the hand he was rocking into me up to press against my sensitive nerves, and started making small circles with it. I breathed hard, in pants that were almost whines, drowning in our mutual desire. His black tongue flicked out to lick his lips, and his mouth opened as he lifted his other hand off of me. My incubus let out a whining growl as his pupils blew wide, his breath speeding up as he looked at me. His head turned, just a little, his chin coming right and forward as he stared at his fingers pumping in and out of me.

I clutched the sheets, rocking against his hand, chasing oblivion, but even through my want I could feel something like war in Saker, a tension drawing ever tighter. I opened my

lust-hazed eyes again to see him holding his hand in front of his face, his lips pulled up and his eyes wild.

Feral.

I whipped my hands up and grabbed him by the wrists, stopping him from continuing to slide his fingers inside me—and stopping him from licking the taste of me off his palm. Saker snarled at me, his dangerous predator’s growl, and I held his hot gaze despite the adrenaline surge.

“No, Saker,” I said. “No more. Stop.”

The words were enough for Saker to grab onto, locking his body in place despite his panting desire. I pulled his fingers out of me and closed both of his hands, freeing my ankles before drawing him up against me, holding his hands against his chest. Saker trembled, and having him between my legs wasn’t good for him right now, as his aching body testified. Or maybe it was too good? Regardless, I rolled us onto our sides, so he had my eyes to look at as I chanted the spell to clean us up.

He relaxed with a shudder once I finished and pressed his face against my shoulder. I grabbed a robe from across the room and tucked it around myself between us for the suggestion of a barrier, then tugged him closer to me. Saker made a frustrated growling sound, then sagged, his unhappiness soaking into me through the soul-bond.

“I’m sorry,” Saker said, sounding defeated. “I’m sorry.”

“Shh, *ledaji*, it’s fine,” I said. “We don’t have to do that.”

Saker let out a low whine, curling up tighter, his left wing arching around us. “*Amalikti*, Rain, I want this so badly,” he said, his voice strained and sorrowful. “And I... I...”

“Sweetheart, it’s okay. I know.”

I stroked Saker’s hair, and despite himself, he relaxed into the touch, pushing against my hand and turning his head so my fingers would touch the right places.

“Do you need less?” I asked.

He made a low sound, stressed and upset, then nodded, his horns rubbing against my shoulder.

“How much less, *ledaji*?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I... I don’t know.”

Saker looked up into my face, his own a mask of pained yearning. Even without having him in my soul, I would have seen his torment. In that moment I wanted nothing except to give him everything I had, so that he would no longer have to wear that look because of me. I only ever wanted him to look at me the way he’d looked at me the first time I fed him lust on purpose, happy and fearless and utterly in love. I wanted him to look at me like that every day for the rest of my life, and I wanted it to be because—

—Holy shit, what the fuck was I even thinking? When the fuck had that moment, that *look*, become anything other than terrifying?

I didn’t know if my sudden turmoil was obvious in the bond, or if Saker could no longer handle being sexually

compatible while I was more-or-less naked, but he curled up into a cat, burying his face against himself. I kissed his side, making him make a quiet *rrr* noise as he curled up tighter into himself, then got up, putting on new nightclothes, breeks included. I slipped under the covers next to him, so that he was next to my chest, with my arms curled around him. He didn't move to leave, so I snuffed the mage-light and snuggled down into the hard mattress of the bed.

“Goodnight, Saker,” I said.

He didn't reply, so I let him lie there, and went back to bed.

56

PLAYING CATCH

RAIN

The morning came with rather more celerity than I'd hoped, and my internal clock woke me right after sunrise. I got dressed and let Saker into his room, so he could prepare, too, then went out seeking the captain. Everyone knew the plans for today—or, at least, our cover plan. Because we needed Saker with his full spellcasting abilities, everyone else needed to stay belowdecks, which I told them (truthfully) was for their protection during the casting of the spell. Several men helped me carry – or rather, did all the carrying of – the two trunks of materials that Saker and I would need, before returning belowdecks to wait out the spell.

A dense, misty haze had settled over the region during the first hours of the morning, after Saker and I had returned to bed. It made the deck slick and wet, and while Captain Ylana said that it would get nasty by the evening, there were ways to deal with the inclement weather. If we'd been doing any other sort of spell I would have asked Saker to heat away the water, then used a common rain-dome to keep our work area dry. But

using abyssal power on the working space was asking for trouble when everything hinged on playing nice with celestial power. Instead, I offered our good witch-captain double what the spellcasting was worth to do a celestial rain-calling to dry off the space we needed, and keep it dry.

She accepted with joy, and walked outside into the rain without hesitation. I watched her dancing the spell with interest; I hadn't seen someone doing a danced spell in a while, and everyone who used them had their own variants and way of emphasizing the movements. The captain did a good job, leaving the deck dry and with a dome of water sliding over the area, then turned to me and gave me the bad news that, with the incoming inclement weather, someone would need to be at the helm to deal with the rough water.

I grimaced. That was a complication. We were going to need to be out on the deck for hours to set everything up, and while we had some gap time planned in, it wasn't enough for me to set up everything on my own and still feel comfortable with the timeline. I took Captain Ylana aside to explain that I was going to be working with a summoned incubus – which was true enough – and that anyone at the helm was going to have to deal with him.

She smiled, an expression full of brilliant white teeth. “It’s a ‘he’?”

I nodded.

“Then I’ll man the helm, magus. I’m immune twice over,” she said with a wink.

So that was a problem solved, even though the fact that there was a first problem of the day left my stomach quivering in terror. Saker came trotting out when I opened his door, and I picked up the folded clothes for him. A little piece of paper sat folded atop his foot coverings, and I unfolded it as I followed him up the stairs. In his bold handwriting, he'd written,

*“Remember that I am with you
and I will always be with you:
tehmissit ina meridati.
Re’saker ’veyn yaniht”*

I felt the hesitance and shyness from Saker as I read it, and I looked up at him in surprise and astonishment, at his willingness to bare his heart to me. I knew his name from reading the patterns of his soul, but he had written part of it for me, signing the note, *your Re’saker ’veyn*. It was an expression of trust, a longer part of his name than most demons ever gave away. And he used the phrase most often associated with soul-mated lovers in Abyssal love poetry: *“beloved’s-shield and helpmate”*, reflecting the Abyssal belief that the two sides of love were protection and aid. But it also could refer to the relationship between a sorcerer and her familiar, with me the strong shield and him coming alongside me.

Something about that felt... not quite right. He *did* help me—but I also helped him. And I did protect him—but he did the same for me, even if it was protecting me from myself most of the time. Even if today, I would be the shield, and he the helper. The faery folk had the right idea when they made their soul-mate bonds equal. There was something broken about

how much power I could wield over Saker, who was my equal or better in so many ways. But I had power, so much more power, and that made him my slave, even though he'd come willingly to me.

I set it aside. This wasn't the time or place to mourn our situation, not when he was holding himself out to me like a gift. I folded the paper back up, kissed it, and slipped it into my pocket.

"Thank you," I said to him.

His flagged tail shook with his hope and joy. I smiled, letting the fizzing pleasure bubble into me as I stepped out into the dry air below the misting rain. Behind me, I closed the door, and added a simple mage-lock that would keep everyone but the captain belowdecks.

Saker stood up into his demon shape and took his clothing from me, with a bright, eager smile that drew a smile from my own face. "You said it was okay," Saker said, with a shy defensiveness. "Back in the Spire—that it was okay for me to be in love with you."

"It is, darling," I said, and stepped up to him, still smiling, to put my hand on his face. "And today of all days I can use a reason like that, to hold myself against dissolution."

Saker pressed his face into my palm, then turned his head and kissed it. "Good," he said, reaching up to curl my fingers around his kiss. "I wanted you to know that I'll be here for you, whatever happens."

I smiled again. “And I’ll stand with you through it all,” I said, drawing his hand to mine and kissing his knuckles. “Are you ready?”

“Just let me get dressed first,” Saker said with a grin.

I laughed and went to start pulling out the things we needed.

It took a long time to set up the linked circles. We struggled to make the lines precise as the ship moved, and eventually I had to use a Jace special and alter the gods-damned gravity so that everything on the deck stuck to the deck as if it was not in ever-increasing motion. After that, we moved more quickly and stopped having to start over from sudden surges of motion bobbling our lines. I couldn’t look up from the ground, though, or I would have had to puke within moments from the seascape moving around us. Saker seemed unaffected.

We finished with somewhat less than two hours to go until we needed to be in place, so we took the time to pack up our materials, and I hauled everything back to the belowdecks after increasing my strength, fretting the whole while about power. But one of the good things about being in the middle of what was looking to shape up into a real pisser of a storm was that water and weather were both good sources of celestial energy, so even though we weren’t in a confluence or near any major ley lines, I’d have more power to draw on than we’d anticipated.

At some point the captain had come up and taken the helm; I could feel her power at the wheel, which I had left un-bespelled for that very reason. Saker ate and we both did our

biological necessities before we took our positions in the linked circles, facing each other. I took a deep breath and let the anxiety go. It was time.

I chanted through the first part of the enchantment, calling down some of the ambient celestial fey energy from the storm to run like quicksilver along the lines of the diagram, and waited until the light filled the circles in which each of our feet stood. In unison, Saker and I said the word that would lock everything that the spell touched to the ground, preventing the storm from shifting us even one hair, and from the power of the rain washing away the ley diagrams we had marked with such painstaking care.

The light flared and died. I took down the gravity spell, and Captain Ylana, watching, took down her rain-calling. The rain slashed down at us, cold and lancing, and Saker and I would have been thrown off our feet by the sudden reassertion of the plane's natural gravity if we hadn't been bolted down. Saker caught his balance faster than I did, with a smooth transition. My body did its best impression of staggering while unable to move its feet, but I managed to get back into the rhythm of the ship in a few waves, blessing Saker for having emptied the Spire of anti-nausea medicine for me.

There was still time before we needed to have the spell up, so we settled into meditation together, our hearts and lungs finding a relaxed rhythm that left us calm and in tune with each other. Saker's warmth wrapped around me, a connection we had built into our spell so that I wouldn't lose any extremities to hypothermia if it was cold and wet. The wind

whipped against us, yanking at Saker's tail and wings and blasting with clawing force against our bodies, but we used the time we had to sink into the meditative state of a mage entering a long and complicated ritual, and our bodies were strong and knew how to move.

We chose the same moment for lifting our hands into motion, the decision filtering into both of us from each other. My void-trap was based on, of all things, gating. Saker and I had spent days puzzling through the best way to handle holding something in the void, and he'd been the one to suggest gate spells, when it never would have occurred to me. It had taken weeks of poring through gating and summoning spells with Saker to come up with a gating spell that would flow like a summoning spell, putting together the magical warping of the physical properties of space with the summoner's focus on moving objects to oneself.

Saker's meteor-redirection spell, on the other hand, was a combination of dowsing, a reversed war-mage spell that flung objects as missiles, and a sending spell. He would need to use my mage-senses to see the pre-ripples of the natural gates, his spatial abilities to displace what he saw to get the actual location of incoming meteors, and then to teleport them to Lyria, claiming their momentum and using it to fling errant meteors back into the void for me to hold.

I drew down my walls by degrees, connecting deeply with Saker as we charged the intersecting spells, using incantations and movements to fill the ley-channels with light and to shape the way. Then, with care, I turned my mind away from him

and towards that point high in the sky above us, where power built on itself before the prow of the firmament. It became my center of being, as I lifted my hands to it, leaning down into the channels of my spell.

I knew what I had to do, no matter how little I wanted to do it. I had to open a hole in the world, baring myself to the void.

And then I had to hold.

I closed my eyes, and poured my senses into that one spot, feeling the power build up from the tension of the shifting firmament, like the soaring tension before the moment of orgasm. I set my power like the jaws of a trap, and yearned for it.

All the force of my wellspring pressed against the plane, and in the instant the very big rock was flung into impact with me, the natural gate flickering open, I struck forward in a great rush of light, and crashed into the void. Power shot down the slender ley-channel that opened down the path of the firmament, an incredible bolt of celestial ley that should have carried the great stone streaking across the sky with it. I poured my power against the shattered night sky, and I held.

Jace's power, already wrapped around the firmament, grew veins into mine, securing us together and pouring strength into me, clean and cold and the same brilliant blue-white of the greatest of the stars. We wove our power together, with song and motion and beautiful words, and together we balanced thousands of meteors upon a knife-blade as they shivered in the void.

The nothingness pressed against our power, burrowing into the celestial firmament. The stardust vanished in a heartbeat and the smallest of the shattered firmament moments later, but the larger stones and the great meteor whose gravity held them fought dissolution, trembling and struggling towards the Material Plane.

Around my neck, the Fallen Star sang into the void. The spells I'd laid on it a mere decade ago frayed, long-strangled ley-connections blooming back into life and shivering out across the world. One reached into the void and the void reached back, turning its attention towards me like a hound scenting its favorite prey. Something about the curling shapes of that growing void-touched span clawed at my memory, but even if the Fallen Star escaped, I couldn't let it distract me from my task.

I focused my mind on the spell, choosing to forget my childhood nightmare for the span of my casting. I opened my eyes and saw, not the tossing rain or the clouds torn by the snatching wind, but into the gate that we held open. I could see everything, not like a person standing there, but as if I saw it with my mage-sight, in all directions for a hundred miles. The void clawed at me and I let it, holding a piece of the sky in it as it screamed, to be dissolved into oblivion.

Tears tracked down my face, hot trails torn by the cold rain slashing across me as the ship beneath my feet cleaved through the waves. Jace wept for the broken sky, too, and Saker, the three of us linked in an unbroken chain. I thought of Tarandrus, thrown into the void to die like this, and of what it

had been like to feel the pieces of me falling away in the void, as if I had been crumbling into dust. I thought about the agony I had felt as I had opened a gate just like this, and pushed the still-warm body of my beloved into the end of all things.

“I killed him,” I said, into the silent expanse between me and Jace. I looked into her dark eyes, and I told her. “I killed Lyon. I found him, and I killed him.”

Jace looked at me, her face full of compassion. “Oh, Rain,” she said, her voice as soft as if we stood face-to-face. “I know, honey. I always knew.”

The tears fell harder. “You knew?” I asked, overwhelmed with love for her—for the powerful, compassionate woman who had nicknamed me Auntie when I had befriended her as a lonely child, and who let me call her Niece in return. My beloved friend, who had let me lie to her, and carried no judgment towards me for the agonizing revenge I had taken on my betrothed.

“Of course I knew, Kazi,” Jace said. “The stars named you for love, because they saw your soul. You would never have let him be consumed by the void if he’d fallen like you said. If Lyon had been there with you, you would have saved him. You went after him because he left Tarandrus to die.” She took a breath as we steadied the cracking firmament. “I always knew.”

“You knew,” I said again, in wonder, my tears washed away by the wind and rain. “You knew, Shana.” She knew, and she loved me anyway.

“I’m with you, Rain,” she said.

I knew she meant more than only now. She meant that she would always have my back, and always be my friend. I wrapped that knowledge around my heart, and I held.

I felt the scarred places in me that had once been holes trembling, and the needle-pricks that turned to numbness as the void plucked at me. Before me, below me, the summer heat of my Saker wrapped around me as I held my gaze to the void. *Tehmissit ina meridata*. I would be his shield today. I would be the shield for the whole damn world, no matter the cost.

I remembered Rihhadiza, taking the spear for her people, freeing the lightning in her blood to save her world in a scene that looked like defeat, but was her greatest victory. *Over my dead body*, I thought, raising my lip into a snarl. I stared into the void, feeling it eat at me, and I gritted my teeth and held.

The broken pieces of the firmament fought dissolution. Nothingness clawed into them, burrowing and eating with an endless inanimate hunger. The meteors broke into pieces, shattering like the edges of the world had done as the void ate into it. Holding became a dance between my Shana and I, as crumbling pieces broke free and had to be caught and flung back as they plummeted towards the Material Plane.

Saker, my gentle war-mage, bared his soul to me in clear-eyed love so that he could be there with me, his understanding of the battlefield so instinctual that he could show me where

each broken fragment would fly without taking his attention off of the Material Plane.

I lost my grasp on some of it, as I ran through my own power and leaned into Jace's. I knew I did.

With me fought Saker, giving in to his predatory instincts so that he could respond with animal speed as he gave the sky no quarter. Some of the firmament burned, in streaks of vibrant light swallowed by the storm, his abyssal power overpowering the smallest pieces in moments. Others he redirected with that flame, his power spread across the sky to flare below each meteor as it gated through. We did battle together and I trusted him like I trusted no one else, not even Jace. I trusted him to stand with me, our hands only ever raised against the same enemy, and to take what he needed from me without ever harming me.

Nothingness wormed under my skin, and I waged war against dissolution, protecting my memories with my outpouring of rage and fear and love, all burned as fuel for the defense. *Saker*, I thought, holding him tight to my heart. *My Re'saker'veyn*. I would not forget him—not one part of him. I stood there, and I held until I ran out of emotion to give.

I began to sacrifice my memories against the implacable, unfeeling enemy. The colors of the sky. The smell of the forest after the rain. The freedom of riding a horse as it thundered through the prairie. The sound of birdsong in the spring. Piece by piece, I fed myself to the void, making myself the vanguard between death and everyone I loved.

Saker. Jace. Qavan. Esva. Marin. Safira. Bashen. Celyn. Sunny. My parents. My brother Storm, who I had forgotten once before, and would not forget again. I hoarded my memories behind my shields and defended them with everything I had. I stood there while the void tore out pieces of me, and I motherfucking *held*.

In one sudden rush, there was nothing left to hold, as the broken firmament dissolved into oblivion. Jace and I stared at each other for one breathless moment, and then, together, we threw the void closed and fell back into our own planes and our own bodies. At the release of the spell, my awareness slammed back into my flesh, carrying with it the cost of destroying the firmament. I collapsed like a dropped marionette, unable to move, my power drained and my body limp with the shock.

Saker ended the spell gluing our feet to the deck and scrambled towards me, wrapping himself around me as I slid on the sopping wet wood, unable to even scabble for purchase as the exhaustion held me in its deadly grip. He got his arms around me and licked rain off my neck, washing me like a cat. The ship dove into a trough, sending us sliding across the deck towards the railing. Saker snarled, holding me against his chest with one arm and digging the claws into the wooden deck to hold us in place as the violent seas sent waves crashing over us.

I could feel him assessing, looking towards the door as the wind and water battered us. *We'll never make it*, I thought, the concept holding only grim resignation. Another wave struck

us, pain singing up from Saker's fingers and toes as his claws held our weight. *Mage overboard*, I thought as the hurt radiated through me, wanting to laugh from the sheer stupidity of it all—of winning our battle with the sky only to be lost to the sea.

My Saker's growl rumbled through his chest, translating to my limp body as I started shivering. He hunched his shoulders down, tucking his wings around my body to hold him close to him, and snapped out an incantation in a language I didn't recognize, his words stolen by the wind. But I could see the tracery of power forming around us, something almost like a gate, and a moment later the deck directly beneath us vanished. We dropped into the belowdecks, Saker shielding my body with his as we crashed down, the spell lasting only a few seconds before the wooden deck reappeared.

He slammed into the floor, all the breath driven out of his lungs as he got flattened between the deck and my weight. My body rolled off him from the momentum, caught only by the curve of his wing as I grunted from the impact. Saker gasped for breath, nothing going into his lungs for a few heartstopping tries before he could get any air.

The two of us lay there uselessly for probably a solid ten minutes, curled up in fetal positions next to each other, but eventually my body remembered how to move and Saker's spine and lungs started forgiving him for abusing them. I rolled over and looked at him, and he met my gaze with a sappy smile and glowing eyes. I smiled back at him with a

spreading happiness, the enjoyment of looking at him filling the empty places in my soul.

“How many people are in the room, *ledaji*?” I asked dreamily, as if we lay in a meadow talking about the clouds.

He smiled back with the same lovey-dovey expression I thought I was wearing. “Six of us, *fikhiri*,” Saker said. *My love*, he said, the expression slipping off his tongue in the casual way of someone tired sharing secrets with their best friend deep into the night. “Nine, if you count the hall.”

So, almost the entire crew was staring at us. Well, at Saker.

“Beauty,” I said. “I think they’re looking at you.”

He looked at me as if he wanted to hear nothing else but my voice. My darling stretched, his wings spreading and his tail curling up, and someone in the room made a worshipful sound in a deep, masculine voice.

“That’s alright,” he said, pushing himself up. “As long as you’re looking, too.”

I grinned and got to my feet with him, and with a few polite words, Saker wove us past the three people at the door. He steered me towards our rooms, getting us into mine and locking the door behind us before draping himself over me and starting to purr with a vengeance. I reached back and tickled his sides before his weight knocked me over and Saker danced back, laughing.

I peeled off my sopping wet clothing and draped it over the lines set up in the room for just this situation, so that the ends

hung down inside the copper basin. Saker followed suit after a moment, taking the towel I chucked at him and starting to dry off, bracing against the wall for balance as the ship moved under us. We kept our eyes off each other as we toweled off so as not to dance too close to Saker's lines, and I threw on a pair of breeks and a simple long-sleeved robe as soon as I was dry. My familiar went through two towels on his fur and hair alone, but there were enough chairs to drape them over to dry.

He flopped onto the bed, naked and damp, with only a towel around his waist, and I dug out the bottle of coalberry wine I'd packed all those weeks ago, along with the box containing two etched crystal wine glasses. Saker pushed himself up as I showed him the bottle.

"Have the energy to toast to success before we sleep for two days?" I asked.

He smiled, broad and relaxed. "Of course," he said. "What is it?"

I uncorked the bottle the manual way. My power reserves were tapped – by the end of the spell, I'd been feeding the circle nothing but Jace's power and the power of the storm – and I wouldn't have anything to spare for spells for a couple days, or until we got closer to a ley-line or confluence.

"Coalberry wine," I said, pouring each of us a glass before re-corking the bottle. "It's a mortal plant bred from abyssal stock—*tikh'uri weyihn* is the original."

Saker's ears came forward, and he sat all the way up. "They make an amazing smoke liqueur from that plant in Abyssal."

I smiled and handed him a glass, which he took, brushing my fingers. “This isn’t supposed to be quite so much like drinking the smoke from a chimney, but it’s still supposed to be good,” I said, and looked up at Saker from my seat on the floor. “What should we drink to?”

“To saving the world?” Saker asked.

“Nah,” I said, shaking my head. “Any old sorcerer could do that.”

A smile tugged at his mouth. There hadn’t been anyone else who could have done this, after all, but it wasn’t what I was looking for.

“What’s something for us? Something important.”

“To remembering what really matters,” he said, his voice hesitant, and lifted his glass out to me.

I knew that he, too, had experienced me choosing what to sacrifice as I stood before the void, knowing I would lose it forever, though I didn’t remember what it was that I had chosen. But I trusted that he knew what it was that I had given up, and that he would give what he could back to me, so I lifted my glass up towards him without regret.

“To protecting what really matters,” I replied, remembering using my soul as a shield for him, and him using his body as a shield for me.

We met each other’s eyes, clinked our glasses together, and drank to that.

57

GIFTS

SAKER

Rain had saved all of us, and I knew what it was she had sacrificed for it. What was lost to the void was lost forever, but in the kindness of fate, all those things could be had again. I would give them back to her, one at a time. I would find ways for Rain to have everything she lost. I would spend a lifetime doing it, if I needed to. Her life would be full of rediscovery.

The first thing I gave her was the sunset.

The second was the stars.

In the morning, I thought, lying in her arms, I would give her back the dawn.

58

HOMESICK

RAIN

We did end up sleeping for two days, almost exactly. The captain of the Starsight was no fool, and as soon as Saker dropped us through the deck, she set the course back for Vannport, so we were most of the way back to the harbor when Saker and I managed to stay awake long enough to emerge from my room. To my deep gratitude, Captain Ylana had been able to take down my mage-lock; it would have been beyond embarrassing to have locked everyone belowdecks for days. She'd also explained to everyone that the unbearably sexy blue demon who'd fallen through the ceiling with me had been an incubus summoned to assist with my spell, which saved me the hassle. I made a mental note to give everyone a bonus for a job well done and an incubus well-weathered.

Saker spent the thirty-eight hours between our waking and our arrival in Vannport by my side. We spent a lot of time on the deck while I stared at the sky for the first time and he purred on my chest; when we were in my room together, he held me and told me stories about my life. We didn't have sex;

when I brought it up Saker wore a look of such devastated longing that I ended up curling up with him on a blanket on the floor, holding him as he fought to handle his emotions. He still did have to eat, but it wasn't an easy thing for us, with a wall between us as our bodies and souls cried out for each other.

Qavan, damn him, had been right. We'd tried it, and neither of us wanted to stop.

Lying with him in the sunlight, everything felt so right, and yet something in me stayed locked up tight. I could think it, look at him and think about love with an excitement that bordered on terror, but as soon as I thought about letting Saker into that hidden place in my heart, my blood turned to water and the words strangled in my throat. My fears held me trapped—had kept me trapped since Lyon had chosen the void over me and I'd chosen safety over love. I was in a prison of my own making, and I didn't know how to smash the final lock.

We reached Vannport shortly after noon. I handed out fat purses to each of the crew members, with another for Captain Ylana, and stepped off the ship and back onto land with Saker in my arms. Cheska was there, waiting for us with a wagon and a smile, and I was more than happy to give her a handsome tip for taking care of us. Saker rode in my lap as the wagon rumbled its way through the city to the inn, but I just wanted to be *home*, and after some half-hearted haggling on my part, I managed to convince the wagoner to take us all the way to Cajahr Spire.

Driving into the confluence, for me, was like rain falling on my desert. Qavan flew out to meet us, landing far enough ahead of the wagon that he didn't spook the mules. With a few words of greeting to the driver, my friend clambered up into the wagon and took my hands.

"Lady, let me give you power," he said.

I nodded, almost frantic. We laced our fingers together and he drew on the energy of the Spire, pulling it away from its endless whorl to pour it into me. I gasped with relief as the power flooded into me, refilling my reserves in minutes, when it would have otherwise taken weeks. It didn't hurt to be without my reserves and it didn't affect my ley impact, but most mages found it deeply unpleasant, and there was only so much power to go around. At sea, most of it was celestial and thus not what my body wanted, but the material strength of Cajahr filled me much faster than I could regenerate on my own. As soon as my vast reserves had filled again, Qavan let go of my hands, and I sank back against the trunk I was leaning on.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

He laughed and settled in. "You've been having adventures again, haven't you?"

"Maybe a little," I admitted.

Qavan snorted. "'A little', she says. Every mage within range saw that ley-line flare, and the fireworks out to sea. That was no simple meteor fall, lady."

I wrinkled my nose at him; he responded with a humorous glare.

“The meteors involved might have been a little bigger than I implied,” I said.

He burst into laughter. On my lap, Saker curled a little tighter, kneading my thigh with his paws. I ran my hand down his back, appreciating the affection and comfort that radiated off of him just as much as the heat of his body.

“My gods, Rain, you’re impossible,” Qavan said. “You do realize you have *friends* who can help you, yes? Not to mention a vast University, and all the resources it possesses. Some of us might even be put out to get left out of the fun.”

I smiled and shook my head. “I know, I know,” I said. “I did try to wring some help out of Rillian, but he didn’t so much as send me a letter in response. Anyway, I didn’t do it by myself. I had Saker, and Jace helped, too. All’s well that ends well, right?”

He harrumphed as the wagon turned around a bluff and the soaring form of Cajahr Spire came into view, then gave me a shrewd look. “Are you ever going to tell me everything that happened with Tarandrus?” he asked. “I know there’s more to the story, lady, though I won’t press you for the tale.”

I smiled at him and took his hand. “Maybe I’ll tell you someday, anyway,” I said. Maybe I really would.

Qavan smiled back. “I’d like that,” he said, squeezing my hand. “I’d like that a great deal.”

Qavan and Esva did their best to convince us to stay, and while part of me wanted to, more of me wanted to be home with Saker, reading or laughing or curled up together. I was tired of having to wait until we were alone before we could talk. All I wanted was my regular life back, a life that I cherished more than I had ever imagined that I could. So I said my goodbyes, promised to visit again sooner rather than later and to remember to bring Esva a big fish next time, and Qavan left Saker and I in the portal room.

We'd already figured out how to handle the last of the clean-up of our operation. The firmament that Saker had captured was all in the general vicinity of Lyria's summoning circle, but dowsing for it would be a nightmare, given that Lyria Spire was smack-dab in the middle of the Barrens. We couldn't leave the star-iron there, since the firmament would eventually punch through to the Ethereal Plane on its way to Abyssal and wreak havoc there, so Saker would go to Lyria and send it to me to catch. He hadn't burned through all of his power, and he had enough to make the transport ring work without any discomfort. When we were done, he could either portal home, or I could summon him.

Saker took his incubus form, stretching his hands up and his wings out, then got dressed in a handsome silk robe, a pale gleaming gray with loose sleeves and a low-cut collar. I teased him about work clothes, and he just smiled and told me that he wanted to be beautiful for me.

While I stared at him, he stepped up to me and kissed me on the forehead, soft and warm. "We're almost done. I'll be home

in time for dinner, *ledaji*.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling helplessly and fizzing with warmth from that. Home. Our home. “See you soon.”

Saker kissed my cheek, then turned and headed into the celestial room to take the portal to Lyria. I watched him go, then eyed Barixeor’s portal and squared my shoulders for the miserable experience of portaling home.

59

AN UNWELCOME GUEST

RAIN

I knew he was in the Spire as soon as I stepped out of the portal. Sorcerers are impossible to miss; we affect the ley landscape for hundreds of miles in every direction, and there's not that many of us on the Material Plane. So in less time than it took for my heart to beat, I realized that *Dastan motherfucking Soulforge* was in my Spire. I snarled, a visceral reaction, my lip going up in disgust and anger.

My head snapped up to stare at his power above me. Something about it set me on edge, like seeing something out of the corner of your vision that wasn't there when you looked straight at it. I didn't remember his power being so teeth-gritting before, but I chalked it down to him being even more of a miserable bastard than he'd been the last time I'd been in a room with him. I took a moment to pin down where he was and went up to go pry him out of my Spire with as much force as necessary.

I found Dastan sitting in a chair with his feet propped up on my dining-room table, eating one of my gods-damned

imported apples. He looked up when I came in with a gleaming smile, and kicked his feet off the table to plant them on the floor. Dastan oozed male virility from every line of his sculpted body. From his strong face set in an expression of confident arrogance to the way his broad, muscular shoulders filled out his shirt, he commanded the attention of every room he entered. I looked at him and thought about the dead succubus whose body he kept alive, feeling disgusted to have to share air with him.

“Leyweaver, I’ve been waiting for you,” he said.

“Why the *fuck* are you in my Spire?” I snapped back at him, narrowing my eyes.

He laughed. “So possessive!” Dastan said. “Come on, sit down. Have a drink with me.” He snapped his fingers and a roll of parchment appeared in the air, falling to the table and bouncing once before coming to rest, half-unrolled. “I have every right to be here, as this little missive from the Archmage indicates, but I only want to talk.”

I didn’t want to talk, but Dastan rarely bluffed, and I thought that maybe the fastest way of getting rid of him would be to listen to whatever vile garbage he had to spew. I took a seat across from him as he apported wine and glasses, unfurling the parchment.

Rage poured into my veins as I read the words inscribed in the complex Tissiten glyphs. How *dare* Rillian claim that I was derelict in my duties, when I’d just faced the void for him—for *everyone*? While panic had been gnawing at my bones,

the Archmage had not only *ignored* my request for help, but had stripped me of Barixeor and demanded I hand it over to his pet, Dastan. If he thought he'd get away with this—!

Dastan poured a glass for each of us, setting one down in front of me as my fingers tightened on the parchment, crumpling it. “Don’t look so outraged, Leyweaver,” he said, waving a hand in dismissal. “Sometimes drastic methods are needed to get people to see reason, and you can be so foolishly single-minded. Nobody else needs to know about this if you do as I require. You can keep your little Spire and whatever life it is you care about so much.”

Slowly, almost of their own accord, my hands crumpled the parchment up into a little ball, squeezing down so hard my knuckles went white. “If you think I’ll just sit down and smile for your *threats*—”

“Oh, don’t be like that.” Dastan sighed, with a pouting expression I’d never seen him wear before, swirling his glass. “Drink, and let’s talk. It’s only conversation. If we can’t come to an agreement, then we can array our armies, hmm?”

I gritted my teeth, setting aside the ball of hateful parchment with care. I wanted him gone, and I couldn’t leave him here while I did a bunch of complex summoning and sending spells with the celestial firmament. The sooner he’d said his piece, the sooner I could get him out of here. With a rictus of a smile, I picked up the glass of wine and lifted it to him in a toast.

He lifted his own with a cocky expression. “To conversation.”

“May it be ever so brief,” I replied.

He laughed again at that, and we drank. The sweet dessert wine coated my tongue, cloying and strong, the sort of cheap dreck people who’d never had wine before seemed to like. I knew Dastan had better taste than *this*. What, was he punishing me for existing?

Dastan’s eyes gleamed at me.

“Gods, what *is* this—” I started, and felt my power slip away. Dread poured into me as the suppression poison in the wine locked down my ability to channel magic. It must have been in the glass—fuck. Fuck! I could see power all around me, and the strange familiar horrifying way that Dastan’s energy curled at the edges, and I couldn’t touch any of it.

“Just a precaution,” he said. “You’re so famous for taking action, and I’d hate for there to be a misunderstanding.”

“What are you doing,” I said, as much a statement as a question, my fear making my skin cold and my hairs stand on their ends. “What the fuck are you doing.”

“You have something I want,” Dastan said, his voice calm. “I’m here for it.”

“You’re not *ever* getting to use this confluence for your filthy *experiments*,” I snarled, grabbing onto rage to keep from shaking with terror.

He tilted his head, with what looked like honest confusion. “Who said anything about experiments?”

Appalling understanding clicked into place. His power didn't flow the way it always had before. There were no channels between him and his familiar, like the channels that I had come to take for granted between Saker and I. What I'd mistaken for those powerful ley-lines was instead the power of the Fallen Star reaching out to him through its damaged prison, twining with the fragile shapes at the edge of his strength like a soul-mated lover. I'd been so angry at finding him here, so knee-jerk reactive, that I hadn't bothered to look twice when my instincts had warned me about what I'd find.

The dread turned to cold terror, because something stood in front of me that only wore the face and power of the sorcerer I knew. The thing before me had no familiar. He *was* a familiar—or something so close to a familiar that it didn't matter, bound to the Fallen Star like Saker was bound to me.

That didn't make sense—couldn't be right. Mages were always more powerful than their familiars, but the Fallen Star had never had any power of its own. It was a soul-drinker and an aberration, but the soul-parasite riding in Dastan's body had enough power that I could see the delicate overlay of its strength on Dastan's wellspring.

No time. Figure it out later.

“Where's Quicksilver, Dastan?” I asked in return, getting to my feet. “You're never without your familiar.”

Dastan smiled at me, slow and dangerous. Or, at least, his face did. “Does it matter?”

I started sliding my hand towards the folding knife I kept in my pocket. “Who are you?” I demanded. “What are you?”

Its smile only broadened, as it stood with casual ease. “Leyweaver,” it crooned, not answering. “You have something of mine, and I want it back. Give me the Fallen Star.”

60

--

THE FALLEN STAR

RAIN

I closed my fingers around my knife, unwilling to roll over and accept the future the Fallen Star's familiar had written for me. Halfway across the world, I felt Saker slashing out the lines to wake the transport ring, and I knew he wouldn't get here in time. I settled myself and turned my heart away, holding the walls up between us so that he wouldn't have to suffer with me. I wished that I'd said something—that I'd told him that I loved him. Too late, now. Far too late.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, as in my pocket, I opened the blade by fractions.

The thing in Dastan's body rested its hands on the edge of the table, strong fingers curling under the thick wood. "Don't play stupid, little mage," it said, in that same even, calm voice. "I felt you when you touched the void. My friend called out to me, just like it did ten years ago, and I followed." Dastan's lips pulled up into a snarl, and his dead hands gripped the table. "Oh, I followed."

“So that was you,” I said, stepping into the deathly calm of a mage casting a spell. “You’re the thing that’s been searching for my nightmare.”

It had been this thing that I had felt, all those years ago, hunting my Lyon alongside me. I locked the blade of my little knife open. One try, I would get one try. Without my power, I was merely a woman, standing against a force of nature. Do the krill even see it coming, when the whale opens its mouth?

“Yes, it was me,” it agreed. “I know all about you, Leyweaver. It’s taken a long time for me to get close to you without catching the attention of any of you so-superior mages.” It sighed, pulling forward a lock of Dastan’s corn-gold hair and examining it with disdain. “After that trouble with the Celestial Plane, I knew you must have been the one to lock me away from my friend. Keeping it safe from wicked people like me,” it said, putting false sympathy into its voice. “But for you to carry it with you everywhere, even to face the *void*...” The thing laughed, a cold sound wrapped in Dastan’s rich baritone. “Oh, I had never imagined that you would be so stupid. So... sentimental.”

I readied myself, searching out the right balance, so that I could fling myself across the table at it and bury my knife in the pulse of its throat. I would probably die in the attempt, but this was about more than me. If the Fallen Star was freed, it would kill hundreds. Thousands. More than thousands. Children, like I had been, afraid and alone.

Saker called me *tehmissit* – the shield of the beloved. Jace told me, *the stars named you for love*. How well they knew me. So much better than I had known myself.

“Go to hell,” I said.

It swung back its head in laughter, for a moment not looking at me. I threw myself at it, my knee slamming into the table as I struck at that bare throat with a blade the size of my finger.

The steel caught only air as the thing jerked away. It flipped the table with inhuman strength, the wood slamming into my chest and flinging me back to slide across the thick carpet of the room, leaving friction burns on the backs of my arms. The knife hit the wall with a clatter as I gasped for breath. My vision blacked out, but my mage-senses showed me the thing’s power gathering as it walked over towards me, energy lashing out and pinning me to the ground as my eyesight cleared, to show me the handsome body that had once been a sorcerer stalking towards me.

“You see what I mean?” it said, as if it discussed the weather with me. “Such thoughtless action, and for what? Some shattered glass and wine staining your carpets?” The thing crouched down by me and gave me a sympathetic look. “Poor creature.”

It hooked its fingers around the Fallen Star’s prison, and tried to rip it from my neck.

The chain hit my spine and stopped. The force of that yank sliced the chain deep into the flesh of Dastan’s fingers, and hot

blood dripped onto my neck. I sneered up at him. As if I wouldn't have enchanted the fucking chain.

It sighed, and unsheathed a dagger. "What a shame," the thing said, with mild disappointment. "We could have had such fun together. I would have liked to wield a wellspring like yours."

It stabbed me.

The blade went between my ribs, catching on the bone, in a spear of blazing agony that whited-out my senses. I came to with ringing ears and spots dancing in my eyes, as the thing wiped my blood off its blade onto my pants. I gasped for breath as the hot tang of iron filled my mouth. Bitter cold spread from the throbbing agony of the wound, following the lines of my blood through me. Mage-killer, I was full of *mage-killer*, with the power of a sorcerer behind its alchemy. Tears started falling out of my eyes, burning with sorrow and rage.

The poison chewed its way through my stored energy, working fast. As I strained uselessly against the power binding me to the floor, I saw with my dimming mage-senses the enchantment on the chain, fed by my power and badly damaged by the hunger of the void, degrade enough for the thing to wield Dastan's power with calligraphic precision, snapping it.

Smiling, it stood, releasing me from its spell-shackles and sheathing its poisoned dagger. "You'll be comforted to know that I have no intention of undoing your prison. Really, I ought to thank you for building it," it said, looking down at the coin

in its hand with a fond expression. “Not everyone gets a hundred thousand years. I’m delighted you thought so highly of my little friend.”

I scrabbled backwards across the floor, one hand pressed against the bleeding wound under my breast. I sobbed for breath, tasting iron, and grabbed for the Spire’s power over and over like a trapped animal clawing at the walls of a pit, even knowing that it wouldn’t work. It slipped through my grasp like smoke, uncaring of my fate.

The thing looking out at me through Dastan’s eyes tilted its head and looked back up, a cold and alien expression on its stolen face. “Little mage,” it said. “This could have been so easy.” It dangled my necklace between two fingers, the battered coin of star-iron spinning and spinning.

A hundred thousand years, I thought, horror and terror crushing my chest like a vise. It will kill for a hundred thousand years, because of me.

I coughed, blood on my tongue, and felt for a weapon, for *anything*. My fingers touched a broken piece of glass and I closed my hand around it, heedless of the way it sliced into me. The thing walked over, two steps, and crouched, looking at me the way a spider looks at a fly.

I swung my arm with everything I had left.

It grabbed my wrist, arresting my motion as the shard of glass kissed its neck. A bead of Dastan’s blood welled up and ran down to mix with mine. Wet crimson slid down my wrist

and fell to the floor, with the terrifying soft sound of dripping blood audible above my tortured wheezing.

It smiled, and crushed my wrist as if it was made of paper.

I screamed. Blood splattered its face. The glass fell from my nerveless fingers and shattered into splinters. It stood, dragging me up by my ruined bones, and lifted me to my toes as I wept and coughed.

”*Ledaji*,” came a sighed word of worship, a word meant for me.

Through the gray haze of pain, I saw Dastan’s pupils dilate, the pulse in his neck speeding up and his hardening shaft outlined against his pants, his body responding to the irresistible lust of an incubus. It didn’t matter if the soul-parasite could feel lust or not—it was in Dastan’s body, and Dastan *could*. Saker stood in the Spire, *my* Spire, the abyssal power of Barixeor filling his wellspring, and I felt it as he slammed all the force of a sorcerer’s strength into his lust aura.

Rage thundered in my chest as Saker stepped into the room. It dropped me and I crumpled around my ruined wrist, unable even to shove away from the thing as agony drove through my body and the mage-killer ate me from within.

“Who are you?” asked the thing in Dastan’s body, turning to look at my incubus as he paced forwards. It wore an expression of stunned, hungry desire, as ravenous as a starving wolf slavering over a raw slab of meat.

Incubus. A sorcerer-incubus, all that power poured into *allure*, into *lust*. Even simply breathing, everyone desired him to the hilt. But now?

I let myself look at him, falling into peacefulness as I watched him walk towards my killer.

Saker was so beautiful. He'd wanted to be beautiful for me, and I looked at him so I might carry something beautiful into my death. His black hair fell loose, long pieces framing his face and the length of it sliding over his shoulders. He still wore the same low-cut robe with its loose sleeves, as silver-pale as moonlight, and with every step his legs slipped through the long gaps in the silk, bare and gleaming. That long tail of his swished along the floor, his black fur soaking up the light. He didn't look at me at all, his gaze fixed on the thing that had come for the Fallen Star.

His face. Soft and yearning, his eyes gleaming with desire, his mouth parted, his ears low. His nostrils flared, and his eyes flickered down along the firm lines of Dastan's body. One white canine hooked over his lip and pressed down.

I heard the thing swallow. Knew it would be unable to defend itself from Saker, and let that knowledge comfort me as I died.

"I'm her slave," Saker said, his voice laced with something dangerous. His anger blazed through me, a consuming fire. "Her darling." He reached the thing and touched its stolen face, sliding his long fingers into Dastan's golden hair. It

looked tawdry against the night of his skin. “She loves me, and she took my choices from me.”

True. It was all true. It would have known if he lied. I couldn’t look away, even as pain ate me and the edges of my vision faded. Saker, my Saker.

The thing leaned into his touch, angling closer, and Saker obliged, putting a hand on Dastan’s waist and swaying close, until its erection pressed flush against Saker’s hips.

“You want to hurt her,” it moaned out, shivering from the contact, falling apart with the raw desire my incubus poured into its stolen body—into its stolen *soul*. Whatever it had been, whatever it had become, it had no defense against what Saker demanded of it.

Saker smiled and rolled his hips against Dastan’s body. “I want her to watch me kiss her murderer,” my familiar said, his voice vicious and heavy with lust.

The thing grabbed Saker’s hair at the base of his neck and my incubus panted with pleasure, his tail lashing.

Everything was fading away, fading to black, my muscles going lax and my vision narrowing and swimming. I stopped being able to hold myself up, and rasped for air through the blood. Angry, he was so *angry*, fury like battlefire.

“Good,” it said, a sharp expression twisting Dastan’s handsome features, and dragged Saker’s open mouth to its hungry one.

It happened in an instant. Saker's eyes burned like golden suns and Dastan's body went boneless, a puppet with the strings cut. The coin holding the Fallen Star fell and hit the floor with a ringing sound. A corona of power flared around it and died.

Everything moved so slowly, like watching honey pour. Saker dropped the limp shape that had once been a person and whirled for me, flames wreathing him. I smiled, small and final, as the pain fell away, dragging me down with it. Soul-drinker. My incubus, who had wanted me to see him tear the life from the thing that had killed me. Mine, to the end.

"*Ledaji*," I whispered, my voice broken and my lips numb.

He skidded to his knees over me, his black hair tumbling down over his shoulders. I couldn't even move my fingers to touch him one last time, so I just looked, drinking him in with my last moments. Beautiful. He was so beautiful. Saker shoved his hands under my blood-soaked shirt, one hand over the stab wound between my ribs, the other over my heart. His rage was transmuting into fear, white terror that scorched my soul. I wanted to tell him it would be okay, that he would live and be happy, but I couldn't make my mouth form the words.

"*My turn*," he snarled, slamming his stolen power into me.

Somewhere, I found the strength to scream.

Fire blazed through me, pure abyssal magic, *war magic*, and the poison in me shattered. My mage-senses flared fully back to life, almost blinding me. I saw the gaping hole in my soul where my power had been, and I realized what it really was

that I had done for Saker that night. His wellspring had been corroded and destroyed exactly as mine was, eaten by the mage-killer, and I'd poured myself into it and filled him with power again. But it wouldn't work now. It couldn't. I had been greater than Saker, greater than him and Dastan put together, and now I would die, Spirekeeper in her Spire, looking up into the face of the one I loved.

Saker poured everything into me, everything he was and everything he had, his power blazing through me with fear and desperation. He would fall with me, fall into this chasm, and then he would die—die with me, he couldn't die, not here, not in my Spire, not where I had pulled him back to life.

He wept, tears as red as blood raining onto me, mixing with the hot tears that fell from the corners of my eyes.

Let me go, I tried to say, but I couldn't move, and even as I thought it my eyes stopped focusing and I stopped breathing and the power of the Spire tore at the edges of my soul. Spire, the Spire, the Spire—

My familiar caught the thought that I hadn't been able to reach. He was not the Spirekeeper, and this was not his power to take. But I *was*, and with an animal snarl he reached in me and through me and plunged the heart of a volcano into me.

It was like having a sword quenched in my heart. It was like having molten steel poured into my veins. I had never felt such pain. Every muscle in my body tensed at once, my spine bowing and my head thrown back, my joints screaming in agony. I gasped, inhaling through my clenched teeth, tasting

fresh blood in my mouth where I bit flesh from my cheek, and my body slammed back into the floor. A sobbing whimper escaped me and Saker covered my mouth with his, kissing me like I was the only thing in the universe that mattered.

I should have died. It should have killed me. I was human, *mortal*, and no human can survive being plunged into the fire at the heart of the world. But I wasn't only human. I was demon, *abyssal*, and Saker's soul wrapped around mine, protecting me even as he rescued me, as the volcanic power filled the places in me that had been stolen by void and poison. Everything was fire, burning; flames licked across my skin and poured through my veins and melted my bones. I opened my eyes and saw only gold. The heat raged around me, whipping through my hair and stinging my eyes. I felt love, love, *love*, and the tears boiled away before they fell.

He tasted like paradise.

I buried my hand in his hair and pulled him to me, pouring my heart into him as I kissed him with everything I had. Saker inhaled, as sharp and full of need as I had ever dreamed—and dragged himself away, even though his desire and yearning coiled through me. He looked down at me with longing and let the power of the Spire slip away again, until it was only the two of us, lying on the cold floor of the dining room. We were both naked and streaked with soot and ash.

I tore my eyes from his agonized gaze to glance beyond him. There was nothing to speak of in the room. It had all been vaporized in the very literal power burn-off, leaving only

powdery ash in small vague heaps and black soot burnt into the walls. I looked back up at Saker with wide eyes. Emotion warred on his face, and red tears tracked through the black soot on his face.

“You weep like I bleed,” I said, wondering, reaching up to touch his face.

He broke, collapsing on top of me, one hand grabbing me by the back of the head and the other wrapping around my hips as he jerked me to him. Saker’s pelvis rocked against me as he buried his face against my neck, making low frantic noises, his wings trembling and his legs hooking around mine.

I was in shock and alive, and so I started laughing, high and bright.

My darling whined, nipping at my neck and panting for breath, sweat sheening his skin. “I just,” he gasped. “I need—”

My demon. My incubus. He needed to know I was alive, safe, here in his arms. His terror was a living thing, snaking through us. I grabbed him by a horn and yanked his mouth to mine, and he moaned into me as I kissed him with all the ferocity I had to offer him. His shaft started sliding out of his sheath against my thigh, slick and hard and hot. He was *intoxicating*—

The door flung open, someone rushing in, and Saker’s body went rigid as he threw himself into a crouch over me, his tail lashing and bottle-brushed. He mantled over me like a hawk protecting its kill and growled, a deep and dangerous sound,

his teeth bared and his clawed fingers curved, ready to gut an enemy.

“Magus—” came Safira’s quavering voice.

Saker snarled in warning, power coiling in his body.

“Back up slowly, close the door, and tell everyone to stay downstairs,” I said, keeping my voice as calm as I could, even as I readied myself to protect the woman from my familiar.

“But—”

“Do as I say!” I snapped, wrapping my hand around Saker’s wrist when he started to move.

He trembled with tension, distraught, and only stilled when the door snicked shut and the transport ring took Safira away. I released him and stroked his hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ears. Saker kept growling, in small waves of sound, but as I continued touching him, he relaxed by fractions, until he rested on top of me instead of crouching over me. His tail still lashed, but over the course of a half-hour it diminished in vigor until only the tip flicked.

At last he sighed and relaxed, sliding one arm under my neck and the other under one shoulder before settling down on top of me, his legs framing mine and his face nestled against my neck. His tail curved and settled across one of my ankles, and Saker started purring. I blinked.

“Ran the gamut, hmm?” I asked, leaning my cheek against the top of his head. I was alive. It was hard for that to sink in. I was alive, and I was fine.

“Mmm,” he said, his voice thrumming.

I narrowed my eyes as I realized it—he should be in screaming agony after that. And he was fine.

“You’re still channeling power,” I said.

He burrowed a little deeper against me, his purr dying.

I pressed my lips together. “It’s going to hurt more the longer you do that.”

“Protect you,” Saker said, his voice muffled against my skin.

“I’m okay,” I said, trying to be gentle.

He hugged me a little tighter, pressing his body against mine, not responding to the words.

“Sweetheart, the danger is gone. You killed it. I’m safe.”

He didn’t move.

“*Ledaji*,” I said, pleading with him. “You’re just hurting yourself now.”

Saker shivered and stayed silent.

“Please, darling.”

“It’s going to hurt,” he said, his voice small, and shivered again.

I took my hand off his shoulder and reached through the air, apportioning an injectable suppression compound and a needle. “Give me your arm and it won’t.”

My familiar sighed and shifted, baring his inner arm to me. I used a tiny summoning to pull the ash off of his skin, then measured and injected the suppression compound into his vein, all with Saker still mostly squashing me. I sent the materials up to my bedroom and stroked his back as he lay there, shuddering as the medication took effect.

“I hate that feeling,” he whined, with an edge of playfulness to the words.

“Don’t be a baby,” I said, smiling up at him. It was a silly, sappy smile, and I couldn’t help myself. I was *alive*. I was alive, and I was fine, and Saker was fine... and he was also *here*, sprawled on top of me, and we were very, very naked. I wiggled my hips under him.

He froze, his pupils dilating.

I smirked up at him. “You gonna let me up yet?”

“Not if you keep doing that,” my incubus said. Was his voice maybe a little hoarse?

He canted his hips forward against mine, making me gasp and arch my back. I might have done some of it for show. His eyes dropped down to my chest, and I grinned.

“You know, the floor is pretty uncomfortable...”

“We’re too filthy to be in a bed,” Saker said without hesitation, looking back into my eyes.

“Up, *ledaji*,” I said with a laugh.

He mock-growled at me, but he got to his feet and held out a hand for me. I took it and stood, wobbling a little, and looked down at my left hand, which had been cut by glass and then crushed. Not so much as a scar.

“You really went all-out, huh?” I said. “I feel kind of bad for leaving you scars.”

Saker stepped closer and gathered me into his arms. “I had a few more holes than you,” he said into my hair. “I don’t mind the scars if you don’t.”

I still would have been just as dead, but I didn’t say that. Instead, I looked up and traced the pale blue mark across his face, smiling at him.

“All I could think of was how beautiful you are,” I said. I hesitated, and swallowed. Nothing like near-death to put a little iron in your spine. “And how much I love you.”

Saker’s nostrils flared, and his arms tightened around me. “Don’t,” he whispered.

I flinched, stung, and he let me go, turning away. His tail curled forward, stiff between his legs, and his shoulders hunched.

I shook my head and set my jaw. “Don’t you dare, Saker.”

He whirled, his eyes full of agony. “Rain, I am going to live for a *thousand years!*” he cried. “And I... I...” Tears spilled out of his unblinking eyes again, and he dropped to his knees, hard enough to bruise. “I am going to live for a thousand years, without you,” he said, his voice dull, looking at the

ground. Saker lifted his face up to look at me, and I stared at him. “How am I supposed to live like that? If you had died, I would have died, too.”

“You almost did,” I said, my voice soft.

“You don’t understand,” Saker said in that dead voice. “Ashes cannot burn. There will be nothing left of me.”

I didn’t know what to do, or what to say. He slumped down, and I got down on the floor with him, in the cold powdery ashes, and sat with him in silence. What comfort could I offer him? I was human, and so I was going to die centuries before him.

“I would give you my time if I could,” he said, his voice so lifeless and quiet I almost didn’t hear.

Something glinted on the floor next to me, and I swept away the ashes to pick it up. The star-iron coin, with its trapped aberration.

A thought tickled at my mind—a memory of the way the thing that had killed Dastan had been bound to the Fallen Star, as if it were possible for a hedgewitch to be the familiar of a creature a hundred times less powerful than it. I frowned down at the coin. I’d never heard of such a thing, but the proof lay in my hands, a star-iron coin in which the powerless master of a hedgewitch had been trapped. I remembered the way the power had flared around the Fallen Star’s prison when Saker had killed the thing in the body of a man.

My soul-drinker. The Fallen Star was a soul-drinker, too, one who devoured the lives and wellsprings of powerful children.

I took a deep breath, and opened my mage-senses to look at my childhood nightmare in a way I hadn't since that bloody night in the field.

I had layered enchantments on this coin, barrier after barrier, until it was an indestructible prison, the only place I had put permanent spells that needed to take my power. Even damaged by exposure to the void, it was enchantment enough to blind, but it was all my power, and I knew it well. I looked through it, and past it, to where I could find the soul of the thing that waited there. Even though I'd expected it, my adrenaline spiked as I saw only the imprint of its soul in the dead space protected by my spells, sweat prickling down my spine.

The Fallen Star was gone.

“Rain?”

I didn't respond. I closed my eyes, and *remembered*:

*cold starlight like spears
hot blood as red as mine
and light and light and light*

*I came here to save my family
I came here to die
but I see*

*this: a thirsty land, drinking light like the void
and this: a hungry thing, drinking blood like a battlefield
and this: a dying man, drinking time like history*

I am full of light

I will overwhelm your darkness

I will pour out your blood

I will steal your time

one more minute

one more minute

one more minute

I drew it in the ashes, the rough shape of the other thing that had been there that night, the thing I had forgotten when I had fallen with the dawn, and never chosen to remember. I opened my eyes and looked at the curving ley pattern written there, then at Saker, who watched me with worry and pain. I couldn't be wrong. I couldn't say this and be wrong.

But I wasn't wrong.

"There's a spell," I said, and almost wept at the hope in his eyes.

61

TWIN STARS

RAIN

I told Saker what I'd seen as we showered in his suite. There'd been nothing in the prison I'd built but the imprint of the Fallen Star, a weak echo of the soul of the aberration that had once lain there in my chains. As soon as I took the enchantments off of the coin, even that would be swept away, wiped clean by the movement of the ley, and then nothing would remain of it. It had died in the same instant as the thing that had stolen Dastan's body, when Saker had drunk both their linked souls; I had seen the flare of it, even held in check by my enchantments.

Saker was my familiar. The imprint of my power was in his, and the imprint of his power was in mine. Anyone who saw one of us, saw both of us. When I'd seen the Fallen Star that first time when my mage-senses had manifested on that cold night, I'd seen both the Fallen Star and the thing that had eaten Dastan from the inside out. The memory was burned into me with perfect clarity, as all manifestations were, like the afterimage of staring at the sun. I'd recognized the subtle shift

in the eddies of Dastan's power, the frail power of the thing that had eaten him, only because I could not forget it. It had been a hedgewitch, only a hedgewitch, below notice. Until it hadn't been.

But the Fallen Star had not been its familiar. The imbalance of their bond had gone in the other direction.

"You know how familiars can get a longer lifespan from their mages?" I asked, turning off my water.

Saker was still rinsing out his long hair, and I took a moment to admire him. The flat planes of his wings gleamed, and his black hair clung to him like wet silk. Water ran down his indigo skin, leaving silver tracks along the lines and curves of his body. His tail vibrated, and I smirked.

"You're looking at me," Saker said, his voice rough.

"You like it," I said in a decent imitation of his purring seduction voice.

His tail did it again, and he reshuffled his wings.

"Familiars," he said, with obvious tension in the words. "And lifespans."

I grinned and turned away, wringing out my hair before grabbing a towel and starting to dry myself off.

"If a witch has a rat for her familiar, that rat will live for eighty years right along with her, healthy and hale through it all. It's part of the soul-bond; our bodies are as much a part of us as our minds and wellsprings, and since familiar-bonds are

asymmetrical, the familiar gets to live at least as long as their mage,” I said.

Saker turned off his water and ducked his head.

“Don’t you dare!” I yelped, moments before he shook himself like a dog, water flying everywhere. I frowned at him and peeled a long black hair off my face.

My familiar grinned. “I know all of that,” he said. “I’m a sorcerer, too, after all.” Saker grabbed a towel of his own and started getting the rest of the water out of his hair.

“Mhm,” I said. “Just listen, okay?”

He snorted, but nodded, allowing me to lecture him.

“There’s a lot of stuff like that. Take Safira and Celyn, for example. When Celyn made Safira his consort, he granted her access to everything he is, including his lifespan and regeneration. All mortal elementals can do that.” I paused in toweling off my hair, glancing over at him, then resumed. “Faery folk can do something similar. Their soul-mate bonds are symmetrical, though, so they essentially get two lifespans in a row.”

“Neither of us are fae, let alone elementals,” Saker pointed out as he toweled off his tail.

“And neither was the Fallen Star, or that thing,” I replied. “In fact, I think it must have been human, once. It didn’t have more power than a hedgewitch, and the Fallen Star wasn’t a magic-user at all. It was a soul-drinker and an aberration, but if they’d formed a regular familiar-bond, the... the Eater would

have still died, centuries ago, when its natural time ran out.” I fell silent for a moment, then shook my head, chasing off the memories. “I think it must have been dying when it found the Fallen Star. I wasn’t the first person to bind it, you know.”

Saker made a sound of interest when I didn’t immediately continue.

I hung my wet towel over the edge of the tub, dragging my fingers through my damp hair to comb out the tangles, thinking about what to say next. “You already know how dogged I can be when I’m researching something. I’ve read every scrap of writing about it I could find, and hunted down the songs and oral traditions. The Fallen Star didn’t have enough ley impact to be tracked and it was eating people who hadn’t manifested yet, so nobody could bait it out. The last person to bind it did it before we have good records, and in the stories, she died from it. But the prison was lost during a long-ago war, and then, four or five hundred years ago, it escaped.” I sighed and got out of the tub, drying my feet on the plush mat before walking over to the hooks where Saker kept his bathrobes. I dug through a couple before shrugging on a ruby silk robe.

“I can only imagine that the thing you killed found it and made a deal,” I continued, leaning against the wall and watching as Saker went through his third towel, standing next to the tub as he dried his wings. “Freedom for time.” I sketched the rough pattern that had connected them in the air with my finger, leaving glowing lines in my wake. “Even though the Eater was a hedgewitch and the Fallen Star a

hundred times weaker than it, the power differential didn't matter because the Fallen Star was a soul-drinker."

I swallowed, almost not believing what I was going to say. "Soul-drinkers can access all parts of a person through their soul, and souls respond far more strongly to consent than power. Just like you could overpower a stronger sorcerer because he kissed you willingly, the Fallen Star could bind the Eater because it came willingly. My nightmare made the Eater something so similar to its familiar that I don't think the difference matters." I took a deep breath, and dismissed the light. "And you could do the same to me, if I came willingly."

Saker watched me, a towel around his shoulders, gripping each end with his hands. His tail swayed back and forth with hypnotic precision. He was otherwise very, very still. I wasn't even sure he was breathing.

"I am very strong," I said into the quiet, watching his eyes. "And I swore to myself, after Lyon, that I'd never give anyone else that same power over me, and no one would get to sway me away from my path."

He stood there, still watching me. I could feel his fear and his hope, like twin stars. I remembered him holding me on the ship, in that darkest night, and telling me that he would be there to call me back to him, with the deep certainty that only came from love. I pushed myself away from the wall and took a step forward, then sank to my knees. Saker inhaled, sharp and surprised. He took a step towards me.

“There’s no reason to be afraid, *ledaji*,” I said gently. I tilted my head up and back, to bare my throat to him.

He came and knelt down in front of me, his mouth parted and eyes full of yearning.

I closed my eyes and let myself look through his, seeing myself as he saw me. “I’ve spent so long being terrified of getting betrayed again. But love can’t be one person joining the path of another, like an acolyte walking in the footsteps of a sage.” I took a breath and let go of his sight. “It’s two people leaving their paths to walk a new one, together. And I will leave mine for you, willingly. Gladly.”

Saker didn’t say anything, for long enough that I started to get anxious. I lowered my chin and opened my eyes to look at him. He stared at me like he was seeing me for the first time. Like he was arrested. Like I was the incubus in the room.

He lifted one hand, as slow as a dream, and brushed the backs of his fingers against my cheek.

“You have to say something now,” I informed him. “You can’t not say anything after I say something like that.”

My familiar put his fingers over my lips, and I pressed a gossamer kiss against them.

“You would give up your freedom, so I could have more time with you?” he asked at last, in a wavering voice.

“Without hesitation,” I said, and reached up to take his hand, lowering it to my lap. Then I flashed a grin at him, because he still looked at me like he had difficulty believing

that I was there. “Saker, *I* want more time with you. I trust you. I love you. And I will give you the same power over me that I have over you. I think there’s a happy ending for us, if you want it.”

“Yes,” he said on the heels of my words, so soft it was barely a sound at all. “Yes,” Saker said again, louder. “I want that.”

“Me, too,” I said, and squeezed his hand. “It’s going to take a couple days at least for me to diagram out the Fallen Star’s ley pattern and pick out the connection between it and the Eater, and then we’ll have to reverse engineer the spell. We don’t have to make any final decisions right now. It’s been a hell of a day.”

I stood up and offered Saker my other hand, which he took. I helped him to his feet, and he cupped my face in one hand.

“I’m not going to change my mind,” he said.

I smiled, and leaned my cheek against his palm. “I know,” I replied. “But I’m still going to give you the chance to.”

62

FALLING TOGETHER

RAIN

Saker leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead, then swept me into his arms, bridal-style. I squeaked and hooked one arm around his neck, making him laugh.

“You’re about three minutes away from falling asleep,” Saker said fondly, smiling at me. “Time for bed.”

“No, I’m not!” I opened my eyes wide. “See how awake I am?”

He chuckled, the sound rolling through his chest. “We’ll see, *ledaji*,” he said. He carried me out into his bedroom and headed towards the massive bed.

I leaned my head against my familiar’s shoulder and sighed. “Take me upstairs?”

Saker stopped, and looked at me in surprise.

“Upstairs?” he repeated.

I nodded, my cheek still against his bare skin. “Mhm,” I said. “You know, where the Spirekeeper and her family live?”

I felt him swallow, and had a little bit of evil glee at the shivering sensation in our soul-bond. If I'd had his tail, it would have been flicking like that of a cat waiting for someone to fall for the trap and try to pet its belly.

“Family?”

The strain in his voice was delicious. The tremulous hope and yearning that thrummed under his skin was even more so.

“Mhm,” I said again. “That’s what you are, isn’t it?”

His tail vibrated and didn’t stop. I could hear the fur shushing against itself.

Saker wheeled and strode for the door and the transport ring, flicking his tail as if to get it to stop revealing his excitement. I grinned and nestled a little closer against his warm chest as he brought us up to the Spirekeeper’s suite. He hesitated in the central room, so I used a touch of power to open the door to my bedroom in invitation. Saker made that same sharp little inhale he’d made when I’d kissed him, his tail giving another shiver, and took a cautious step.

Then he was carrying me to my bed, and I could feel his rising desire.

I tilted my chin up and inhaled against him, as if I was the one who could taste lust. He made a soft little sound of want, so I turned my face and bit him on the neck.

His claws dug into me, and he let out a quiet, shuddering moan. I could feel my pulse between my legs, and my skin tingled. It had felt good. I knew it had felt good. I knew

exactly how to touch him. My incubus. I laced my fingers in his hair and dragged my open mouth against the column of his throat, then bit him again.

Saker dumped me on the bed and followed, panting, clambering on top of me until he was on his hands and knees over me. The ache in his groin matched mine, and we *wanted*. I tried to pull him down, but he resisted, and I whined at him.

”*Ledaji*, wait,” he gasped, even though his heart pounded and his body demanded the same things mine did.

I wanted to grab him and pull him down and kiss him senseless. I wanted to feel him against me, and finally, *finally* know what it was like to have him inside me. He was an *incubus*, a fucking *sex demon*, and I knew he had wanted this since the beginning. But he had asked me to stop, and I did, dropping my hands and crossing them over my chest, pulling the red silk back over my breasts.

My familiar dropped his head, damp hair falling down, and tried to pull himself together. I waited, feeling the exhaustion that Saker had promised leaching into my bones.

He looked back up, his eyes still wild with want. “There’s no stopping if we start, Rain. You’re not going to want to stop.”

“Well, I hope not,” I started.

He shook his head, a sharp jerk of motion. “No, I mean you won’t be able to,” Saker said. “My—my spit, and my slick... I’m a gods-damned aphrodisiac.” He laughed, helpless and

brittle. “It’s not magic, it’s chemical, you’re not immune and if you taste me or—or if I taste you, or if my—if I’m inside you, you might as well have drunk a philter, *you won’t be able to stop.*” His voice sounded desperate, overriding his need. His tail kept trembling and he was half-hard, the length of him slipping out of his sheath. “You have to be sure, you have to be sure, *please*, because I won’t know to stop and I can’t hurt you, I can’t do it, I can’t—”

I held up my fingers to his mouth, and he stopped, breathing hard and shivering in waves. I looked at him for a long moment, at his pleading golden eyes and the tightness of his restraint. Love, I was looking at love, the love of my life. We were going to have a thousand years together, and it wouldn’t be enough.

“Deskhet’lyn Re’saker’veyn,” I said, using for the first time the name I had read in his ley, and crossing my fingers that I’d gotten all of it right. “Don’t be afraid.”

He shuddered, his wings going lax and his lips parting.

“I love you. I want you. Every part of you. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my entire life. Thank you for telling me, *ledaji.*” I looked up at him and smiled. “Will you kiss me now?”

Saker slid down on top of me with a groan, fitting his body against mine. He brushed aside the silk and pressed our chests together. Joy rose in my heart, making my throat tight, that we were here, together. I leaned up against him as he looked down at me, his mouth a finger’s-breadth away from mine. I couldn’t

stop smiling at him, my happiness as radiant as the light of our power. The wet heat of his desire pressed up against me between my legs, and I ground my hips up against him, wanting to give everything to him. He slid against me, and I felt the flush of pleasure spreading from that contact, promising endless delight.

“You’re sure?” he asked, needing to hear it again. “You’re sure?” He rocked his hips as if he couldn’t help himself, little tiny motions that sent spikes of pleasure through my body. He ached, the proof of his desire dripping onto my stomach.

I slid my hand between us and wrapped my fingers around the hot length of him, making him whimper with his open mouth brushing mine. Sweet Helena, it felt good, the soul-bond giving me the sensations he felt as I stroked up the hard slick shaft of him.

“Rain,” Saker whimpered, his eyes rolling up as I squeezed him. He ground down against me in a flare of pleasure.

I arched up, pressing myself against him. “Saker,” I moaned back. “Yes.”

He kissed me, hard, and I opened under him, wanting him as much as he wanted me. His needy mouth moved against mine as if whispering enchantments, and I parted my lips and twined my tongue around his. *Fuck*, he tasted like want and sex and smoke, heated and heady and *sharp*. I tasted him and I tasted my own lust, electric and sweet and thick on his tongue. I clawed at him, pulling his hair, trying to bury myself so deeply in him that I was under his skin and he was under mine.

Saker grabbed my hand and pinned it to the bed, then broke the kiss and peeled the other off of him with a groan. My incubus held my hand to his face, gleaming with his desire, and ran his tongue up my palm with long slow strokes. I whined, tugging against his hand, but he just pinned me to the bed, rolling his hips against mine with increasing urgency. Being held down by him only heightened my desire, as vivid and pleasurable as I'd ever imagined while thinking of his teeth on me.

The flush of his aphrodisiac hummed through my body, heightening every sensation, making my nipples ache and my skin beg for touch, turning the pulse between my legs into a demanding throb. Maybe it would have been that way, anyway. I wanted him. I'd wanted him for so long. But if this was what it was always going to be like, I fucking got it, all those cubari parties. I'd have summoned a fucking incubus, too, if I knew it was going to be like this.

His mouth crashed into mine again, a clash of lips and teeth and tongue. A fang clipped my lip, and the iron tang of blood brought with it a jolt of heat. I ran my tongue against his, demanding more. He was slick and hot and he tasted so fucking good. I could have kissed him for an eternity, while the stars lived and died and the world became something new.

Saker pushed my wrists together and held me there with one hand, his other hand sliding between my legs. Those long fingers of his found the peak of my sex and stroked me with small quick circles that made my nerves sing with delight. I writhed up against him, my back coming off the bed, chasing

the pleasure he gave, and knowing, too, that Saker wanted me to chase him. He pressed me back down, his wings flaring as he angled his hips, dragging his hard length down along my cleft, sliding down between his guiding fingers to push against the wet need of me.

I pushed my hips towards him, and he pulled away at the same pace, giving me nothing. I threw my head back, whining, voicing the wild desperation that drove me. My dragon grabbed my neck with his teeth, biting down hard enough that the pressure stung, his fingers still circling, circling. Lightning sang through me, my body alive with the sensation of him. He was in me, the overwhelming joy of him, twining around me and through me, the panting hot endless desire of him—

”Saker Saker please fuck me please Xair and Helena gods Saker please I need it oh goddess I need you inside me Saker Saker Saker—”

My voice, begging, begging, and fuck I needed him I was going to die I needed to feel him—

(and I could feel him like his body was mine, the exultance of the heat of me pressing against him, the slide of my skin against his, the way his body sang with pleasure and the way my need for him filled his wounded soul)

He growled, deep and dangerous, and my voice sobbed pleasure as he sank into me like he was made for me. The nubs along his shaft pressed hard against me, and I clenched around him with sliding silken pressure. Holy fuck, it was so much, almost too much, the doubled sensation as we opened our

souls to each other growing into something so much more than the sum of two parts.

Saker released my neck and snapped his hips against mine with a sharp hard motion, grinding down as I whimpered. Then he started moving again, long slow strokes that dragged pleasure out from inside of me and sent it streaking out his body, up his spine and into his belly. I matched him, reveling in him, in the overwhelming perfect feel of us together.

I arched up against him while his muscles worked and while he stared into my eyes, bright with desire, the yellow coins of his sun against the deep gray of my moon. We moved faster together, my hips begging for more and him giving it to me—giving me anything, everything I wanted. Endless words fell from my lips, a stream of desire, and he couldn't stop grinning at me with a delighted disbelieving joy, as I gave him all I had.

“Tell me what you want,” he demanded, as if I wasn't already.

I lifted my chin, looking at him as if I could devour him, my mouth open and my eyes fierce. “Come for me, Saker,” I gasped out. “I want you to come for me, *please*.”

“*Ledaji*,” he moaned, losing his own ferocity. He fell down against me, his mouth on my neck as he drove into me.

I felt him let go—stop caring about drawing things out, and stop holding back. We were heat and desire, falling together. I forgot for a moment where each of us ended: my body closed down on my hard shaft as I drove into myself with sublime synchrony, and we came with a scream and a guttural cry,

bright pleasure in cresting waves. I basked in his satisfaction as he came inside me, in the heat of his come and the shifting pressure as he flexed inside me.

“More?” Saker asked, breathless, while stars still danced in my vision.

He knew the answer, had known the answer before he’d let me have him, and still he asked and so I gave him what we both wanted.

”*Yes.*”

He started moving, incubus that he was, with no need to rest, his eyelashes limned with gold and his tongue dripping with honey. I fit my body to his, moving with him like we were one creature, in perfect ceaseless motion. With every lift of his hips I ached for him and he ached for me, and with every thrust he hit that place deep inside me that felt impossibly good and my body gripped him with a slick strength that made him crave me even more.

Saker let go of my wrists and hooked his arms around my thighs, lifting my pelvis into the air to fit more tightly against his. I pushed up against him and smirked as he shuddered with pleasure. My expression was wiped away as he thrust into me, with a burst of pleasure as the new angle brought his studded girth tighter against the sweet spot in my channel and as the thickness of the base of him pressed against my entrance. I accepted the challenge, to have more of him, and hooked my legs over his shoulders.

His claws dug into my thighs as he straightened, bodily lifting me. Now each thrust of his hips stretched me wider, pressed deeper, with a pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. Touch, I needed to be touched, I needed it and he needed it, he needed *everything*. I ran my hands over my body, digging my fingers into my skin as I dragged them up my belly, leaving lines of fire; I cupped my breasts and tweaked my nipples hard enough that he might have been biting them. Saker's shoulders curved forwards as he threw his wings out, fanning at the air, lending power to his hips as he drove into me.

I wrapped two fingers around the base of him, a hot ring of ecstasy that he ground into, moaning: moaning my name, *Rain, Rain*, like he had the first time he'd come with me. I slid those fingers higher, pressing his slick against my sensitive peak and sliding my fingertips in time with his hips. Saker turned his head and sank his teeth into my calf, and I threw my head back and screamed his name with the sheer unbridled rapture of it, the pain and the pleasure and the heady unbearable need of it all.

He slammed hard against me, the rest of him sliding inside of me, the pressure of it a flare of aching delight.

(silk and heat wrapped around me, tight and wet and gripping, it was so much, so much, everything I had dreamed and wanted and needed)

I reached up and wrapped my fingers around the perfect column of his neck, mine, he was *mine*—

(letting go, falling, a collar around my neck and my lover around me, plummeting towards absolution)

I tilted my hips and bore down on him and slid against his perfect body, that endless yearning moment stretching like time as I arched into it, a bowstring pulled back—

We crashed into ecstasy, in a gasping and sobbing of *oh gods, oh gods*. My body slammed into his and his mouth slammed into mine, my nails clawing lines of white pleasure on his back. I breathed into him and breathed him in, as the hot pressure inside me came to its crescendo.

Saker stroked my hair as my legs fell to the side, pushing his face up against my neck, nuzzling behind my ear, declaring his love over and over: *edihalu, edihalu, edihalu*. Everything was heat and pleasure and tension, and I came again with a whimpering moan, clenching and releasing around him. He fell with me, pressed against me, shuddering with it, his mouth hot and wet against my skin.

I collapsed back against the bed, hazed with ecstasy, showered with kisses. Saker was all gentle affection, his body pressed against mine. One of my legs lay bent against his thigh; his tail swept against it and wrapped under my knee, soft. Adoration and love, pleasure and contentment. I leaned my face against his and closed my eyes, letting myself be swept away.

63

FAMILY

SAKER

She fell asleep under me, warm and yielding. I kissed her again, a delicate press of lips against the soft skin of her temple, and started to untangle myself from her. Rain made a soft sound as I slid out of her, and though the scent of her was intoxicating, I refrained from burying my face between her legs and drawing my exhausted love back into wakefulness. Instead, I found the bathing-room and cleaned myself off, then made a washcloth damp and did the same for her.

I left her in my silk robe and picked her up. It felt good to have her wearing my things. Rain had claimed my robe with the same casual ease that she gave me things, as if everything we owned truly belonged to each other. Smiling down at her as she curled against me, relaxed and content, I remembered her telling me that everything she possessed was mine as well. My wonderful Rain. Noetan Sela had given her to me and given me to her, two people whose souls could heal each other.

I looked down at her for a long moment before placing her under the sheets in her bed, fanning out her long hair to dry in

the night. I wanted to curl up with her, staying with her to protect her against a danger long past, and to reassure myself that she was alive and well. Remembered terror rolled over me and I shuddered, mantling my wings as if I could hide her from danger. Perhaps I couldn't hide her, but I could hold her, and the safety she felt in my arms was all the reward I could ever have asked for.

Still, I hesitated next to the bed, not wanting to overstep her boundaries. But I remembered her saying "*family... that's what you are, isn't it?*" I felt shy about staying without explicit invitation, but she had invited me into her sanctuary and then fucked me thoroughly. She'd found my name, which I had never spoken to anyone, and given it back to me in the song of her voice. She'd told me that she loved me. Wanted me. Needed me. *Don't be afraid.*

I let go of my hesitation and sighed, almost silent, sinking into the bed with my beloved. Rain wouldn't be afraid when she woke, fearing what it meant to lie here with me. I'd felt it, when her terror had turned to grim determination, almost as if she'd whispered it into my ear: *I wish I'd told you I loved you.* And now she had, looking into my eyes with nothing but love, and asked me to kiss her, knowing everything about me.

I curled around her, luxuriating in the feel of the silk and her skin, and lay breathing with her for a long while, until the night was deep and sleep finally wrapped its generous arms around me.

64

AFTERMATH

RAIN

When I woke, the morning was stretching towards noon. I lay curled up on my side, heat and pressure along my back. I smiled, slow and satisfied. Saker pressed against me, his arm around me and his face against my hair. I sighed with pleasure, and he moved his hand to lace his fingers through mine. I looked at our joined hands, the light brown of my skin against his night, and was... happy. Just happy; overwhelmingly happy, so happy my chest felt tight and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

“You stayed,” I whispered.

Saker nuzzled my hair. “I hope that was right.”

I let go of his hand so I could roll over to look at him. His golden eyes were soft, still carrying uncertainty. That was okay. I’d spent a long time saying no, and it would take time for him to get used to the yes. He’d never been a lover before, or had a family. But we were going to have a thousand years, and I would be happy to spend the rest of it learning how, together.

I leaned my mouth up and kissed him. Saker made a low sound, his eyes fluttering closed. His hand came up to the back of my neck, and I knew that if I wanted to have him again, right now, he would give himself to me without hesitation.

I broke the kiss, feeling a little shy. I'd had a family, of course, but this kind of love – this unreserved love, where each of us would give each other all of ourselves without pause – that was new for me, too. He smiled at me, and I smiled back at him, silly helpless smiles. His heart showed in his eyes, looking at me like I was the most precious thing he had ever seen. Looking at me with love.

“Of course it was right. Every part of me is yours, Saker,” I said, and for a moment he looked like he would burst into tears, his eyes going ruddy and wet.

He blinked them back and closed his eyes, his breath coming fast and shallow. “Sorry,” he said, his voice tight. “Sorry. I—I just—”

I reached up and tucked loose hair behind his ear. He captured it and pressed a kiss against my palm, then folded my hand closed and held it to his chest, opening his eyes to gaze at me again. A broad smile spread across my face.

“It’s all real, *ledaji*,” I told him. “I love you. I’ll tell you a thousand times. Ten thousand.” I breathed a giddy laugh. “A hundred thousand, darling, I’ll tell you every day, and it won’t be often enough. I can’t ever deserve you, but by the gods, I will try.”

Saker started smiling again, almost like he couldn't believe we were here together. He leaned forward this time, pressing a soft kiss to my mouth, and I shivered with pleasure.

"You saved me," he said, "You deserve more than I can give."

"I don't want more," I said. "I want you." I rubbed my cheek against his, and his contentment rippled through us as I laid my head on the pillow again. "You saved me, too, you know."

Saker laughed. "Yes, I remember."

"You've been saving me every day," I said, "Little by little. I was broken and locked in a prison of my own making, and you set me free." I smiled into his eyes as his fingers swept across my neck in an affectionate touch. "You're going to have to marry me, you know."

He drew in a sharp breath, a shiver running down his body. I felt the hairs down his spine and on his tail rising, and I grinned at him, feeling rather wicked.

"Are you asking?" Saker said, his voice rough.

"Maybe," I said.

His mouth parted, and the corner kept trying to pull back in a smile. I kissed him on the nose, quick and soft. He did the same back to me.

"Alright," he said.

I raised my brows. "Alright?"

“Mhm,” he said. “Alright.”

I laughed, and he smiled, and then my darling rolled me onto my back and kissed me, gentle and sweet, holding my face between his hands. I kissed him back, eyes closed, luxuriating in the feel of him and the joy of him. Saker lifted his mouth off of mine, then pressed his lips down again as if he couldn't bear not to, his fervor sending heat racing across my skin. I threaded my fingers into his hair and leaned up, pressing my body against his, more than happy to make love to him again. He pulled away a fraction, breathing down into my face, with that beautiful helpless smile, and braced himself with his elbows on either side of me.

I looked up, expectant, and he booped me on the nose with one finger, making me laugh.

“You're being coy,” I said, running my hands through his hair.

He started purring, and I closed my eyes and laid my head back, enjoying it. Saker leaned back down. He kissed me on the corner of my mouth, and then my cheek, and then down my neck and throat, purring the whole time. I smiled and smiled, so happy to be here with him. I wanted this moment to last forever.

My familiar lay his head next to mine, and his purring slid to a stop as he brushed his fingertips along my collarbone. “As much as I want to take advantage of your surrender, I think we should maybe tell everyone that we're alive,” he said, with obvious reluctance.

I winced. That was reasonable. The last anyone knew of what had happened was me throwing Safira out of a room burned to the ground while a feral Saker crouched over me.

“Gods, not to mention contacting the fucking Monitors,” I said. “I’m surprised they haven’t been pounding down the door.”

My familiar laughed at that, and pushed himself up. “*Ledaji*, look again,” Saker said, grinning down at me.

I furrowed my brow and paid attention to my mage-senses for a moment—and as soon as I did, shot up off the bed with a yelp, sudden enough that Saker had to fling himself to the side to keep me from slamming my head into his.

“Saker!” I yelled. “You ass!”

He rolled onto his back, laughing with delight.

“Fucking Crucible of hell, there are *six* thaumaturges and a fucking *sorcerer* down there, and you didn’t tell me?!”

Saker wiggled against the bed. “You have mage-senses,” he said, his smug pleasure radiating off him like heat off a bonfire. “It’s not my fault.”

I scrambled out of bed and out of the wrinkled silk robe, then started dressing as fast as I could make my hands move. “Tissit Kalar!” I said. “That’s the fucking *Archmage*! Why the fuck aren’t they coming in through the thrice-damned *portals* by now?!”

Saker grinned, earning himself a sharp glare.

“I locked the Spire,” Saker said.

I screeched. “You did *what!*”

“Locked it,” he repeated, lacing his fingers behind his head. Oh my fucking gods, he was pleased with himself. “You needed your sleep.”

I shoved my feet into boots without bothering with socks, hopping on one foot as I did, glaring at him. His mouth curled up into a smile, the cat who ate the fucking canary.

“How the *fuck* did you do that?” I said. “You’re full of suppression tincture!”

Saker wiggled a little deeper into the bed. “You’re not,” he purred.

I gave him an open-mouthed look of shock, impressed at him despite myself, then shook my head and raked my hair back into something akin to a horse-tail.

I started stalking to the door when Saker’s voice lilted up at me, “Your shirt’s on backwards.”

“Gah!” I rotated my shirt, slapped my hands on my hips, and looked back at Saker. “You coming with me, or what?” I snapped.

“Nah,” Saker said. “I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

I made another exasperated sound and strode out of the room for the transport ring, and headed down to face the music.

I had to face my servants before anyone else. They had, all of them, stayed in the kitchen together, and when I walked in three pairs of worried eyes turned towards me. I didn't think any of them had gotten any sleep, judging by the dark circles under Safira's eyes.

"Magus," Marin said, her voice wavering. "You're alright."

I grimaced and scrubbed at my face. "I am, and so is Saker, but I *have* to go deal with the welcoming committee outside right now, or it's going to be a huge fucking problem."

Safira opened her mouth, but Bashen put his hand in front of her face. "Do what you need to, Rain," he said, his voice firm. "We can wait."

I looked at them all, my stomach twisting with tension, then went to the door and opened it, deciding at the last moment to keep the portals locked in case there were strike teams waiting on the other side. Nine heads swiveled to look at me with the precision of hawks locking onto a hapless mouse. The Archmage looked like he was ready to blast me into a greasy smear, his eyes reddened and mouth snarling.

"Archmagus Whitescale, honored magi, please forgive my rudeness in leaving you locked outside in this trying time," I said in my best polite voice, though I wanted to spit in Rillian's face and slam the door on his nose. "After the events of last night, I thought it prudent to leave Barixeor locked while I recovered, in case other enemies waited. Please, be welcome," I finished, and stepped to the side, gesturing into the entry of the Spire.

Rillian stalked in first, without saying a word, followed by the six thaumaturges and their two assistants. One woman looked at me with a knowing, self-satisfied expression I recognized from Mage-Seneschal Nighteye's face, then glanced down at the floor. My eyes followed hers to her shadow automatically, catching sight of the Mage-Seneschal's shadow-eyes opening as she passed, half closing in a wink before her shadow returned to normal.

Oh. The Mage-Seneschal was a shapeshifter, and I was willing to bet he was here without Rillian's knowledge. I did not like knowing either of those facts.

I followed, feeling unsettled, as the Archmage hauled us up to a study before whirling on me.

"You murdered Dastan Soulforge! Why should I not kill you where you stand?" he snapped, his assorted entourage looking anywhere but me.

Once, his pointed rage might have sent terror streaking through my veins, but in the past week I'd faced down the end of the world and defeated it by feeding it to the void, then gotten stabbed, poisoned, and nearly killed. My whole feud with Archmagus Whitescale seemed so petty now, and he came off as a puffed-up toad croaking after his rock got flipped instead of a powerful, dangerous sorcerer.

I crossed my arms and raised one eyebrow. "I didn't, actually. Dastan was dead before he set foot in Barixeor. He had a soul parasite puppeting his body." I gave him a sharp smile as his jaw snapped shut with an audible clack of teeth. "I

didn't even kill the parasite. Magus Saker did, since I was in the process of dying at the time."

Nobody moved while Rillian and I stared each other down. He gave in first, his shoulders slumping as he dropped down into a chair and put his face into his hands. Silence held sway while he sat there, grief marking the lines of his body.

He loved him, I realized with a profound sense of shock. Dastan hadn't only been a protege, or someone the Archmage had been grooming for a public face. Rillian had actually loved him like a son, and the loss weighed on him. Of course he'd come, when he had no right to take over the Wardens' enforcement procedures. Maybe that explained why Nighteye was secretly tagging along and allowing Rillian to shove his way to the front, even though the Mage-Senechal technically was in charge of all inquiries.

In a snap decision, I decided not to accuse the Archmage of trying to take away Barixeor instead of providing the assistance he should have given. The parchment had been incinerated, and since it was written in Rillian's handwriting, it had either been a secret missive or a very good forgery. Rillian would surely declare that it was a forgery rather than admit to making such a stupid play on Dastan's behalf, and I didn't want to rely on the Mage-Seneschal's honor when it came to making an investigation. Whatever games the Triumvirate played with each other, I didn't want to be involved. Those deep waters didn't interest me.

“Allow me to take you to where the incident occurred,” I said at last, breaking the heavy silence. “Magus Saker is still resting, but I was present for the entire event, and I can give you my testimony.”

The thaumaturges all looked at the Archmage, who didn’t move, then back and forth between each other. At last, one of them pressed her lips together and stepped forward. “That would be good, Magus Leyweaver. We’d also like to interview your staff...?”

“I only have three employees,” I told her. “Bashen is the minotaur, and Safira is the consort of the lake’s water-horse. Marin is my quartermaster and cook. All three are still on One Sky, in the kitchen.”

The woman, an iron-haired lady with a stern face, glanced over at two of the thaumaturges and gave them a jerk of her chin. They bowed without speaking, leaving the room with one of the two assistants—*not* the woman the Mage-Seneschal was masquerading as, I noted, without any surprise. He would want to be present for my recitation.

The rest of us trooped up to the incinerated dining room, the Archmage following behind, and I walked them through what had happened from the time I’d arrived in Barixeor the day before through Saker saving my life. I didn’t volunteer any information about the Archmage’s decree or about Saker being my familiar, and I didn’t get any questions about them. Rillian gave me a narrow-eyed look that told me he really *had* written the letter, but he certainly didn’t tell the others about it.

Maybe, in some twisted way, he thought it was a peace offering for Dastan's death. It wouldn't smooth anything over, of course, and Rillian just as easily might decide that my silence meant I had some devious plot to hang his actions over his head, but he could stew in that as much as he wanted. I didn't care. I just wanted, after a decade of consequences, to finally take a damn vacation.

When it came time to collect the body, I apologized with my best imitation of sorrow, feigning a regret I didn't feel that Dastan's remains were impossible to identify. Rillian ended up collecting a section of ash from near where I'd found the Fallen Star, placing them in an inlaid wooden box lined with copper that I brought up from storage. I supposed that Dastan's family didn't need to know that there was a good chance that "his" ashes included part of my dining-room table; the knowledge looked hard enough for Rillian to bear.

Compassion was a new emotion to apply to the Archmage, but seeing him like this would have tugged on the stoniest heart. He looked fragile and old. No doubt he would be back to his pernicious self before long, but in this moment, I could see the man behind the political monster, and I pitied him.

Death comes for us all, but the cruelty of sudden loss is a burden even for the most stoic of men.

65

HAPPINESS

RAIN

E ventually, after a great deal of convincing, the troop of mages left, with one of the thaumaturges opening a gate in my front yard and the whole lot of them stepping through. I didn't relax until the last traces of the gate had been swept away by the Tsirisma Confluence, but as soon as I knew I wouldn't have to face any more people, I unlocked the portals and sagged, shuffling into the kitchen and dropping in a chair with a groan.

My stomach answered with a snarl, reminding me that I hadn't eaten for more than a day, so could I maybe fix that?

Marin, always prepared, put an enormous plate of food in front of me, and I started inhaling it as Saker came downstairs and took his seat next to me. I watched as Marin and Safira's eyes locked on him, and then with bemusement as Saker's eyes glowed and they both blinked, as if they'd just woken from a spell. He kept eating their lust – *all* of their lust, apparently – and Safira shook herself and went to open the door to Barixeor, letting Celyn in. The water-horse came into

the kitchen on two feet, stark naked but (thankfully) not dripping wet.

Everybody sat and chatted with each other while I cleaned my plate of food, save for Saker, who similarly devoted his attention to the bowl of raw meat Marin plunked down in front of him. At last, I leaned back in my chair, looking around the room while Saker crunched through a whole rodent of some kind or another.

I ran through the whole story again, giving them a fuller picture of what had happened than I'd given to the Wardens.

Marin shook her head at the end of the tale, sighing. "I know there's nothing we could have done, but I hate that we spent days dancing attendance on a monster."

I drummed my fingers, pursing my lips in a pensive expression. "That's the problem with monsters, I guess," I said at last. "Everyone they encounter has to live with the touch of their shadow. For what it's worth, I'm very glad that none of you tried to do anything about him." I shook my head. "Even if the Eater had been only Dastan, he could have made any of your lives miserable if you'd tried to interfere. As for *you*—" I said, pointing my fork at Safira. "What were you fucking thinking, bursting into the room like that? That's the stupidest thing I've ever seen, and you *know* what a dumbass I can be."

Safira's skin darkened as she blushed, her shoulders hunching. "It's not like I could have died—" she started.

"That's where you're wrong," I said sternly, setting the fork down. "There are ways to sever consorts from their

elementals, and any sorcerer who knows how has the power to do it. You're only immune from a regular death while you're protected by Celyn, and don't fucking forget it."

"Even knowing you would wake up in the lake, re-formed by the waters, I would have mourned hurting you for the decades it would take," Saker added, his ears shifting and tail curling around my ankle.

"Don't try it," I warned when Safira opened her mouth to argue. "Look, I'm happy to let you find your place in the world, but I've been living in this one since I was a child. *Never* do something like that again. I won't have your death and Celyn's grief on my conscience."

"Rain," the water-horse said, looking away from his love to meet my eyes. "You need not be so maternal. I have been remiss in my duty, and failed to teach Safira how to navigate these waters. Be assured that I will do so, and take your peace." His mouth curved up into an unsettling smile. "She is capable of more than you give her credit for."

I made a disgruntled noise, but relented.

My familiar, amused, leaned close to my ear and whispered, "*Inati.*"

At last, Saker and I escaped back upstairs, and I threw myself onto my bed (our bed?) with an exaggerated groan. My darling laughed and started undressing, undoing the laces at the back of his neck. I put my hands behind my head and watched him, that same unanticipated happiness welling up in me.

“How come everyone but Bashen wasn’t fantasizing about you?” I asked. “That’s new.”

Saker grinned as he finished taking off his shirt and stretched, his arms over his head and his wings spreading down and out.

“I couldn’t do it with a room full of people,” he said. “Something fell into place for me, though, when I soul-drunk the Eater. I knew exactly where all the lines between its power lay. What was its lust, what was its soul, and what was its wellspring.” Saker unwrapped his skirt and draped it over a chair, then clambered into bed and over me, crouching on all fours above me while I smiled up into his face. “And I did today, too. I think I’ll always know, now.” He lowered himself down, bending his arms so he could kiss me. “I was thinking about it this morning, and realized that I can take all of their lust for them without any risk of taking anything else, and I can do it for you, too, if you would like.”

“When would I ever want that?” I asked, grinning.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Saker said, in a casual voice that didn’t match his wicked expression or the excited anticipation washing into me. His voice dropped as he said, “If you want to make love in the morning.” He kissed me, caressing my mouth with his. “Or have me in the garden at a party.” His tongue darted out as he kissed my neck. “Or get fucked against the wall after lunch.”

I made a low noise, desire pooling in my belly. Saker nipped my neck, and I slid my hands down and grabbed his ass. He let

out a satisfied groan.

“Okay, enough talk,” I said. “More sex.”

Saker laughed, a wicked dark chuckle, and started undressing me. He paused long enough to run his tongue over my nipples before tugging my pants off, sliding between my legs with a deep inhale and happy sound. My lover wrapped his arms under my legs, bending my knees and stroking down my legs.

“This is what I want, *ledaji*,” he said, his voice thick. Saker kissed the side of my thigh, just below the knee. “This is what I’ve always wanted.”

“Love?” I asked.

“That, too,” Saker agreed, as he settled himself lower, a different sort of hunger coiling through me as my breath sped up. “But *yenamalikh*, what I want is to *worship*.”

He lowered his mouth to me, and I moaned before his tongue even touched me, as his dragon’s flame-hot breath fanned out against me, hot enough to burn any ordinary mortal. And then he *did* touch me, and my back arched up off the bed as the hot wet length of his tongue pressed against me. Pleasure radiated out from my core as he started licking me in long slow laps, the aphrodisiac in his saliva fuzzing out into my body, making me more sensitive and flooding me with heat.

I reached down and wrapped my hands around his horns, the way I’d first imagined having him. Saker made a pleased

sound and started purring, with enough force that the vibration translated to the press of his mouth against me.

“O-o-oh,” I moaned out.

He shifted his attention to focus on my peak, dragging the forked tip of his tongue across me so that his slick tongue pressed down on all sides of my sensitive nerves. Saker kept his mouth against me, scorching hot and wet, the tension coiling inside of me as I rocked my hips against his face, holding him there. I looked down at him, panting and with hazy vision, consumed by want.

His hot golden eyes flicked up to my face, full of predatory hunger as he pressed against me. Saker held my gaze for a moment, before turning his attention fully back to pleasuring me. My familiar shifted and leaned a little more into our soul-bond and his aching desire poured into me, matched by the throbbing of his arousal and his sheer delight in devouring me.

I stroked my hands along his horns, as if I could have them wrapped around him, and whimpered as he sucked on the peak of my sex, throwing my head back with the glorious surge of lightning-strike pleasure that ran through us. Saker took the opportunity to slide a finger into me, his face moving as he teased me, panting against me, and then I felt his other hand wrap around himself.

I moaned, pushing up against him as he pressed his finger into me in time to the movement of his hand, adding a second finger and following my bucking movement without hesitation, still purring, purring, the vibration shivering out

through my sex and across my skin. I gave into sensation, giving him my wantonness with ease. Pressure built, rising inside of me and inside of him, liquid hot gold running through my veins and streaking up my spine, building and building until all I could feel was the impossible sweetness of the pressure of his fingers inside me and the hot press of his tongue against me.

His name fell from my lips, over and over, and then even that sound died as my body arched up against him, everything drawing tight and singing with fragile, perfect pleasure before he moved *just right*. We climaxed together, my body seizing his fingers as I cried out. I slammed his mouth against me as I bent up towards him, and his hand pumped as pleasure shot through him, his groin tight and his shaft jerking against his fingers.

I fell back, my fingers falling from his horns as I collapsed onto the bed, and it was so good, so good, I needed it, needed more—

Saker looked up at me as I whined, taking his mouth off of me, and his eyes flared with light for one moment. All of a sudden, I was fine, only regular levels of post-coital bliss, and as Saker pulled his fingers out of me I shivered from the pleasure without needing to claim more. He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm and crawled up next to me, flopping down on the bed with an adoring smile. I smiled back, but threw my head back and whimpered as he ran the backs of his fingers down along me.

He laughed, pleased. “I guess you get to keep the sensitivity,” he said, sounding amused and intrigued. He did it again, making me writhe underneath his gentle touch.

I grabbed his wrist and plucked his hand off of me, giving him a mock-glare that was really weakened by my shallow breathing and the fact that I kissed him not two seconds later. Saker kissed me back, his love and adoration twining around my soul, just as mine did for him. We broke the kiss, and Saker rested his forehead against mine.

“Are you happy, *fikhiri*?” he asked. “Do you still want me to stay?”

I leaned forwards, kissing him again. “Love of my life,” I said, and he smiled with such aching joy that tears pricked the corners of my eyes. “I’ll follow you to the ends of the worlds if you ask me to. I’ll always want you by my side.”

And it seemed like that was the right thing to say, because Saker kissed me again, his long fingers tangling in my hair, and together we forgot the world.

[EPILOGUE] THE ECLIPSE GALA

RAIN

As had been tradition for hundreds of years, every time there was a lunar eclipse over the University, the Archmage, keeper of Merrhenya Spire, threw a party. It had been an unusually long gap between galas – almost three years – and so attendance was expected to be quite good. Saker and I had spent probably too much time gloating about our secret and figuring out the most dramatic possible way to reveal it, and now the day was finally here. While the miserable weather outside Barixeor Spire kept me locked inside – extra miserable, now that I was as much abyssal as Jace was celestial – the University stood far to the south of us, in a tropical region full of lush trees and raucous birds, and I was looking forward to the warmth.

“Ready?” I asked, looking over at Saker.

He admired the collar I’d made for him for one moment longer before turning to me with a brilliant smile. It was a pretty piece of work, fitting to his throat in flexible, overlapping steel scales, all etched with patterns evoking

foliage that doubled as ley-channels for the enchantments on it. “Very ready,” he replied, and jumped onto my shoulder as a cat.

The collar shifted with him, so that it fit his cat’s neck with the same comfort that it fit his demon’s neck. It fit him in all his other shapes, too. I was damned proud of it, and it was as much his design as mine.

I took one more long look in the mirror. We looked incredible together. Around my neck curled a star-iron torc, made from the firmament gifted to me by the stars. The dove-gray gown sewn all over with tiny, glittering gemstones draped across my body, gathering at one hip before falling down in a glimmering cascade to stop at my ankles. My bare feet wore only enchantment to keep them warm and unharmed, with my toenails and fingernails painted a shimmering black. The onyx and platinum jewelry matched the dark shadow of the Blackwings cloak that fell down my back, held in the form of a pair of great feathered wings that brushed the ground as I moved. On my shoulder, Saker was as black as night, gleaming and golden-eyed, lithe and powerful.

With a smile at our reflection, I broke the disc that had come with my invitation, and the world whirled into motion. Around us, the arrival-room to the Lunar Pavilion resolved, all marble walls and tapestries. A moment later, the waiting servant bowed to us and opened the door to the entry hall. A second pair of servants stood there, dressed in stark black, and I smiled at them, handing over my announcement card.

One opened the door into the main room, while the other stepped forward and announced, “Magus Rain Leyweaver, the Starsworn, Keeper of Barixeor Spire, and her cat.”

Eyes turned towards us as I stepped into the room, wearing my best smile. A lot of eyes. My smile tried very hard to trespass into smugness as mages eyed me, but I kept it together. Saker sat regal on my shoulder as people started whispering to each other—either about the cat, or about the wings that I flexed and resettled along my back. Blackwings might not have been the most famous legendary artifact out there, but we were in a room full of sorcerers and thaumaturges, and some of them definitely recognized it.

Across the room, I saw Archmagus Whitescale clenching his wine glass with such a foul temper that I was surprised he didn’t snap the stem between his fingers. Tales of the Very Big Rock and the destruction of the Fallen Star had circulated and grown; I’d heard at least one song that had more verses than sense, and for more time than I’d enjoyed my face had been plastered on every mage report on the plane. My heroism hadn’t sat well with the Archmage, especially in comparison to the derision he’d earned for standing aside.

I circulated through the room for a little while, saying hello to friends and acquaintances, and replying that, why, yes, I had a cat, and isn’t he handsome? He’s really quite excellent for pest control, you know; far better than the Spire wards. Oh, you like the wings? Yes, Blackwings, did you know that they’d been in a rotting crate at the bottom of an ethereal ocean for an eon or so? Such a waste.

Across the room, I saw Qavan look up at me, raising one slender brow with a smile, but he stayed back to watch the fireworks. Jace made her way over to him, looking resplendent in violet-and-silver brocade, her star-iron sword-cane gleaming in the magelight. She caught my eye and smirked, tilting her head towards Rillian, as if to hurry me up. Eventually, I made my way over to the Archmage, who put on an expression that looked like it was supposed to mimic polite welcome, but instead made him appear rather like he wanted to explode me with his mind.

“Archmagus Whitescale,” I said, in my oiliest voice. “What a lovely gala this is, as usual. You truly have a brilliant mind for event planning. I can’t wait for the eclipse to start, and see what you have in store for us.” I looked down at his glass of vivid green liquid, and made a little pleased sound. Judging by Saker’s levels of amusement, I was maybe overdoing it, but watching Rillian Whitescale turning colors hadn’t lost any of its delight. “Oh, is that a lunar grasswine?” I asked. “What a delightful choice for the evening.”

I could practically hear the man’s teeth grinding.

“Yes,” he said, his voice tight. “A young vintage, but quite excellent. From the Danakhhar Vineyard, though I doubt you’ve heard of them.”

I could feel people looking over, knowing how the Archmage and I felt about each other, and enjoying the show that came from me doing yet another thing that was allowed, but which made the Archmage want to froth at the mouth.

“Oh, Danakhhar?” I asked, showing him my teeth. “‘Vineyard’ is a bad translation, don’t you think? Since the fruits are foraged from the wild by nomadic fae, and it’s never the same location twice.”

His lips tightened into something like a smile. “Then I’m surprised by you, Rain,” he said. “Since you know the makers, I’d have thought you’d have a glass in your hand by now. Too busy rubbing the contrast between your latest conquest and your witch’s familiar in everyone’s faces?”

I smiled like a knife. “You’re quite right,” I said. “I could use a glass. Saker, would you be so kind?”

Saker meowed back, and I prepared a cantrip as he leapt off of my shoulder.

My familiar landed in a crouch on the ground as an incubus, and Rillian’s glass slipped out of nerveless fingers as the whole room inhaled. I caught the wine glass with my cantrip and turned to admire Saker as he stood.

It hadn’t been easy to give him physical clothing between forms, but we’d spent a long time thinking about what would display him to best effect, and it had been worth the effort. The backless silk shirt clung to his skin, moon-pale, and a skirt made of layers of heavy, rippling fabric emphasized his body, with slits going up the fronts of his thighs and another up the back for his long tail. Gleaming pearlescent powder marked the membranes of his wings in geometric patterns, outlined his golden eyes, and ran in a vertical line from his lower lip down

his throat. The long filigree cuffs running up his horns dripped with pearls.

I heard a thud as someone fainted, and a yearning voice began swearing with eloquent fervor.

Every eye followed Saker as he sauntered over to the alcohol table, where an awestruck sommelier stood, his mouth open. I had to keep from laughing hysterically as Saker touched one stunned sorcerer on the jaw with his fingertips, meeting her eyes for a long moment before making it to the sommelier. The woman – who I knew to be indomitable – looked like she'd been touched by a god.

Saker flirted with the stammering sommelier and flexed his wings for the watching crowd, his long tail swishing behind him. Someone sighed with passion, though conversation started to rise as mages picked their jaws off the floor and started getting their bodies under control. My familiar passed the sommelier a gold coin for his trouble – he must have apported it – and turned back to me with a satisfied smile, returning to my side and passing me the glass of summer-green grasswine.

Still holding the Archmage's glass in one hand, I swirled my own and tasted the wine, while Saker came up behind me, brushing his fingers along my neck in a distracting fashion.

“Are you pleased, magus?” he asked, in a rumbling purr, making my breath come a little quicker. Oh, wicked incubus.

“Perfect, *ledaji*, thank you,” I answered.

Saker put his hands on my shoulder and jumped back up as a cat, fixing the Archmage with a very smug stare.

I looked up to Rillian with an arch smile, and held out his wine glass to him. “Your wine, Archmagus.”

He plucked it from my hand, his face twisting, saying nothing.

I took another sip of my grasswine. “You were saying something about my witch’s familiar?”

I watched with satisfaction as the Archmage turned purple and whirled away from me, snarling as he strode through the crowd, and you know what? It was even better than if I’d had a mortal cat, after all.

I made a pleased little sound and turned to Saker as the people around us decided who would drag the explanation out of me first. “What do you think, love?” I asked. “Will the stories told about tonight be true in a thousand years?”

Saker’s laughter lit my soul as he purred for me, his tail sweeping against my shoulder.

I grinned at him as Qavan beelined through the crowd towards us, Jace following in his wake. “You know, I can’t wait for us to find out.”



Endings are only new beginnings...

Read on for more by Mallory Dunlin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mallory is a monster aficionado who spends her time reading, writing, and dreaming about beastly lovers. When she doesn't have monsters on the mind, she can be found hiking with her two wolfhounds or watching survival shows with avid glee. She makes her home on the East Coast alongside her dogs, three chickens, and a mischief of rats.

If you enjoyed the book, she'd love to hear from you! Leave a review, join the newsletter at mallorydunlin.com, or reach out at mallory.dunlin@gmail.com!



*Do you like soulmates, enemies-to-lovers, and deadly fae princes who won't let anything stand between them and their one love? Check out Captured by the Fae Beast, the first book in the *Monsters of Faery* series.*



If you prefer feral women, desperately horny men too shy to make the first move, and only-one-bed situations, read on for the first chapter of The Changeling and the Dragon, the next book in the Echoes of the Void series.

THE CHANGELING AND THE DRAGON

CHAPTER 1: NOT ACCORDING TO PLAN

I needed to get out of Papiko. The sovereign city wouldn't allow its neighboring country to extract criminals, even ones who had assaulted a keeper of the law with a deadly weapon, but the guards at the gate had me trapped here, and my desperation grew daily. I took stock of my situation for the hundredth time, standing in the shadows of the docks, looking out over the harbor. I had five knives, two copper bits, and a hungry belly to my name, and no one wanted to give me the chance to earn more coppers, not even the lowest-class brothels.

It wasn't like I didn't know what the problem was. I'd lived in the Lunar Court of the fae for the first nineteen years of my life, kept by my kidnappers and guardians. I'd grown up around unseelie fae, who were creatures of high temperament and chaos, and here in the human world, I struggled to remember the rules of behavior, or to keep in mind the laws that ruled humanity. I'd learned to move like the fae, in quick, smooth, fluid motions. I'd learned to talk like them, too, lilting

and sharp-edged, to the point where I couldn't shake my accent, cutting my words too tightly on the consonants and leaning too far into the shapes of the sounds. But even if people could overlook my behavior, my movement, and my voice, nobody overlooked my face.

I glanced down at the puddle of water in the top of the barrel next to me. In the light of the moon, my coloration washed out, the jaw-length vivid red curls of my hair looking brown and my heavily freckled skin pale. The moonlight did nothing to hide the sharpness in my wide-set brown eyes, nor the firm line of my mouth, set with determination. And it called to life the white tattoos that marked my face, gleaming with the almost imperceptible light of the silver wood that I had once called my home.

The beautiful lines curled and cut across my skin, the part of Faery I would always carry with me, even now that I walked the human's Material Plane instead of the opposing Ethereal Plane of the fae. Three parallel chevrons on my forehead ran from my hairline to meet just between my brows, and above them, a crescent moon, horns up, marked my third eye. A circle, representing the full moon, sat just below my lower lip. And, in a line as broad as the width of my smallest fingernail, a toothed oval circled my neck, following my collarbone.

A fat drop of water fell from the overhanging roof onto the water, casting ripples across my reflection, and I looked away, my heart aching for the home I'd lost and might never see again. The four planes that made up the world only rarely touched without the use of magic, and the sort of spell that

could open a door between them could only be cast by the strongest of mages, those ranked as thaumaturges or sorcerers. I hadn't been given the opportunity to learn how to travel the paths used to steal me and to return me, and I was no mage, nor the sort of person who could ever hope to hire a mage of that caliber. I didn't have any way home.

I looked back over the docks, forcing myself back into the present. With no money and no hope of earning more, I could never manage to get on a ship in the usual way of things, and everything going onto ships was inspected to prevent people from stowing away. A ways down the docks, I saw a large ship in the process of getting loaded, the sort of ship that would travel further than the next city down the coast. It was the sort of ship that could get me out of here, if only I could get onto it, and a reckless idea took hold of me.

I focused my sight, leaning into my ability to see spells. The fae called it "clarity": the gift of seeing through glamor and illusion, and reading the channeled ley energy that made up spells of all kinds. My *vehmalt* - my male guardian, who stole me from the Material Plane - had given it to me as payment for my service to the fae as a changeling, and I'd grown up with it, a gift that had saved my life more than once. Hopefully it would save me again tonight.

As I paid attention to the spellwork around me, the world began to gleam with spectral light. Mages and witches all sensed magic in different ways, and from the few low-rank magic-users I'd spoken to, the way I saw spells differed from their mage-senses, which didn't get blocked by such petty

things as walls and objects. For me, it was as if the spells were just another physical object, patterns made up of threads and ropes of silvery light, and I'd been reading them for so long that I could usually figure out what the spell did, what rank of mage had cast it, and roughly how long it had left before it degraded and vanished from the world.

I glanced up at a fraying spell on the gutter, a slapdash fix for a leak that couldn't have been put there by anyone stronger than a hedgewitch, and wouldn't last another week, especially if it rained again. Then I headed down to the docks, strolling along the water's edge. The harbor and ships were all protected by magic, ranging from powerful, long-term enchantments that must have been made by thaumaturge-rank mages, down to good-luck spells that might have been gifts to sailors as they left, fragile little things made by hedgewitches. It all shone silver to me, whether painted onto hulls or hanging in the air along the water's edge, a lacework of light.

The beauty was lost on me as anxiety and hunger gnawed on my spine. I needed a way to get into the harbor's water without detection, to find a hole in the wall of spells like a rat trying to find a crack in a house's foundation. People looked at me, the strange woman scanning the air like a mad person, and I made myself slow down, slouching and making my eyes go dull and lazy. It worked well enough; the glances became less, and I turned into just another tired resident, taking in the fresh seaside air.

There. A spell closing off one of the storm drains, worn like a shirt washed too many times by the force of the harbor's

waters. Its bright tracery had holes in it, and the strands that remained had thin places, in the way that poorly-made yarn does. One quarter of the drain's opening had no ley power blocking it at all, and I thought I would be able to fit through that gap in the harbor's defenses.

Trying to look nonchalant, I turned and followed the storm drain up the street and out of sight of the docks. Eventually I found a grate large enough for me to get into, spell-free but with little gleaming fragments of ley channels that suggested someone had deliberately broken the spell on it for access. I took advantage of their work and slithered down into the slime and wet. The water came up almost to my knees, even this far from the harbor, warm and with a shining skin of grease on it, and the tunnel of the drain stretched out into the black in either direction.

I turned towards the harbor and started walking, needing to hunch over in order to fit in the storm drain. The water rose as I descended towards the ocean, with the strong smells of salt water, fish, and rotting plants clinging to me. Before I got within sight of the worn spell, the water reached the level of my face, but that didn't matter. I didn't have enough magical power to even rank as a hedgewitch, but I nearly did, and I was counted among the people who had manifested a magical skill, which the humans called "knacks." As long as I had air in my lungs, I didn't need to breathe. I could hold my breath indefinitely, and that was what was going to get me aboard that merchant ship.

I took a deep breath of the humid, salty air, ducked my head under the water, and started to swim down towards the harbor. The adrenaline made me jittery, and I tried to shove it away, focusing on the here and now: the way the salt stung my eyes, and the caress of the warm ocean, and the heavy cling of my wet clothing. I didn't have any *options*. If I walked out the gate, I'd be executed or sent to heavy labor until I died. If I stayed in the city, I'd starve to death or get thrown into prison for vagrancy. I had to get out, and this was my way out. I didn't have the option of panicking.

The fading light of the spell at the drain's mouth loomed, and I eeled my way through its gap, feeling the pressure of the spell dragging at me as I squeezed through it. My passage damaged it further, and as I turned, I watched the ley channels flare before dissolving with vigor as the water flowed across them. Guilt dragged at me for a moment, and I turned away from that as resolutely as I'd turned away from panic. Survival first.

Staying underwater so that no one would see someone in the harbor and fish me out, I swam down the docks, counting ships until I reached the one in the process of getting loaded. I thought it would sail with the tide, which gave me a few hours to figure out where to wedge myself on the ship, so that it could carry me out of Papiko's harbor and to somewhere new. The only places on a ship that aren't perfectly streamlined are the anchor and the rudder, and I spent a while examining both. While the anchor would be a more comfortable ride, it hung above the water line, and when the ship turned, I'd be on

display for everyone on shore. With the rudder, at least I could stay underwater, so I grimly set to trying to figure out how to attach myself to it.

There weren't any gaps large enough for a person, and if I dared stick my arm in the gap between the rudder and the ship, it would get crushed as soon as the rudder turned. As soon as the ship got underway, I wouldn't be able to hold on against the dragging force of the water. The panic started rising again, and I crushed it down, ruthlessly. I had knives, and I had clothes.

I writhed out of my shirt, leaving only my breastband and the thin undershirt covering my torso. Hooking one arm around the turning mechanism, ignoring the terror of losing my limb that the position inspired, I cut my shirt down one side seam. I wouldn't be able to stay underwater at all once the ship caught the wind, but they had to get out of the harbor first using oars and the current, and the dark of the night would hide me from anyone on the shore once the ship passed the mouth of the harbor. I hoped.

Squinting against the sting of the salt water, I followed the line of the rudder until I found the top-most connection between the rudder and the ship, and tied the cloth of my shirt around it. I looped the other ends around my wrists until I hung a handspan from that dangerous join, and waited.

Even warm water saps your heat after a while, but I hadn't yet started shivering when the ship began moving. It backed out of the docks, pressing me towards the stern of the ship, and

I braced my feet against the hull so I didn't fall against the rudder. Not long after, it started turning, the rudder striking me and crushing the cloth of my shirt. The eddy of the water sucked at me, and I fought to keep my position, trying not to panic. If I lost my grip, I would lose my chance of escape, but I wouldn't be hurt. It would be fine.

The rudder straightened, sucking me along with it, and I hung grimly on, holding my arms bent as the ship started moving forward with the current. After a few minutes, I dared to unwind my cloth enough to let my head pop up out of the water. The ship towed me along like a piece of seaweed fouling the rudder, heading for the mouth of the harbor. Squinting at the dark hulks of the other ships along the docks, I decided I'd better start climbing, because getting seen seemed less likely at this point than getting left behind.

I hauled my hips forward against the drag of the water and grabbed a knife in each hand. Then, praying to whatever god might be listening, I straddled the thick wooden shape of the rudder. Hot prickling sweat sprang up under my arms as I fumbled my legs forward enough to brace myself by sliding my feet into the crack between the rudder and the ship. It shifted, not enough to crush my foot but enough to terrify, and I sprang into motion, digging my knives into the wood and using them as handholds to haul myself forward and up.

The steep slope of the rudder met the stern of the ship in an overhang, which in no way would I be able to climb. I jammed my knives into the tarred joins of the wood and started moving sideways, fear lending me strength as my arms started shaking

from the strain of holding me up. I panted, my breath sounding harsh, and started moving faster, in short jerks as I tore my knife free, whipped it to the side, and slammed it back into the join.

My hands screamed in pain from holding onto the hilts, and in desperation I threw myself for the protruding anchor, leaving the two knives embedded in the hull of the ship. I hit the iron hard and wrapped myself around it, shaking and almost crying. My fingers refused to close down, but I managed to get my legs hooked around the anchor and crawled my way up it until I could brace myself between the massive snarl of metal and the wood of the ship. I leaned my head against the wood, holding my arms curled up against my chest, and tried not to cry.

I couldn't stay on the anchor forever, but I could stay for a while, and rest. The anchor's seat in the hull protected me from the wind, and I settled into the calm meditative waiting mode of an ambush predator. My body started shivering in waves as my clothing dried, but I didn't let it rule my thoughts, instead focusing on the next part of my plan. I needed to make it the rest of the way up the hull, get into the belowdecks, and find a good hiding place in the cargo. And I probably needed to do it tonight, because people would be active on deck during the day, and after a sleepless night and day with no food or water, I didn't think I could manage the climb.

I waited several hours, though, for the ship to get underway, and for the excitement of setting out to sea to fade away. My

hands still ached, but they responded when I flexed them, and after a little more moving and stretching, they warmed enough that they didn't hurt as I moved. The small knife between my breasts was useless for this endeavor, so I pulled out my matched pair of ankle knives, and took a deep breath.

Alright, Haari, I told myself. Up.

Bare feet might give me some grip, so I took off my sandals and tied them to the back of my pants, out of the way. The anchor provided an easy climb back to the outside of the hull, and I stood carefully on the iron arm of it, leaning against the wooden hull. It had a slight overhang, but not a terrible one, and it turned into a nearly straight rise only a few feet above my head. Adrenaline coursed through me, narrowing my vision and making my body tremble. If I fell out here, I would die. It didn't matter how long I could hold my breath if I couldn't make it back to shore. Eventually I would fall asleep, freeze, or get eaten by sharks or leviathans.

I shoved it out of my mind. The only option was getting up the hull, so I would do it. I jammed my knives into the hull and started climbing, moving fast. Time was my enemy; gravity would exhaust me long before motion did.

Sharp pain radiated from my abused hands down the tendons of my arms, and my vision focused on just the space in front of me, as I hauled myself up hand over hand on bent arms. I scrabbled at the wall with my bare feet, catching against the varnish of the wood, and the tiny amount of grip

helped propel me upwards, until I reached the railing and hauled myself over it, thudding down onto the deck.

Luck helped me; nobody saw me, or came running to investigate the sound. With shaking hands, I slid my knives back into their sheaths, bracing my hands against my legs so I could get them in. Anxiety shivered along my spine, from being so exposed, and I scuttled over to a collection of canvas and ropes, concealing myself in the shadows.

A childhood spent in the silver wood, surrounded by unseelie fae, gave me what seemed like an uncanny ability to tell where living things moved or hid. But for me, it was simple survival; you won't get eaten by a predator if you don't get near one. I listened to the world around me as I hid. Not too far away, I heard someone humming... maybe the helmsman... and a faint, rhythmic sound far in front of me had to be footsteps from someone, either on watch or catching the fresh air.

Before I moved, I leaned into my clarity again, hunting for spells. The ship shimmered with them, the brilliant lines of fresh incantations carving through layers of old, shredding spells. I sneered at one on the sails, a spell to boost the power of friendly winds. The power bled out of the new channels into the old ones, sapping it of strength and twisting it in strange ways. Sloppy work, the sort of shoddy magic cheats did for good silver. I couldn't abide people like that. An unseelie pays her debts, and more, and an unseelie heart beat beneath my human breast.

I crept out of my hiding place, looking up at the crow's nest, dark against the stars. They would see me moving if they looked down, but their job surely meant that they would be watching the black waters of the sea, looking into the dense shadow of the night to try to catch sight of any pirates or dangers. Still, I held myself low to the ground, moving with the smooth, slow motion of a stalking predator as I crept forward. I made it to the edge of the top deck and froze, swallowing a curse.

The ship's deck was just... open. Two lanterns hung on the wall below me, illuminating the wooden deck. The wheel for the helm stood maybe fifteen feet in front of the door directly beneath me, and the helmsman stood behind it, hands on the wheel. Near the bow, two people strolled along the deck. In the darkness, I couldn't tell if they looked back towards me.

I still had no options. I couldn't live on the deck, and as soon as the sun rose, I would be found. I needed to get *inside* the ship, and I needed to do it now. My hands shook, the animalistic fear of capture flooding me, and I dug my nails into my palms. *No*. I couldn't panic. I had no time for panic. *Breathe*.

On the deck, the vague shapes of the two people shifted. One leaned against the railing, looking out over the bow, and I hoped that meant they both looked away. I climbed over the railing, every rustle of my clothing sounding like a roar, and slithered down the wall, using the frame of the door as a foothold before sliding down the side of it. Splinters dug under my skin with burning pain, and I ignored it.

Only one spell on the door, a little cantrip on the hinges, to keep them free of rust and turning smoothly.

I opened the door. Slipped inside. Closed it.

I made it down to the lower deck without seeing anyone, but as I set foot on the first stair to the hold, I heard a shout, and instinct flung me forward. I dashed down the stairs and into the hold; stupid, stupid, they wouldn't just *forget*—

Even a large ship becomes very small when you're being hunted.