



ALL THE
DEVILS
ARE HERE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DEVYN SINCLAIR

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Book Cover by Manuela Serra Design.

*To all the lonely girls... I've got you.
Maybe we'll find our monsters someday too.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

This book is meant to be fun and fantasy, and it is indeed less heavy than many of my books. That being said, there are still some things which may be triggering to some. No book is worth your mental health. So if you feel you might need to know a bit more, the full content warnings for this book are available on my website.

www.devynsinclair.com



CHAPTER ONE

LAURENT

I fought the power that held my limbs in place, struggling against the force that made every movement feel like swimming through tar.

But there was nothing I could do. I didn't have power. Even in this brand new body, I understood that I was not like him.

Indestructible, maybe. Strong too. But I didn't have the kind of power I needed to match the magic which glued my limbs to the stone I lay on. No matter how I fought and struggled, I was bound.

A soft chuckle came from my right, and his face appeared over mine. Not old, but neither was the man young. I didn't know what age he had been before he created me—I just knew that it didn't matter.

How long had I been alive? It was only days, and yet it felt like so much longer. There was a weight to my life I didn't understand. Why did I feel this heavy? Like I'd been stolen from something and placed here, though I also knew I hadn't. I

was new life in this world, and yet it was already exhausting to be alive.

Perhaps it was the heaviness of expectations and ownership along with this magic. His ownership.

“Fight all you like, Khalas. It only helps me. Every layer of resistance I overcome tightens this bond.”

A faint glow lined his face and body, just like the magic that was buried under this island. And in his hands were a hammer and chisel. Dread dropped low in my stomach, my body turning to stone in response—an attempt to protect myself.

It was exactly what he wanted.

“I gave everything for you,” he said, placing the chisel over my heart. “And you will give me everything, Khalas. Your heart is mine.”

His hammer fell, and there was nothing but shattering pain and the echoes of his blows.

Over.

And over.

And over.

I sat upright, sucking in breath, my hand on my chest. Right over the scar that looked like broken glass over my heart.

Pounding made me jump, and I realized that was what had brought me out of the dream I’d had far too many times in my very long life. It never seemed less real, no matter how many times I saw him and felt the pain. Likewise, when I was in my stone form, those cracks would never fully heal, despite now being whole.

Again, more pounding. I pulled on a shirt, not bothering to button it as I went down the stairs. Just enough to cover the scars and not frighten whatever delivery person or patient who’d gotten the address wrong or thought my home was a good place to come see me.

A third round of knocking came, and I pulled the door open harshly, momentarily blinded by the afternoon sunlight. Her scent hit me before I even saw her.

Tart lemons and fresh flowers—light, like daisies. My eyes recovered, taking in a messy blonde bun, shoulders carrying a too-heavy backpack, a suitcase at her feet. Leggings that clung to curves I knew too well despite all my resistance, and finally an exasperated smile.

“Meg.”

She blew out a breath. “Sorry. I wasn’t sure if you were home or not. Christine told you I was coming, right?”

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. “She did. I’m sorry, I forgot.”

Christine had told me her friend was coming to stay while she waited for Christine and the Kings’ arrival in Paris. It wasn’t uncommon—Meg had stayed here before with me, and it was why I knew her scent so well and the temptation of everything that was her, despite not being able to do anything about it.

Standing aside, I held the door open and let her bring all her luggage inside. “I’m glad just to be here,” she said with a sigh. “Transatlantic flights are the devil. Especially in coach.”

I was still in the middle of pulling my head out of the dream. No matter how many times I had it, it still took me a while to shake the effects.

“I thought Christine would have paid for first class.”

Meg sighed. “Am I in the same room?”

“Of course.”

She shouldered the backpack once more, lugging the suitcase up my thin stairs, and it wasn’t lost on me that she changed the subject.

I tried not to look at her as she went up the stairs, and failed completely. Whenever Meg was near, I wasn’t able to take my eyes off her. She wasn’t my mate—not in the way her

best friend Christine was to my friends, but it didn't change anything.

Her scent lived in my nose even when she wasn't here, and since the first time I met her, shortly after the opera house incident that had turned Paris upside down, I'd had to hold myself back.

Unlike Christine, Meg was mortal. It wasn't fair to her to get involved with someone who would outlive her a hundred times. Despite the fact that she was a walking temptation and had made it clear she was interested. We'd made the mistake once.

I shook my head and closed the front door, going into the kitchen to make some coffee for the two of us. She would need some after a long trip, and I needed some to wake me up. And maybe to pretend I didn't know Meg would jump at the chance to be with me. I was an asshole, but it was for the best.

It wasn't an accident that my English was much better than it had been three years ago, and that I offered my home to Meg whenever she happened to be here. I wished she were here more.

Apparently, I enjoyed torturing myself.

I heard her footsteps on the stairs. "Would you like some coffee?"

"That would be amazing." She sat at my small table, and in this small kitchen, her scent filled the room. Only wearing sweatpants, I needed to be careful. Just being around her—

"And thank you," Meg said quietly. "For letting me stay. I know it's probably an imposition."

"You're always welcome here, Meg. You know that."

There were flashes in my mind of the first time she'd stayed here with me. Christine and their Majesties had just left the city, and Meg had a few more days. The flashes were dark, breathless, and filled with heat.

Those brief moments in this very kitchen were some of the best in my very, very long life. But they couldn't happen

again. Alex said I was being foolish, and the other two kings echoed his sentiment.

Maybe they were right, but it was self-preservation. Meg was someone—

I cut the thoughts off as best I could, but they were still there. It would be so easy to fall in love with Meg. Despite my fears, I was halfway there already. And I knew deep in my gut, despite the fact that she wasn't my mate, I wouldn't be able to live after she was gone. Not if I'd loved her. I had a bleak, brutal, and empty eternity in front of me, and I didn't want to spend all of it broken and grieving.

And aside from that, I was protecting her. She wasn't safe with me, and I couldn't tell her why.

Meg cleared her throat, and we startled out of the tense silence I'd created. "Well, I appreciate it."

Turning, I took two mugs from the cupboard and began to pour them. "What are your plans while you're here?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty open until Christine gets here. I might just do some sightseeing, the way I usually don't get to. Tomorrow my friend Janelle invited me to a boat party. She was in Joan as well."

The few times she'd been here before, she'd been here for work. Being in the *Joan D'Arc* revival had given everyone in the cast a certain level of fame and notoriety. Not in a bad way, but now there was work in Paris for them when there otherwise might not have been.

"It's a little cold for a boat," I said.

Meg shrugged. "Probably, but I don't have anything better to do. But tonight I thought I might go to Club Spectre."

I spun, pinning her with my stare, and found her smirking. "You want to go clubbing after such a long flight?"

"You know me, Laurent. I never stop moving. Besides," she winked. "I need to stay up for the jet lag. I'd rather stay awake while dancing and drinking than sitting in bed desperately trying to keep my eyes open."

I glanced at the time. It was later than I thought—almost evening. Meg was known in our community now as Christine’s friend. And after the opera fire, no one was inclined to make the Kings angry.

Most people didn’t know how laid back the Kings were, and they preferred to keep it that way, allowing things to quietly rule themselves out of assumed order. So Meg would be safe at the club. But that didn’t mean I wanted her to go.

Because the thought of her dancing with someone else drove me mad in ways I shouldn’t be thinking about. I had no claim to Meg, no matter how much I wished.

“You know yourself best.”

She laughed and came over to retrieve her coffee, and I didn’t dare move from my spot leaning against the counter. Her arm brushed mine, and I might as well have been in my stone form for how much I was moving right now.

We’d been right here before, and we both knew it. When it was darker, more intimate, and I’d made the mistake of thinking I could have her. Of risking everything for a taste that would torture me for eternity.

Meg shook her head. “I don’t know if I know myself very well at all right now.”

“Are you all right?”

The air was tense again between us, flavored with her sharp, floral scent I wanted to drink in. Meg lifted the coffee to her lips, and I found myself lost in watching her, following the line of her throat as she swallowed, and lower, to where her skin disappeared beneath her hoodie.

She looked at me, blue eyes full of pain I’d never seen before. But it was gone in a flash, and she smiled, returning to her normal, brilliant self. “Did you have heart surgery?”

Her eyes flickered to my chest where it was still exposed, the shattered web of red scars now visible. I’d been so distracted by her I’d forgotten my shirt was even open, let alone that she could see.

“I’ve never seen a scar like that, though.”

“Surgery.” I cleared my throat. “Yes. A long time ago.”

She grinned. “Glad it worked out and you’re still here. Then I’d have to pay for a hotel whenever I come to Paris.”

“We can’t have that,” I murmured. “What kind of life would that be?”

She laughed again and stepped away, breaking the spell she had on me. “Right?”

“Anyway, I think I might take a walk down by the river first and see how I feel later. Maybe I can even convince a stoic doctor like yourself to have some fun.”

Fun.

There was plenty of fun I wanted to have that would make the sound of her rapidly beating heart go even faster. And mine too—if I had a heart that beat.

But it was good I didn’t have to worry about my heart—it had already caused me far too much pain.

“Take a key,” I said, pushing off the counter and grabbing the extra set from the hall, taking a moment to breathe in air that wasn’t drenched in her scent. “Though I’m sure I’ll be here when you get back.”

Meg took the key from my hand, watching me carefully. Every other time she’d come to visit, we’d been fine. Normal. There hadn’t been this thick tension in the air that made it difficult to breathe or even be near her. I blamed it on the dream she’d pulled me out of—it had my emotions too close to the surface and too far away from the cool persona I used every day with my patients. Friendly, professional, and easy. That’s all there was. It was all I could ever have.

“Okay,” she said carefully. She was too polite to call out that something was strange, though we both knew it was. “I’ll see you later.”

I turned back to the counter and downed my too-hot coffee in one go so I didn’t watch her leave. Not only because those leggings were driving me crazy for all they left to the

imagination, but because I didn't ever want to watch her walk away.

Meg was supposed to spend a whole week here before Christine and the others arrived. For the first time since I met her, I wondered if that wasn't a good idea.



CHAPTER TWO

MEGHAN

I took a breath and leaned against Laurent's door for a second. What the fuck was that? I knew I threw him off when I showed up because he'd forgotten, but I'd never seen the gargoyle doctor so out of sorts.

A walk hadn't actually been in my plans, but I needed to take a breath. The air in his kitchen was thick with unspoken words. There was always something invisible in the air around us, and there had been for years. But I'd never *felt* it like this before.

Pushing myself off the door, I started walking the familiar path toward the ruined opera house. It was exactly the same as the day it burned, and every time I was here, I walked by it like a memorial. Everything had changed since then, and yet it felt like nothing was different.

Anyone who looked at my life would probably roll their eyes, but I couldn't help the way I felt. Like everyone was

moving on without me, and I was nowhere. Especially now, with nothing on the horizon.

There were people crowded around the opera house, taking pictures. It was even more of a tourist attraction than it had been when it was being restored. I didn't need to get close to it. The memories I had of learning the building was on fire and fleeing for my life were plenty.

Even now, fire made me nervous. All of us had been celebrating, and by the time we realized what was happening, the flames were far closer than we'd realized. I could still feel the heat we'd had to jump over.

I kept going and made my way to the river. There were mixed memories here too, knowing what had happened to Christine. But those monsters were gone, and even my best friend still liked walking by the river when we were here.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I smiled when her name appeared on the screen. "Why do you always have a supernatural ability to know exactly when to call?"

"Because I'm incredible and being immortal gave me special powers," she said without missing a beat. Then she laughed. "No, Laurent texted Alex and said you'd arrived, so I figured I'd check in."

"I'm fine."

My best friend paused. "I didn't ask how you were, so now I'm thinking you're very much not fine."

I sighed. "Christine."

"Meg," she sang my name back at me. "What's going on?"

I shook my head even though she couldn't see it. "Nothing's going on. I'm just tired from the flight, and Laurent was a little strange, so I'm just walking by the river."

"Strange?"

I laughed once. "I think I woke him up. He answered the door all disheveled, barely wearing a shirt, and he clearly didn't remember I was supposed to be here today. Then it felt like he just..." I sighed. "It's nothing."

“Hmm,” she made a non-committal sound. “I still think he’s into you.”

I heard voices in the background and Christine laughed. “I don’t suppose your royal majesties could *order* Laurent to get his head out of his ass and ask out Meg?”

Three years ago Christine had been a viral singing sensation that had taken the world by storm and led us to Paris for the revival of the opera *Joan d’Arc*. The three gargoyles who were her mates—and the kings of the gargoyle world—lived in the opera house at the time. Rival gargoyles had tried to kill her, but it backfired and my best friend was now an immortal badass that the world thought was dead.

It was easier to perish in the fire that had destroyed the opera house again than be the center of the world’s attention and risk her or her mates being discovered.

“They don’t have to do that,” I said. “He had a taste, Chris. Clearly, that was enough for him.”

“Stop it.” Her voice was sharp. “I know exhaustion can sometimes lead to pity parties, but that’s one I’m not going to let you have.”

I pressed my lips together. She wasn’t wrong, but I also couldn’t exactly protest and tell her I was right when she had *three* gargoyle mates that worshipped the ground she walked on. I didn’t begrudge her that. I was truly, truly happy for her.

Visiting with her and her mates over the last couple of years had been amazing—especially when I got to meet them in exotic places most wouldn’t be able to go to.

But I also wouldn’t lie and say I wasn’t jealous. I absolutely was. With Christine halfway across the world, and the fame of being a *survivor* of the opera house, I was lonely. Thankfully, the attention had mostly faded. It wasn’t nearly the level Christine had had to deal with, but even my small amount was enough.

Having someone to come home to and spend time with would be nice.

“You’re right. I’m sure a good night’s sleep will help.”

Or, I added in my mind, a good night under someone. If there was one thing it was easy to find in Paris, it was men willing to show a woman a good time. If Laurent wasn't willing, then someone else would be.

I ignored the stab of guilt in my heart at the thought, though there was nothing to feel guilty about when all we'd ever shared was one kiss.

One fucking hell of a kiss.

"Okay," Christine said. "I have to go. But maybe I'll talk to you tomorrow? We'll be there before you know it."

"Sounds good."

I ended the call and looked out at the smoothly flowing river. Both Christine and Laurent had asked if I was all right.

And I wasn't.

I was broken, and I didn't know how to fix it. Everything had been fine until the new creative director of the ballet came storming through Manhattan and decided to change everything about the way the company did things. From the way our ballets were choreographed to the people in the company itself.

He claimed it was a new direction that would revive the company and bring in new audiences and new sponsors. And maybe it would, but I wouldn't be there to see it. After secretly observing our entire season and evaluating all the company members, those he was interested in keeping were offered an audition to keep their place.

I wasn't offered one.

So suddenly I had no job and nothing to look forward to. The loneliness was easy to bear when I could throw myself into work. Without it...

Shaking my head, I jumped off the short wall I'd been resting on.

I'd taken work here in Paris in between seasons, so there was a chance I could find something just to hold me over. But it felt like a lifeline when I called Christine and she suggested

we meet here. I hadn't told her about the company yet—I didn't know how.

But no, it was safe to say I wasn't okay. I felt empty. Gutted. And though a club wasn't really the way I wanted to spend my night, it felt normal and safe in comparison to anything else. When I'd had everything, I was the life of the party. The girl everyone wanted around and to be with. I would pretend to be that girl for a night and see if I could recapture the magic.

Any kind of magic. Here by myself, I could admit how badly I wanted to be a part of the world that wasn't human. Because learning that it existed was like learning that Santa Claus was real. It was *exhilarating*. All those books Christine and I read were real, and it was so much better than ordinary life. Especially now that it felt like I didn't have anything left.

The sun was setting early, the way it did in the winter. It wasn't cold for February, and there wasn't snow, but it was still nicely brisk with the cooling breeze off the river.

Nerves jangled in my stomach as I walked back to Laurent's house. I didn't want things to be weird. Hell, I wanted them to be a lot more than what they were. But he seemed bound and determined that there would be nothing between us.

But him being so close in the kitchen, with his chest showing... all I could do was remember now, and wish it had gone differently.

The siren outside the windows dragged me from sleep, my heart pounding. I was on my feet, looking around for the danger, despite being entirely safe in Laurent's guest bedroom. I shouldn't be panicked about this. The fire was over and had been over for days. But my brain was still going back to the crazed moments outside the opera house when there was nothing but chaos and I was looking for Christine, thinking she was dead.

I needed something to calm me down. There wasn't any chance I could get back in that bed and sleep. It was nearly

midnight, so I didn't bother putting on more clothes. Just the nightgown I had on. Laurent was asleep.

Creeping down to the kitchen, I decided getting a glass of water would be what I needed. The act of normalcy. Even if it wasn't enough, it would be a start.

The light of the refrigerator was bright in the dim kitchen, but faded again to nothing but the glow from the streetlamp outside when I closed the door.

"Meg?" Laurent's gentle French accent had me gasping, nearly dropping the glass and spilling water all over myself.

"I thought you were asleep."

"I heard you wake. I did not mean to frighten you."

He was nothing but a silhouette in the darkness, and he had scared me. But I wasn't afraid of him.

"It's all right."

Coming closer, I saw he wasn't wearing a shirt, but I couldn't see much more in the gathered darkness. "You cannot sleep?"

I swallowed. "Bad dreams. It was the siren that woke me, and I needed to do something."

He was so close, and my entire body was on edge—now, in a good way. It wasn't a secret that I found him attractive. I was the one who asked Christine if her mates had friends, and Laurent was incredible. I just didn't know how to do this with a monster.

I wanted every part of him, monster included, but as brave as I pretended to be, I wasn't. Not when it came to things like this.

"You are safe," he said softly, accent lilting over the words. "I promise."

"I know I am. I wish my mind understood that."

I thought I saw the ghost of a smile. "Maybe I can help with bad dreams."

Laurent's hand curled behind my neck, and suddenly I was in his arms before he kissed me. There wasn't an inch of him that wasn't made of incredible strength. His scent wrapped around me along with his body, cool and sharp like peppermint.

His mouth moved on mine, drawing me deeper, and my heart still beat wildly. But now it was for him and not from fear. One of his legs slipped between mine, and he pressed me back against the counter so I could feel all of him. Every hard inch that felt like stone even though he wasn't in that form.

One hand stroked down my spine and I wrapped both of my arms around his neck to pull him closer.

This was what I wanted. I wanted heat and safety and company in the darkness. His kiss was driving away every fear I had, and it was safe to say I'd never been kissed like this. Every cell felt alive, zinging with energy, and if this was even close to what Christine felt with her mates, I would never be the same.

Laurent pulled back and pressed his forehead to mine, briefly. "I am sorry."

"Why?" I tried to guide his lips back to mine. "Don't be sorry."

He caught my wrists and held them. Not hard, but enough to make my heart pound harder. My mind spun, imagining him pinning me down beneath him.

"We can't," he whispered. "I can't."

"Wait—"

"Have better dreams," he said quietly, kissing the back of one hand before placing them at my sides and stepping back. It was too dark to see his face, but there was no way I could have imagined the heat I felt in his gaze. Right?

Right?

I stood by the counter until I heard his bedroom door close.

Blinking back the memory, I was in front of Laurent's door. Earlier, when he'd served coffee with the two of us so close, it was all I could do not to lean in and try one more time. Because ever since he'd kissed me, nothing else had even been close to enough.

I pushed inside, listening for sounds of him, and heard nothing. Maybe he was sleeping again? That was okay. He seemed really out of sorts, and I felt bad for interrupting his rest. It was a Friday, so hopefully, he'd still have some time this weekend to recharge. Laurent was a doctor. Even as casual a practice as I knew he had, it still had to be exhausting.

Heaving my suitcase onto the bed, I opened it and started looking through it for something to wear. Not all of my clothes were here, but a lot of them were. If I didn't find something soon, I would have to go back or cancel my lease in New York. But I had some time and some savings, so that wasn't anything I needed to worry about tonight.

A short, sparkly dress jumped out at me. I didn't feel the urge to wear it, but it was something the old Meg might wear, and that made it appealing. It was a deep turquoise, and I dug out my makeup and did something that complimented—gold with accents of the same turquoise.

I did my hair too, curling it and coating it with dry shampoo so it didn't seem like I'd just gotten off a twelve hour flight.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I *should* just stay here and read a book. Fall asleep if my body needed it, fuck jet lag. Just go to the party tomorrow instead.

I closed my eyes, emotion rushing up so quickly I was going to ruin my makeup. Hot tears pressed behind my eyelids, and I breathed in and out. The feeling of loneliness was so deep and so sharp it was gutting. Nothing felt right. Going out didn't feel right and staying here didn't feel right. I didn't have a place anymore, and it was brutal.

Once I felt like I wasn't going to spill over, I opened my eyes and looked in the small mirror on the wall. I looked like

the old Meg. Now maybe I could pretend to be her, even if just for one night.

In the hallway, I heard movement, and the sound of Laurent going downstairs. I didn't know if I was ready to see him, but it was too late for that. It was later than I thought—I'd taken my time getting ready and sitting in my self-pity.

Strapping on the shoes I was sure would hurt me later, I slipped my wallet into the pocket of my coat and went downstairs. Laurent was sitting in his small living room, a book open on the arm of the chair. He looked up when I appeared, and his eyes roved over me, taking in the dress under my coat, my shoes, and the curls in my hair.

Again, I felt like there was heat in his gaze. But if there was any kind of desire there, why had he pushed me away?

He smiled. "I thought you might change your mind."

With the memory of his kiss so close to the surface, it struck me how much better his English was now. It was still accented in a way that made me want to have him read to me. It was like catnip. But where his English had been a little broken when we met, now it was perfect.

There was no way it had to do with me, but I wasn't going to pretend like I didn't want it to be.

"I almost did. But I'll give it a go," I said. "Any chance I can somehow convince you to go with me?"

Laurent stood, and for the first time I took in what he was wearing. Dark jeans and a dark gray shirt pushed up to show off his forearms. They weren't fancy, but they felt *intentional*. Not the kind of clothes I knew he wore to meet his patients.

He caught my look and smiled. "What kind of host would I be if I let you go alone?"

There were butterflies in my stomach as I watched him put on his coat. "You don't have to, Laurent."

He smirked and opened the front door for me. "I know."

It was all I could do not to inhale his scent as I stepped past him into the darkening night.



CHAPTER THREE

ARIEL

The image of the woman shifted as wind blew across the surface of the water. I was in the corner, looking over his shoulder, keeping myself as loose and formless as I could.

I wanted to stay here and watch her as long as he would let me. The way she moved was... entrancing. Naturally graceful in a way that most humans weren't. She was beautiful too, and sad. I could see the emotion brewing beneath her skin.

I didn't get glimpses of the outside world as much as I would like, and the times I did, it wasn't anyone as beautiful as her. It wasn't surprising Khal was near her. I would take the chance if I had it.

But why?

I'd seen and been with humans before, and none of them called to me the way this one did. Like I was a moth and she was a strange, impossible flame.

I didn't want Khal to stay with her, because I didn't want Prospero to take an interest. If he did, she might die, and I very much did not want this beautiful human to die. It was a miracle any of his guests had survived.

If you could call it surviving.

Khal and the woman walked down the street, and I saw the things she couldn't. The way he looked at her while she looked away. How his hands curled in order to stop himself from reaching out to touch her.

Why had he gone with her?

Didn't he know how dangerous it was?

Didn't he remember he was being watched?

Anything could be used against him.

It wasn't much of a life, but at least he was no longer here.

Caliban prowled into the entrance, eyes glowing yellow in the darkness. He was nearly invisible, even to my eyes. But he watched our captor with the same interest.

And fear.

"Ariel," our captor said, rousing me from my trance of trying to disappear.

I floated down beside him, allowing him to sense my presence. The pool of water in front of him still wavered with the image of the two. The woman was smiling, and again I felt a pull toward her. Was it because she knew what Khal was? She wasn't afraid of him, despite understanding he was a monster.

"Make sure she gets on the boat."

I felt the magic take hold, and dread seeped through me. "Do not bring her here."

He turned and looked at me, eyes cold. "Why shouldn't I?"

There was nothing I could say to answer him. None of my reasons were valid to him. He didn't understand the torture of being bound in this place and to him. He only thought of

himself and his pain, and nothing was too great a sacrifice to fix it. Even this girl who nearly glowed through the magic of the vision.

“Make sure she gets on the boat,” he repeated. “And do not disturb me until I emerge. It is great magic I must work now.”

He turned and disappeared deeper into the cave, down into his lair where we were not permitted. Where he wouldn't be aware of anything but the magic he conjured.

In one way, it was a relief having some time without him looking over our shoulders. But I did not want to do what he'd commanded. The water in the bowl was now dark and empty, and I wished I could still see her.

“Who was she?” Caliban asked, rising to his more human form. “She is...”

He didn't have to finish the sentence for me to understand.

“I don't know,” I told him. “But she was with Khalas.”

“He won't come for her. He knows better.”

“Does he?”

I stared into the dark water. There was something about the woman which called to me, and it was from afar. If Khal felt the same, like something about our magic drew us closer, then I didn't know if he would be able to resist.

For all our sakes, I hoped he could.

It would still be worth it to keep our captor here.

Even if it meant the rest of us would be in pain forever.



CHAPTER FOUR

MEGHAN

Club Spectre was exactly as I remembered it. Still early enough in the evening that it wasn't particularly crowded. Laurent and I left our coats at the check and made our way deeper.

I'd been to the club a couple of times since that first fateful night when we came here with Christine's mates. And every time I wondered just what kind of monsters were here. Now I knew it was a haven for every kind of otherworldly creature, which was partially why I liked it. Even if I never had a mate or anything like it, I was still fascinated.

Laurent nodded to a man on our left, and I felt his hand on my lower back as we moved down the stairs to the first bar.

"I shouldn't be surprised you know people here. Though I still don't think of you as a person who goes to clubs."

His soft chuckle made goosebumps rise on my skin. "What makes you think I know them from the club and not from

elsewhere?”

“Fair point.” I looked around from the female bartender to the few people dancing and the man he’d acknowledged. “Is everyone in here a monster?”

“I wouldn’t say that too loudly, but yes. I think you’re the only human at the moment.”

I couldn’t stop the smile on my face. “That’s just wild.”

The bartender—a gorgeous woman wearing a vest I would kill for—came over to us and looked expectantly.

“What would you like?” Laurent asked.

“Vodka cranberry.” The words were automatic. The drink that was always reliable wherever you went and was easy to drink when you weren’t out to get wasted. I still wasn’t entirely sure being here was a good idea, and I *knew* getting drunk with Laurent would be bad news.

He ordered in smooth French and she nodded, moving away to get our drinks. I took the time to look at him while he wasn’t staring directly at me. The strong line of his nose and jaw, right now with a hint of stubble. Laurent’s eyes were a gray-green I knew too well, and I obviously knew what it was like to feel his full lips on mine. But he’d made himself clear.

We can’t. I can’t.

“Laurent?”

He looked back at me, and my breath went short in my chest, just like in the kitchen. “Yes?”

“Why are you really here with me? I know this probably isn’t what you want to be doing right now. I’ve been to Paris plenty of times, and you’ve never come out with me before.”

Our drinks landed on the bar beside us, and I grabbed mine and took a sip. Maybe it would calm the jittery nerves flowing under my skin.

“Why don’t you tell me why you don’t seem like yourself? A question for a question.”

I swallowed, everything in my body going rigid. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Laurent smiled as he took a sip of his drink, and I would be a damn liar if I said that smile didn’t do things to me. This was a mistake. Coming here with *him* was a mistake.

“Then I don’t know either,” he said with a shrug. “It seemed like the thing to do.”

Like the floodgates had opened, people began to enter the club. The noise level grew, and I took another drink. “A show nearby must have let out,” Laurent said quietly.

“You’re really not going to tell me?”

Laurent shook his head.

I didn’t know what I was doing. Everything felt strange, and the way I was acting, no wonder he’d noticed I wasn’t myself. But I still wanted to know. I didn’t want his pity. I didn’t want anyone’s pity.

There were more people dancing now, and even if I couldn’t do it for a living anymore, it was still the place I felt the safest.

“I’m going to dance,” I said, knocking back the rest of my drink—far too quickly—and turning away from him. The old Meg would enjoy the teasing and the playing hard to get. The new Meg couldn’t handle it.

I didn’t make it all the way to the dance floor before he caught me lightly around the waist and folded us into the growing crowd of dancers. “I’ve upset you.”

“Of course not. I’m just a friend of a friend, Laurent. I don’t have a right to be upset with you. For anything.”

The music was faster than the way we were dancing, but it still somehow matched. I wanted him so much closer than he was, but his hands rested lightly on my hips, and they made me feel better than they should have.

Laurent blew out a breath, like he was giving in to something, and he pulled me closer so he could whisper in my ear and I could hear him over the music. “I came with you

because there's something wrong. Even if you don't tell me, I can see it in your eyes. I know that look, and I know from experience that it can lead to... unwise decisions."

I pulled away, but he held me fast. "So you came with me because you think I'm reckless? That I need a fucking *babysitter*?"

Shoving his hands off my body, I turned and headed for the door. I'd already been hesitant about this, and I wasn't going to stand there and be told I was a loose cannon.

To her credit, the girl at the coat check moved fast, and I was able to get outside before Laurent followed me. The air was much colder now, and I hugged my coat around my body. I should have stayed home and cuddled myself into bed with a book. At least in the books I read there was always a happy ending.

"Meg," Laurent's voice followed me along the river. "Meg, wait."

"No, thank you."

"Meg," he swore in French, his accent heavier than I'd heard it in a long time. "I didn't say it right. That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?" I whirled on him, making him skid to a stop. "If you don't think I'm someone that can't go to a fucking club by herself, then what did you mean? Because I can—"

He lunged forward and grabbed my arms. "I didn't want you to be *alone*."

The words stopped both of us in our tracks, and Laurent was gasping in air like he'd been running. Though I knew he didn't need it. The man was made of stone and didn't *need* to breathe. He was worked up.

"I didn't want you to be alone," he said again, more gently.

"Why not?"

He shook his head and released me, stepping back. "No one should be alone when they're sad."

“I’m not sad.”

“Like hell you’re not,” he huffed a laugh.

“Oh, and you know me so well? Better than anyone? Better than Christine?”

The look on his face was one I hadn’t seen before. It was hard. Fierce. The furthest thing from the kind, soft-spoken doctor I knew. He stepped in close—so close I had to look up to see his face. “I know you better than you think.” The words were low and fervent. “And even if I didn’t, I’m a fucking doctor. I know pain when I see it. So *what happened?*”

“*I got fired.*” The words cracked out of me, and my voice broke. “Is that what you wanted to hear? The company restructured, and they didn’t want me anymore. I wasn’t good enough. So now I’m here in Paris with *nothing*. I thought maybe pretending to be who I was before would help, but clearly not. I’m not even good enough for this.”

Hot tears flooded my eyes and I couldn’t hold them back. This time, everything was too close to the surface. I bent over, a hand pressed to my chest because it ached so badly.

I hadn’t really cried about it yet, and not until this exact moment had I realized it. I’d been too busy trying to make sure I didn’t feel it that I hadn’t let myself, and now I was sobbing on the banks of the Seine with a gargoyle who would never want me in the way I wanted him.

Hands lifted me back up and came around me, holding me against his chest. Cool peppermint filled my nose, and it only made me cry harder. Because I was drawn to this man—this monster—in a way I couldn’t control and he didn’t want me.

What I would never say out loud was that I wasn’t even good enough for him.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, one hand lifting to cradle my head against his chest. “They’re fools, Meg. You are more than good enough. For anything and anyone.”

My sob caught in my throat. He didn’t know how much I wished it were true.

“Does Christine know?”

I shook my head against his shirt. “I don’t know how to tell her. She’s going to want to help, and there’s nothing she can do.”

“What can I do?”

Lifting my head, I looked at him. His eyes gleamed in the darkness, lit by the nearby streetlights. So like that night three years ago. It felt safer to be this close in the darkness. Like it was worth the risk.

I twisted up all at once and pressed my lips to his. For one glorious second, everything felt right. A soft moan came out of me, and Laurent’s hand tightened on my hair. He kissed me back, hard and deep, pulling me so close it felt like we would never come apart.

But he pulled away. “Meg.”

There was agony in his voice, but I couldn’t care. I couldn’t do this again. “Why not?”

“I *can*’t.”

Slowly, I pulled away from him, and I couldn’t meet his eyes. “I…” I cleared my throat and locked my gaze on a single cobblestone. “I’m going straight back to your house. You can follow me, but I can’t… just give me the dignity of not having to walk with someone who’s rejected me twice, okay?”

“Meg—”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said, and turned before he could stop me. All the way home I heard his footsteps behind me, but he respected my wishes. He didn’t come inside right away, and I was already closed away in the guest bedroom when I finally heard the front door open.

I was exhausted, aching, and sad. So finally, I curled up under the blankets and I let myself cry.



CHAPTER FIVE

CALIBAN

*T*he others were gone from the island, and I was on the prowl. I didn't like to be close to the mountain when he sent them away. If I was out of sight and moving, he would rarely call me. But if I went to our house to rest, he might.

I would prowl.

The night was lit with pale moonlight, but the shadows were still deep in the trees. It was a relief to blend in with them and remain hidden.

They were going to bring her here.

Her.

The beautiful woman from his scrying.

I didn't want her to come here.

He ruined everything he touched.

Everyone he brought here died. Or was transformed into abominations.

Like me.

But I loved to see her when he watched. She was beautiful. Graceful like a cat.

I wished I could see her myself, if I wouldn't terrify her. Preferably as far away from this island as one could travel.

But she would be here. He'd ordered them to bring her, so they would.

A growl escaped into the darkness, the rage at being owned rising once again under my skin.

When she came here, I would protect her as best I could. I was tired of watching people die.

Stopping on the beach, I looked out over the ocean. Some day I hoped I could see something other than water. But hope was hard to have after so much time.

Instead, I would wait for a thing which could be counted on.

For her.



CHAPTER SIX

MEGHAN

The day was cold, bright, and seemed a lot more hopeful than it had last night. By some small miracle, it didn't look like I'd been sobbing into my pillow. My eyes weren't puffy, and I somehow felt... clearer. Everything still hurt and Laurent's rejection still stung, but I felt lighter in the way only tears could allow.

Because it was cold, I didn't dress like I had for the club. But being a New Yorker, I was prepared for it. Fleece-lined leggings and a comfy sweater under my coat did the trick. I didn't even care that it wasn't *party* attire. I looked cute enough, and that was all there was to it.

My phone chimed. Janelle was almost here to pick me up. That meant facing the awkwardness that was waiting for me downstairs if Laurent was there. Which, given that it was already past noon, was pretty likely.

I didn't hear anything, but when I turned the corner into the kitchen, he was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee, his back to me.

Laurent didn't turn, but there was no way he didn't hear me. He could hear the sound of my beating heart, and even if he couldn't, his stairs weren't quiet.

"You're going to your party?" He asked.

"I am."

He stood and came to me in the small hallway. "You have your key?"

The small act of caring made me smile in spite of the pain I felt standing next to him like this. "I do. I don't know when I'll be back, though."

"I'm not—" He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "About last night. I'm sorry, Meg."

"Don't apologize," I said quickly. "It's fine. I was out of line."

A knock on the door interrupted whatever he was going to say. "That's Janelle," I said. "She's here for me."

He stared for a long moment, face unreadable. "Have a good time."

"I will." The smile on my face wasn't entirely real, but he didn't need to know that.

I opened the door to Janelle's smiling face. "*Bonjour!*" She pulled me into a hug, and now my smile was far more real. "It has been too long."

"Yes, it has."

Janelle was in the chorus of *Joan d'Arc*, and we'd bonded more after the opera house burned than before it. But she'd been amazing, and I tried to see her whenever I was here.

"Are you sure a boat is a good idea in this cold?" I pulled Laurent's door closed behind me, and he was still standing there, looking at me. I ignored the hollow feeling in my stomach that matched the gaping chasm between the two of us.

The sky was overcast with pale gray clouds where it had been clear earlier. Janelle waved a hand and opened the door to the waiting car. “It will be fine. Monsieur Chagny’s boat parties happen every year at this time. There is more than enough alcohol to keep everyone warm.”

I stared at her. “You didn’t tell me it was Chagny.”

The man was the angel investor of *Joan d’Arc*, and had personally made sure Christine was taken care of while we’d rehearsed for the show.

She laughed. “He still feels badly about the whole thing, and everyone from the cast pretty much has an open invitation to his events. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you. And,” she lowered her voice, “if you’re looking for some fun, he’s really not bad in bed.”

“*Janelle.*”

Her laugh rang out loud in the car. “What? Don’t tell me that shocks you. This is *France*, my friend.”

She wasn’t wrong, and I couldn’t blame her for thinking I might be interested. In Paris last year she and I had gone out one night and we didn’t come home for three days. Of those three days, I remembered maybe half. I’d been running from my feelings for Laurent then too, but I wasn’t planning on jumping into bed with anyone this time.

We caught up as we drove, and it wasn’t until Janelle was in the middle of telling me about the latest drama in the Parisian opera world that I realized we’d been driving way longer than I expected to arrive at a boat. And when I looked out the window, there were airplanes. No boats. “Where are we?”

She looked at me. “We’re going to the boat.”

“I’m not sure if there’s more of a language barrier here, but these are planes.”

Janelle looked at me, an amused smile on her face. “Did you think it was a riverboat? We have to fly to Marseille first. A little over an hour, but don’t worry, there’s champagne, and the flight goes quickly.”

She waved to someone outside the window, and I turned to find more of my former cast mates and some people I didn't recognize boarding the plane. "Wow."

"I could have sworn I told you."

I followed her out of the car. "You probably did. I've been distracted."

Looping her arm through mine, we boarded the plane together. "Hopefully, we can distract you in a good way."

But she didn't ask what was wrong. And even though I didn't really feel like talking about being dumped on my ass from my dream job, I still wanted people to care if I wasn't feeling great. Not that I could blame people for not reading my mind, but Laurent's face was in my head, telling me he didn't want me to be alone because he knew I was sad despite having tried to hide it.

I shoved the thought aside as I stepped into the plane, because it was incredible. I'd never been on a private plane, and it was spacious even with all the seats full. Where I sat was like a fully stuffed armchair that had the ability to lie all the way back. A couple of flight attendants circulated with champagne, and I lost myself in the hum of conversation and everyone talking and catching up.

The bitter taste of the champagne went to my head quickly, given that I'd eaten nothing yet today, and I ended up with a happy buzz while we flew.

It probably should have bothered me that no one asked me anything. I was engaged enough in the conversation by listening, but I was a bystander, and that was okay.

What the hell was wrong with me? I'd never been okay with being a bystander in my entire life. Was I so broken by this that I'd become an entirely different person?

I hoped not, but tipsy on a private plane to Marseille definitely wasn't the right place to ask that question.

Janelle was right, the flight felt like no time at all. The air was warmer and more humid when we got off the plane, but I was still glad for my coat and sweater. The boat docked nearby

wasn't what I expected. It was nearly big enough to be a cruise ship, and the deck was already crowded with people.

Music filtered through the air to us, and Janelle laughed. "I am so excited." Her accent was deeper with the champagne and the glint in her eyes. "It's the best party every year."

Someone shrieked with joy from the upper deck and pointed at us. I couldn't make out the French, but Janelle laughed and shouted something back. "I will go say hi. You're okay?"

I blinked. "Yeah, I'm fine."

She grinned and nearly sprinted to the gangplank, waving to Monsieur Chagny on the way by. I walked more slowly toward him and the boat. "Miss Irela. I didn't realize you were joining us today."

I smiled at him. "Janelle invited me. I hope that's all right?"

"More than. I know parties aren't the best way to repay putting your life in danger, but if you ever need anything, I hope you'll let me know."

"Of course."

What would the company do if Raoul Chagny called them up and told them they had to reinstate me? The man was a renowned patron of the arts. There was no doubt they'd take me back in a heartbeat. But what would that do?

I'd be in the company, and the director would hate me for having to have me when he didn't want me, and the rest of the company would resent me for having someone like Raoul on my side. It wouldn't make anything better.

But maybe I could approach him later about something with one of his other projects. Still, no matter what, I didn't want anything I didn't earn.

I walked up the ramp onto the boat and jumped as someone stepped in front of me. It felt like I looked up for miles into one of the most attractive faces I'd ever seen in my

life. Glossy dark hair like raven's feathers, and piercing eyes that were impossibly just as dark.

A dark suit that fit narrow hips and broad shoulders, and a secretive smile that made me wonder if this man was a model. He was made for billboards, that was for sure.

And to add on top of everything, I felt pulled to him like I was yanked on a string. It was unnerving as much as intriguing and entirely confusing.

"Hello." Even his voice was low and musical.

"Hi. Do I know you?"

His smile deepened. "You don't, but I wish I'd had the pleasure earlier. My name is Ariel."

Heat rose to my cheeks. There was something about the way he said the words, like they wrapped around me and held me closer.

He just stared at me in silence until goosebumps rose on my arms. There wasn't anyone behind me on the dock, so I wasn't holding up a line, but it was still weird.

"Okay. It was nice to meet you."

I stepped around him and he stepped with me, blocking me with his body. "I don't think you should be here," he murmured. "This is not the right place for you."

"Excuse me?"

When I looked up at his face again, it looked like he was in pain, that beautiful face shining with sweat. "You shouldn't get on this boat."

At the same time, he reached for me and grabbed my wrist, pulling me closer. "Your words and actions are saying two different things," I said, pulling my wrist out of his grasp. "And given that you're a stranger, you don't get an opinion on where I go."

This time I spun around him quickly so he couldn't get in front of me and power walked the rest of the way onto the boat. I turned back to find him watching me with that

mysterious smile on his face, like he was happy I was on the boat even though he told me not to.

Weird.

The pull between us spun outward, and I felt it even as I walked away from him up onto the deck.

Janelle was there with the friend she'd run to, and waved me over. "Meg, this is Rina. Here," she shoved a drink into my hand. "You need one of these."

"Do you know who that is?"

"Who?"

I turned to point to the man, but he wasn't there anymore. Fuck. "Oh. I'll point him out when I see him again. He told me not to get on the boat. Said his name was Ariel?"

She snickered. "All right. Sounds like he should be the one who stays off the boat."

"Oh wait, there he is." I caught a glimpse of the man across the deck, still looking at me. From here, he nearly looked like a specter in the black suit with his dark hair.

Janelle turned to look and her eyebrows rose. "I take it back. He should absolutely be here. No matter what he said, and no matter what *I* said about Raoul, I think you should go for that instead."

Laughing, I took a sip of my drink. *Fuck* that was good. The perfect blend of fruit and alcohol—the kind of drink that was dangerous.

You know what? Maybe I needed a little danger. Trying to get my old self back last night massively backfired, but there was no reason it couldn't work now. I trusted Monsieur Chagny and his guests, and it was time to have some fun.

Tilting my head back, I downed the drink in one long go to the cheers of those around me and came back up for air with a smile. Who cared if this was what I needed or not? I was here, and I was going to make the most of it.

Thunder boomed over the boat, and from where I lounged on a couch, I saw lightning flare over the ocean's horizon. Janelle was draped over my stomach, gently snoring, and my own head was rocking more than the boat.

I needed to stand up—I needed to feel the air on my skin. Moving Janelle to the side, I managed to slip out from underneath her and nearly tripped over two people making out on the floor.

Who knew what time it was? It was pitch black other than the lightning and the occasional flicker of moonlight through the clouds. There was still a party raging nearly everywhere, and the room I stumbled out of was by far the quietest.

Rain fell on my skin, cooling the heat beneath it. It wasn't falling hard yet, but it was getting harder and starting to slant in the wind. I held onto the rail and looked over, just barely able to see the surface of the dark water in the glow of the boat lights. It was nearly matte with the pouring rain.

Right then, the clouds opened, and the rain fell straight. The sound of it on the water and the decks drowned out the sound of the music, and nearly the screams of surprise. More lightning and more thunder.

I tipped my head back to the sky, the force of the water nearly painful, but *fuck*, it had been a long time since I felt this alive.

The boat rocked, and I slipped, holding onto the rail. "Woah."

The water was suddenly so much closer, the wave lifting so high I could almost touch it. "Oh fuck."

Lightning flashed, and I saw the surface of the ocean in the brightness. It wasn't even close to flat. We were in the middle of waves I'd only seen in things like movies where they were on boats five times the size of this one.

“Still happy you came on the boat?” A voice called over the roaring storm.

Even though he had to yell, his voice still managed to sound like velvet. The man from earlier, still in his black suit, standing without holding on like the sudden swerving of the boat didn't affect him at all.

The front of the boat rose so high it felt like we were in the movie *Titanic*, and then, free fall. That's what it felt like. The boat went over the wave and we dropped, the splash soaking me through as I clung to the rail and tried to keep my feet. “Who the fuck are you?”

He still stood with his hands in his pockets, not a care in the world.

“It doesn't matter,” he said, coming closer. “But I'll see you soon.”

Leaning in, his lips brushed the shell of my ear and I shuddered from the heat. “I wish you had listened to me.”

He stepped back, and I only had time to see him smile before he tipped himself over the rail and into the blackness. I felt myself scream, but I couldn't hear it. The storm was too loud, and the air was filled with other screams because there were no more lights.

Panic clawed up my throat, and I wrapped my arms all the way around the rail. There was no way to see and nowhere to go.

Oh god. Oh fuck. Were we going to die?

I was still drunk, and for the first time, I realized that this might be worse than I even thought. This wasn't a storm a boat should be out in.

Fear bottomed out in my gut. My heart pounded in my ears and I started thinking about all the things I should have done. Fuck, this was really it, wasn't it? Your life really did flash before your eyes.

I shouldn't have let Laurent go so easily—I should have tried harder. I should have told Christine everything. I should

have done a lot of things...

We went over another wave and dropped straight through the air into the water. The tip of the boat sank so deep, pure water flooded over the railing and nearly swept me away. The screaming only got worse, and someone banged into me, flung by the water. People were running, but with no light and no traction, there was nothing to do except hope and pray we wouldn't sink.

More water crashed over me. *Fuck* it was cold. This wasn't the Atlantic. It could be a lot colder, but my teeth were chattering.

Not that it mattered if I was going to die.

The heat of tears warmed my skin. Thinking about my teeth chattering wasn't the way I thought I'd go. None of this was the way I thought it would go. And that man was right. I wished I'd listened and stayed on dry land.

But I couldn't go back in time any more than I could will this storm to settle.

A splintering sound cracked through the air, something hitting me in the back painfully. I nearly lost my grip.

Please.

I didn't know who I was begging now, but it was all I could think. Please don't let this happen. Please don't let us sink. Please don't let me die.

Please.

My stomach swooped with the free fall over another wave, and in the next burst of lightning, I saw the truth. The next wave was coming, and it was taller than the rest. We weren't going to make it over the top of this one.

The light faded, and fear sank into me like the jaws of a predator. Final. Knowing it was the end. We were slipping downward in the hollow of the wave.

I filled my lungs with as much air as possible and held my breath, waiting for the crash. Even the lightning couldn't reach us in the shadow of the wave. I closed my eyes.

It all happened at once. Screams were the last thing I heard as the force of a building landed on top of me. There was no holding on—my body ripped from the boat and tossed through the water like a rag doll. It was all cold and all water, and there was no way to tell which way was up.

I opened my eyes to sheer blackness and void. Pure terror electrified me, and it was all I could do to keep holding my breath. Maybe I would reach the surface.

Maybe.

A flash brighter than the lightning ripped through the water. I whirled and saw the colors of fire smothered quickly, the blurry shape of the yacht sinking below the surface. It was being dragged down so fucking fast into the darkness. And the light was gone as quickly as I saw it.

I kicked for the surface, but I never seemed to get any closer. There was just more water and more water and more water and my lungs began to burn. I choked back a sob, grief ripping through me. I was going to die. I couldn't hold my breath much longer, and there was no sign of air.

But I wouldn't give up until the last second. Even if my world felt like it was fading to black. Like a stage light slowly shifting to a final spotlight that would sink into the dark.

There were lights in the dark, pale blue and whirling like stars. They rippled and flowed like a dance in front of my eyes. Maybe this was a final gift, so I could sink into the dark without fear.

I clung to it like I wished I could cling to life, grateful for one more taste of beauty.

And I released my last breath, all that was left of me.



CHAPTER SEVEN

TRIN

I caught her body as it went limp, pressing a hand over her mouth. She needed to surrender to the water in order for me to help her. Her small form thrashed as her lungs filled with water, but that was fine. I could keep her alive like this.

Moving my hand to her neck, I brushed her hair back in the water so it was a glowing halo around her head, lit up by my luminescence.

For a moment I was stunned by her image, a goddess floating asleep in the void, waiting to be woken. She was a dormant star or supernova, calling to me to keep her close and safe while also letting her shine. If I'd had any breath in my lungs, it would be gone.

One quick sting from my wrist and her body calmed, accepting the alien sensation of water in her lungs. Only the venom that would allow her to breathe, and nothing else. It would last long enough to get her home. That was all I needed.

Back to the island before he called for me and wondered why we both weren't there.

A dark shape floated past, and Ariel appeared in a rough form, looking down at her.

Neither of us wanted to take her there, knowing what might happen, and neither of us had a choice.

But, like Ariel, I knew the woman I held in my arms was special. She felt *bright*. Like she was glowing beneath the surface of her skin, though there was no light visible.

She wasn't like any of the other humans dragged to our island home. They were rarely women, and rarely alive for more than a day or two.

That wouldn't happen to her. We might not have much power, but I wasn't going to let her die. There was something about her, and we were going to figure out what it was.

I began to swim for home, for the first time in a century feeling something like hope.



CHAPTER EIGHT

LAURENT

Meg's quiet sobs were going to haunt me. She was trying to keep quiet while she cried, but I could still hear her. I could hear her heartbeat through the walls, her tears even more so.

I didn't sleep at all, listening to the ragged nature of her crying, like she had cracked open and every bit of sadness she'd ever felt was pouring out.

It killed me to know I was a part of that. I'd hurt her, and it was like a knot in my gut. Watching her walk away didn't help. Especially since it was the last thing I wanted. I *wanted* to lean into that kiss. I *wanted* to tell her she lit me up inside and I was drawn to her like nothing I'd ever felt. I wanted to tell her that I didn't care that she wasn't my mate like in the way Christine had hers, because mates were so fucking rare, I didn't think I had one.

I wanted to see where the chemistry between us went and give her everything she wanted.

But none of what I wanted mattered, because I was still immortal, and Meg deserved someone she could grow old with. And I couldn't take watching her wither away. And that was the least of it.

I was a selfish coward, but Meg could live a full, safe life.

She wasn't home when I woke, but I hadn't expected her to be. Whatever party she'd gone to seemed like the kind to last overnight, and I had no right to tell her where she needed to be, or when. Still, I hoped she would be here when I got home from work. Just so I could see how she was and if she was okay.

The pain in her eyes when she finally told me the truth, and then her cries...

Shaking my head, I pulled on my coat and walked the few blocks to my office. I wasn't busy, generally, and today was no exception. My small practice was private, and mostly non-humans, though there were a few. But it was a relief to help people, because of my past.

'Do no harm' spoke to me on a level deeper than your average doctor, though I worked to make sure no one ever knew. I pushed open the door and my receptionist, a dryad named Cleo whose tree was in one of the parks not far from here, smiled before tilting her head and speaking in French. "You're here."

"Should I not be?"

She shrugged. "I thought they might have called you to go. You're a part of the emergency collective, yes?"

"Cleo, what are you talking about?" I hung up my coat and rolled up my sleeves. It was true I was a part of a coalition of doctors with flexible schedules who could go to a crisis if needed, but I hadn't been contacted in over a year.

"There was a storm off the southern coast last night. It was huge and out of nowhere. There was flooding, boats beached, etc. They mentioned on the news they were calling in doctors, that's all."

Dread settled in my stomach. "A storm?"

“Very large, apparently. Out of season too.”

I went to my office and booted up my computer, immediately searching the headlines. The images made my feet begin turning to stone in order to keep myself still. Pure destruction along the coast, with debris still floating in the water. It was barely eight in the morning. When did this happen?

There was a live feed of rescue boats bringing people in, and the commentator was speaking. “We don’t yet know the full count of casualties and the missing, as rescue crews are still scouring for any signs of boats which had made radio contact last night. One such vessel belonged to the well-known patron of the arts, Raoul Chagny, who was hosting a party for more than two-hundred people on his yacht when the storm struck. While the man himself has been rescued, the vessel did capsize, and more than half the guests are still missing.”

I knew him by reputation and nothing more than that. But when the shot cut to him and he began to speak, I froze, terror making my stone form appear so quickly I nearly burst through my clothes. In the back of the shot was Meg’s friend—the one who had come to my house yesterday. The woman was crying, and I could barely see her behind the talking millionaire, but she was there.

There was no sign of Meg.

Grabbing my phone, I called hers, and it went immediately to voicemail. Which didn’t mean much. If she’d been in the water at all, the phone was probably dead. But there was no way I was going to sit here and *wait* to find out if she was all right.

Danger be damned. Everything be damned. If she were gone—

Grabbing the ID for the emergency medical collective, I strode back out into the front office. “Cancel my appointments. Use the emergency as the reason.”

“Oh,” Cleo looked up in surprise. “Of course. When will you be back?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll keep you posted.”

Swinging my coat off the hook and back onto my body, I didn’t wait to hear her response.

Being a monster was helpful sometimes. It allowed you to disregard the things that normal humans had to worry about, like transportation. Why would you go through the trouble when you’d helped some of the local air spirits a few years ago, and they were more than happy to fly you to Marseille in less than half the time?

I’d had to change my hands and face to stone to keep the cold air from freezing, but it was worth it when they let me down near the Marseille dock barely half an hour after I’d left my office. I hadn’t even stopped at home for my medical bag, because as much as I could help, I wasn’t here as a doctor.

I was here for Meg, and Meg alone.

The badge got me past the lines, and I started looking, panic growing stronger with every face that wasn’t hers. A woman in a bright yellow coat was taking names from people, and I swallowed down my fear, shoving it into a place it could be useful.

“I’m looking for a possible victim.” My voice rasped on the last word. Meg was not a victim, and I was regretting everything I’d said or done around her. Because this? *This* was my worst nightmare. Here I was, trying to avoid pain for both of us, and the rest of the world, by not letting myself get closer and instead I was full of fucking regret.

The woman looked at me and noted the badge around my neck. “Name?”

“Meghan Irela.”

She shook her head. My chest felt like ice, and I wondered if it were possible for a stone heart to crack in two. “No, not here. But we haven’t taken everyone’s information yet. Plus,

they're still bringing people back." Then she pointed. "The doctor's tent is over there. I'm sure they have work for you."

"Thank you." I went in the direction she pointed and doubled back, still looking for Meg's blonde hair. But every head I found was someone else.

There.

I dropped to my knees in front of the woman I'd seen on television. She was shivering, wrapped in a blanket. "Janelle?"

She looked up, and there was no recognition in her gaze. "Who are you?"

"I'm Meg's friend. The one she was staying with."

"Oh." She looked around, and I saw the gash on her head that had been treated, though there was blood on the bandage. One glance told me this group was heading to the hospital soon.

Reaching out, I gripped her shoulder. "Where is Meg? Have you seen her?"

Janelle shook her head and winced. "I fell asleep on her, and then everything was dark. Maybe she went with that guy. I told her to."

Rage I had no right to feel built in my gut. "Who?"

She shrugged, swaying. She was in bad shape, but I needed to know.

"*Who*, Janelle?"

"I don't know who he was. All I know is that he was super hot and he told Meg not to get on the boat. But she didn't listen. Maybe she was with him..." she trailed off.

I froze so entirely I didn't breathe. "He told her not to get on the boat?"

One nod.

"What did he look like?"

"Really dark hair and dark clothes. He kept staring at Meg. I thought she needed to loosen up." Tears welled in her eyes.

“I hope they’re both okay.”

Standing, I flagged down a nearby EMT. “She needs to get to a hospital now. She’s having trouble with balance and her speech is erratic.”

“Got it.”

He sprinted off in the direction of the stretchers and ambulances, and I looked around to see if the man she described was in sight.

“Oh,” Janelle said, her eyes finding mine though her gaze was hazy. “She said his name was Ariel.”

If lightning struck, it wouldn’t have rendered me as still as my body went, hearing the name. *No*.

I no longer looked to see if he was here. He wouldn’t be. He was far away from here, in a place I never, ever wanted to go back to. The very reason I’d forced myself to stay away from Meg in the first place.

And if he was there warning Meg away, he was really there to make sure she *was* there, no matter what.

The unexpected storm... *fuck*, it all made sense.

I turned away from the water and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. Horror rang through me like a bell, and I could barely think.

This was my fault. It had to be. The only reason, the *only* reason Ariel would be here for Meg was because of me. At *his* orders. There was no other connection.

How foolish was I? Already devastated that Meg had gotten swept up in an accident, when it was no accident at all. My legs could barely support themselves, and I fell into a crouch. All these people were here because of me. How many had died?

He’d been silent for so long. A small, foolish part of me hoped that maybe he’d given up trying to use me. But of course he hadn’t. It wasn’t who he was.

Instead, he waited and took the one thing he could see I wanted. Meg.

I stood again and forced myself to walk all the way outside of the barricade to where it was more quiet before I pulled out my phone.

The kings needed to know about this. Not only because they were the rulers of my world, but because they were Christine's mates. She deserved to know her best friend was missing, and they deserved to know it was my fault.

Alex answered on the first ring. "Hey, Laurent."

"Your Majesty."

He snorted. "How many times do I have to tell you to lay off the formalities?"

"You might feel differently in a moment."

I sensed the change in his attention, and he switched to French. "Laurent, what's going on?"

"Are you near a television?"

"I can be."

Swallowing, I closed my eyes. "Turn on the news. I can't imagine there's not a channel that's covering it. French news if you need to."

Lower, I heard, "I'll be right back," followed by the closing of a door. The faint sound of talking from a screen, and Alex sucked in a breath. "Good god. How many casualties? Do we know if there are any monsters? Gargoyles?"

"I don't know," I shook my head, though he couldn't see me.

"This is awful, Laurent. Of course it is, but why are you calling to tell me about it?"

I took a deep breath, knowing this was going to change everything. "Prospero is alive."

Dead silence on the other end of the line. Then he cleared his throat. "Prospero, the one who created you? The one who

—”

“Yes.”

“I thought you said he was dead.”

Gritting my teeth, I blew out a breath. “I lied. He’s never been dead. He’s bound where he is. For now. He’s never stopped trying to break free, never stopped trying to take everything, and as long as he doesn’t have me, he can’t.” At least I hoped there was no other way.

“Laurent,” Alex sighed. “What the fuck is going on? I’ve never heard you sound like this before.”

“Meg was on the boat.”

“*What?*”

My voice broke once. “She was on the boat that sank, and she’s not here, Alexandre. A storm, a *massive fucking storm* that came out of nowhere in February? He took her. Because of me. All these people—”

“Laurent,” Alex’s voice snapped through the line. “How do you know? How do you know he took her?”

“I know,” I said. There was too much to explain about Ariel, but there wasn’t a doubt in my mind. Where Ariel was, Prospero wasn’t far behind. The spirit was just as bound to the island, and even more bound to the sorcerer, though I wished he weren’t.

That was my fault too.

“Why does he want Meg if he can’t break free, anyway?”

“There are a lot of things he can still use me for, Alex. Never forget who I was before I met you.”

He sighed, and I heard a soft creak, like he was sitting down on a bed. “And you still feel the same way? About her? Keeping your distance?”

Huffing a laugh that contained no humor, I looked at the sky. If history looked back on me and painted me as the most foolish gargoyle alive, I would deserve it.

“Part of that was a lie, too,” I admitted. “Everything I said was true, but I was also trying to protect her from him. And everyone else because of him. But no. I don’t care what I said before. I just lived through an hour thinking she was dead. Nothing else matters.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

Turning so I could see the ocean spread out in front of me, I closed my eyes. The place he had taken Meg was my worst nightmare. It didn’t matter that doing this could change the fate of the world. I didn’t care that she wasn’t my mate. Everything in my body screamed that she was *mine*.

“I’m going to get her.”



CHAPTER NINE

MEGHAN

Water burned in my throat as it came up, salty, and far, far too much of it. I retched over the side of whatever I was lying on, puking up what felt like an entire bathtub's worth of water.

It just kept coming until finally I could take a breath.

That wasn't easy either. My lungs felt weak, and my body felt like I'd spent too much time in a hot tub *and* a sauna. Waterlogged, and yet dry and itchy.

Rolling onto my back, I gasped for more breath, seeing nothing but a damp, rocky ceiling above me.

The last thing I remembered...

I rolled and threw up again, but this time it wasn't water. The last thing I remembered was *drowning*. The boat had gone down, and I was under the waves with no way out. Was I dead?

Somehow, I hadn't thought the afterlife would be a cave, but honestly, it could be weirder.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I tried to look around. Everything hurt, and the more I woke up, the more wrung out and exhausted I felt.

Raising my hand to my throat, I felt salt crusted on my skin. It was all over my chest too, under this blanket. The blanket was warm and soft and felt good on my battered body.

Then it hit me—I could feel the blanket on *all* my skin. I was naked, and no idea how I'd gotten that way.

Okay, Meg. Figure out what the hell is going on.

Breathing slowly, I turned my head to look at the small room I was in. It was definitely a cave, rocky and damp, with some candles that looked melted into the walls. The color of the flames was... off. Like they held more color than a flame should. It painted the stone in rich oranges and yellows that reflected off the wet stone. A small depression in the stone looked like a fountain, with water trickling down the stone to form a small pool, and a window that showed me some greenery but gave me no hint about where I was.

Other than that, there wasn't anything else in the room but the bed I lay on. Which appeared to be some kind of soft fur on top of the stone shelf, along with the blanket.

The sight of water made thirst explode in my throat. Need, sudden and painful, nothing I could resist. I held the blanket around me and sat up, bones creaking. Even after some of the hardest training days I'd ever been through, my body had never felt like this.

Sharp, fiery pain stabbed through my legs as I tried to stand and make my way around the puddle of water I'd thrown up.

But there was no strength in my limbs, and the second I made it upright, I stumbled and fell. The only thing I could do was close my eyes and prepare for the further pain of hitting stone, but it never came. I fell against something soft and warm that kept me from smacking my head.

I opened my eyes and couldn't make sense of what I saw. A puddle of darkness was beneath me and the scrunched up blanket. What—

The patch of void moved, slowly pulling out from beneath me and lowering me to the ground. I slid down, landing where I leaned against the small fountain, and the cloud of darkness resolved itself into a... cat?

Holy shit.

Not just a cat. A panther. Big yellow eyes shining as he looked at me, and a strong, steady purr that rose in the silence. It sat back on its haunches and watched me with a gaze that seemed like nothing like an animal.

“Thank you,” I said, my throat feeling like I had the worst flu in the history of everything.

I needed the water.

Trying to reach it was harder than I wanted, but I stretched, barely able to make my lips meet the surface of the small pool.

A hand appeared in front of me, lifting water to my lips. A *human* hand. I jerked back to find there was no more panther in front of me. There was a man. A man?

His eyes were still the eyes of a panther, but his face was that of a man, with short, dark hair. The same soft black fur curled over his shoulders and arms, and as I looked further down, curled around his ribs and legs. But the rest of his body was entirely male, and every part of him was breathtaking.

The purr in his chest was more distinct now, and he reached out, gently turning my face with one finger back to where he was holding the water for me. “Drink.”

His voice was low and smooth as velvet, but raw in a way that reminded me of the wild animal he shared a form with.

Cool, sweet wetness across my tongue, soothing the aching burn in my mouth and throat. He held another cupped handful to my mouth, and I drank it down, savoring the relief it brought me before I looked at him again.

Thank fuck I already knew monsters existed, because if I didn't, this would be so much worse. Imagining waking up after drowning, not knowing that magical creatures existed and suddenly being confronted by one? I would probably believe I was dead.

Frankly, I still wasn't convinced I was alive.

"Who are you? Where am I?" My voice scratched like it had been torn through with broken glass.

The hand he'd used to turn my head gently cradled the side of my face as he held more water to my lips. "You can call me Ban." The words were quiet.

"Ban," I echoed once I'd swallowed. "I'm alive?"

"You are alive," he said.

"That's good."

His purr turned into a chuckle before sliding back into the low, comforting sound. "Yes, it is good."

"How? How am I alive?"

Ban lifted another mouthful of water to my lips, and I drank it greedily. But even as the water was giving me energy and relief, my eyes felt heavy again. Like my body wasn't fully able to deal with whatever trauma had happened while I was unconscious. Even sitting, I swayed toward the ground, and he caught me.

I was lifted, still curled in the blanket against his chest as he laid me down on the mattress again. "You need to rest. You are alive, but you are not safe."

"What?"

Settling next to me, he made sure I was covered with the soft blanket. His warmth was intoxicating, and sleep was pulling me down even though I didn't want it to.

"I will keep you as safe as I can," he whispered, and I felt a thrill of something in the air as he shifted back into the form of a large cat.

I ended up with my head on a large furry body, feeling safe and protected, even though he told me I wasn't.

I surfaced slowly, listening to the rich purr under my ear. It wasn't fur beneath me now, but skin, and a hand stroked down my spine slowly. Breath warmed my temple, and I realized I was fully wrapped around Ban before I even opened my eyes.

How long had I been sleeping?

My one arm was curled around him, feeling the soft fur on his back. Why was I so comfortable here? No matter who I was before, I still wasn't the kind of girl to *snuggle* with someone I'd never met. Let alone a monster.

I lifted my head and found him staring at me.

Just like the man on the boat—the one I now assumed was dead because he'd thrown himself over the side—he was beautiful. The dusting of dark fur that crept around his neck and over his cheekbones didn't lessen it. This close I saw his nose was flatter, closer to that of a panther.

It was like I couldn't help myself, reaching out to stroke down his nose. His eyes closed, and his purr grew stronger before he leaned in and nudged my temple with his nose.

“What are you?” I asked quietly.

“I am Caliban.”

Ban. Caliban.

“But what are you? You're a shifter, but also not. What kind of monster are you?”

He smiled, and I saw slightly elongated canines. “I am just me. There's no one else like me.”

“Oh.”

There was a hesitance in his gaze before he spoke. “You are not afraid of me?”

I blinked. “No. Should I be?”

“No.” Surely I was imagining the relief I saw.

The feeling of him stroking down my spine again had my eyes closing and my head sinking down to his chest again.

A *deep* inhale ruffled my hair, and his voice joined his purr, like a soft exhalation of pleasure. I needed to stand up and figure out where the hell I was, why, and how I could get home. But the sound rumbling through me and how tired I was, along with how comfortable, made me reluctant to move.

The scent enveloping me was earthy and rich. It lifted straight from Ban’s skin into my nose and made me want to bury my face deeper. What the hell was wrong with me?

It was like the scent of him woke up a side of me that should definitely *not* be awake right now. Focus, Meg.

“You said I’m not safe,” I whispered. “Why?”

“I will keep you safe, kitten.”

I laughed, the sound muffled by his chest. “I’m not a kitten.”

A huffed, gentle sound that moved my hair again. “You are small and soft. You have a hard time standing on your own. You are defenseless without fur, and you smell delicious. You are a kitten.”

“But—” I didn’t know why I was feeling this way about the word. With the way his body was pressed against mine, I didn’t want him to think of me as something young and innocent. No matter if I shouldn’t be having those thoughts, and no matter if they didn’t make sense. I didn’t want to be something he saw as a burden.

I wanted something I definitely shouldn’t want—to let this monster consume me.

He nudged my temple again. “I have never held a human kitten before.” The purr was nearly deafening in my ear. “A beautiful kitten.”

A blush rose to my cheeks, followed by guilt. How long had it been since the boat sank? Did Laurent think I was dead? Did Christine? And I was here curled up with a creature who made me feel things I didn't understand, not trying to get back to him.

But I still wanted those things. Like a burning need inside me, I wanted to touch and taste and *play* if I didn't still feel like death warmed over.

He stiffened, suddenly looking behind him toward the door. When he looked at me now, his eyes were full of fear and panic—nothing like the lazy pools of gold they'd been seconds ago.

Pressing his forehead to mine for one long moment, I felt him shifting. "Be careful, kitten."

He slithered off the stone bed and onto the floor in his feline form before jumping out the window with eerie silence. I laid my head on the furs beneath me as I heard footsteps outside the door.

Heavy, steady footsteps that *felt* sinister even without Ban's warning.

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but a man who looked completely ordinary wasn't it. He was older, with silvering hair and wrinkles on his face, but he seemed to be entirely human. The oddest part about him was the clothes.

He was wearing robes like he was in a bible play. Or maybe like he was going to a renaissance fair. But his eyes were bright, and he smiled at me when he saw me looking. "I'm happy to find you awake and recovering."

I didn't say anything. The way his voice carried—a rich baritone—it reminded me of some of the men who were in Joan. Bristling and performative. It put me on edge despite his smile.

"Where am I?"

"My home, and I welcome you to it. Terrible what happened to your boat, but I hope I can make you comfortable here."

Holding the blanket to my chest, I tried to sit up, and it wasn't easy, reminding me of Ban's words. It was true. I could barely stand on my own right now. "Where are my clothes?"

"I feared you would fall ill in clothes that were so wet. There are others you can wear, of course." He waved a hand, and glitter flashed in the air, followed by a bundle of white fabric landing on my legs. It was a filmy white dress that didn't seem thick enough to hide much.

"Um, thank you."

He stood there, waiting, and I stared back. "The least you could do is turn around."

"Given how you were rescued, it's hardly necessary."

My face flushed with anger, but I held my tongue. This man was a stranger and I had no idea what he was capable of. I needed to be careful. Still, I couldn't be completely silent. I took a breath, long and even. "As much as I love hearing about you violating my consent while I was unconscious and dying, now that I'm awake, turn the fuck around."

His eyes narrowed a fraction, and I saw a tic in his jaw. But he turned his back, and I still kept the blanket covering most of my body as I pulled the dress over my head.

Just like I'd thought, the fabric was nearly sheer, and I was grateful it was thick enough to hide my nipples. But it felt good to be wearing anything at all.

"Good," he said, turning too quickly to believe he hadn't known exactly what was happening. "Let me show you around."

I stood slowly, and without Caliban to steady me, I nearly fell again. Instead, I used the wall. It lent me the strength I needed, but I was moving slowly. My body hurt less than when I'd woken the first time, but it still ached.

"Where are we?" I asked again, hoping for a straighter answer.

The man said nothing as I approached the door. The hallway outside the door was equally rocky and cavelike,

leading in either direction.

“It’s known many names, and I’m sure it will continue to know many names, but I call it *Miann*.”

There was light ahead, and all at once we stepped into bright sunlight, and I blinked away the shock of whiteness to find dread seeping down my spine. The cliff we stood on rolled down to the ocean amid lush greenery and beautiful trees and flowers. Beyond that, the water disappeared into the distance with nothing else in sight.

The truth I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge stared me in the face. I was alive, but I was nowhere close to home, and based on the empty blue horizon, rescue was far beyond my reach.



CHAPTER TEN

MEGHAN

*M*y throat was closing up on me. “Oh, god.” The words gasped out. “Where the hell are we?”

The man chuckled. “I haven’t seen a modern map in a long time, but we’re somewhere in the Mediterranean. I’m sure I could figure out where, but I don’t particularly care.”

He turned and strode back into the rocky hallway, and I grabbed onto the stone to turn and follow him. “But are we close enough for me to get back? I was in Paris, and I have friends who are expecting me.”

The man kept walking, and as I followed, the tunnel twisted down through the rock and stone. Occasionally there were breaks in the stone that showed the outside, and when there weren’t, heatless flames clung to the walls to give light.

Down and down and down until the hallway opened, and it was more like a house—or a mansion within the stone—rather than a small hallway. Down at the far end I saw the entrance to

the outside, and as we walked away from the exterior, I saw rooms that seemed like bedrooms, maybe a kitchen, and a couple of other things I couldn't place.

Still, the man was silent.

"I appreciate you helping me," I said. "I'm very glad to be alive, but I can't stay here."

Not only would Laurent and Christine be freaking the fuck out, but I couldn't just stay on a random magical island, no matter how much I liked the shifter I'd woken with.

A magical island.

You could know these things were real and still be blindsided by the truth of them.

"You live here?" I asked him. "That must be nice. I mean, I do want to go home, but being able to escape to a magical tropical island every once in a while sounds great."

The room we walked into could have been a laboratory. It smelled like a perfume store, with an exotic blend of everything. Sugary top notes and an okay center down to an earthy, smoky bottom. A glowing pool of water in the ground looked like I could soak magic into my very skin, and there was such an array of bottles and materials I wanted to look at every little detail.

"You called?"

A low, velvet voice came from behind me, and chills ran over my skin. It was familiar, and I whirled to find the beautiful man from the boat. What was he—

"Yes, Ariel. Thank you."

Ariel.

Creeping fear flickered across my skin. He should be dead. I'd *seen* him throw himself over the side into the ocean, and even if he'd survived that, why was he *here*?

Ban crept in around him, staring at me in his feline form. It felt like he wanted to come closer, but didn't dare. This wasn't what it seemed.

Panic climbed up my spine, freezing me to the spot.

“You seem to be under the impression that you are here by accident, or out of some goodness of my heart, Meg.”

He knew my name, and I realized my mistake. Ariel was standing in the doorway blocking any way out. Ban growled low and was silenced with a wave of the magician’s hand.

“You’re here because I want you to be here. You have no idea the kind of magic it took to conjure that storm. So answering your question, no, we are not close enough to anything for you to go back. Even if we were, that is no longer an option for you.”

The storm was his fault? “That boat sank,” I said. “People *died*.” There was no way for me to know if I was the only survivor, but given the strength of the waves, it was possible. “For someone who’s not special? I don’t have magic and I don’t have mates. I don’t have anything of value.”

“You have one thing,” he said simply. “You have the eye of someone I need. To put it plainly, you’re bait. And if you’re not bait, you’re the answer.”

“Who?” I shook my head. “I’m not—”

Lunging, he grabbed my wrist, and I yanked it away, sprinting to the door. I’d made it past Ariel once before. I could do it again.

“Stop her.”

I didn’t make it.

Ariel evaporated into smoke, only to appear with his arms around me and walk me back into the room. When he released me, I lunged again, but the maniac who’d conjured a fucking *hurricane* to kidnap me was ready this time.

Magic—it had to be magic because nothing else was touching me—yanked me backwards and forced me against the stone wall. My head cracked against it, causing the world to blur with pain. When I opened my eyes, I saw Ban’s feline form writhing on the floor, attempting to overcome whatever

power was holding him there, and Ariel was watching me with sorrow in his eyes.

You shouldn't get on this boat.

He'd tried to warn me, and I hadn't listened. But how could I have known it was this?

"I didn't want to do this," the older man said, approaching me. His hands were spread wide like I was the one who was dangerous here. Light glowed at his fingertips. I didn't believe him.

"But I need your help, and it doesn't seem like you'll offer it willingly. Ariel, hold her."

The spirit's gaze snapped away from me and to the man in front of me, but he didn't move. "You seem like you have her well under control."

"It wasn't a request. Hold her still and make sure she doesn't move."

Ariel's body vanished into nothing but dark, shifting mist, leaving nothing but his head and shoulders behind. He glared at the magician, but he started to move toward me, and when his gaze locked with mine again, what I saw was pure, feral rage. Along with grief.

Devastation.

"This isn't necessary," Ariel said. "Don't do this."

The older man glared at him, and Ariel's body lurched forward like he'd been shoved, though there was nothing behind him.

I shook my head, pleading. The magic still held me against the stone, and I couldn't move. Dread dripped down my spine. "Don't. Please."

The dark mist pressed against my body, his hands reforming over my wrists as they reappeared and the other magic released me. Now Ariel's dark presence was the one holding me in place, and I shoved against him, trying to find the strength to push away *smoke*, and it didn't work.

“Please, Ariel, don’t do this.” I echoed his own words. “I don’t belong here. You told me that. Help me.” Over his shoulder, the magician was only a step away, and desperation took over. Tears flooded my eyes. I couldn’t breathe. How naïve was I that I’d thought he’d wanted to help me?

I didn’t know what was going to happen, but the casual look on the man’s face terrified me. He didn’t care what this would do to me. I was nothing to him. “Please, Ariel. Make him stop.”

Ariel’s lips found my ear with words so quiet I was the only one who could hear them. “I’m so sorry. I don’t have a choice. It’s okay. It will be all right, I promise. Just breathe. I’ve got you.”

“Stop,” I begged.

His voice was agony. “I *can’t*.”

A second hand gripped my wrist, and both heat and pain surged through my skin. I screamed, Ariel pressing himself more firmly against me.

Raw fire consumed my hand, tearing through blood and bone and breaking me apart. I might have screamed, but the pain was bad enough I couldn’t hear anything but the pounding of my heart in my ears. It was the worst pain I’d ever felt. Worse than any injury I’d ever had.

“Breathe.” The words were a command I obeyed out of desperation. “It doesn’t last long.”

“Fuck you,” I spat the words out as the pain ceased in one wrist and appeared in the other. It felt like putting your hand on a hot burner and not pulling away. Like the man was cutting my hand *off* with a jagged blade.

I was no longer coherent. Somewhere outside of myself, I could hear my own voice screaming from the pain. Ariel’s body was rigid as steel against mine, his voice barely audible as he begged me to hold on. I couldn’t listen because I was doing begging of my own, and nothing stopped. Not the pain and not the pressure.

A brief break, and my body sagged, unable to fall because Ariel was still holding me upright.

Underneath Ariel's smoke, a palm covered my heart, and the other withered hand closed around my throat. Pure pain erupted, stronger than before, and it was too much. "Please." My voice croaked. "Stop." I felt my body caught by smoke and mist before everything went dark.

"She'll be fine, Ariel."

"You just tortured her. Do you understand that?"

A sound that was near to a growl. "I'll torture you next if you don't remember your place, spirit."

Ariel's low laugh filled the space. "With what magic? You gave all of yours away just now. I hope she survives, because I will savor every fucking second of your unraveling."

There wasn't any response, but weight circled my wrists along with a shiver of low magic, and the metal pressing there didn't feel like the skin was burned. But my eyes flew open, anyway. Not in time to stop him from cuffing thick silver chains on me.

"Who the fuck are you?" I asked. "And what did you do to me?"

"Just a little gift from me to you." He said. "For a few days. I just used the last of it to seal these. When you die, I'll get it back. Or I'll get what I want, and you'll live."

My mouth dropped open, and I looked back and forth between him and Ariel, who was looking at the man like he was seconds away from murder.

Generally, I didn't think of myself as a violent person, but I wouldn't care right now. Murder might be the only good option. "What?"

"Like I told you. You're bait." He looked at me, focusing on the place where the scrap of a dress he gave me rode up my

legs where they'd laid me down. "If I didn't need you—"

Ariel *snarled*. "If you finish that sentence, I don't give a *shit* what happens to me. I will end you and accept my fate."

The man merely smirked.

I didn't know what to do or think. There wasn't anybody who cared about me enough for me to be used as bait like this, and almost no one I knew would have the skills to get here, let alone take on a maniac magician. I meant enough to Christine, but she had nothing to do with this.

"Who is it you think I have any power over?"

"Khalas," he said, standing and moving away. "But you may know him as Laurent." The way he said the name made his disgust clear.

Shock rolled through me. "What are you talking about? Laurent and I aren't anything. He won't come for me. He won't even know where I am. And whatever you think, he's *rejected* me twice. I'm not whatever you need me to be. And why the fuck are you chaining me to a wall?"

He shrugged. "That's for your own good. The magic of the island can be... temperamental when it's passed around. And I've never given anyone this much before. You'll be glad you're here soon enough."

He crossed the room to the door and gestured for Ariel to go first before turning back to me. The shadow looked at me, and this time it wasn't devastation in his gaze. It was nothing but feral heat, and I wanted no part of whatever this was. This asshole might have tortured me, but Ariel helped.

Before he left, the magician turned. "My name is Prospero, and you are going to be my salvation, Meghan Irela, whether you like it or not."

The door slammed behind him, and I was left alone and in silence.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

LAURENT

“*Y*ou need to wait there,” Christine said over the phone, repeating the argument she’d been losing for the past half-hour. “We can be there soon.”

“Christine, stop.” Erik said from the background. “You are staying here with us, and Laurent is going to get Meg. It’s the end of the discussion.”

She growled in anger, and I understood it. The only reason I wasn’t growling right now was the cool cap of ice that had formed over me. Everything was swirling beneath the surface, but I was calm and getting everything ready.

The last twenty-four hours had been hell, not knowing what Meg was feeling or experiencing and feeling guilty for not knowing who was behind it. I hadn’t even had an *inkling* Prospero was looking for me again, and Meg had paid the price.

He’d never been so subtle before in reminding me that he was lingering at the edges of my life and waiting for me to

make a mistake. But now? Rage surged through me and I forced it deep down where it needed to wait.

Not just Meg had paid the price, but seventy people on the yacht which sank, and countless destroyed homes and businesses along the coast because of unexpected flooding. All because of me.

“I will bring her back, Christine.”

“Why does it have to be you?” It wasn’t a sarcastic question, it was a genuine one. “After everything, I’m not sure Meg wants *you* to come rescue her.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I heard Marius’s voice on the other end of the phone.

“It means I was foolish,” I said. “In more ways than one. But I need to go now. Your Majesties, I don’t care how long it takes. If Meg comes back without me, you are to leave me there.”

“Laurent—”

“You know why. Promise me.”

I hoped it wouldn’t come to it, but in the end, I would fix this. One way or another.

A long silence before Alex spoke. “Fine. But it is a grudging promise.”

“I don’t care if it’s grudging, as long as it is kept.”

Another painful silence. “Good luck, Laurent.”

“Thank you.”

Ending the call, I grabbed the bag I’d prepared and left the hotel room. The small boat I’d purchased yesterday from an aging fisherman was waiting for me at the marina. Small, but it had a motor. Prospero might see me coming, but it wouldn’t matter. It was what he wanted in the first place—me back to *Miann*.

The last time I’d sailed about alone, I’d been fleeing the very place I was heading to now. I’d taken pains not to do

anything similar in all this time. Even though it was necessary, sickness roiled in my gut.

I took another breath and readied myself. I'd been a damn fool when it came to Meg, and I wasn't going to let her pay for my mistakes. Or my past. Prospero had crossed a lot of lines in his life, and I'd hoped being stuck on the island would be enough to contain him. Or finally destroy him.

I was wrong.

But he wasn't going to harm Meg. He would not use me to torture her. Because with every second that passed, Meg was becoming a need I couldn't deny. She wasn't my mate, but she was *mine*, and it was time everyone knew it.



CHAPTER TWELVE

MEGHAN

This wasn't the same room I woke up in when I was throwing up water. For one thing, it wasn't at the top of this strange cave mansion we were in. But it was slightly better equipped than the other room. It had a real bed and a slab of rock with a hole in the corner that I didn't even want to think about.

Another glowing pool was in the corner, big enough for me to get into it if I wanted to.

Considering Prospero seemed like a massive perv, I wasn't going to be doing that anytime soon.

The chains around my wrists had plenty of length. I wasn't restricted in any way because there was so much length between the two, and the piece that was sunken into the wall still allowed me to reach every corner of the room. The single place where it yanked me backwards was when I got to the

door. I couldn't manage to reach for it, let alone go outside it. I didn't even think it was locked.

Arrogant bastard.

After exploring everything and drinking from the pool—pleasantly surprised by how cool and clean it tasted—I retreated to the bed to think about what he'd said and what the fuck was happening here.

If I was interpreting everything correctly, and I wasn't dead or hallucinating—which I hadn't entirely ruled out yet—this was wild.

Prospero thought I was something to Laurent. I wasn't even going to try to figure out why he called him Khalas. Something about the way he'd said it made me think he was under a very different impression of the man I knew.

Laurent was one of the gentlest people I'd ever met. Even when he'd nearly yelled at me outside the club, his touch had been soft and warm. Not once had I ever been afraid of him, and I couldn't imagine him like that.

But he'd rejected me. Not once, but twice. If anything, that thoroughly proved he didn't want me or anything to do with me. Not like that.

Why on earth would he come rescue me? He probably thought I was dead.

The true horror of what happened was starting to sink in now that I was awake and my body was in less pain. How many people on the boat had died? Everyone was drunk, and there was no light. No way to find lifeboats, and even if they had, the waves had been so violent I didn't know if anyone *could* have survived that.

Janelle? Raoul? They could be gone, and I had no way of knowing.

Grief clung to my chest, and I curled up around myself. Did everyone think *I* was dead? Was Christine okay? Did Laurent know what had happened? Oh fuck. Not just them, but everyone else. My family and friends in America.

I didn't even know how long it had been since the boat sank.

Tears stung my eyes, but I didn't want to cry. Not here. If he was watching me, I didn't want to show weakness. But all I wanted to do was curl up tighter and weep. For me and for my friends. For everyone who died because, for whatever reason, a magician wanted to use me.

Through the window the sunlight changed, slipping from afternoon into early evening. But I didn't move. Where would I go? What the fuck was I supposed to do here?

A sound like a soft sigh startled me, and I turned to see dark smoke seeping through the cracks around the door. A second later Ariel appeared out of it. He was no longer wearing a suit. Instead, he only appeared as half a body. A bare torso, arms, and head.

His skin was nearly white and shone gently in the light, like a pearl. I couldn't ignore the way his body looked, either. It wasn't just his face that was beautiful, the paleness of his skin making him look nearly like a marble statue. Lean, and with more muscle than a spirit should have.

I'd already felt exactly how much strength he had when he held me down. Which was why it wasn't okay he was here. "What are you doing here?"

The look on his face was indescribable. He was staring at me like I was the dessert he'd been craving for a decade. Such intensity that he didn't seem to even hear my question at first. The fact that his gaze did something to me pissed me off. It was just like Ban. It dug down deep in my gut and made me *feel* things.

He came across the space and reached out for me with now-physical hands, and I recoiled. "Don't you fucking touch me."

He stepped back like I'd struck him. Then he looked up at me and inhaled, holding out his hands like an offering. "I came to apologize."

“For what?” I spat. “For not fucking *telling anyone* that the boat was going to sink? For letting me get on there and then letting people die? Or for holding me down while your madman of a boss? Owner? Whatever the fuck he is, *tortured me?*”

“I’m sorry.” He appeared the rest of the way, wearing what looked like soft dark pants. Coming closer, he knelt in front of the bed. He offered his hand again, and I pulled away, pretending I didn’t see the hurt in his eyes and wishing I understood it. “I’m so sorry, Meg. I’m sorry for all of it. I know that not having a choice doesn’t make it better. I know that. But I’m still sorry. I came to apologize, and hopefully, explain.”

I glared at him, pushing my back against the wall and attempting to arrange the chains around me so they were somewhat comfortable. “And if I tell you to get the fuck out?”

The same devastation as earlier filled his face, and he looked down, breaking our eye contact. “Then I’ll go.”

Why did that affect me so much? It shouldn’t. But as angry as I was at him, I also didn’t want to be alone. “Why am I here?”

Ariel looked up sharply, like he was surprised I hadn’t sent him away. Then he blinked. “Prospero didn’t lie. You’re here as bait.”

“For someone who doesn’t care about me?” I scoffed. “That hardly makes sense.”

“If you think he doesn’t care about you, you haven’t been watching closely enough.”

I shook my head, unwilling to think about that. Because if it were true, and he’d kissed me back or taken me home and done... *anything* else with me, I might not have gotten on the boat. Maybe I would have stayed in Paris, and I couldn’t bear to imagine that right now.

“What did he do to me? Really?”

Ariel hesitantly held out his hand for mine. “I’ll show you.”

After long moments staring at it, I leaned forward and placed my hand in his. All at once, Ariel stiffened, and there was a *hum* in the air, the same kind of feeling as when Ban had shifted back into his feline form.

“*Fuck,*” he said under his breath, hand tightening on mine.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Here.” Gently, he pushed the metal cuff as far up my arm as it would go. Not far, but enough to reveal the inside of my wrist. He pressed a finger to my skin, and violet light appeared.

“What is that?”

“Magic.”

“Obviously,” I said. “What kind?”

“Just magic. The magic of the island. That’s what it looks like.”

I glanced up at him, startled by how close we’d gotten as we hovered over the glowing spot on my wrist. “It’s purple?”

Ariel smiled. I was dazzled a bit. It was so much more than the smirk I’d seen, which was just as gorgeous. But his smile was the kind that made your heart skip a beat and your breath catch and made you wonder if it was real. “It’s not always purple. It manifests in different ways. Probably purple because of you.”

“But why?”

He shrugged. “It could be that you like the color. Maybe it thinks the color looks good on you. Maybe it thinks those flowers you smell like are purple.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You smell like a bouquet. I don’t even have real lungs, and all I want to do is inhale you.” The words were desperately soft, and I realized his mouth was by my ear again, just like when he’d held me down.

All at once I shoved him away, and once again I caught the flash of hurt in his eyes before he covered it.

“You don’t get to say things like that to me. You don’t know me.”

“Don’t I?” Ariel’s gaze turned sharp.

“No.”

He laughed once and stood, disappearing into smoke almost entirely. “There’s one more thing you should know about the island’s magic.”

“What’s that?”

“This island gives whoever’s unfortunate enough to find it what they want. And I don’t mean a craving for a specific food, I mean your deepest, most pure desire. It’s not necessarily a kindness. Think about that.”

Before I could ask him what the hell he meant, or what having the island’s magic inside me meant, he evaporated and went out the window, leaving me alone again. “Cryptic bastard,” I said, flopping back on the bed.

“Glad I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

I sat up, searching for the new voice, and nearly screamed when I saw the man in the pool of water in the corner. “Apparently this cell is just grand central for people who don’t knock?”

He smiled, and I took in what I could see of him. Blonde hair and muscular shoulders. No shirt, but that seemed to be the norm around here. He was fucking hot too, and I needed to go to sleep.

There clearly was something wrong with me. I swallowed too much seawater and now I was encountering all these gorgeous men. Maybe the island was doing something to me like Ariel said, and my deepest craving was a bouquet of delicious monsters. Or maybe magical creatures were just hotter.

It was probably the last one.

“My apologies,” he said. “I wanted to see if you were all right. I haven’t seen you since the boat.”

“The boat? You were on the boat?”

“No, I was in the water. I kept you alive and brought you here. At Prospero’s command. Believe me, I wouldn’t have brought you here otherwise.”

I covered my face with my hands. “What the fuck does he have on all of you? And how did you keep me alive?”

He rose up out of the water without moving, and my jaw fell open. Tentacles. The man had tentacles. His lower half was an octopus with beautiful silvery blue tentacles. The edges of them glowed in little patterns like constellations, and I remembered vaguely seeing blue light before darkness.

Turning his hand, I saw something there. I wasn’t quite close enough to see what it was, but it was definitely something not on a human wrist. “My venoms have some unique effects. Especially on humans,” He said. “It can give the ability to breathe underwater for a while, in small doses.”

“Is that why my lungs felt like they were on fire when I woke up?”

“Yes,” he said, lowering himself back into the water.

I wanted to see those tentacles again. They were fascinating and beautiful. Part of me felt like I should be revolted by them, but I wasn’t. There was nothing about any of these men, Laurent included, that disgusted me. Why would I be disgusted simply because they weren’t human? And in spite of everything, the way he was looking at me was definitely not disgusting.

Once you learned the world was so much bigger than your small view of it, everything was more interesting.

“Wait *venoms*, plural?”

Smirking, he nodded. “I have a couple.” He leaned on the edge of the pool, crossing his arms. “As for your first question, that’s a bit complicated, and not exactly a fun story.”

I’d asked him what Prospero had on all of them. Shifting, and the chains clinked together, reminding me exactly where I was and why. “You said you wouldn’t have brought me here.

Would you take me home? Or... just the coast? Somewhere with people?"

"I would if I could."

My heart sank. "He ordered you not to?"

"No, actually. But that magic in you isn't going to let you leave. Not until Prospero is ready for you to do so, or you get rid of it."

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon."

He smiled, but it was regretful. "Probably not, no."

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I wrapped my arms around them and let my chin rest. "What's your name?"

"Call me Trin."

"Is that not your name?"

"It is now. I'm told I used to have another one, but I don't remember it."

His voice was soothing. A tenor that sounded like he would have an excellent singing voice, and the way he spoke was both calm and rhythmic, like the sea. It made me feel better.

"Why not?"

"It's just... been a long time."

Clearly there was more to the story, but I'd just accused Ariel of being too familiar. It would be hypocritical of me to do the same thing. I nodded, pressing my chin further into my knee. "Okay, Trin."

The silence that stretched between us wasn't uncomfortable, and there were too many thoughts in my brain that I didn't want to face. "Is it rude to ask you what you are?"

"My species?"

Trin smirked. "I've heard it called Cecalia. As far as I know, there aren't many of my kind. I may be the only one currently alive."

Ban had said the same thing. Interesting.

“And you are human.”

“Boring old human,” I said. “Nothing special.”

Water splashed, startling me. Trin was pushed up on his arms and staring at me with fire in his eyes. “Never say that.”

“It’s true.” I unfolded my legs and stood, crossing to him. I felt safe with Trin. I felt safe with Ban, and as furious as I was with him, I felt safe with Ariel, too. The remorse he felt seemed real, and I desperately wanted to believe him.

Trin backed up across the small pool, tentacles flowing smoothly to push him in that direction. I sat on the edge of the rock, dipping my feet into the water. It felt warmer than earlier. “It’s true,” I said again. “I shouldn’t tell the truth?”

I wasn’t sure what had made me come closer to him, but now that I was, I couldn’t stop staring. All that bare skin which flowed down into his many arms. He was strangely alien and so fucking beautiful. This was the last thing I should be thinking about right now, which was exactly why my mind was clinging to it so tightly.

Maybe I wanted this monster to make me think about something other than the awful situation I found myself in.

“I don’t agree that it’s true.” He came back toward me, planting an arm on either side of my hips, but was very careful not to touch me. Like this, he was tall enough that we were eye to eye, and the color of his eyes was as beautiful as it was unnerving.

A bright turquoise threaded through with gold and irises that were slightly oval. Very much not human.

“So don’t say it,” he whispered.

“What?” I was so entranced by his eyes I’d forgotten what I wasn’t supposed to say. All the air around us had disappeared. He was close enough to kiss me, and right now, I thought I would let him. Because apparently I was horny enough to think about fucking everything in sight right now.

There didn’t seem to be another explanation.

“Don’t say you’re not special,” he whispered, lifting a hand and dropping it again. “May I touch you?”

“You’ve already touched me.”

A small smirk that made my stomach tumble. “You weren’t exactly conscious for me to ask.”

“Okay.” My breath was shallow in my chest. What the hell was I doing?

I gasped at the softest sensation curling around my calf. Trin shuddered just like Ariel had, and his eyes went wide before becoming so much more intense. Just like Ariel had looked, like I was everything he ever wanted.

That was impossible.

“What?” I asked. “What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything.” His hand came up and slipped around my neck, pulling me closer. “I don’t want you to say you’re not special, because you are. If you’re not, how come even seeing you from afar makes me feel things I’ve never felt before? How come you being here feels like hope? How come you’re intoxicating?”

His forehead touched mine, and I wasn’t breathing. This time it wasn’t because of the water. “I don’t understand. You don’t know me. None of you *know* me. How can I be any of that to you?”

The tentacle slipped higher, circling my leg completely. It didn’t feel anything like what I’d thought it might. It was smooth and warm, almost like being touched with a hand. Except for the gentle suction from the inside his tentacle, which made things feel...

There was no way to describe that, and I didn’t know if I was ready to examine how that simple touch was affecting me. Everything in my body was caught somewhere between guilt and desire.

But guilt for what? For longing for someone who didn’t want me back? For feeling heat rise under my skin when so

many people died so I could be here? I didn't know, but I was confused.

His voice was hypnotic. "How can a place like this exist? How can I exist?"

"It's just the way it is," I said.

"Right." He smiled, fully dazzling me again before he tilted his head and kissed my cheek. "And you are who you are, and I know you are special. All right?"

The tentacle released me and he slid away, floating down in the water until only his head was above the surface, tentacles spiraling out underneath him. "I'm sure I'll see you soon," he said, dipping beneath the water and swimming away.

The pool must be connected to the ocean beneath the surface of the island.

Pulling myself up from the pool, I returned to the bed, sitting on the edge while my feet dried. Ariel's words echoed in my head again. The island gave you your deepest desires. I'd thought it flippantly before, but was that what was happening?

Was I ready to admit what those desires were?

Maybe.

But as the sky darkened outside into night, I decided it could wait until the morning. Chained up as I was, there would be plenty of time to think.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ARIEL

I sat on the edge of the rock, looking out at the ocean and the last lingering embers of light. And I was drinking. It was nearly impossible to get drunk as a spirit, but if I stayed in a physical form long enough, I could manage it.

At the moment? I was almost there.

I wanted to be so fucking blackout drunk I didn't have to think.

The water beneath me lit up and Trin surfaced, scaling the rock quickly before assuming a more human form. He could, for short periods of time. But he needed water nearby. Too long meant death.

“Any of that to spare?”

I passed him the bottle. He knew there was plenty, conjured as it was.

“I don't think it went *that* badly,” he said.

“You weren’t there,” I said, pain crackling through my chest once more. “He made me hold her while he shoved his magic into her body and she *begged me* to stop. Obviously, I couldn’t. And now—”

“That part I know,” he said. “You’re not the only one.”

As soon as the magic entered her, it was like the world shifted. The air rippled, and suddenly Meg was the center of it. When I touched her skin again, it was only confirmed.

A pure, feral craving for her that went beyond all reason. She was *mine*. Mine to claim, mine to touch, mine to love.

My mate.

“I didn’t think it was possible,” I admitted. “For us.”

“Neither did I,” Trin said with a chuckle. “But I can’t say I don’t love the feeling. It’s... incredible.”

I wasn’t bothered by the fact that it was Trin, too. It felt entirely natural. For all we knew, it wasn’t us alone. The man currently in my thoughts appeared out of the darkness as a cat, completely silent, before shifting.

Trin handed him the bottle, and Ban took a drink.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” I said quietly. “Did he hurt you?”

“No more than usual.”

For whatever reason, Ban took more of Prospero’s anger than me and Trin. He was straightforward and blunt—a part of his nature—and generally didn’t give a fuck. Still bound, just like we were, but Prospero picked on him. Probably because his transformation had been more animalistic than the rest of us.

“Have you seen her since?”

“No. I was waiting until he slept. But I will go to her tonight and keep her warm.”

“Ban, be ready,” Trin said. “She has the magic in her now, and it changes things.”

“How?”

I took the bottle back and drank until my throat burned. “We’re her mates,” I said when I took a breath. “Both Trin and I. There’s no reason it wouldn’t be you too.”

“A mate?”

In all the time we’d been on this island, I’d never heard him sound so hopeful.

“But you can’t tell her,” Trin said. “She’s not ready for that.”

Ban nodded. “It makes sense. Kitten doesn’t want to be here, and having mates could make her never want to stay.”

I raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything about the nickname. The rest of his statement was busy hitting me in the gut. How would this ever work? Even though it would be easy enough to see her now that Prospero was so limited—dumping your magic into another person would do that—everything was still a mess.

She was everything that mattered now. In less than a second, every priority I had was rewritten, and she was at the top of the list. Breaking free from Prospero was a close second.

And still, she wanted to leave.

Not that I blamed her.

But if we could tell her, and if she accepted us, would that change? If we managed to break free of the bastard holding us—something we hadn’t been able to do for centuries—would we be able to leave and go with her?

“You don’t think...” Trin stole the bottle and tilted it back into his mouth. “You don’t think it’s Prospero too, right? And —”

“No.” I cut him off. “No.”

There wasn’t a tangible way to describe how I knew the man wasn’t also Meg’s mate, but I knew.

“That’s what I felt, but we’ve been wrong before.”

“Not about this,” I whispered. It was half a statement and half a prayer. “She’s ours.”

“I need to know,” Ban said, standing. “I don’t like not knowing.”

He shifted and melted into the darkness with the disturbing silence only he could manage. I was a fucking spirit and my movement still made more noise than him when he was in his feline form.

“What the fuck are we going to do, Ariel? Everything in me is *screaming* to do the same thing. To go to her and do... absolutely everything. It was torture swimming away from her earlier. I had to, otherwise I wasn’t going to be able to hold myself back.”

I understood. Even sitting here and knowing she was close by was nearly too much. The most I’d felt of her body was when I’d held her against that wall, and that was *not* the memory I wanted to be thinking about. I wanted to press myself against her in every different way possible. To have her writhing and moaning my name instead of shoving me away.

At the same time, I wanted to dive into her mind and find out everything about her. What she liked and what she *loved*. Her history and past, what she wanted for the future. How she ended up connected to Khalas, and why she’d claimed he rejected her. The man in Prospero’s visions wasn’t a man who’d rejected anything to do with Meg.

Was he also her mate? If the three of us were, and we were born of the island, it would make sense. We would find out when he arrived.

No matter what Meg thought, I knew the truth. The gargoyle was singular once he’d made up his mind. Even after escaping and knowing he should never come back, Khalas was on his way here. For her. And he wasn’t going to let anything stand in his way.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CALIBAN

I prowled through the darkness toward the mountain and the room where he'd locked Meghan. My kitten. What the others said made sense. Even before she'd had the island's magic, I felt something for her that I'd never felt before.

If I wasn't her mate...

No.

I would not think about that until I knew.

The mountain rose up in front of me, and I found her window. A soft blue glow came from inside, where the floor was open to the magical water.

Leaping, I landed in the window and made my way in. My kitten was asleep and in chains.

Rage burned through me. He'd put her in chains after torturing her and forcing the magic to inhabit her? If I was able to destroy the chains with my fangs and claws, I would do so. As it was, it was only the magic inside me that kept me

from turning around and ripping out Prospero's throat while he slept.

Her scent hit me, and I froze.

Mine.

Connection so deep and so pure it was obvious what it was. This little kitten was my mate, just like Trin and Ariel. *Yes.*

I approached the bed and let my purr rise up. The last thing I wanted was to scare her.

Putting one paw on the bed, she stirred, and I purred louder. She smelled so good, my kitten. Like flowers, but nothing we had on the island, and a sharpness I didn't recognize but that tingled my nose pleasantly.

She rolled over, eyes opening briefly. "Ban?"

The softness of her voice woke the man in me. It was a struggle to stay in this form when she sounded like that. But for her, I would.

I crept up onto the bed and laid alongside her, letting her wrap around me, and she did so instinctually. Light flashed behind my eyes, instinct washing over me so deeply, I shuddered.

The delicate scent I already loved became so much more intense. The way I felt her wrapped around me snapped into crystal clear focus. Everything her scent told me was sharper, confirming everything.

Relief and joy washed through me. My kitten. I didn't stop the louder sound of my rumbling purr.

I also understood the others drinking. Knowing this joy and not being able to tell her was a different kind of torture. But it was one I would accept if it meant I could stay here like this. With her. My mate.

Turning on my side, I stretched out further, letting a paw lay over her. My kitten needed to be warmer. Especially in the clothes he'd given her. I loved the way the dress hugged her

body. I did *not* like the way Prospero looked at her while she wore it.

But that was a problem for later.

Right now, I would make her feel safe, so when we could tell her the truth, she would be ours.

Our mate.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MEGHAN

I recognized the warm darkness I stood in right now. The scent of sawdust and sweat, the warmth coming from the sidelights, the soft brushes of ballet shoes on wood, and the harder stomping of the toe shoes. The audience cheered, and I looked down to find myself in one of my costumes for *The Nutcracker*. The last show I'd performed in.

A toy soldier. Red coat, white tights, and black boots.

The strings rose in the orchestra, and I recognized it. Curtain call. It was my cue. But where were all the other performers? Where were my cast mates?

I ran out on cue under the bright lights, but faced an empty stage and an empty audience. There was no one here with me. The pit was empty, music playing from nowhere.

A rattling distracted me, and I looked down. My hand was wrapped in a metal cuff that sank to the floor. I didn't have to

look at my other hand to know it was chained too—I felt the weight.

“There you are.”

I heard Laurent’s voice behind me, and his breath warmed my neck, and I felt the brush of his lips on my skin.

“We wondered where you went.” That wasn’t Laurent. It was Trin. He was in front of me, and it didn’t seem to matter that there wasn’t any water. Ban prowled out of the shadows in the wings, shifting to his human form and coming closer, the three of them surrounding me, hands reaching and touching and I couldn’t speak.

Here, in whatever world my mind was living in, this was all right. This was *perfect*.

“You’re a toy soldier.” My head snapped to my left and found Ariel standing there, entirely human and wholly naked. “Is that what you want, Meghan?” The way he said my name made me shiver. “To be our toy?”

The chains sank into the floor, pulling me down onto a box that hadn’t been there before. One of the wooden, black painted monstrosities every theatre had to mimic sets that weren’t finished. I was bent over it, and suddenly my legs couldn’t move either. Sprawled and open, surrounded by these men, and I wasn’t afraid even for a second.

Ariel stood in front of me. All I could see was him. His hand cupped my cheek, thumb reaching out to run over my bottom lip. I leaned into his touch, craving more of it from all of them.

This had to be a dream, and in a dream, there was nothing to lose. No reason I had to tell them no. I was chained down, and it was my dream. If I told the chains to break, they would.

My heart pounded, and I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to break the chains.

I liked them.

Ariel crouched, dark eyes on mine, thumb pulling my mouth open just enough. “I need you to tell me yes or no,

Meg.”

“To what?” My voice sounded loud in the cavernous space. Echoing the way Ariel’s didn’t.

“Do you want to be our toy?” He asked again, the velvet softness of his voice making me shudder. “For us to play with for a while.”

Leaning in, his lips brushed my cheek and the corner of my lips before moving to my temple. “I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

He was gone, and Laurent was there, crouching, those eyes I’d dreamed about so many times so close. “You’re fucking perfect.”

Now I knew it was a dream. Laurent would never say that to me. Hell, he wouldn’t be here at all. But each of the four of them lit something within me, and this hurt no one.

No one but me, when I woke and remembered this was only in my mind.

“Yes,” I finally gasped. “Yes, I want this.”

My costume was gone, and the wood beneath me scraped my skin along with claws down my back. Fangs that dragged over my shoulder and a warm, powerful body. “*Kitten*,” the word was hot and heavy in my ear merely moments before I felt *him*.

Pushing deep in one thrust, and it was only pleasure. I couldn’t move, pinned by his body and his cock, held still by the chains. Ban didn’t hold back. It was all-encompassing and immediate. Pleasure flared behind my eyes, everything made sharper and brighter by his teeth on my shoulder, holding me in place while he rutted and fucked. At once he was unleashing himself and taking his time, pleasing no one but himself and what he needed to come.

It was the thought that sent me over, pleasure exploding behind my eyes and ravaging me. I couldn’t move the way I was pinned down, and it made everything that much more intense.

Trin and his tentacles appeared in front of me, and he was looking down at me with a playful smirk. His cock brushed my lips, and I opened, closing my eyes and savoring the way his tentacles wrapped around my arms and head, using them to fuck me.

Ban came, purring, and I couldn't move or breathe, Trin driving himself into my throat. The new thickness I felt was Laurent—I knew it without having to see. The possessive hands on my hips and ass. It was him. He settled himself deeply inside me, and I was so full, even if Trin didn't have his hands in my hair hauling me onto his cock, I wouldn't be able to breathe.

But Laurent didn't move. I saw Ariel in front of me, watching at a distance, but I also felt his hands on my ribs and his knees on either side of my hips. I was too full—it wouldn't fit there.

It wouldn't.

I gasped around Trin's cock, because it did fit. Ariel's cock sank into my ass and filled me to bursting. Pulling on the chains, I was going absolutely nowhere, and Ariel laughed. He was gone from where I'd seen him across the stage. Everyone was with me now, and a sultry voice spoke in my ear. "Nowhere to go, Meghan. Not until we're finished with you. And I don't think we'll be done for a while."

A moan slipped out of me, and Trin slammed home, coming in my mouth. I couldn't even catch my breath, Ban taking his place, mixing the taste of me with Trin.

Laurent and Ariel began to move, and I was nothing but a molten creature of heat and pleasure. Nowhere to go, nothing to do but take everything they gave me.

And they gave me everything.

I faded into a place of nothing but joy and bliss, heat and stars. There was music too, but I could barely hear it over the pounding of my own heart. The pounding of other things, too.

My mind was open, accepting what they wanted and that it was enough. More than enough. They wanted *me* and letting

them take over was a relief and so much better than I imagined it could be.

Every sound they made, every time they came, every time they whispered heated words in my ear, I floated higher. I could live in this place forever, and since it was a dream, they didn't stop. They didn't get tired. It could have been hours or days, I wasn't sure. All I knew was this was the happiest I'd been in a long time.

I didn't want this dream to end.

Like the thought shattered everything, they vanished, taking my orgasm with them, the chains disappearing into darkness and dragging me down with them.

Why hadn't I ever owned a cat?

That was my main thought as I surfaced from sleep, Ban's deep, rumbling purr under my ear. The vibration was soothing and seemed to block out the thoughts which had been plaguing me. I didn't even have any bad dreams.

Dreams.

Holy fuck. Yeah, I didn't have any bad dreams last night. I had the best dream ever, and I was distinctly wet between my thighs because of it. Dream orgasms were amazing, but they left a little to be desired. My mind had come a hundred times, but my physical body hadn't, and it wanted to.

Down, girl.

Trying to bring myself back to a normal, less aroused state, I focused on the purring cat beneath me.

I vaguely remember him appearing last night and accepting his warmth. It was still February in the outside world, but so far what I'd felt on the island felt like summer. I supposed that was par for the course for an island steeped in magic. But regardless, it was chilly at night, and curling up

next to him was like curling up next to a pleasant, warm furnace.

Bright sunlight poured into the room, and I opened my eyes slowly. Ban was in his feline form and somehow wrapped around me like one of those gigantic pregnancy body pillows. It almost made me laugh.

I stroked my hand over his fur, and his soft, lingering purr became more intentional. A shiver of magic rippled through the air, and his body shifted beneath mine so my ear rested on his chest and the rumble was so much closer.

“Good morning,” he said softly.

“Morning.” I could still pet the velvety fur on his back, and I felt a little hypnotized by it. Until I felt something I should have expected, but somehow was still surprised by. The way Ban was pressed against me, I felt *everything*. And as a man, it was morning, and he was hard. Which reminded me that in spite of the fur, he was entirely naked. That didn’t cool the arousal swimming under my skin. It only made it worse.

He was so close, and my body was still needy. *Fuck*.

“How do you feel?” He asked.

It should be impossible that I was still sleepy, but I guessed nearly dying and having magic shoved into my body would do that. If I went back to sleep, would I have more sexy dreams? “How should I feel?”

Ban moved, rolling me so I was on my back and part of his body was pinning mine down. The way he placed us made me even more aware of him and the way he was looking down at me. Even more than yesterday, this growing, dawning attraction that seemed impossible. With Trin too.

That dream... was it because I wanted them? I mean, I *did* want them, even if it made me feel guilty. And confused. There was just something there that drew me to these men, despite where we were and what was happening to me.

Was this what Christine felt? That she was suddenly ridiculously horny around her monsters? Or was I just horny

because I was alive and they were beautiful, and my heart was still bruised with rejection?

“I don’t know how you should feel. But I am sorry for yesterday.”

I couldn’t quite stop myself from reaching up and touching his face. Exploring the fur on his cheekbones and tracing the ridge of his nose. “You didn’t do anything.”

“He hurt you.” His purr morphed into a growl. “And I couldn’t stop him.”

“That’s not your job.”

Another growl. “I disagree, kitten.”

My stomach fluttered at the nickname. “Why?”

“Mmm.” He leaned down, pressing his face into my neck and inhaling like he had before. I flushed, wondering if he could scent my arousal. “Because you’re mine.”

The casual way he said it had my heart fluttering along with my gut. That kind of casual possession and desire was what I’d always wanted, despite it not being something women *should* want. Everything in me craved to be the center of someone’s world in the same way Christine had found.

It gives you what you want. Your deepest, most pure desire. Think about that.

Both excitement and dread twisted through me at the same time. That wasn’t possible, right? The magic hadn’t hypnotized the men of this island to suddenly be in love with me. If it had...

“Oh, no.”

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

The dream. The attraction. What I wanted.

It felt like the tipping of the scales over what I could bear. To be teased with what *was* my deepest desire only for it to not be real? That was the worst kind of cruelty.

Tears flooded my eyes, and I looked away. The arousal I'd felt was gone now, and those big golden eyes, searching for what hurt me, were too pure and too genuine. "It's okay," I said. "It's not your fault. The magic is messing with you. Because it gives people what they really want?"

Ban tilted his head. "For those not born or created here, yes."

"Created?" The word threw me off. "What does that mean?"

He didn't answer, instead leaning into me again and breathing me in. Something about the raw nature of that attention made me crave it even more. Which only amplified the hurt.

Ban's head snapped up. "He is coming."

"Go," I said. "I don't want him to hurt you again."

"He did not hurt me much. It was worth it to try."

The very thought of him in pain for me twisted me up in knots. "Please. I don't want you to be in pain, and I don't want him to keep you from me."

He growled and pressed his forehead to mine. "He cannot keep me from you. I will be close by."

Instantly, he shifted to his feline form and was gone out the window without a trace of sound.

I sat up, making sure my clothes were arranged properly before I heard the footsteps outside my door. Prospero entered with a tray and a smile on his face. "Good morning."

"You and I have different definitions of good," I said. "Waking up still a prisoner is not in my definition."

His smile tightened, and he approached, putting the tray on the end of the bed. In spite of myself, my stomach growled. On the tray was one of my favorite breakfasts. French toast and bacon. There was even a side of eggs and a glass of what looked like orange juice.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I assure you, it was and is necessary.”

“Once again, different definitions,” I said. “I don’t feel like it was necessary to kill that many people to get someone’s attention. You have magic. You couldn’t have sent a message? Stopped by for a brief hello?”

Prospero’s eyes were razor sharp, and there was no more kindness in them. He looked different today. Older and more haggard. Even his walk was more rigid. “I appreciate that you are naïve enough to think it can always be so simple. But on the other side of nearly a millennium on this island, there is no price I will not pay to be free, Meg. You would feel the same. The lives of one or the lives of many make no difference, nor does your life.

“This might be the last time you see me. While the magic runs its course, I must remain in the mountain near the power the island has placed here. An extension of its heart. But do not think because you don’t see me that you’re free, or that I won’t get exactly what I want. Enjoy your meal.” Turning, he stalked toward the door.

“Is it poisoned?”

The smile he sent over his shoulder held nothing but violence. “Only one way to find out, I suppose.”

I flinched at the slamming door, and almost instantaneously Ban was at the window, shifting into human form before he hit the floor. It was the first time I’d seen him fully standing like this, and I stopped to stare.

Frozen in place was more like it.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t known his body was sculpted. There was nearly no fat on him, which made sense given both his forms. But once again he wasn’t wearing clothes, and below his abs was...

Well, it was a cock. There was absolutely no way to call that thing a penis, or even a dick. That thing was a cock, end of story.

Because it was long and thick despite not being hard.

You would have thought I'd never seen one before, given the fact that I couldn't move. But he was just standing there, looking at me with no self-consciousness. And the small smirk on his face told me he knew why I was suddenly more a statue than a gargoyle.

In the dream I'd had, I hadn't *seen* any of them like that, because I'd never seen what they were packing. But I'd felt them. And what I was seeing now didn't disagree with that. But it didn't matter.

"It's not poisoned, by the way."

It broke my trance, and I looked over to find Ariel by the door. He was smirking too, and that made me blush.

"I was watching him while he conjured the food, and he didn't taint it with anything."

"Oh." My voice was quiet. "How did he know this is what I like?"

He floated closer. "It's not hard to conjure things based on someone's preferences once you're near them." As if to illustrate, he twisted a hand, and a flower appeared. A purple daisy, beautiful, and nearly the shade of violet which shone under my skin yesterday.

I put my hand on my stomach. Now that there was food in front of me, I was hungry. But still, the ease with which he made the flower appear was... strange. It was my favorite flower by far. But it didn't mean anything if all it came from was magic.

Again, my heart grieved for a loss I couldn't name.

"Oh," I said again.

The food was there, and it smelled amazing, and at the very least there was no confusion about what Prospero and I thought of each other.

I pulled the tray closer and began to eat. It *was* delicious, and I wasn't going to be a person who refused food on principle, as long as he wasn't poisoning me.

In the corner of my eye I saw the flower disappear into smoke, and a look on Ariel's face I couldn't quite interpret.

I needed to not look at him and not remember his words in my dream. Because it would simply make all of this harder.

Ban sat next to the bed. It made him look comically short, but it also hid his cock, and it was good because I didn't need the distraction.

The three of us existed in silence while I ate. And I did *eat*. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't eaten in at least two days, and those were the ones I'd actually been conscious. When I finished the tray I felt like a bloated marble, but I was also relieved, and my body was happy. And it wasn't like I needed to stay in shape for the ballet's season.

The juice wasn't orange, but mango, which was a pleasant surprise.

Ban took the tray and set it just inside the door, and Ariel took his moment, kneeling by the bed where he'd been yesterday. "What can I do?"

His voice was only misery. "Tell me what I can do to make it better. Anything to show you I didn't want to help him."

"It's fine, Ariel. I know it's not real."

"What are you talking about?"

Ban was still standing at the door, watching closely too.

"Whatever you feel for me, it's just because of the magic. Like you said yesterday, the magic gives you what you want, and it took my loneliness and gave it to you. Made you want me. Like you said, it's not a blessing. It's just mocking me."

"That's not—"

"It's okay," I insisted, my voice thickening. "It knows what I wanted, but I don't want it just because of a spell. Hopefully, when I get to leave, it'll leave you alone."

"Meg..."

I couldn't even look at him, because even if what they felt wasn't real, the pain in my chest was. And I couldn't bear the

kindness. “I’d like to be alone for a while. Please.”

There was a long silence. “Very well. But at least take this.”

I tasted the frisson of magic in the air, but didn’t look until I suddenly felt their absence. When I looked up, both of them were gone.

At the end of the bed sat a blanket where Ariel had left it. I pulled it up over me, welcoming the small comfort, and closed my eyes. It was easy to imagine I was anywhere but here.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TRIN

“*W*hat did you say to her?” Ban stalked into the living room and Ariel was close behind him, glaring.

Our home was one of the few places we could be away from Prospero. Right now it mattered less, as he was confined to the mountain, and the lower levels at that. He couldn't watch us here. That was the most important part, but when he could call any of us at will, it didn't matter much.

“We said *not* to tell her.” Ariel snarled. I'd never heard him sound like this.

“What happened?”

He only spared a glance at me. “For some reason, Meg thinks that what we *feel* for her isn't real. That it's only because of the magic of the island and nothing more. And she shouldn't know that, because we said we weren't going to tell her.” He glared at Ban again.

“I didn’t tell her.” The shifter sat on one of our chairs, elbows on his knees. “I didn’t say anything about us being mates. But I understand now why she was melancholy.”

Ariel still looked on the verge of thunder, and the air spirit could conjure storms that rivaled the one Prospero had used to take Meg, so I just looked at Ban. “Tell us what happened.”

He did quickly, and I winced at the mention of him saying Meg was his, but he told the truth. He hadn’t told her. “You’re her mate too?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Then it makes sense, Ariel, if she only thinks that Ban is in love with her. It’s a fiction because the magic is giving her what she wants. Not revealing the mates she was always meant to have.”

The spirit relaxed, but frowned. “Is that true, though? She’s human, and if she never came here, we never would have met her. How is it then that you can say we were always meant to be mates?”

“You’re right. We never would have found her,” I said. “But you can’t tell me you didn’t feel something before it hit.”

Ariel condensed himself fully into human form and dropped onto the couch, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Of course I did. But that doesn’t change the fact that it only clicked into place *after* Prospero shoved magic into her. Why didn’t we know the second we saw her?”

“Think about it,” I snapped. “We weren’t born. Not into these bodies, anyway. All born of the same magic and not naturally formed. Our resonance is both unique and matched. Maybe Meg needed some of the island’s magic for us to sense the bond.

“But everything, *everything* I’ve ever read about mates says that the bonds are formed at creation. Whatever kept us from knowing before, this?” I touched the center of my chest where the draw to Meg was. “It wasn’t created yesterday. It’s always been there, and you both know that. You can feel it, can’t you?”

Ban nodded. “Yes. Like I knew, and then I *knew*.”

“She thinks it’s because she was lonely,” Ariel whispered. “That her deepest desire was for something to combat it.”

I shook my head, though my heart hurt for Meg. “No.” Ariel preferred to lurk among the humans when he could, while I, being much more limited, preferred to steal books from Prospero’s library and read them. “That’s not it.”

“Why?” Ban asked.

“Because it’s not just a deep desire,” I said. “It’s... the heart of someone. And it’s not something you can just know and identify. If you asked Prospero what his was, he would say revenge. We all know that’s not what it was. His was power. *True* power.”

And the island had given it to him, which was why the three of us were trapped, and the fact that Khalas had escaped was a miracle. But Meg...

I didn’t doubt her truth. She was lonely, and naturally, it’s what she would think. But being someone’s mate was never an accident, and never at the whim of magic. It was on a level so deep it *couldn’t* be changed or challenged. But given the unique way we’d been brought to life, it also wasn’t surprising the connection needed something more to be uncovered.

There were a few other places like this island in the world—isolated places of power out of sync with the rest of magic. Meg was now in sync with us, and we could never go back.

“Whatever her desire is, it’s down deeper than that. I’m sure we’ll find out what it is, and I hate that she feels lonely, but we’ve always been her mates. *Always*.”

“Really?” Ariel asked. “You’re not blowing smoke up my ass to make me feel better?”

I raised an eyebrow. “First, I would never blow anything up your ass. Second, yes. I wonder if Khalas—”

“I wondered the same,” Ban said. “He’s like we are. Created here. Maybe it will convince her.”

“Probably not,” Ariel said. “He rejected her already, and she’s incredibly aware of the fact. If anything, it will only make her think it’s worse.”

“We’ll get through to her,” I said.

Ban stood. “How can you be sure?”

“We have to,” I said. “She’s our *mate*.”

I didn’t need to describe the bright, pulsing space in my chest that knew she was mine. It was the same in each of them, I was sure. Meg was my mate and would be forever. Even if she chose to leave and never return, she would still be my mate.

Mating bonds weren’t created. They simply *were*. There wasn’t anything—not even the significant power of this island that could alter them, break them, or will them into being. They were soul-deep and from the moment of existence.

And no, it didn’t matter if your other half or halves weren’t born yet.

“I don’t want her to be sad,” Ban said. “But I don’t know how to convince her it’s real.”

Ariel no longer looked as angry or tortured. Which was rare for him. “That’s not what we have to worry about right now. We need to get the magic out of her. Before it starts making itself known.”

“How?” I asked. There had been others on this island. Men who’d been given the same power. None were left. And I was desperately ignoring the fear Meg would be next.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. But I’ll be working on it. And I’m sorry, Ban. For assuming.”

“Forgiven,” the shifter said. “I will wait by her window and listen. Even if he is weak, I do not want him near her alone.” He transformed and disappeared.

“Keep watch for Khalas?” Ariel asked.

“I will.”

As soon as he was here, our options opened. He wasn't bound to Prospero. Even if he wasn't Meg's mate—and I hoped he was—we needed him, and he couldn't get here fast enough.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LAURENT

*I*t was there.

The island.

Miann.

Just a little bump on the horizon, but I could see it. I could barely sit still with the need to be there *now*. By all rights, I could have been there faster by bargaining with more wind spirits or one of the ocean creatures. But I couldn't guarantee that for the return trip, and whether or not I was making it with her, there would be a return trip for Meg.

So I was going the slower, human way. Even if it killed me.

The sun was past its highest point and was now sinking. It was a long way before dark, but I would be there by then. Whether Prospero would know where I was and when I arrived, I didn't know.

I couldn't worry about that until I got there.

What I really wanted was to see Meg and beg her forgiveness. I didn't care what it would take for her to believe that it was real. I would do whatever she wanted.

If she was all right.

Prospero was unpredictable. To lure me in, he was using Meg, but what he was doing in the meantime was anyone's guess. But if he knew what was good for him, he wouldn't have touched her. Because if he had, I would rip his head from his body with my bare hands.

I might anyway.

My rage made me focus and press against the fear. The whole journey I'd been fighting the urge to shift. It wasn't likely I'd sink the boat, but suddenly becoming stone in the middle of the ocean wasn't ideal. Still, my instincts wanted me in my most powerful form.

Later.

The journey felt like it took forever and also no time at all. When I began to see the shapes of the trees in the distance, I also spied a small wave underneath the water, speeding toward me.

Trin exploded out of the water, landing on the boat in a splay of tentacles that was somehow graceful. "It's about fucking time, Khalas."

"Don't call me that." But still, I smiled. It had been too long since I'd seen my friend. "Is she safe?" I couldn't talk about anything else until I knew.

"She is," he said, nodding. "Scared, and locked away, but she is safe."

"What did he do?" I barely recognized my own voice.

Trin's mouth was a grim line. "He gave her all his power. And she's in the mountain, chained to a wall. Claims it's protecting her against when the magic loses control."

"*WHAT?*"

There was no way to control the reaction. My wings ripping out of my back and the boat rocking with my sudden shift.

Trin nodded. “She also doesn’t think you’re coming.”

I was nearly entirely stone now. “Why not?”

“Because you rejected her. She doesn’t imagine you’d have any reason to. She doesn’t think she could be bait when you don’t care about her.”

“That’s not—”

Trin held out a hand. “I know. I saw you with her through Prospero’s scrying. But it’s what she thinks. And...” He shook his head. “She needs to see you. We can get her out, and he won’t be able to follow. But he’ll be pissed.”

I didn’t give a fuck. “Take her to my birthplace,” I said, and Trin flinched. None of us had particularly good memories of that place, but it was as good as any for a reunion, and it was far away from Prospero and the mountain. “You’re sure he can’t leave?”

“Yes,” he said. “But you still need to be careful. Just because he’s confined and weak doesn’t mean he’s powerless.”

I forced myself back into my fully human form. “I know. I didn’t come to give him what he wants.”

Trin kept looking at me like there was something else, and I stared. “What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head and smiled. It wasn’t convincing. “It’s good to see you. And we all certainly have... a lot to talk about.”

The splash took me off-guard, him jumping into the water before I could ask him what he meant and the waves of his passage moving away too quickly for me to keep up. But it didn’t matter. I would be there soon, and she was safe.

Or rather, she was alive.

Safety would have to come later, but I was coming.

Hold on, Meg. I’m almost there.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MEGHAN

*P*rospero didn't come back.

Like he'd said, I didn't see him again. Good riddance, for all I cared. But I was nervous about what he meant when he said the magic would run its course. I'd had about enough of the vague threats and all the things that seemed to be common knowledge to everyone here but me. And he said I would die...

At some point during the afternoon the breakfast tray disappeared, and then, when the sun was once again beginning to turn the sky gold, another one landed on the bed with a rattle.

Another of my favorites. Fettuccine alfredo that tasted like it was from a five-star restaurant. I didn't really want to enjoy it, given my current situation, but *fuck* it was delicious. At least the magic here was good for something.

I shut the thought down almost immediately. The whole day had been nothing but me drowning in my own thoughts and longings. Now that I had one good thing I wasn't going to allow myself to sink back down into wallowing.

Just enjoy the fucking pasta, Meg.

I put the tray back by the inside of the door when I finished and curled up under the blanket, watching the sky dim through pretty shades of violet.

When you read the stories about the damsel in distress, those stories never told you how boring all the waiting was. Then again, the women in those stories usually knew someone was coming for them.

I wasn't sure of that. At all.

A breath of air moved, and I looked up. Ariel was inside, looking determined. "Go away."

His jaw hardened, and he came toward me in a fully human form, solid and real, dark pants slung low off his hips. I didn't have a chance to sit up fully before he was leaning over me, so close I could feel heat rolling off his bare chest. The kind of heat that shouldn't be coming from someone who was made of smoke.

His hands were on the cuffs circling my wrists, pinning me beneath him, but still not technically touching my skin. I ignored my own flare of desire because it wasn't real. Nothing here was real. Despite how badly I wanted it.

There was fire and determination in Ariel's eyes, and they were on mine, only dropping to my lips briefly. Him kissing me was all I could think about, imagining how it would feel. What the fuck was wrong with me?

I was furious with him. I didn't want him near me.

Right?

I shook my head, more to myself than anything else. This was insane, and it was nothing more than magic. Seeing my expression, Ariel's eyes hardened. "I know you're pissed at me, Meg. I know that. But you should know I'm not going to

stop trying. You think you know everything, but you're wrong, and just like Ban, you're *mine*." His face dropped closer to me, and all the breath went short in my chest. I hated how much I wanted the words. I *hated* that I couldn't let myself believe them. "And I will show you it's real," he said softly. "But right now I need you to come with me, and quickly. We need to move fast."

The chains on my wrists fell away, and I gasped. "You could have done that this whole time?"

"Yes?"

I jumped off the bed. "Then why the hell didn't you?"

The anger in his eyes matched mine. "Because as much as Prospero is a piece of walking shit, he wasn't wrong. The chains would protect you in some ways. But we're willing to take the trade-off for getting you away from him."

I swallowed. "We? What's going on?"

"Close your eyes."

"No, Ariel. Tell me what's going on. Now."

He was standing in front of me, and I couldn't tell which one he wanted more. To fight with me, or to kiss me. Both of those things warred on his face, and I wasn't sure which one I wanted either.

"You are absolutely infuriating," he whispered. "Close your eyes, Meghan."

I pressed my lips together and stood my ground, in spite of the way hearing my name on his lips made me feel. "No."

A dark smile slid onto his lips. "Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He swirled into smoke, and I didn't even have time to scream before I was caught in arms made of mist and flying through the window. I shut my eyes and held on, nothing but *absence* beneath my feet. "Ariel," I gasped.

A dark chuckle seemed to come from all around me. "I told you to close your eyes."

We dropped straight down, and the scream froze in my throat. I'd always loved roller coasters, but I never thought I'd feel what it was like to be on one with no safety net.

Ariel solidified around me like he'd heard my thoughts, showing me exactly how he was wrapped around me and that he wasn't about to let me fall away, despite the speed we were moving.

"I've got you," he said. The words were gentle, and I closed my eyes tighter. My heart skipped a beat. No no no no no. I couldn't do this. I couldn't—

My bare feet touched grass, and my eyes flew open. Ariel released me and stood back, still close enough for me to see him looking at me with a longing that hit me straight in the chest. "Over there," he said, tilting his head, and then he was gone, fading into nothing.

I turned, and for the second time in five minutes, my heart skipped a beat. At the edge of this tropical clearing, was Laurent.

He was frozen, staring at me like he'd never seen me before, and I didn't know how the hell he'd gotten here. "Laurent?"

He was here?

He was *here*.

Impossibly, he'd come for me.

His name unfroze him, and he moved, closing the distance between us at impossible speed. He hauled me into his arms in one movement, so fast my feet left the ground. I gasped, the breath knocked out of me, but I didn't care because he was touching me. Hands in my hair and stroking down my back.

"It's not possible," he murmured. "It's not possible."

"What?" I asked. "What's not possible?"

One hand gripped my hair, making sure my eyes were on his. "You're my *mate*," he said, like the words were wrenched out of him. "I—"

Laurent's lips crashed down on mine, and I was blinded by the power of the kiss, and seconds later horror dawned on me, breaking away from him. "Not you too." The tears were already forming. "Please, not you too. I can't take it."

"Meg..."

"No." The word was more a moan than anything else. He let me slip out of his arms and I wrapped my own around myself. Everything hurt. Laurent was everything I wanted and that, too, was gone now. "I can't do this."

"Meg, what is going on?"

He reached for me, and I stumbled backward. "It's not real," I whispered. "It's just the island giving me what I wanted. You're not my mate. This place gives you your deepest desire, right? Well, ta-da, I'm the loneliest girl alive, and the second he forced magic into me, now everyone wants me. And as much as it's *everything*, I don't want it to be fake. I want it to be *real*."

The last word was a sob.

Laurent took my face in his hands. "Sweetheart, that's not how it works."

I was crying now, the way I hadn't really let myself. And in spite of the fact that I needed to let him go, his arms were the only place I wanted to be.

"Do you understand? *That's not how it works*, Meg."

"No, I don't understand."

He's still holding my face, lowering himself so our eyes are level. "There's nothing in this fucking world that can create a mating bond. Nothing that can fake it. Not magic that grants wishes or the most powerful being in the universe. You are born with it, or you aren't. And you are my mate." The last word was said with an awe I didn't understand.

Slowly, I reached up and pulled his hands away from my face. "You pushed me away," I told him. "Twice. You told me you couldn't." My face twisted up, and I turned away for a

second, breathing and trying to control the outburst of emotions. “And now it’s just... you want me?”

“I have never not wanted you, Meg.”

“That’s not true—”

“*Never.*” I faced a Laurent I didn’t recognize. So filled with dominance and power it left the gentleness of the doctor behind. “I wanted you the second I saw you, and I have ever since. But I didn’t think you were my mate.”

“Why would that matter? I wanted you,” I said. “I didn’t care about you not being my mate, so *why?*”

“*Because you deserve better.*” He heaved the words out like they were sheer pain. All of him looked like he was struggling, from his legs in perfectly fitted jeans to the shirt stretching across his shoulders. Everything was taut and tense, like he was holding himself back. “I am immortal, Meg.”

“So?”

“*So?*” He laughed, but there was no humor in it. “You deserve more than someone who can’t grow old with you. Who you’d have to pretend you weren’t with as soon as our ages started to show so people wouldn’t ask questions. You deserve more than to live your life in hiding. And I knew that if I let myself love you, I would never stop. After your life, it would be an eternity of being *without you.*”

I stared at him as he came closer, eyes on mine. “I was selfish,” he said. “Not wanting the pain. And I thought I was selfless enough to help you let me go. Then, I thought you were dead, and I knew that not loving you would be worse than the grief of a thousand lifetimes. Even if you weren’t my mate, I was never going to be without you again. You still deserve better, but even I’m not selfless enough to be without my mate.”

He kissed me. Softly at first, brushing his lips over mine. Suddenly we were both ravenous. My hands were in his hair and his were pulling me closer, lending heat through the nothing material of this dress.

It was so much more than the kiss we'd shared in his kitchen, or even the brief heat we'd shared a few days ago. I didn't quite believe it. This was real? How could it be real? Christine's mates knew the minute they saw her. "How come you didn't know?" I asked, breaking away. "How come it wasn't until now? I didn't—"

"I don't know." His lips brushed my forehead. "I don't know, and I don't care. I wanted you to be my mate so fucking badly, Meg. Every day, I wanted that, and I knew it was never going to happen, and it was hell. I don't know why I didn't feel it before, but I don't care. You're mine."

The last word sent a quiet thrill of power through me, and I looked up at him, realizing how wrong I was, and how wrong I'd been. "Oh, fuck."

Laurent searched me like he thought I was hurt. "What?"

"Say that again."

Leaning down, the words were whispered against my lips. "*You're mine.*"

I savored the sharpness of him, mint, and sweetness I couldn't put a name to. "You're telling the truth?" I asked once more. "This can't be faked?"

"No," he said. "It's so much deeper than that. No one would—human, hybrid, or magic—would survive the kind of power needed to embed something like that in your soul. You'd be ripped apart. It is a part of you, as much as your DNA."

Not able to help myself, I tucked my face into his chest. "Then you're not the only one I have to apologize to."

"Oh?"

I wrapped my arms around his chest, and he settled around me like I always imagined they would. My mind and body felt like they'd been put through the wringer, and I still wasn't sure how to feel or what to do. But something deep in my chest had calmed.

Was that why it had felt so wrong? My own soul recognizing mates and me saying no? Was that why I'd felt such horror and sorrow I couldn't grasp?

"You're not the only one who's told me I'm theirs in the last day," I said, voice breaking. "But I didn't believe them. I thought it wasn't real. Even though I wanted it to be."

I felt the sudden presence of others, and Laurent looked up over my head.

Behind us, Trin, Ariel, and Ban all stood in human forms. Or as human as they could be. I was dying to know how Trin was standing on two legs and in human pants. Especially since I saw the way his skin shifted into blues, greens, and purples before it even reached his belt.

Mates.

I thought the word, and it sang through me like fresh music in a studio. The exhilaration of nailing difficult choreography for the first time. The *rightness* of it caused my knees to buckle.

Laurent caught me around the waist before I made it, holding me against him. "Is this all right?" I asked him, meaning the others.

There were no shadows in his eyes, and no hesitation. "If I was always meant to be your mate, Meg, then they were too. I don't care if I have to share you, as long as you're mine."

The others were closer now, circling around me.

I closed my eyes. "This isn't real," I said. But this time I said it not because I thought they didn't want me, but because I couldn't believe it.

Ban reached out and pulled me away from Laurent, searching my face. "Who made my kitten cry?" Then he glared at Laurent. "It's good to see you, Khalas, but if you made her cry—"

"No." I reached up and touched his face. "I mean yes, but not like that." Then I stopped, brushing over the soft darkness on his cheekbones. "It's true?"

His rumbling purr exploded between us, and his lips were on mine before he kissed his way across my jaw and down my neck. “*Mate.*”

My entire body shuddered. I couldn’t feel it the way they did, but I wanted to. Spinning to Trin, his strange, aquatic eyes were on me, consuming me. And even more than before, I was aware of how thin and revealing this shred of a dress was. “You?”

He chuckled and held out a hand. As soon as I took it, I was pressed against his body, feeling all the warm skin of his torso. “Do you have any idea how difficult it was to leave you last night, knowing what you were to me and knowing it wasn’t the right time to tell you? Believe me, Meg, it was the only thing on my mind.”

What was on my mind right now was making my skin flush. Because it was sinking in that these men who were my mates were distinctly *not* human. And Christine was going to cackle when she found out.

I’d once told her that everyone was a monster fucker at heart, and that couldn’t be more true for me. I’d been fascinated by them even before I knew they were real. Now?

Trin lifted my chin with his finger, and the way his gaze trailed over my cheeks made me think he knew exactly where my mind was going—wondering what he could do with the tentacles that were currently hidden.

But there was one more man to face, and I pushed those dirty thoughts aside as I turned to face Ariel.

He was looking at the ground and not at me, hands in fists by his side. He cleared his throat. “What happened,” he said, voice ragged like he’d been screaming. “It can’t ever happen again.”

“What do you mean?”

He finally met my gaze, dark eyes like the void at once filled with pain and hope. “I mean that you *are* my mate. I felt it the second the magic finished entering you. And I can never hurt my mate. It’s not possible. My soul would shred itself

first. No matter what power Prospero has over me—over us—he can't order me to do shit to you.” He moved closer and looked into my eyes. We were as close as we could be without touching. “Never again,” he said, the words soft but resonant. A vow I felt in my gut.

Ariel reached for me, and this time I didn't pull away. When his hands met my skin he breathed out, like it was pure relief. There was no way to pretend I didn't feel it too. Wrapping me up, he pressed his forehead to mine. “I am so sorry.”

The words were a broken whisper.

“I know. And I wasn't fair.”

“Yes, you were. I don't care if I have to spend the rest of my life making it up to you. The only thing I want is for you to trust me.”

Both of us were holding our breath when we came together, the kiss hesitant. And then it wasn't. It was like being opened up to silver light, the way his magic slid over my skin and into my mind. Not taking and not breaching, but soothing and tasting and making sure I knew how much he wanted every piece of me.

When he pulled back, my cheeks were wet again, and Ban growled. “Stop making her cry.”

“They're happy tears.” I reached out my hand to the shifter. “Promise.”

Stepping away, I let Laurent hold me again. He was here. He was *here*. And I was surrounded by... mates. A laugh bubbled up in my throat and I slapped a hand over my mouth. “It's going to take a while to believe, even knowing it's real.”

Laurent shifted his weight behind me. “Prospero?”

“Still where he needs to be.” Ariel said, and his eyes flicked to mine. “And down for the night. I drugged him.”

“How?”

He smirked. “Easily.”

“Where can we go then?” Laurent asked, pulling me more firmly against his chest. “As much as I’d like to lay you down on the grass and make sure you know how long I’ve wanted to taste every fucking inch of you, there are things we need to talk about if we want to get you out of here.”

My whole body flushed, and I was caught up in the image of him, but not only him, with me in this clearing playing out my fantasies.

Yet it still wasn’t lost on me, he said getting *you* out. Like I would be leaving this island alone.

Yeah, right. I had mates, and if I was going to leave this island, they were going to come with me.

“The cave,” Trin said. “It’ll do for now.”

Laurent didn’t give me the choice. He lifted me into his arms like it was the easiest thing in the world as he followed my other mates.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

MEGHAN

The cave we walked into was like a postcard come to life. All the glowy, magical water I'd already seen in the other pools, but the stone in here glowed too, slowly shifting colors under the surface like the material itself held some kind of aurora borealis.

"What about the house?" Laurent asked.

"This is faster," Ariel said. "And you know what will happen if all five of us go back to the house."

Ban growled a purr, and I knew exactly what he meant. If we went to a place where there was a bed? None of us stood a chance.

Trin shed his pants, and I got a shot of a gorgeous human-shaped ass before magic shimmered in the air and he was once again in the form I'd met him. "Does it hurt to be on land?"

“No. But I can’t do it for long. No more than an hour or two at a time.”

“Oh.”

Laurent set me on my feet but didn’t let me go, leaning in and kissing my neck. The moan I let out was entirely accidental. “You know how long I’ve wanted to be able to do that?” He whispered. “The kind of torture it was to have you sleep down the hall, so close to me?”

I turned and looped my arms around his neck. “You didn’t have to stay away.”

His beautiful eyes filled with sadness. “I’m still immortal, Meg. We all are.”

“So is Christine. There are ways.”

“Not—”

Twisting up in his arms, I kissed him, melting into him when he kissed me back without reservation. I didn’t want him talking about problems we couldn’t solve yet. Not when I just found out he was mine.

They were all mine.

The thought stole my breath entirely. His hand tangled in my hair, and I felt it harden to stone and turn back again. His tongue, too, hardened against mine.

I smiled against his lips. “Having a hard time staying human?”

“You have no idea.”

“I’ve never seen you that way, you know.”

He kissed me again. “I am incredibly aware. You’re the only person who’s ever made me want to shift again.”

I gasped under my breath. “What do you mean?”

“I haven’t been in that form since I left this island the last time. Not fully. Until you, I was sure I never would be again.”

My heart hurt for him. It was part of who he was. What had it cost him to deny that for all this time? “Why?”

Lifting his hand, he ran his thumb over my lower lip, and that little motion shouldn't ignite the kind of heat under my skin that it did. I leaned into the touch, and he noticed. "Later."

"Promise?"

"I promise, Meg."

I didn't want it to be later. I wanted it to be now. But I had so many questions about this place and about everything else. I could hold on. For a little while.

We turned, and the others were intentionally not staring at us. I laughed, feeling so much relief that I could laugh instead of cry, even if there were things we needed to deal with.

"Feel like joining me in the water?" Trin asked with a smirk. "It's warm."

"Why do I feel like if I get in the water with you, talking won't get done?"

"I'll be good," he promised. "But I think you could use a bit of hot water."

I flushed, and I saw Ariel roll his eyes.

"Are you saying I smell?" I asked mildly.

Trin's eyes went wide. "*No.*"

I laughed. "I'm kidding. I figured you meant like a hot tub."

"Exactly."

Crossing the space, Laurent held my hand until I couldn't hold it anymore, and Trin met me at a shallow edge of the water. It was easy to see the way it got deeper the farther back it went into the cave.

He hadn't lied. It was warm—much warmer than the pool in the cell Prospero gave me. Taking his hand, I stepped down the rocks deeper into the water, soaking the fabric of my dress. Pale as it was, it was nearly invisible now.

"Sure you don't want to take that off?" The low question made his voice sound deeper.

A flush crept up my skin, over my face and neck. Getting naked with all of them was a priority, but none of the needed talking would get done if I did. “You said you’d be good.”

All I got was a smirk.

The water where I stood was up to my waist, and Trin guided me back to where he’d been, leaning against the edge so we could see the others. Lining himself up behind me, he wrapped his arms around my chest, and... everything else around my legs.

I thought I’d imagined everything.

In seconds, I realized I had not. Because the tentacles gently curling around my legs now made me realize the way he could hold me open and pin me down. I gasped quietly, leaning back into him.

Fuck, getting in the water might have been a terrible idea.

Trin’s lips grazed my neck. “And you say I’m the one who needs to behave?”

There were no thoughts in my head at the moment. Not when all I could feel were a hundred gentle suckers on my thighs, curling down my legs, all the way down beneath the arches of my feet, pulsing and releasing like an incredible massage. Or more than that.

“It’s been a long time,” Laurent said, clearing his throat and forcing his gaze away from me. “I’m sorry for what happened.”

“We’re not.” Ariel leaned forward where he sat, elbows on his knees. “It wasn’t ideal, but it worked. Kept him here. And we need to continue to do that, or kill him.”

“Who is he?” I asked, breathless, trying to focus.

Ban snorted. “A monster.”

I raised both eyebrows and Laurent’s eyes were dancing with laughter. Considering the men with me right now...

“He is human,” Ariel said. “Or he was when he came here.”

Laurent's gaze watched where Trin's hands were on my waist, eyes filled with the same heat I'd seen before. Now, I knew it was real. I wasn't finished arguing with him—keeping himself from me for three years? We were going to talk about that.

But first I was going to fuck him.

Trin noticed his gaze too and tightened his grip possessively. I didn't sense any animosity between them, and they clearly knew each other. It was hard to think about that when Trin's lips were on my hair.

As soon as the truth sank in, it was like a piece of me clicked into place. No matter if I couldn't feel it like they could, *something* inside me recognized them.

I wanted to feel them. Everything Christine said about her mating bonds? Could I have that?

"Prospero was a human king a very long time ago," Laurent said. "Deposed by his people, for good reason. Back then, humans knew magic and could utilize it. They still can, but it's rarer.

"This island isn't the only place of power in this world, but Prospero sought it out, wanting revenge. And he got it. Those who'd deposed him died terrible deaths. But there's always a price, and Prospero's was his life. He was bound to the island. The island offered him a way to leave. Hearts, for his life. Four hearts, the way Prospero tells it. A vision of four hearts, each tinged with the energy of a domain. Lives, for a life."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"It doesn't have to be. Magic like the kind of *Miann* isn't benevolent. It's neutral. It takes, even if it gives. To free himself, Prospero needed to offer the hearts of four beings. We don't fully know why. Maybe the number of lives he'd taken with the power. Maybe because of the elements the vision seemed to be infused with. But that's what it required."

What would this magic take from me?

I looked down at my hands where they rested on the stone and wondered. Would I be able to get rid of it before it did

something I couldn't give back? Until now, I hadn't been truly afraid of it. But suddenly I felt like I was a prisoner in my own skin.

"No one, neither human nor creature, would give their heart willingly," Ariel said. "So he created his. Or he tried. Kidnapped sailors off passing boats."

"Seems like a theme," I muttered.

Laurent smiled, but it faded quickly. "He made beings and cut out their hearts, offering them to the island in exchange for his freedom, and at the same time wanting a slave to send into the world to do his bidding. But it didn't work the way he planned.

"A spirit so formed of the magic of the island he cannot leave for long. A shifter who is not human enough to not be noticed." His gaze shifted to Ban. "Another shifter who cannot be away from water. And finally, me."

Ban had said something about being created. That was what he meant.

"I—"

My gargoyle kept talking, like he needed to get it out, standing and pacing across the space with restless energy. "When Prospero brought me to life he used so much magic it untethered his humanity. Creating life from other life is easy. Creating life from nothing but rock takes much more power. So he took as much as he needed. But it burned his mortality away.

"And after he recovered, he carved out my heart. I did everything he ordered me to." The look on his face had me climbing out of the water and going to him. Trin immediately released me.

Laurent didn't flinch at my soaked dress as I wrapped myself around him. His arms came around me like a reflex, holding me, but he still spoke evenly. "You need to know this about me, Meg. Another reason I wanted you to be free of me. I wasn't always a doctor, and I'm very sure I don't deserve you."

“Don’t say that,” I mumbled into his shoulder.

Pulling away, he looked at me. “I’m a murderer, Meg. Prospero’s revenge started with four, but it didn’t end there. And it wasn’t all he wanted after he realized my creation bound him here further. All four hearts had been offered, but he still wasn’t free because he wasn’t human.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I don’t.”

“I wasn’t able to say no.”

My eyes drifted to Ariel for a moment. He hadn’t been able to say no either, and I felt for them. Not being able to stop something like that?

Laurent let his fingers drift down my cheek. “I have killed many, many people. Humans. Like you.”

“Well, you can’t hurt me,” I said. “Right?”

“No.” The words were a whispered prayer. “And I never would.”

“Right. I already know Prospero is a class-A dick. He proved that when he had Ariel hold me down while he forced this magic into me.”

“He *what?*” Laurent spun on Ariel, whose mouth was pushed into a grim line. “I knew about the magic—”

“He fucking tortured her,” Ariel ground out. “The bond hadn’t snapped in, and I couldn’t stop it.”

“The magic revealed the bond,” Trin said. “Because of what we are. It’s why none of us felt it.”

Laurent was now looking at me, devouring every part of my body with his gaze and looking for where Prospero harmed me. “He said it was to keep me here,” I whispered. “So you’d come for me.”

He pulled me in, enveloping me in the embrace and leaving his lips at my ear. “I will always come for you, mate.”

The word reminded me that he’d come for me even when he thought I wasn’t.

“Why does he want me?” Laurent looked over my shoulder at the others. “I know why, but it seems different. Why go this far after so much time?”

My body convulsed once, pain spreading through me from my chest. It burned like the magic we’d just been talking about.

“Meg?”

I went limp like I was a puppet with all my strings cut, and I landed on Ban’s feline form as he tossed himself underneath me. Pain pulsed through me in waves. Nothing was real but pain. I couldn’t breathe, muscles spasming outside of my control.

“*Meg.*” Laurent was holding onto me, feeling my pulse, and I felt myself slipping away. Almost fragmenting into pieces. Lighter and lighter

In a spin of dizzy light, my gaze shifted and I was by the door of the cave, looking at all of them from where we’d entered, a hand that wasn’t mine around my throat. Magic rooted me to the spot.

All four of my mates turned with rage on their faces. Prospero’s hand held tighter, and I pulled on his arm. It didn’t fucking move. He didn’t feel quite human, now that I knew the truth.

“Hello, Khalas.”

“*Let her go,*” Laurent said. His voice wasn’t human anymore, and neither was he. Stone wings exploded from his back, graceful as they were deadly. The wings of a bird of prey. He grew taller, shirt shredding, and I saw the cracks on his chest.

Cracks. Not scars.

He said he’d had heart surgery. And he had, in a way. The monster who had me by the throat carved his heart out of him. If he didn’t have me immobile, I’d cut *his* heart out myself.

Hadn’t they said he was drugged? That he wasn’t allowed to leave the mountain? How the fuck was he here?

Laurent was taller now. Every part of him broader and thicker, legs transforming into the paws of some kind of large cat. He was a beast, and I still recognized him. He was mine.

“Did you really think that what you slipped into the wine would stop me? If you did, you’re more foolish than I thought, Ariel.”

In the corner of my eye, I saw Trin’s tentacles creep over the edge of the stone like he was ready to launch himself at me. Ban, too, was circling. They were all ready for battle.

“Take your hands off her, or I’ll rip your head off your body,” Laurent said.

“You won’t, actually,” Prospero said, shoving me forward toward them. “I’m not really here.”

“What?” The word gasped out of me as I landed in Ariel’s arms.

Ban and Laurent instantly placed themselves between me and the magician, but I didn’t think it would do much. He’d transported me right to him, but he wasn’t really here?

I saw it now. What I’d felt when he touched me. The faint shimmer of magic around his form. He was projecting himself. “How long has it been, Khalas? Nearly eight hundred years? You never gave me a chance. Never gave me a weakness I could use until her.”

No one said anything, and I turned deeper into Ariel’s arms. Prospero’s gaze was too deep, lit with both magic and madness. It was terrifying.

“And then I saw you with her and began to plan.”

“What do you want?” The words even sounded like stone coming out of him in this form.

I peeked over my shoulder and Ariel turned me so I could see, keeping my back pressed against him. His fingers dug into my hips, and in spite of what and who was in front of us, I craved that feeling. I loved the desperation in the way he was touching me.

I fought the instant wave of shame that hit me for wanting it so badly and pushed it back. Now wasn't the time.

"I want what I've wanted since I brought you out of that rock," Prospero said. "I want my freedom. And you'll give it to me."

"The hell I will," Laurent said.

The slow smile on Prospero's face raised chills on my arms. "You will. Because if you don't, your mate dies, and I'm free anyway. I've had a long time to think about this, Khal—"

"*Don't* call me that." Laurent snapped.

Prospero ignored him entirely. "I've had a long time to plan for this. You have until the magic takes Meg to offer yourself to me. It will kill her, eventually. Whether through whatever it decides to throw at you, or absorbing her soul into the island, she will die. But if it transforms her fully, I'll have her heart, and my freedom regardless of what you want. So I suggest you enjoy your time with her before she dies, or you do. She will be released once I take back everything I gave you, and you are dead. Don't bother with the loopholes, I've already addressed them. I can't be harmed while she holds it. By any of you," he looked at Laurent. "And the magic returns to me when she dies."

Ban growled, and Ariel tightened his arms around me. "That's not going to happen," he whispered.

"You bastard," Trin hissed. "She's innocent."

"Every day, it will take her more. How long? I'm not sure. I think the record is three days. But given the amount of magic she now holds, I can't imagine it will take much time. It will be interesting to watch."

"I should have killed you before I left," Laurent growled.

Prospero laughed. "As if you're capable of it when I have my power. Take your time and say goodbye. And good luck," he looked directly at me. "The island's power knows my every thought and every idea. Every... creative way to kill you. And given that the power in your body doesn't belong to you, it

wants to return to its true master.” He lifted a hand, and pain raked through me like claws made of diamond.

I barely kept myself quiet, a whimper still making its way out.

Silver magic soaked through me, easing the pain and wrapping me in comfort. Still, it was agony.

“One way or another, Prospero,” Laurent said. “I will kill you.”

The sorcerer sighed. “You won’t, but I’m sure you’ll figure that out. In the meantime, at least try to make it interesting. It’ll come for you, Meg. Sooner than later. I’ll make sure of that.”

He smiled and vanished like he’d never been there in the first place, and everyone blew out a breath in relief.

“That must have exhausted him,” Trin said. “Borrowing what little of the island’s power he can access?”

Ariel nodded, his cheek still pressed to mine. “Hopefully it will have taken enough out of him that he needs to keep to his fucking self for a while.”

Laurent turned, slowly reverting to his human form. “Meg, are you all right?”

“I think so.” Now that the pain was gone, I didn’t feel any different. And as it was, I couldn’t feel the magic he’d put inside me. It was just *there*, lurking like a shadow.

“Good.”

I looked between the four of them. “Will it really try to kill me?”

“It’s one of the reasons removing the chains was a risk,” Ariel said. “They negate the effects, but only to an extent.”

“Let’s go home.” Ban stepped toward the edge of the cave and sank into his feline form.

Home. The energy in the air shifted, and Laurent reached out and took my hand. “Couldn’t agree more, *mate*.”

The heat rose so quickly it nearly made me faint. Four of them? That made me feel like this? There was a chance that was what would kill me.

My skin began to prickle like I was burning. Or a sparkler. How intense was the connection to make me feel like this?

Glancing down, I saw the tips of my fingers were glowing the brutal, neon shade of violet. And there *were* sparks coming from my skin.

This had nothing to do with my mates. This was the magic.

I felt myself slipping away again. Disintegrating. Being pulled apart from myself, though this time it wasn't painful. "Wait," I said. "It's taking me."

"No."

Turning, Ariel evaporated into smoke, spinning me inside his mist. But it didn't help. I was pulled away, right through his arms. It was seamless. One second there, and another not.

Their voices rang into echoing silence, and I was gone.



CHAPTER TWENTY

ARIEL

*M*eg vanished and Khalas *roared*.

It had been centuries since I heard that sound. But this time, I fully agreed with him. Everything in my being was rigid—completely opposite of what it felt like to be a spirit.

He turned to us. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” I told him. “This is the magic attacking Meg, not Prospero. He might be provoking it, but he doesn’t have the power to do this right now. He’s been planning this, and with Meg, but not until recently when we saw him spying. And as soon as we knew that much, he ordered us not to warn you.”

The gargoyle was fully stone now, the beast in him responding to our mate being gone. *Our* mate. Seeing the relief in Meg’s eyes when she realized it was true. Holding her—*kissing* her—I needed her back right this fucking second.

“He’d have planned this forcing of your hand... Laurent,” Trin said, hesitating over the name. None of us were used to calling him by his new one. “Relying on the island’s power to do it? That, I didn’t expect. But in a way, it’s better.”

“And in another way, it’s worse,” Laurent said. “Prospero is predictable.”

“There are only so many places on the island,” I said. “We can find her.”

Somehow, my voice was far calmer than I felt. I *felt* like I wanted to turn into a whirlwind and destroy everything in my path in order to protect her. Keep her safe from the danger I exposed her to. That Prospero forced on her.

“We need to kill him,” Ban said. “As soon as she is safe.”

I didn’t disagree. For centuries, we hadn’t had a reason to try. Bound to the island as he was, the master sorcerer was nearly impossible to kill. And I was willing to own my own apathy—as long as Prospero was trapped, we were keeping a monster happy and mostly contained. Now?

Now the hold he had on me felt like a stain. A bruise on my soul. Ban was right. We needed a way to end this. Maybe the reason we hadn’t yet was fate gently guiding us toward Meg, because if we had broken free we never would have found her. But we had her now, and I didn’t plan on letting her go.

“I will kill him,” Laurent said. “Somehow, I will. But finding her comes first.”

A thought occurred, and I didn’t know if we were all thinking it, but there was no way to keep it in. “There’s a way to always find her. But I don’t know if she’s ready.”

All eyes in the room were on me. It wasn’t a secret that mates could bond, and the idea of feeling her? Sensing her emotions? Her pleasure and her pain and everything in between?

My feet disappeared into smoke. I wasn’t able to keep myself together when I thought like that.

“One thing at a time,” Trin said, but the way his voice sounded too, I knew I wasn’t the only one having a hard time controlling myself at the thought of bonding our mate.

“Where would it take her?” Laurent asked, his body shrinking back into its human form. He’d destroyed most of his clothes, but there wasn’t any part of him we already hadn’t seen. And sharing a mate? We were all about to get that much closer.

I didn’t want to think about where she was. The magic wouldn’t go easy on her, but given how much was in her. My body froze once more. How fast would it try to kill her?

There were plenty of dangerous places on this island, but the magic was clever and had used things at its disposal, like Prospero’s own creations. The fastest way to kill someone? Prospero had already turned that into an art for his own experiments.

But I glanced at Trin. “Do you think—”

The octopus shifter swore and dove under the water. Ban growled and was out of the cave in seconds.

“What?” Laurent asked. “*What, Ariel?*”

“You’re going to want to shift back,” I told him, knowing he was far faster in that form. “We need to run.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MEGHAN

I gasped as I reappeared in freezing water that was sloshing around my hips, and I was in a cage.

A cage.

A fucking golden bird cage hanging from a chain into what I now recognized as the island's water. What the fuck? Where was I and where were *they*? The island had taken me from them, exactly like Prospero had said it would. And now that I knew the truth about what we were, I understood exactly how much my disappearing would make them panic.

I whirled around and screamed. I wasn't alone in this cage.

A woman was here with me, arms over her head and held there with golden chains that matched the cage. She was alive—breathing—but not much else. Her big eyes were open, but it was clear she wasn't seeing anything, her head leaning against one of her arms.

Long golden hair draped over a bare chest and just touched the water surrounding us.

“Hello?”

I reached out to touch her and my hand flew upward, locking itself in a matching golden cuff. And then the other one. “Oh, forgive me.” Prospero’s voice came from across the room, where he stood in the doorway. “A temporary double booking. You’ll have more room shortly.” Then he laughed. “Didn’t think it would bring you here, but at least it’s moving quickly.”

“Let me go,” I said. “You can. I know you can.”

“I could, but I won’t.”

My arms ached where they were pulled upward, trapped by the golden cuffs. The island was mimicking whatever the hell he’d done to this poor woman. “Who is she?”

“Myranda is none of your concern,” he said, and I noticed he was leaning on the table, barely keeping himself upright. He wasn’t a projection now, but he was haggard and suffering. Like taunting us and giving me his power was killing him the same way he wanted it to kill *me*.

Light blazed in front of him on the stone wall. This room, outside the pool, was covered in shelves stuffed with books and scrolls and strange contraptions. Stones and stranger things I wasn’t sure I wanted to look closer at. But nothing told me what that light was.

He came toward us, and I cringed away from him as he entered the water, not even flinching at the freezing water. The woman—Myranda—didn’t react at all.

“Time to go,” he said, hauling open the door to the cage and unhooking her. She walked under her own power, like she could respond, but she was still blank. Like a doll.

She turned, and I saw her back. What looked like a tattoo peeked through her hair, and I saw metal. What the hell was going on here?

Prospero looked back at me sharply. I'd said it out loud without realizing it. "Did you think I'd spent my time on this island twiddling my thumbs? Despite what your gargoyle might think of me, there are those who value my talents and pay well for them, Meghan."

The huge, swirling piece of light on the wall resolved itself into an opening. Misty and dim, the fog crawled through to this room on the floor.

"It's ready?" A resonant voice asked, though there was nothing I could see on the other side of the portal.

"It is." Prospero had her by the elbow, and he picked up a set of large golden keys off the table. "Payment first."

More light. Silver, like the portal, floated through and struck Prospero in the chest. For long moments I could see everything—his blood and bones, the way his heart was beating. He returned to normal and shoved Myranda and the keys through the portal. He didn't look nearly as exhausted now, but was still leaning on the table for support. "Pleasure doing business with you."

The portal collapsed into nothing, drops of magic falling to the ground like a lingering splash. "See?" He waved a hand and the door to this gilded cage slammed shut. "Plenty of room for you now. The only thing is, I'm paid to make sure my creations are indestructible. You, I'm sure you're aware, are not. Have fun."

He left the room, and terror gripped me. "Hey, *wait*. Don't leave me here like this. *Prospero*." It was the first time I'd said his name out loud, and I hated it. He really was going to leave me here to die, because the magic he'd given me thought this was a good way for me to go.

I didn't think it was ever going to feel normal, watching someone look at you and decide to let you die.

The cage lurched, falling an inch, and my stomach swooped. Beneath my feet, there was nothing but water. It was glowing, like the rest of the water I'd seen, beautiful colors curling and breathing within it. But there was no bottom I

could see. No rocks or fish, just empty water sinking down into eventual darkness.

The cage jerked downward another inch, icy water reaching new skin and stealing my breath. “You don’t have to do this.” I spoke to the magic as if it could hear me. “I promise. I’ll find a way to give you back that doesn’t involve killing me.”

Another inch into the water. It was at my belly button now, and there wouldn’t be too much time before this was dangerous. My feet were already going numb from the icy cold, my teeth starting to chatter, and arms starting to shake. Like the magic was answering me, the cage started to swing back and forth, creating waves that were washing higher over me and making me colder.

“Please stop,” I begged. “I don’t want to die.”

“I see why he likes you. Infinite optimism and naïveté. Easy to manipulate.” Prospero was leaning against the door frame like he never left. “But I don’t care. Once you live as long as I have, you understand how little meaning life has as a mortal. If I’ve had to sacrifice some? So be it.”

“You’re insane.”

He smiled. “You just noticed?”

When he disappeared, he was really gone this time. The door slammed shut and the sound of a lock boomed through the room with a stale echo.

I dropped another six inches, a small scream coming out of me. The cage was sinking. Slowly, but steadily. I pulled on the chain holding me, but there was no way I was going to be able to break the thickness of that metal. And the cuffs were flush against my skin like they were made for them.

My hands were shaking now, and my breath was coming faster. I was desperately trying not to panic, but it wasn’t working. I’d already drowned once recently, and I didn’t want to do it again.

With my feet on the bottom of the cage, I kicked off, reaching with my legs to reach the bars. Pain lanced through

me, my entire body going rigid and electricity flowing through me.

Fuck.

Of course the magic would do that. Make it easy for me to escape? Never. Or was that what Prospero had done to the cage to keep whoever he needed in here?

I couldn't make my body move now. Was that what had happened to Myranda? She'd tried to escape too much and was just a shell of herself?

The water was just over my breasts, and I could barely feel the rest of me. Where was the chain coming from? There was no mechanism above me, just appearing from nowhere.

Before I'd come here I'd been fascinated by magic. But I hadn't fully thought through what could be done with it. Maybe Prospero was right. I was naïve.

The water hitting my neck made it so much harder to breathe. Was the water getting colder? My lips must be blue by now.

Stretching and grasping the chain, I heaved myself upward, giving myself a little more breathing room. But there wasn't much. I was too cold to grip properly, and I couldn't hold on to the top of the cage without being electrocuted.

Where were they?

Until right now, fear hadn't been at the forefront of my mind. Because I already knew they would come for me. They were trying. I hadn't had enough time with them.

I fucking hated feeling this helpless, even though it was Prospero's—and the island's—intention for me to have no power at all. I was nothing more than a pawn for him to sacrifice in the massive game of chess he'd trapped us all in.

My hands slipped, and I plunged back into the water. I had to arch my back to keep my mouth above the water. In seconds, there wouldn't be more. Forcing all my air out, I heaved in a deeper breath, filling my lungs before the cage dropped me below the air. This was it.

Suddenly I was seeing darkness, flashes of lightning behind my eyes as I watched the boat sink, and all those people.

Oh god, I was going to die. The knowledge and feeling coming back in full force.

Please, please, please.

I didn't even know if it had been this cold that night. My lungs couldn't hold on to the air as well when it felt like every inch of my skin was being stabbed with frozen knives.

Water moved past my skin, and my body moved. I opened my eyes and saw Trin slam into the bars of the cage. His body went rigid too for an infinite moment. Before he released the bars and shot upward. There wasn't enough room for him to slip between them.

I was fading. They were here, but I was running out of air.

The distant sound of a splash, and suddenly the cage was sinking faster, falling into the infinite blue and taking me with it. I pressed against the cage as it dragged me down and blessedly wasn't electrocuted.

It was hard to describe the sound of metal underwater, but that's what it was. The cage was sinking, and hands were tearing the bars open. Stone hands.

As soon as the opening was big enough Trin was through it, threading his tentacles through the bars first and wrapping me close. "Breathe out," he said, and I was perfectly able to hear him.

I did as he asked, releasing the last tense piece of my air before his mouth slammed into mine. Pure, sweet oxygen laced with the taste of the ocean hit my lungs. I inhaled him, my mind coming back, though I was still cold.

So fucking cold.

Laurent was still here, and we were still sinking together. He reached through the bars and snapped the thick gold chain with one set of stone claws.

I saw him shift into a human and swim upwards.

Trin didn't let me go. He breathed another lungful of air into my mouth before guiding us through the hole in the bars Laurent made. Then, with one thrust of his tentacles, we *launched* upward.

The surface broke around me, and hands were already there, pulling me out of the water and laying me out on the stone floor. Ariel's face looked down at me, filled with panic and fear.

"Meg?"

I blew out the rest of Trin's air and inhaled, still shaking.

He lifted me off the ground enough to wrap his arms around me. "You're all right," he breathed, and it sounded like it was more for him than for me. "You're safe."

Behind him, Laurent was heaving air into his own lungs, leaning on the edge of the pool. "Fuck, that's cold."

"And that was too close," Trin said.

"It was electrified," I said. "I couldn't—"

A growl interrupted me. "Let me warm her." Ariel released me reluctantly to allow Ban's long body to lie against mine. The normal warmth I'd felt him give off was now like a nova. Nearly painful as it burned through my frozen limbs, and I turned toward him, blindly seeking that heat.

"We can't stay here," Ariel said. "I'm not sure it makes a difference to the magic, but it could."

"No arguments from me," Laurent said. "The house?"

"Our house," Trin confirmed.

Vaguely, I heard Laurent's laugh. "Still in the same place?"

"No, we had to move it. Follow us."

My face was tucked into Ban's chest, and I didn't move it as I was lifted. It was still so warm. As much as I wished I could stand and tell them I was okay—*be* okay and stand up for myself—I couldn't.

I felt the smooth movement of Ban's steps as we walked,
and beneath my ear, a gentle purr.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MEGHAN

I didn't fall asleep, but I was definitely in a daze as we went wherever they were taking me.

"Does Prospero know about this?" Laurent asked.

"He has his suspicions, but hasn't ever said anything." Ariel said. "Frankly, I'm sure he knows. But there's not much he can do, he doesn't know the extent, and thankfully he doesn't care enough about us to ruin it. In spite of his power, I was still born of the same magic. It gives me some leverage. We move it every once in a while out of caution. If he directly asked me, I might have had to tell him. But now that Meg is here, it's safe."

"Thank fuck," Trin said.

Because I was their mate, and they couldn't hurt me. Telling Prospero where we were could lead to harm.

It felt good to be safe, even if I wasn't quite ready to open my eyes.

"You all live here?" I managed.

"Yes and no," Ban said, the words rumbling beneath my ear where he still held me. "We do, but we pretend we do not, as not to give him ammunition."

I still felt like I couldn't open my eyes. Adrenaline, fear, and the cold coalesced into a weakness and exhaustion I couldn't quite fight.

"Here," Ariel said. "In here."

"Do you have medical supplies?" Laurent asked.

"Yes."

"I'll take whatever you have."

I heard the smile in Ariel's voice. "You really are a doctor?"

"A lot of good it did me."

There was softness underneath me, and I shivered as Ban released me.

"Clothes?"

"We have those too."

A hand slipped beneath my neck. "Meg?" Laurent's voice was close by, and I managed to crack my eyes open. "You're still freezing, sweetheart. I need to get you out of the wet clothes."

"Not the way I imagined first being naked with you."

He laughed softly and leaned down to kiss me. It helped with the cold part of the problem. "We'll take care of that. But I need to make sure you're all right first."

"I'm fine."

"Part of being your mate is that I feel..." he sighed. "I'll just fucking say it. We're going to be protective. I can't breathe unless I know you're safe and healthy. It might be stifling at first with four of us right now, especially since

someone—*something*—is actively trying to kill you. But I won't apologize for it."

The way his fingers tightened on my neck and fire lit in his eyes, my stomach dropped deliciously. "I don't know you as well as I thought, do I." It wasn't a question.

Laurent shook his head and lifted one hand, shifting it into claws that matched his legs. "If it makes you feel better, no one does. I've been hiding a very long time. But I will never be sorry you dragged me out of it."

He took one claw and placed the tip in the center of my chest, dragging it gently down my skin like a caress. Beneath it, the fabric of my soaked dress cut open like it was nothing but air.

I arched into the touch, my eyes still locked with his. If my body didn't feel weak right now, I would be doing more than arching. As it was, the dark lust in Laurent's gaze had me pressing my thighs together.

"Let's get you out of this," he said gently.

He broke eye contact and moved quickly, peeling apart the cloth with cool medical efficiency. It wasn't until he tossed the wet dress aside and reached for the blanket that he truly looked at my body, and my face flushed.

Laurent was stopped in his tracks, staring at me. Shaking his head, he started rapidly reciting something under his breath in French as he lifted the blanket all the way up to my chest.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm reciting the Hippocratic oath," he muttered. "So I don't take advantage of you when I don't know whether or not it will do you harm."

"I'm *fine*." To prove my point, I pushed myself into a sitting position, the blanket falling around my waist and pooling there, drawing his gaze. "See? Feeling better. Perfectly all right."

"But you almost weren't," he said, reaching out. His hands held both sides of my face, fingers sinking into my damp hair.

The way he held me, everything trembled. Because I knew with every fiber of myself that he felt I was precious.

It stole my breath.

“Twice now,” he said. “Twice you’ve almost died because of me, Meg.”

“But I didn’t.”

He brought my lips to his, desperate and rough, gathering me into his arms so tightly I once again couldn’t breathe.

I would take this kind of suffocation every time.

Now that there was nothing between us, I understood the previous times we kissed he was holding everything back. The truth, his want for me, the incredible strength and dominance in the way he held me.

“I know you didn’t. But the thought of it makes me *burn* with rage. So as much as I want to pin you to this bed and fuck you until we’re both exhausted, I am going to check you like the doctor I am first. Understand?”

Pressing my lips together, I nodded, unable to speak, and not sure I could describe how the way he just spoke and kissed me made me melt.

“Good.”

Ariel appeared and dropped some supplies and clothes on the bed and turned to leave. “You don’t have to go.”

He looked at me, eyes dragging over me. “You two need a moment.” Then he smiled. “I’ll be back.”

Laurent dug through the supplies and found a stethoscope. “You’re really going to use that?”

“We found you about to drown. Of course I’m going to use it.”

His hand slipped behind my neck again, holding me still while he placed the small circle where he needed it. I breathed in and out for him, over exaggerating the movement. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “You’re not making this easy.”

“You said I had to let you,” I whispered. “You didn’t say I had to make it easy.”

I’d been avoiding some of the questions I needed to ask him. But if I didn’t, they’d eat me up inside. “Laurent?”

He glanced up and met my eyes briefly while he wrapped a blood pressure cuff around my arm. “How many people died? On the boat?”

I watched his mouth firm into a line. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t lie to me. They died because I was there. I deserve to know.”

I was distracted by the feeling of his hands on my skin. He unwrapped the cuff and reached for the next thing on the bed. “When I left to come here, it was seventy from the boat. It could be more by now. But the storm also caused a lot of damage along the coasts.”

“*Seventy.*” I pressed a hand to my chest.

“Janelle is alive,” he said. “Along with Raoul Chagny. Without Janelle, I wouldn’t have known where you were immediately. I’m sure Prospero would have made sure, but she told me a man named Ariel told you not to get on the boat. And I knew.”

They were alive. Tension released between my shoulders. I’d feared the worst and hadn’t let it in, my mind compartmentalizing everything to try to make sense of everything happening the last few days.

“How long has it been?”

“Three days.”

I hadn’t lost much time while unconscious. Also relieving. “And Christine?”

Laurent did smile then. “Chomping at the bit. She wanted to come, but thankfully their majesties didn’t let her.”

The fact that my best friend was mated to the kings of the gargoyle world was still wild. But now I was there too. I had *mates*.

The mate sitting beside me took my temperature. And now that I was warming up, I was becoming more aware of the fact that even though I was naked, he was almost naked too. When he'd shifted, he'd ruined most of his clothes—the barely there remains of his pants hanging on by a thread and hiding the sight I really wanted.

“Clean bill of health?”

He sighed with a smile. “I can't run nearly the amount of tests I want to. But your lungs are clear, your heart is strong, blood pressure is normal, and your temperature is rising.”

“You can help it rise a little faster.”

“Don't tempt me, mate.” His voice turned rough, and I recognized the beast within him speaking.

I reached out and pulled him closer, tossing the thermometer aside. “No. I will tempt you. I've been waiting three years to have you, Laurent.”

“And you will have me,” he growled. “As much as you want me. But—”

“If you tell me *but* one more time I am going to spontaneously combust.”

He grinned. “But, our conversation earlier was interrupted. We need a plan before I lose the next twelve hours ravishing you. Because there's one thing happening to you I can't fix.”

Lifting my hand, he held it out. I blinked at my fingers. I'd thought I'd gotten so cold that my extremities had started to turn colors. But no, I was warm enough now, and my fingers were distinctly... purple. The same color purple that had glowed beneath my skin when Ariel touched it.

“It's in the roots of your hair as well. And on your toes.”

“What's happening to me?”

“He put the island's magic inside you. He let it poison you.” Laurent's voice was low, and it shook with dark rage. I felt the way his hand struggled not to crush mine. “Every day it will progress until you're a part of it. And it will kill you.”

“He said something about transforming, too.”

“That’s not better,” he said. “I promise.”

“What do we do?”

He slid his hands behind my back and stroked down my spine, pulling me to his chest. “That’s what we need to talk about. And what happens after that is anyone’s guess. You have four mates. We all want you, and I’m a patient man.”

I ran my fingers over his ribs, finally feeling all the skin I’d been dying to feel for years. “If you’d taken me home from the club? What would you have done?”

Laurent’s eyes darkened with heat. “Don’t ask me that when I can’t act on it.”

I smirked. “Fine. But I am going to ask you.”

“I look forward to it.”

Glancing down, what was left of his pants did little to hide how he felt about it.

Reaching over, Laurent picked up the pile of clothes that Ariel had brought and immediately tossed aside the bra and underwear.

“Hey.”

He pinned me with a stare. “In less than an hour, faster if I can manage, one of us or all of us are going to tear these off you anyway. I’m saving us time.”

My whole body turned red, and I grabbed the blanket, pulling it up to my chest. One corner of Laurent’s mouth curled up. “Not suddenly going shy on me, are you, Meg?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s never been who you are. Don’t start now.” Lifting the large shirt up, he helped me thread my arms through. “It’s different though.”

“Why?”

Fear clung to my chest, and I didn’t know how to say it. “Sex is good,” I said. “Sex is great. But everything else is…”

harder. You're my mates, and that means everything, and..." I didn't know how to voice the rest of it.

There was a pair of soft cotton shorts in his hand, and I pushed out from underneath the blankets and grabbed them. Because I wasn't ready for him to dress me like that.

"And?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's okay. It's just a lot."

Laurent's hands landed on my hips, pulling me to stand between his knees. I couldn't help but smile a little, my stomach fluttering, because the sudden, easy closeness was what I'd dreamed about.

"Meg," he said gently. "Talk to me."

That faint accent on his words and intensity in his eyes made my heart pound. The only person I'd ever talked about this with was Christine, and even then I hadn't told her everything. It felt mean to complain about how lonely and sad I was when my best friend was the center of everything I wanted.

I leaned in, savoring that I was allowed to loop my arms around his neck. My body was tense with fear, and like he sensed it, his hands slid to my lower back, massaging his fingers into it.

"I'm scared," I finally whispered.

He nodded once. "Tell me why."

It was too much. Too big. "Because of you. And them. It might not be the island giving me whatever deep desire is hidden in my soul, but it is what I've wanted. Just having it dropped in your lap? I don't know how to do this. And with that, it might all be taken away." My voice cracked on the last word.

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart."

"How can you be sure?"

A low growl that set my hair on end in a good way. "I haven't been alive this long just to find my mate and lose her.

I'm going to do everything in my power to fix this."

"And if you can't?"

Nothing in his face changed. He was just as fierce about it. "Then I'll do what I promised Christine and make sure you get out of here. With or without me. I'm sure the others would say the same."

"That's not an option." I dug my hands into his hair. "*No*. Promise me."

"Let's go talk about it." He stood, and I could tell it took an effort for him not to lift me into his arms. Instead, he wove our fingers together and led me out of the room.

But I couldn't help but notice he hadn't promised anything.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MEGHAN

I hadn't seen the house on the way in. But now I did, and it was... as beautiful as it was *normal*.

Carved walls of pale stone that didn't feel oppressive, colors subtly shifting like the cave. Pillars that supported a large open space with comfy cushions and couches, and a large open pool for Trin. Steam rose off the surface of the water, and given I still wasn't entirely warm, it was appealing.

Ban was lounging on one of the couches, still not wearing any clothes. He had no reason to be shy, but heat still painted my cheeks since I wasn't used to just seeing anyone so casually naked.

Trin was on two humanesque legs in the kitchen I could see through a large archway.

It felt bright and open despite the fact that we were clearly underground. There were no windows, but the light felt natural. The air, too, felt clean and open. If it was true and

Ariel was responsible for this house, it made sense. A spirit was likely to savor the open air as opposed to anything else.

That same spirit was on a couch across from Ban, watching me carefully. In spite of the apology, there was still some tension between us.

“This is weird,” I whispered to Laurent.

“Is it?”

Shrugging, I released his hand and wrapped my arms around myself. “A bit, yeah.”

He turned and kissed my temple, and I leaned into his touch, closing my eyes and losing myself in the sharpness of his scent. The words he whispered in my ears were soft. “It will take some getting used to. For all of us. But never worry about me. It may have been centuries, but these men are my brothers. We have the same maker and were formed by the same magic. You haven’t seen my possessive side, Meg. I’ve never let it out. And I don’t pretend I won’t want you to myself, because I will. You’re *mine*.”

Delicious chills ran down my spine.

“But you’re theirs too. And I think you and Ariel have more to work out.”

I pressed my lips together, nervous. “I’m going to be bad at this.”

“Never.” One more kiss on my forehead, and he stepped back, allowing me space to move.

The steps I took across the room to Ariel felt like the longest steps in the world. And I remembered what Laurent asked. Was I going shy?

I never used to be shy, but there was also never anything at stake. I never let anyone in. Just partied. But the last three years were different. I started changing, and with everything at the ballet—

Everything about the way Ariel was sitting was casual, but his eyes weren’t. His gaze dragged up my bare legs and finally landed on mine.

“Can I sit with you?”

All at once, he turned to smoke, the cloud wrapping around me and when it cleared, I was on my back on the couch with his body over mine. “Did you think I was going to say no?”

“No? I don’t know.” His hips were settled between my legs, arms curled underneath me so far he cradled my head. I was entirely *held* by him. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” The word was a low growl. “I helped him torture you. I’ll never be able to take that back, no matter how many times I apologize for it. You begged me to stop.” His eyes closed, and my heart ached for both of us. It wasn’t the way I’d wanted to meet a mate.

But I didn’t think this was the ideal way any of us would have wanted.

“My best friend, Christine,” I whispered. “She has mates too. The gargoyle kings.”

Ariel opened his eyes again, his pain receding into curiosity.

“And I’ve always wanted it. Something so deep and something that was mine. That’s why it hurt so much more when I thought it was just because of the island. I wanted it to *mean* something. I didn’t want it to be just because you were here and the magic felt like you were convenient. It wasn’t because of you, or what you did.”

Now that it was coming out, I felt like I couldn’t stop. “It felt so cruel. Like the thing I wanted most had been turned against me. And I didn’t know if I could take it.”

He still held me, the fingers behind my head twisting and untwisting my hair. “The first time I saw you was in a vision. Prospero scrying to look at you and... Laurent. And I couldn’t stop looking at you. The way you moved, the way your feelings seem to bubble up beneath your skin. You were so fucking beautiful, and I was jealous, even from so far away.

“Even not knowing I was your mate, I wanted to touch you when I was sent to get you on the boat. I wanted to make sure

you never came here because of that bastard, even though I was ordered to make sure you did. It's clear part of me knew. And you *are* mine."

Covering my mouth with his, he drowned me in silver and light. He tasted impossibly like the wind and *freedom*. I wasn't cold anymore, and the magic coursing through my body made tingles course under my skin. Like the good kind of being electrified.

"All right," Trin said. "Let her breathe, Air."

I laughed into the kiss and broke away. "Is your nickname really Air?"

"Sometimes. Mostly when they want to annoy me."

His smile was beautiful. So much better than pain and sadness. He did pull back, sitting up and taking me with him so I could see the others. For a moment it felt like we were in our own private world.

But Trin was standing nearby with a cup and a plate. "Hungry?"

It hadn't been that long since the pasta, but a lot had happened in between. "More thirsty."

He held out the cup, which was filled with water. As soon as the water hit my lips, it was like I'd been walking in a desert for days. I downed the whole thing in one go. "Wow."

Trin chuckled. "Near-death experiences will do that to you."

Despite his laughter, his comment took the air out of the room. That was what we needed to talk about. "Yeah."

Trin took the cup back to the kitchen, and a second later, a mug appeared in my hands, warm and filled with tea. I inhaled the familiar scent. Irish breakfast with a little sugar and a little cream. I drank it gratefully before I looked at Ariel.

"It's a neat trick, but I still like people to know my favorites."

He smiled gently. "So it means something."

“Yes.”

“I’ll remember.” A hand curled around my waist, pulling me closer so I was nearly sitting on his legs. “Don’t worry, mate. I want to memorize every inch of your mind and body. Once I know your true favorites—flavors, sensations, positions, *orgasms*—it will be even better.”

My breath went short, and I curled myself around the mug before I could toss it aside and ask for more.

“So,” Laurent asked. “Any ideas that don’t involve Meg or me dying?”

“Figure out how to separate Meg from the magic and free us,” Ban said. “So I can rip his head off.”

Laurent huffed out a breath. “You’ll have to get in line.”

“Can I ask why you haven’t killed him before now?” I asked. “None of you seem to like him.”

“It’s complicated,” Trin said. “But he controls us both because he created us, and because he controls our hearts. Because of his connection to that power combined with our creation? It’s a recipe for control. Not to mention he put many of the spells in place before we knew better. Only K—Laurent. Sorry, that’s going to take some getting used to—doesn’t have the bond anymore. Because we planned it. We stole his heart from Prospero and gave it back, getting him off the island.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure I understand. It’s a lot to wrap my head around.”

Laurent met my eyes. “He used borrowed magic to create me. Because it was so much power, it essentially took his life. Before, he was still alive and human enough to leave, but now he’s a part of this place. If he goes too far from the island, he’ll die, because the island’s magic is what is sustaining him.”

Ariel sighed. “Your question earlier, Laurent. About why now? He got the idea that killing you will somehow release the magic he borrows to create you, so he can return it and become human once more.”

“Seriously?” Laurent shook his head. “It’s not that simple.”

“He knows it too,” Trin chuckled. “But at this point, I think he’s beyond caring.”

“No kidding,” Ariel said. “There’s no logic left in him.”

I thought about it. “If he wants to give magic back to the Island, is that why he’s getting paid in magic?”

All four of them looked at me, and Ban sat up. “What do you mean?”

“There was a woman in the cage with me. He was there when the magic dropped me in. But she was like... catatonic. He sent her through a portal, and when whoever was on the other side gave him payment, he lit up so brightly I could see his skeleton. I assumed it was magic. He said the woman’s name was Myranda.”

Laurent looked just as confused as I was, but the others looked angry. “He’s always had projects,” Ariel said. “He keeps us away from them. Doesn’t tell us they’re here, where he gets them, or where they go. And usually we’re commanded so far away we can’t help.”

Again, the way he controlled them.

I looked at Ban’s chest, and I saw what I hadn’t before—because I hadn’t been looking. A long, thin line over the left side of his chest. Trin, too, had a pale, faded scar.

“He has your hearts,” I said. “Literally.”

What they’d told me before the magic stole me was finally clicking into place.

“You were made to free him, but everything backfired. Now he still controls the three of you because of the hearts, and Laurent is free.”

“Yes,” Ariel said. The single, painful word was through gritted teeth. “We’re not bound to the island the way he is, but it does have power over us. And as long as he has them, we belong to him. Which is why I’m so grateful you’re my mate and I cannot harm you anymore.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“My heart?” Ban said. “Yes. But we can’t get to it.”

Trin came over and sat on my other side. Ariel didn’t blink when he tugged me away and tucked me in next to him, taking a turn.

“They are in the island’s heart, and have been since he made the offering,” Trin said. “The reason we can’t get to them is not only because the magic will rip anyone apart but Prospero—because he’s more magic than man now—and Ariel, who’s been ordered not to.”

“But—”

“Things were different,” Laurent answered my question before I asked it. “Prospero was much more trusting, because we’d never defied him and had never thought to. He didn’t imagine his *creations* would ever turn on him. And we hadn’t truly thought about it because we didn’t know better. Ariel was not burdened the way he is now, and it was easier. Though they paid the price for my freedom.”

I finished the cup of tea, and the mug in my hands evaporated into mist before I could even move to put it down. That was convenient. At least there was no need to do dishes.

“What made you change your mind? About rebelling?”

“You don’t need to hear about that,” Laurent said, his tone final.

He might not tell me right now, but I would know eventually. He already admitted to murder, so I didn’t imagine what would have made him realize the truth was all sunshine and roses. But at the moment it was irrelevant.

“So we need to figure out a way to get the island’s magic out of my body before it kills me, and without Laurent giving up his heart and life. And also a way to *get* your hearts so you can be free.” I couldn’t quite stomach saying that we would kill him, though it would probably end up that way.

In a fucked up way, Prospero wasn’t wrong in what he’d said to me. Life meant something very different in this world.

“Simple,” Ban said. He smiled, and I liked the sight.

Ariel sighed. “We have a little time, I think. The island is a... force. It reacts. Plays. It’s almost like it thinks before it moves, though it’s not conscious. But we do know it doesn’t react well to being put into human bodies, which is why it will keep trying to kill you.”

“Great,” I muttered.

“But Prospero has never separated himself entirely from his power before. And that could make all the difference,” Trin said.

I sighed. “He wants me dead. The island wants me dead. Too bad you can’t just kill me and bring me back.”

The reaction was immediate. Laurent was on his feet and Ban shifted into his feline form. The mates on either side of me tempered their reactions, but only just. Magic flooded my system, silver and bright, and Trin kept me pinned so tightly to my side it was nearly painful.

“*No.*”

I looked at Laurent. “Stop my heart and restart it. You couldn’t do that?”

“Even if that wasn’t far more difficult than people think it is, I wouldn’t do it. I *can’t* do it, Meg.”

“But would it work?”

Ariel leaned forward and gently placed a hand over my heart. “I don’t think so. The kind of death we’re talking about is not the kind you come back from.”

I closed my eyes. “This is impossible.”

A new presence came close, and I found Laurent kneeling in front of me. “He wants it to feel that way. But like I told you. No matter what, you’re getting out of here. Even if that means I have to sacrifice myself to him just to get close enough.”

“Stop it,” I hissed. “Don’t even think about it.”

The look on his face told me there was no chance in hell he wouldn't think about it. That if there was a way to save me this instant, he would do it, even if it cost his life.

"We have time," he said. "Now that you're safe. And it will not be fixed tonight."

That's right—it was the middle of the night now, even though it felt like daylight in here.

"He's right," Ariel said. "It's not getting solved now. The magic will regroup." The heat in his eyes told me exactly what he thought was getting solved now.

"I—" I swallowed. "I don't know how to do this."

Trin was the one who turned to me. "I do. Do you want all of us? Trust us?"

My whole body was on fire and I couldn't seem to meet his eyes, but I nodded.

"Then you don't have to know how," he said quietly. "All you have to do is say yes."

Nerves swam in my gut. Four mates. Exactly like my dream. I wanted it more than I could put into words.

I lifted my gaze to his. "Yes."

He hauled me into his arms and kissed me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MEGHAN

Trin didn't stop kissing me as he carried me down a hallway into a room that was warm, the air steaming from the large pool that took up nearly half of it. There was a bed too—bigger than was strictly reasonable. My mouth was dry, and I wasn't sure what was about to happen. All I was sure of was that I wanted them, whatever form that came in.

He went straight into the water, his form changing as we entered it. The pants he was wearing slipped away, and his tentacles were wrapping around my legs just like they had earlier.

It felt like a lifetime ago now.

Lifting me, he sat me on the edge of the pool and raised an eyebrow when he reached for my shirt. I nodded, grateful for Laurent's foresight with the underwear.

Trin stared at me when it was gone. The lights on his tentacles pulsed in different colors, mesmerizing me.

“Trin,” Laurent said from behind me, and I turned to see him entirely naked and sitting on the bed, staring at the two of us. My jaw was on the floor and my gargoyle was smirking at me. “Did you know that Meg is a ballet dancer by trade?”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I managed. “But I’m not sure—”

He lifted me just enough to strip the shorts off my hips before he sat me on the edge of the water again, multiple limbs curling around my legs and guiding them open until I was nearly in a split and entirely exposed. More tentacles wrapped around my hips, helping to balance, and two curled up and over my thighs, moving upwards. “That’s interesting,” Trin said, eyes gleaming. Everything had happened in seconds, and I was barely breathing.

“What do you say, Meg?” His lips were inches from mine, and it felt like his voice was music. Singing me into a place I’d never been before. “Is this all right?”

He was grinning as he asked, as if he didn’t know I was panting and waiting for whatever was going to happen next.

“You’re a siren,” I whispered.

“I’m not, but I have some of the same tricks.” He dropped a kiss on my lips and kept moving down my neck and across my collarbone. He was everywhere, the way he had me pinned open and also teasing me with his lips. “For example, the venom that allows you to breathe underwater? I have another venom too.”

“What does it do?”

He smiled into my shoulder. “It will make you beg,” he whispered. “The four of us won’t be enough for you until it’s over.”

Everything snapped in with clarity. There wouldn’t be any awkwardness or questions. He was offering me the gift of wanton abandon, so I didn’t have to think or worry about who or how or why. Just a night of pleasure with my mates.

“How long?”

Again, he smiled. “That depends on you, Meg. If it starts to fade and you want more?” Lifting his wrist, he showed me the small spike on the inside of his wrist. Running my fingers over it didn’t feel like anything. One flex made it extend, and it was suddenly sharp as a needle.

“Never,” he said. “Never again without your permission. But I thought—”

I grabbed his wrist, letting the spike jab into my palm. I was tired of being unsure and nervous. Let it take me away.

It was instant. The world took on a gorgeous shine, and all my worry dropped away. I felt good—I felt *amazing*—and all the pent-up arousal I’d been pushing down out of fear and the need to figure everything out came raging to the surface.

I gasped, and Trin dropped his mouth to my neck again. Just that single touch echoed through me, and I could feel it everywhere.

I could also feel every single sucker as they pulled at the skin of my legs. Those two arms on my thighs moved, suckers settling directly over my nipples and pulling. “Oh my god.”

“That’s it,” he said quietly.

I was wet, and it had nothing to do with sitting next to water. Trin looked up at me with those stunning inhuman eyes. “This is what I wanted to do yesterday.”

Placing a hand between my breasts, he pushed me backward until I was sprawled on the stone, and held there by each of his arms. And his mouth was on me.

Strong hands pushing my thighs even further apart, until I was extended further than a split, to the limits of my flexibility, and all I could even think about was that his tongue was slowly circling my clit.

So soft and gentle, it still rocked through me like I’d been edging myself for hours.

I supposed in a way I had been, and completely ignoring it.

“Please, Trin.”

“Please what?” The vibration of his voice was like a fucking vibrator because of this venom in my system, and all I had left to give was a moan. He answered mine as he sealed his mouth over me and sucked, pulling in time with the suckers on each of his tentacles. My body arched, nearly sent into overload from that. It was like my clit was being tasted in a hundred places.

“I didn’t think it was possible for you to taste better than I imagined, but it is,” he murmured.

Need rose under my skin, and I understood what he meant now. I could come in a second, and it wouldn’t be enough. It would never be enough.

My hands were free, and I reached, not fully sure what for. My fingers met velvet. The back of Ban’s hand. His golden eyes were right next to mine, shining like he was prowling in the dark.

All at once, I imagined him hunting me, but not to kill. For everything else.

The tip of a tentacle brushed my bottom lip, dragging my gaze back to the monster between my legs. Bright eyes looking up at me, mouth sealed over my clit. He moaned as he sucked.

The same arms that had been teasing my nipples curled beneath me, pushing me up so I could see him—see myself spread in front of him like a feast.

The golden shine on the world rolled outward, pleasure crashing through me harder than the storm that sank the ship. All the pent up tension spinning through me and out, dragging my voice from me so it echoed through the room.

It coalesced and broke apart in shimmers. Trin released me, arms moving to bring my legs together and make me slip back into the water with him. My arms ended up around his neck, and it felt like we were permanently tangled with the way he was entirely twisted around me.

“Wow,” I murmured.

“Mmm,” Trin dragged his hands down my ribs. “I’ll happily share you, mate. But I want you to imagine the things I’m going to do to you when we’re alone.”

His voice was even more musical right now, allowing images and desires to bloom in my mind. A thousand possibilities for him and these eight arms of his, and I hadn’t even seen his cock yet. Shuddering, I twisted up, searching for his lips, and he met me halfway, mouth crashing down on mine with fire that met mine head on.

“Get out of this water,” he threatened, loosing the tentacles from my body. “Or I’m not letting you go.”

“What would that look like?”

My eyelids were heavy and my entire body was warm, drugged on his venom and the desire already reaching again. Yearning. I needed more.

“Dragging you down to the bottom where you’re weightless and breathless and fucking you until you tell me to stop.” His grin was wicked. He could make my body breathe water. Combined with this venom? It would be incredible.

Lust slammed into me like I’d been struck, and my entire body shook. “Go to them,” Trin whispered.

I managed to step away from him, but not before a tentacle slipped between my legs and created brief, delicious suction on my clit. Stumbling, I reached the stairs out of the pool.

Trin wasn’t done with me tonight. I knew that. If I hadn’t, I wasn’t sure the venom in my veins would have let me walk away. But I needed more.

Ariel caught me just outside the water, swirling from smoke into man and back. Just enough man that I could feel him, long and hard behind me, and smoke enough that he could pull my legs apart as easily as steady me. My arms were behind my back, held by his misted ropes, while his real hand rose gently to my throat.

“What do you like, Meg?” The words were soft and silver.

“Everything.” Right now it was everything. But I knew what I craved, and it was what they were giving me. The idea of someone paying such close attention to me and my body that they knew it better than I did. I fantasized about being the absolute center of someone’s world, and them showing me it was the truth. I wanted to be cherished and fucked. I wanted to be able to trust enough to surrender.

Ariel laughed in my ear. “Everything?”

I felt him at my entrance, his mouth dropping a kiss on my shoulder as he leaned down in order to thrust up. All the way into me. It might have hurt if I wasn’t riding the high of Trin’s power, but I was, and that made Ariel’s single thrust echo through my body like lightning.

I arched backward, on the edge of another orgasm, mind drowning in the sound of Ariel groaning into my neck. “Fuck, Meg.”

The way he was holding me now—making sure I couldn’t move as he began to thrust—was so opposite of the first time he’d held me. There was nothing painful about this.

“Open your eyes,” he ordered, and I saw Ban in front of me. There was a feral gleam in that gold gaze as he sank to his knees, and Ariel reached down, spreading me open for my other mate.

The brush of his tongue was rough and long—so fucking long it felt like it never ended. Rougher. Not quite a true cat’s tongue, but *fuck me*, it felt incredible.

He was purring, and I was pulled in a thousand directions. The texture on my swollen, sensitive clit, along with Ariel’s long strokes had me shaking, and yet I couldn’t move, the way he held me.

“I want to mark you,” Ariel whispered. “I want you to feel me and crave me the way I crave you. When we leave this place I want the world to know you’re fucking *mine*.”

I went blind, all my vision disappearing in a blaze of pleasure. He didn’t stop, and neither did Ban, catching me in a firestorm of bliss, carrying me back and forth between tongue

and cock, each movement drawing out the pleasure until I was gasping.

“Yes,” I managed somehow. “Yes.”

Christine’s mates had claimed her, and she loved it. I wanted that too. Would Ariel bite me? Or was there a different way for a spirit to mark someone as their mate?

Opening my eyes once more, Laurent was still sitting on the bed, watching me. His hand moved between his legs, stroking slowly and steadily.

My face flushed. How many times had I imagined that exact thing? The way his forearms would tighten as he fucked his fist. The way his abs would flex as he came. I never imagined that he would look at me like *that*.

Pure possession. He owned me with a single look. Not a hint of hesitation about the fact that I was being utterly fucked—just patience, knowing his turn was coming.

Like he knew my thoughts his mouth curved into a smirk, and it sent me over the edge again, my body crushing down on Ariel’s cock. He swore, heat filling me deep as he came.

I wasn’t completely on the ground anymore. I was floating in Ariel’s mist before he rested me on my feet, still inside me. Ban rose in a smooth movement, licking his lips with that impossibly long tongue. He was hard too, his cock trapped between our two bodies as he stepped closer.

Every hair on my body stood on end. My nipples hardened and muscles tensed. He was my mate, and a predator. Everything in me knew it, and wanted more. His purr still vibrated between us, and I wondered if he could get me off with that purr. Like a living vibrator.

“You’re the best thing I’ve ever tasted, kitten.” the words were low, brushing over my skin like velvet. “It makes me want to eat you alive.”

I shivered, not sure if he meant my pussy or *me*. It didn’t matter, because I was turned on by his words. He couldn’t hurt me—not as his mate. I was entirely safe with him, but the danger brought an edge forward that I liked.

Ariel guided me forward, hand in my hair, cock still inside me, over to Laurent. “She’s all yours.” He was offering me like a present, and I loved it as much as I rebelled against it.

He pulled out of me, and I whirled as soon as my toes hit the floor. “I’m not an object you can give away.”

Eyes narrowed, he came so close that his nose brushed mine. “Is that so?”

One hand came up to grip my hair while the other slipped between my legs, two fingers inside me where I was still filled with his cum.

“I seem to remember a dream,” he whispered in my ear.

I gasped. He’d been real. When I’d seen him across the stage and he’d been touching me at the same time. He’d been in my dream and seen everything. “No.”

“Yes, mate. A perk of being a spirit. And I saw exactly what you wanted in that dream. I saw my mate completely immobilized. And I saw her taken by all four of us, in *every* hole. Without choice and without relief, until we were finished with you. Until you couldn’t taste, feel, or see anything but us.”

My pussy clamped down on his fingers and he laughed softly, kissing the corner of my mouth just like he’d done then. “Can’t lie to me with my fingers in your cunt, Meg.”

“It was just a dream.”

“We’ll talk about your lying—and your desires—when you’re not tripping on the world’s most potent aphrodisiac. But right now, I’m giving you to Laurent so he can fuck you the way you’ve always wanted him to.”

A whimper came out of me. He was right. I wanted it. There was nothing I *didn’t* want from them. And even his still fingers inside me were enough to make me shudder.

All at once he stepped away, and stone claws scraped gently down my back before a strong arm pulled me backward and laid me out on the bed.

“Problem?” Laurent asked, body suddenly over mine.

I shook my head. There was definitely no problem with this. Another thing I'd imagined more times than I could count. Now I was looking up at him, and it was about to be real.

Grabbing his shoulders, I pulled him down to me and kissed him, hooking my leg over his hip. A growl ripped out of him, and I felt his weight shift as parts of him turned to stone and back.

He looked between our bodies, reaching to line himself up with me. Laurent looked back in time to lock eyes with me as he entered my body, and I knew I would never forget this moment as long as I lived.

I placed a hand on his chest, just breathing. We stared at each other, each breath stretching into infinity. I never thought it would happen, and now that it had, emotion pricked my eyes. All of this was perfect. Everything I could have asked for.

Finally, I was the center of someone's world. But not just one—four of them. Four mates I already knew were ready to fight and die for me.

One move from Laurent, and I was suddenly coming. The friction of him inside as his cock grew and hardened beyond flesh was too much. Every stone inch fit into my body, and I loved it. He was trying so hard to control himself and not let himself loose.

I didn't care—I wanted the monster. I wanted the messy, dark part of him inside that matched mine. But my voice was frozen. The only sounds I could make were *yes*, and things only the gods of pleasure understood.

Everything built on the last, the venom seeming to take deeper hold and throw me a thousand miles down into an ocean of sheer ecstasy. My nails dug into Laurent's skin, and I tried to pull every part of him closer.

My mind was soaked in pleasure and lost in it. In this moment, I wasn't fully human anymore. Just a being made of light and moaning, spasming around my mate's cock.

Somewhere I heard his sounds, too. So fucking hot—words in my ear I wished I understood—and the sounds he made every time he thrust into me. It was harder, faster. Brutal in its beauty, and I closed my eyes, falling into one last nova. Magic shivered over my skin, breathless and violet, and not the malevolent force I'd learned it could be.

It was beautiful.

I felt Laurent's heat, and the swelling at the base of his cock, stretching me and locking his body to mine. *Knotted*. Christine had mentioned this, but I didn't know it would feel like *this*. Like the knot itself was teasing my clit from the inside and like one touch of a breath could send me over the edge.

The venom was still swirling inside me, but he wasn't going anywhere right now. It was a chance to take a breath, even if my body wanted more.

"Meg," he breathed. "That was—"

Instead of speaking, he captured his lips with mine, tongue at once teasing and battling my own into submission.

He rolled, draping me over his body so I could lie on his chest with him still deep inside me. It felt like a contradiction to say a monster's knot in my body was soothing, but it was. I wasn't going anywhere. I had no options, and my *mate* was here protecting me, stroking one hand down my spine as my body caught up with the exhaustion the venom had denied.

Ban shifted to his feline form and curled up next to us, his back warming one side of me. From where my head rested I saw Trin emerge from the water with his strange not-quite-human legs. I felt Ariel's breath on my neck for a brief moment, though I didn't see where he settled.

More. The venom in me made me crave, but my body wanted sleep. I wasn't sure which to beg for.

Laurent's warmth was lulling me, along with the steady movement of his hands. The thought occurred to me, and I still had no filter.

"Do you want to mark me?" I asked.

He stiffened beneath me before he relaxed. Arms wrapped around me and held me as close as he could. “You have no fucking idea, sweetheart. As soon as possible. As soon as you’re ready.”

When would I be ready? It was the thought that carried me down into sleep, perfectly content.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LAURENT

*M*eg's body draped over mine as she relaxed, melting into me in ways I'd only dreamed of. Being inside her? Fucking heaven. My only wish was that none of the shit on this island was hanging over our heads so we could finally get to know each other. As mates and lovers. The way we were meant to.

The tension in the air was palpable as we waited to make sure she was asleep. Ariel pulled on pants, and Trin brought a blanket. As soon as my knot loosened, I slipped out of her and wrapped her in it.

I would be a happy man if I could stay inside her forever, but I didn't know how long Trin's venom lasted. If it was longer than she would be asleep, she needed as much rest as possible.

Ariel tossed me a pair of pants as I stood, and I shook my head, smiling. He was there when I was created, and now we shared the same mate. "That bothered?"

He frowned. “You’ve been living with humans for eight-hundred years. I assumed you’d be more comfortable in clothes.”

I winced. “Sorry.” It was an easy thing to think I still knew them the way I had, but I didn’t. Much had happened in the time I’d been gone, clearly. And I wouldn’t make assumptions about them. Especially in light of what Prospero had ordered Ariel to do.

“It’s fine.”

Glancing back at Meg, she was fast asleep, hair spread out over the pillow like gold. Ban still lay beside her, curled up. She was so fucking beautiful, and I didn’t know how to fully contain both the relief and joy at her being my *mate*.

The first time we’d met, I’d been stunned and attracted. And now that I knew, I wished I hadn’t waited. And yet, if I hadn’t, we wouldn’t be here with the other three. I wasn’t going to pretend it would be easy to share her. But the four of us already shared so much, it was more natural than anything else.

“Ban,” Ariel called.

We would talk while she slept, now that we weren’t panicking, trying to find her and keep her alive. “This place is shielded?” I asked.

“If it wasn’t, do you think we’d still have it?” Trin asked, sinking back into the living room pool.

It was a fair point.

Ban stalked out of the bedroom and laid on the floor. He’d always been more comfortable in his animal form, but I trusted him to speak to us if he had something to say.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “For turning your world upside down.”

“Don’t fucking apologize,” Ariel said. “You brought Meg. You found her in the first place. How?”

“The gargoyle kings,” I said. “Their mate is her best friend. A few years ago, the girl, Christine, was injured and it

needed to be kept quiet. So they called me. Shortly after, I met Meg, and she would stay with me when she visited Paris.”

“And you never... before this?”

“We kissed. But no more. I didn’t want to subject her to the life of being with an immortal if we weren’t mates, even though I wanted us to be.”

Trin ducked under the water and ran his hands through his hair. “Now I know why we didn’t try harder to get out of here. Something was telling us to wait until she could be here.”

“I made a promise to that same friend,” I told them. “Meg is getting out of here, even if it means I have to give myself to Prospero. I will not risk her life.”

Ban sat up in his human form. “I would prefer not to risk yours, either.”

“That may not be an option. He’s thought of every possibility. Can we do this?” I asked. “Do you think there’s a way to undo it and kill him?”

“I don’t know,” Trin said honestly. “But what other choice do we have?”

“We might have one he hasn’t thought of,” Ariel said quietly.

All three of our heads swiveled toward the spirit. Ban was the first to ask. “What do you mean?”

“Did you happen to catch the burst of magic right before you...” It was like he could stop the smirk off his face. “Finished?”

I hadn’t, and I shook my head.

Ariel stood. “Her fingers were violet earlier. Are they now?”

My eyebrows rose into my hairline. I went back to the bedroom, keeping my steps silent. Meg hadn’t moved from where we’d left her. I leaned down to look at her hand. When I’d been checking her vitals her fingers had been tinged with

violet magic down to the first knuckle. It was still there, but now only on the pads of her fingers.

I returned to the living room. “The magic receded.”

“Really?” Trin asked. “That’s interesting.”

It was. It wouldn’t hold for long. But it had been pushed back, and that would help us. “Why, do you think?”

Ariel sighed. “The island hates having its power in humans. It always has. They’re weak, and can’t handle it.” I bristled at the idea that he was calling Meg weak, but he wasn’t. “It wants familiarity and safety. All of us have a spark of the magic. No matter that it doesn’t belong to the island anymore. If I’m right—and we should test it—it might be soothed by brushing up against us.”

“How does that help?” Ban asked.

“Maybe we can wait him out,” Ariel said. “If we can keep Meg alive and hold the magic back long enough, there’s only so much time he can be without it. His body *will* die without it. Once he’s gone? It’s all easy. I can get to the heart of the island, and I can help Meg give the magic back without it killing her.”

Silence hung in the air for a minute, and Trin burst out laughing. “You’re saying if we spend time fucking our mate and protecting her, there’s a chance to solve all this? Sign me up.”

Ariel couldn’t stop smiling either. “We do have to be careful of the island. It *is* going to do things like that again. Even if we succeed in calming it.”

A growl ripped out of me. The sight of her in a sinking cage, fighting for breath? Stone rippled over my skin at the memory. It wasn’t something I would soon forget.

“No,” Trin said, responding to the words I hadn’t realized I’d spoken out loud. “And I’m not going to forget her being electrocuted. Thank fuck you were there, K—Laurent.” Pausing, he blew out a breath. “I know why you don’t want your old name, but it’s still strange calling you that.”

“I know. But I appreciate you trying.”

He sighed. “That was why I couldn’t get to her faster. You’re made of stone. It couldn’t hurt you.”

“Do you think she tried—” I stopped the words. Of course she tried. Meg was not only smart, but strong. She knew we would be coming for her and would have wanted to give herself as much time as possible. And it *shocked* her.

I was on my feet, having to pace to take the edge off the immediate flare of anger and protective instinct. She was *mine* and no one would harm her.

“Can the bond fix it?” Ban asked. “The magic inside her?”

“I don’t think so,” Trin said with a sigh. “I wish it would. We’ll be bound to her, but the magic is entirely different.”

“You’re sure you can undo it?” I asked Ariel. “If he’s gone?”

“Sure? No. I think I can. But you know as well as I do that magic is delicate. I would be absolutely sure before I tried anything. Frankly, I think the island—whatever awareness it has—would be glad to have it back.”

I heard stirring from the bedroom. She wasn’t awake, just moving around. But I still had the urge to get back to her as quickly as possible.

“That bedroom?”

“Brand new,” Ariel said with a smirk. “Made it while you were checking her.”

Shaking my head, I turned back to the bedroom and stopped. “I know it’s not under the best of circumstances, but I’m glad to see all of you. And I’m sorry I abandoned you.”

Ariel was at my shoulder, and he placed a hand on it. “If any of us were to get out, it needed to be you. It limited the damage, and you brought us our mate.”

A smile broke through. “That’s going to be strange for a while.”

“Tell me about it.” He blew out a breath. “Never thought I was one for sharing.”

Ban laughed. “But?”

“But that was incredible,” Ariel said. “And as odd as it is, none of it felt strange.”

He was right. It felt natural. The four of us weren’t close anymore, but we were brothers. Brothers because we were all created of the same magic, and brothers because we shared a mate. Brothers in everything but name.

There wasn’t anything else that needed to be said, and I led the way back to our sleeping mate.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MEGHAN

I was warm. That was the first sensation I felt as I surfaced. The second was that I was calm and normal. Trin's venom had faded, and the effects had passed.

A heavy arm was draped over my body, and I was covered in a blanket. I opened my eyes slowly and found Ariel in front of me across the bed.

Ban was near my feet. I felt his fur brushing my toes. Which meant that Laurent was behind me if Trin was in the water.

I laid my palm on the back of his hand and curled my fingers between his. He shifted ever so slightly, breathing deeper, and lips brushed the nape of my neck.

“Good morning.” The softest whisper.

Turning, I spun, staying under his arm until I was facing him, and immediately tucked my head under his chin. He

pulled me closer, that same arm wrapping around so he held me completely.

“Are you all right?”

I nodded. I was more than all right. How many times had I imagined waking up in his arms? So many times, and now I wasn't only with him, I was with four of them. It felt like too much.

My body was sore, but not so sore I regretted anything. Last night had been gorgeous and perfect even if all of them hadn't fucked me yet. The venom had allowed me to let go—I needed to thank Trin for that. If I hadn't been so exhausted, it would have been a much longer night, and I wouldn't have cared.

Finally, I raised my head a little so I could see Laurent's face. He smiled. “There you are.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“A while. We wore you out.”

A flush crept up my cheeks. “Yeah.”

“Don't be embarrassed,” he whispered even more quietly. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

He was right. I didn't. But it was still new, and everything...

The things I felt and wanted were different from what I imagined. The dream I'd had that Ariel had seen was, until last night, the hottest thing I'd ever experienced.

After years of feeling lonely and broken, it was strange to be dropped into the middle of happiness, no matter how strained everything else was.

He grinned and kissed my forehead. “Did we fuck your voice out of you?”

“No.” They hadn't, but my throat was scratchy from the sounds I'd made.

“Good.”

“I just can’t believe it,” I mumbled the words into his skin. “You’re here. You’re real. You... want me.”

Sorrow entered his gaze, and he pressed his forehead to mine without breaking the contact. “It will always be one of the biggest regrets of my life, Meg. Pushing you away. And I’m so fucking sorry if I made you think you weren’t worthy of wanting.” My stomach tumbled into butterflies. “You are everything,” he said. “And were everything, even before I knew this.”

Picking up my hand, he placed it over the center of his chest, where he could feel I was his mate.

I wanted to feel it too.

My hand covered some of the scars on his chest, and I traced them. Now I knew the truth. “He carved your heart out.”

“Yes.”

“Does it hurt?”

Laurent shook his head. “Not anymore. It did when he held it captive. But I still have dreams about that moment.” A flicker of a smile. “It was actually what happened when you arrived in Paris. You brought me out of that dream.”

“That was what happened? You seemed so off and I didn’t know what it was.”

He chuckled. “Yes. I was off. Going from one of my worst memories to having you in my house, smelling fucking *edible*. I was barely holding it together.”

“Could have fooled me,” I said quietly. “I just thought you were sleepy.”

Slowly, I traced the scars on his chest. They were a web. A shattering. But he’d taken his heart back.

“Are you going to tell me the truth?” I asked, not looking at him, instead still drawing gentle patterns on his skin. “About what changed your mind?”

He sighed. "It's not an easy thing to hear, sweetheart. And I... I don't want you to think less of me."

I pressed myself against his body and wrapped my arms around him. "If you're my mate, I want to know all of you. The good and the bad. You're not who a monster made you to be."

He chuckled. "I'm a gargoyle, Meg. By definition, I am a monster."

I made a face into his neck, and he felt it. "You know what I mean."

"I do." He stroked down my spine, making me arch into his touch like a cat. Touch starved as I was, I couldn't get enough of the simple joy of something like that.

"When Prospero finally had me, he decided his revenge wasn't finished. He thought he wanted revenge just like you thought you wanted mates. It wasn't true."

"What did he want?"

His breath moved the hair on the top of my head, and he kept smoothing his hand down my skin like he knew I was addicted to the sensation. "Power," he finally said.

Well, he certainly had that, didn't he?

"It was only a few years on this island when Prospero created each of us. The others were made from men he took. Sinking boats that came too close and experimenting. He wanted someone more than human to do his bidding, and none of the monsters of the world would listen. Plus, because of the vision he had of the island, he needed hearts from magical beings. Each one different."

"You mentioned something like that."

"Humans might think of them like elements. But it's not quite the same. Spirits and incorporeal beings, creatures of the sea, creatures of the land, and those who are not truly living. The four domains. The island wanted one of each."

I smirked. "Are you telling me you're really a zombie?"

He laughed quietly, grinning. I would never get tired of his smile. “Kind of. I’m the only one that was made from nothing. And I was his crowning achievement, even if it ruined his plans. So he used me. Sent me to take out the people he considered enemies. And I did it. I didn’t have a choice. I killed them. I like to think if their majesties had been alive that they would have stopped me.”

“It’s weird to think about that,” I admitted with a grin. “A little daunting.”

“That I’m so old.”

I smothered my laugh in his chest. “No, not exactly. Just that you’ve lived so much. You’ve seen the entire world transform. And I’m just me. I’ve seen and done nothing.”

“I have seen a lot. But all that time, something was missing. And now I know that I was waiting for you.”

My stomach swooped. *Fuck*. That was intense, and even though it was true, I didn’t know how to wrap my head around it.

“A few years into Prospero’s revenge spree, taking out the long list of people he thought had wronged him, he found out the *son* of the King who deposed him had married and had a child. He already killed his father when he first came to the island. Prospero hadn’t mastered the art of magic the way he has now, so his skills were less consistent. He sent me to kill the wife and child.”

I gasped in spite of myself. Laurent pulled away, and I didn’t let him go. “No,” I quickly murmured. “Don’t you dare move. Tell me.” He wasn’t going to assume the worst of me before I knew the whole truth.

“It was an order. I had to fulfill it,” he said quietly. “But he hadn’t ordered me how. So I went to the King. I told him who I was and why I was there, and who sent me.”

“He didn’t kill you?”

One corner of his mouth turned up. “He wanted to. But I’m not very easy to kill, and if he killed me, Prospero would just send someone else. So he sought out sorcerers. Alone, in case

Prospero was watching. And when everything was arranged, we went. I cut their air off and allowed their hearts to stop. I killed them, and they were immediately revived. Just like you wanted me to do to you. It was not easy.”

I blew out a breath, relieved. Even if he hadn’t done that, it wouldn’t be him. Not when he was ordered. But I was still relieved. No wonder he’d had such a strong reaction to my suggestion.

“I’d had more than enough death,” he said. “And that experience cemented it. So we came up with a plan, and it worked. Stole my heart and Ariel fused it back into me. I left and never returned.” He smiled then. “For a while I protected the King and his family, in case Prospero sent someone else.”

“When did you stop protecting them?”

He smiled sadly. “When they passed, they no longer needed protecting.”

Oh. It was one thing to know how long he’d been alive, and another to see it illustrated so clearly. Rolling, I pushed him on his back so I was looking down at him. “You saved their lives, left, and protected them. Why the hell would I think less of you for that?”

“I’m still a murderer,” he said. “Just because it’s been centuries doesn’t change it.”

It was hard to feel the same. Yes, he’d taken life. But he’d saved life as well, and had become a doctor specifically to help people. Who knew how many lives he’d saved in the centuries since he’d left this island?

“You’ve done more than enough to make up for it, Laurent.”

“I’m glad you think so.” His voice told me he didn’t agree, and likely wouldn’t. Ever.

I felt the tingle of magic against my skin, and a new arm snaked around my waist, stealing me from Laurent and pulling me flat on my back in the center of the bed. “I think it’s time to wake you up properly, kitten.”

Ban was above me, staring down at me like I was a meal. He said he'd wanted to eat me alive, and now that I knew what his tongue was like... I wasn't opposed to that kind of eating.

"I'm not a kitten," I told him again.

The growl that came at him made my hair stand on end, and he pressed his face into my neck. "You're *my* kitten," he said. His teeth came down on the place where my neck met my shoulder, not biting, but showing me where he wanted me. Just like he had in my dream.

Big hands grabbed my arms and pinned them to the bed, the pressure moving back and forth between them, like he was pressing one and the other. *Kneading*.

Between us, his cock was hard, and his hips were moving even though he wasn't inside me. "Ban," I whispered.

That rough tongue ran over the place he'd gently bitten, and I shivered, everything tightening. When he looked at me, his eyes nearly glowed in that way that cat's eyes do, and I wasn't sure which was more present—the panther, or the man.

Laurent's hand slid over my wrist, pinning it to the bed where he'd put it. "I've got her, Ban."

I looked over and glared at him. "I think the five of us are going to have to have a conversation about you ganging up on me."

My gargoyle smirked. "Are you going to complain about us conspiring to make you come, mate?"

When he put it like that, I couldn't say shit.

Fingers wrapped around my other wrist, and I looked over to meet Ariel's dark, sleepy eyes. He wasn't phased by me trying to escape from his hold. Just stared at me, and that made my heart pound. "Going to have Trin hold my legs apart?" I asked.

A flicker of a smile. "If I have to."

"No running from me now, kitten." His tongue scraped over my skin, between my breasts and circling them, the texture making me arch into him.

“I was never going to run. Promise.”

That wasn't exactly the truth. Last night when I'd looked at him I'd imagined running, and him chasing. Once upon a time I'd been told about a chase in a misty forest, and had been intrigued. Now, I would love it. I knew without having to try it.

“Don't make promises you can't keep,” Ban said before circling his rough tongue around my other nipple. “You'll run, mate.”

My breath went short. “Why?”

I needed him to say it out loud.

“So I can hunt you down.” Lowering his body, he fit himself against me, easing into me in short, delicious thrusts. “Track your scent. Find wherever you're hiding and mark you as mine.”

That was how he wanted to do it? Even with him already inside me, I grew wetter. He pulled back and pleasure *rocked* through my body. I moaned. “What the *fuck* is that?”

His cock dragging backwards felt like claws of pleasure dragging inside me and lighting up fucking everything.

Plunging deeper, Caliban purred, pushing until he was fully seated in me, hips forcing my legs apart. And he pulled back again, those needles of pleasure grazing my skin. It hurt, and yet it didn't. It was like every one of those little tines was one of Trin's spikes.

“*Fuck.*”

Ariel turned, still holding my arm down, but murmuring words against my lips. “How do his spines feel, Meg? Good?”

“Spines?” Ban fucked into me again, and on the pull back I felt what he meant. Spines expanding from his cock and sending me into a world of pleasure. “Oh my god.” The words were barely heard through Ariel's lips.

“They're bigger when he's a cat.” He pulled away, leaving me exposed to Ban.

Driving himself into me, his mouth came down on mine. It clicked with shocking clarity that I hadn't kissed him yet. With the texture of his tongue dancing with mine and his spines drowning me in bliss, I tipped over the edge.

I cried out into his mouth shaking, body spasming around his cock and making his spines dig deeper, and I swore I felt them in every part of me.

He growled, arms scooping underneath me and holding me closer even though I was pinned to the bed. Erratic, jagged movements grew harder, faster. I was still gone, every drag of his cock and those spines just making it last longer.

His tail slithered around his body, touching my clit, and the softness of it contrasted with the sharpness of everything else. I shattered again, and he did too, his teeth on my neck so fucking close to breaking the skin.

I couldn't even say I didn't want them to.

Violet light flashed behind my eyes, and I cried out, my voice echoing off the ceiling.

Ban's spines clung to my body, filling my pussy and locking us together in the same way that Laurent's knot did. The others released my hand, and I held my shifter closer, kissing him.

"Seems like I need to get up early more often," Trin said.

From the corner of my eye I saw him standing in the doorway, but the way Ban was purring, I wanted to stay right here. It was calming, and my body was still savoring the after-effects of pleasure. Every time I moved those spines felt like a mini-orgasm. I couldn't quite catch my breath.

"Join us when you're ready," Laurent said, brushing my arm. "We have more to tell you."

"Okay," I murmured. Moving wasn't high on my list of priorities at the moment.

Ariel slipped away too, and I heard the door close behind them. Ban kept purring, holding me close and inhaling at the point of my pulse. It was so comfortable and easy, I could

have fallen asleep again except for the fact that I wanted to enjoy this, and him.

Finally, his cock released me and we slipped apart. Ban pulled back, but it wasn't joy or happiness in his eyes. It was sorrow. "I am sorry, kitten."

"Why?"

His cheek pressed against mine. "I am sorry I am not better."

"Ban," I took his face and moved it to where I could see his face again. "What are you talking about? That was incredible."

"I've not been with a human before," he said quietly. "Never been with anyone before. Only myself."

Shock rolled through me. I should have guessed that. These men had been on this island for hundreds of years. Had Ariel and Trin? I cut the thoughts off and refocused on my mate, who was still looking at my neck and not at me. "Ban," I said softly again. "Did I do something to make you think I was disappointed? Because I'm not. At all. I've never felt anything like it."

"Not just that," he said, purr faltering. "I am not... as human as your other mates."

He looked so sad, it hurt my heart. "Ban—"

"I'm not always good with words, or speaking. My other form is simpler."

"Ban, look at me?" His golden eyes lifted to mine. They were so beautiful, I wanted him to see it. "My other mates are made of nothing but air, can turn to stone, and one has tentacles. It doesn't make them any less my mates."

He didn't say anything, so I kept going. "What they told me is true, right? You've always been my mate?"

"Yes."

"Then why would I want you to be anything but what you are?" I pulled his face to mine and kissed him, hoping he could

feel the truth in it.

These men—these monsters—were my mates. For the rest of my life. I didn't know them well yet, but there was nothing about them that I would change. They'd already been *mine* for centuries. That was hard to comprehend as it was, but to think I'd want them to be different? No.

Pulling back, I stroked my hand over his head and neck, feeling the longer hair on the top of his head, and the smooth velvet that stretched down to his back. "I'm your kitten," I whispered, and everything about him changed.

His purr roared back to life, and he pressed his mouth to mine again. The arms cradling me kneaded in my hair, and I realized what it was. I'd told him I wasn't a kitten, and he'd felt like it was me rejecting him. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"I'm sorry I told you I wasn't. It's not what I meant. You could never disappoint me, Ban."

He smiled, eyes closing, and inhaled my neck again—one of his favorite places to be. "Even when I want to eat you alive?"

"I know you can't harm me," I said with a giggle. "So even then."

Gently, he lifted himself off me and in turn, lifted me off the bed. His tail came up and curled around my ankle, and I couldn't stop the smile on my face.

"When you run and I hunt you, I'll do my best not to take a bite."

"Mmm," I leaned against his shoulder, pretending the thought of running from him didn't make me want to drag him back to the bed. "Biting might have to be gentle, but lick me all you like."

His low growl brought tightness and wetness back to my body, but he didn't turn around. Both of us knew we would have more time later.

I was looking forward to it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MEGHAN

No one batted an eye as Ban carried me into the living room and sat with me in his lap. His tail still curled around my legs, and I loved that. But now that we were out of bed, in spite of his warmth, I was chilly.

Ariel waved a hand and was suddenly holding a blanket, which Ban pulled over the two of us. He nudged my head with his, and I smiled. Ban was the one I'd woken up with. He'd made me feel safe even though I had no idea what was happening, and I still felt safe in his arms.

“You said you had more to tell me?”

My eyes were closed as I leaned my head against Ban's. I could go back to sleep now, and would be happy about it.

Laurent cleared his throat. “We do. But before we tell you, I promise it's actually going to help, and it's not just all of us being horny.”

I opened my eyes.

“And it was Ariel’s idea.”

The spirit snorted. “Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.” I heard the smile in Laurent’s voice.

“What is it?”

“Show me your fingers,” Ariel said. I held them up and he caught my hand, laying it out so we could see them. The tips of them were purple, like they were yesterday, but not quite as far. “It retreated again.”

I frowned at him, but he kept hold of my hand when I tried to pull it away. “This is the magic taking over your body. And we noticed last night that... it was taking over less of you after you’d fallen asleep.”

“After we’d fucked you, kitten,” Ban whispered in my ear.

Ariel chuckled. “This morning confirms it. The spark of the island’s magic we hold soothes it and slows it down.”

“So,” Trin splashed into the living room pool in what could only be described as a cannonball. “We think we can wait Prospero out. Until being without the magic kills his physical form. And in the meantime...” His smile was so wide, and he moved his eyebrows up and down in a way that had me laughing.

“Okay, now I get why you warned me about sounding horny. But this is a good thing, right?”

Ban’s hand slid up my thigh under the blanket. “I think it’s a good thing.”

“But the magic?”

“It will do it again,” Laurent said. “But this will slow it down. We’ll have the time we need to figure out how to get the magic out of you, get to know each other, have some incredible sex, and hopefully solve our Prospero problem.”

Something had been eating at me, and I needed to know the answer. “Prospero said something about the magic

transforming me if it didn't kill me. You said it wasn't better. Tell me the truth. What could happen?"

None of them spoke, and they looked at each other.

"Is it really so bad that none of you want to be the one to tell me?"

Ariel ran a hand over his face and paced away from me before looking back. "There's a reason the island's magic is so mercurial. There may have been something more... natural when this island came into being. But people and monsters have always been drawn here for one reason or another. And when the magic takes over you, if you don't die before it's complete, you're then a part of it. Absorbed into it."

I blinked. "The magic is made of people?"

"Souls," Trin clarified. "Some of it, yes. We've seen it happen more than once in our time here. As far as we can tell, no true consciousness remains. I hope there isn't." The last words were quieter.

"What if we can't get it out of me in time?" I asked. "I'll just... cease to exist?"

"No," Ban said firmly. "That will not happen. We won't let it."

But I saw the way Laurent's mouth tightened. There was a possibility, even if he didn't want to admit it.

"We'll find a way," Ariel said. "Once Prospero is absorbed himself, we aren't nearly as limited."

"And how long will that take?"

"We don't know," Laurent said.

I saw the pros to the plan, and I wasn't about to say no to sex and a chance to get to know my mates. But it wasn't a perfect plan. It wasn't even really a plan, it was hope tied up with a ribbon. One thing could go wrong and I could die. Or Laurent could die if his hand was forced.

Any of them could die trying to save me from whatever trap the island decided to throw my way. Being taken again

scared me, though I knew they would save me. Nothing would stop them from finding me. Still, it was terrifying.

“Meg?” Trin’s voice.

I gently pushed up from Ban and kept the blanket with me. “Can I... can I have some clothes?”

Ariel caught the blanket and pulled me closer. “In the bedroom, in the closet.”

I nodded, padding back the way I’d just come and found the closet he’d mentioned. Last night I’d been a bit preoccupied.

This space was beautiful too. Airy and open with pale white walls and ambient light. The air was slightly humid because of the open water, but I liked it.

The giant bed looked like it belonged on one of the sets of the ballets and operas I performed in. An overly ornate headboard and footboard, with the bed in the center of the room instead of pushed against the wall. There were shelves behind the bed with various books and decorations.

In the closet there were plenty of clothes. Dresses like the one Prospero had given me, and everything else. I pulled on a pair of leggings and a soft t-shirt. Simple and comfortable—but at the same time easy to move in. I didn’t know when the island would take me again, and I didn’t want to be caught off guard.

Ariel appeared around the corner and leaned against the wall. I looked at him and glanced away. The way he looked at me felt like he saw through me completely, and it was unnerving.

“Are you all right?”

I huffed a breath. “Not really, no.”

It would be so easy to say that I was fine. Because in one way, I was. This, here? This was incredible. I wanted to stay here and drown in the feeling of having mates, of being owned and loved and figuring out how the hell we worked as a unit.

But that wasn't *truly* an option until we all got out of here. Alive.

Sex and mates and comforting kisses were amazing, but they were masking the truth. I could die. Laurent could die. Any of us could die, and there was so much hanging over our heads I didn't know how to ignore it.

He came to me slowly. It was strange the difference between him last night—his incredible dominance, seeing what I needed even if I couldn't verbalize it—and him now. There was only gentleness in his face and body.

"We'll keep you safe," he told me.

"I know." I shook my head. "I know you'll try. But there's so many things that are based on chance, and we could still lose everything. All of that? It doesn't make me less scared."

Ariel reached out and pulled back. I didn't let him. Catching his hand, he took over as soon as I consented, pulling me into his embrace. "It's okay to be scared," he breathed. "I'm terrified. For you. For all of us. I'm furious that I've just let myself be here and not notice what Prospero was doing and planning. I promise you, Meg, I won't let anything hurt you."

A sob caught in my throat, and he gathered me up in his arms. "I know you want to. But you can't promise it."

"The hell I can't," he said. "I would rather shred myself trying to reach my own heart than let you be hurt again. I will do whatever I have to. You are mine to protect." That last part was softer.

"I don't want to cry," I whispered, even though I was halfway there. Hot tears pressed behind my eyes, but I worried that if I started, it would all be too much. A spilling over of both bad and good.

Yesterday I couldn't have imagined letting Ariel comfort me, and now I couldn't imagine *not* letting him. Pushing him away had been tearing at me, in spite of everything. I knew he didn't have a choice in what Prospero ordered him to do, anymore than Laurent had had a choice. But I'd been so...

I wrapped my arms around his neck and let myself go. It wasn't pretty—I wasn't one of those women who cried elegantly. It was messy and ugly, choked sounds forcing their way out of me so forcefully I couldn't breathe.

Ariel simply held me. He didn't hush me or try to make it better. All he did was stand with me in the storm and weather it with me.

It came out in a flood. Everything bottled up, and it wasn't all bad. It was just... overwhelming.

When my tears finally slowed and my breaths softened, I found my voice. "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

There wasn't a simple answer to the question, so I shook my head. I didn't really know. All I knew was that I felt guilty, weak, and frightened, and I hated being any of those things. I didn't cry that often, and since I'd been here I felt like it was most of what I'd done.

Ariel pried me loose from his neck and took my face in his hands. "Meg, you were stolen, and I helped. Trin helped. You've been drowned. Twice. A man has openly admitted he's trying to kill you *and* the man you've been in love with for years. Not to mention you now have four non-human mates who are yours for life. And it's all happened in about three days. You're entitled to freak out a little."

I hiccuped a laugh, tears still leaking from my eyes.

"Anyone else would be on the floor right now. You're not only still standing, you're going to try to fight. Fucking incredible. Not to mention that magic makes your emotions more powerful. It brings things to the surface even if you don't want them to. So feel what you feel and don't be ashamed of it."

Closing my eyes for a second, I shook my head between his hands. "You give me whiplash."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

“Last night you were so...” I didn’t have the words for the way he was. “And now.”

His expression deepened into a smirk. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m still that man. You’re my mate, and I intend to learn you inside and out, body and mind.” He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I want to own you and make you scream, and I want to help your other mates to do it, too. I’m going to pin you down and fuck you because I can feel how much you need it. I’m going to give you the freedom to ask for what you want and not be ashamed of it. And more than anything, I want you to feel safe, no matter what.”

With his thumbs, he brushed away what was left of my tears. “So yes, mate, I promise you. You’re mine, and I’m yours, and we will be alive after all of this so we can make it real.”

Pain struck, pure and true, directly in my heart. It was familiar this time—exactly like what I’d felt before Prospero had appeared and nearly destroyed everything. My body went limp, and Ariel caught me. Muscles seizing up and releasing, I couldn’t control anything.

“*Laurent*,” Ariel called.

I couldn’t see anything, couldn’t breathe the way my lungs were tensed, and everything was waves of pain. Like the electrocuted cage but so, so much worse.

“What’s happening?” Trin’s voice.

“Watch her hands,” Laurent said. His voice was close even though I couldn’t see him. “It’s *Miann*. The island.”

A low growl. “Can you stop the pain?”

“No.”

I gasped, my lungs finally releasing and air rushing inward so quickly I nearly choked on it. A hand pulled me upward to a sitting position. “Breathe, we’ve got you.”

“Fuck,” I spat out the word. “I could live without that happening.”

Laurent held one of my hands, and I realized what he'd meant. My skin was violet to the ends of my fingers. Below my leggings, my toes were violet too. How much of my hair was now colored?

"I wonder how much we can pull it back," Ariel murmured, silver light sinking through my skin.

Of the four of them, it seemed like Ariel was the only one who could harness independent magic outside of their abilities to shift. If he thought he could get the magic out of me, I would let him.

They wouldn't if they weren't sure. "Ten-year-old me would be thrilled about turning purple," I muttered.

All of my mates laughed, but none of them really found it funny. I didn't either.

"You should eat something," Trin said.

I smiled. My body wasn't hungry, but he was right. I did need to eat. "Okay."

"What would you like?" Trin reached out and pulled me to my feet, and then into his arms. I didn't need to be carried, but I sure as hell didn't mind it. Deep down I sensed the way *they* needed it, and I craved the simple pleasure of being touched.

"What do you have?"

He laughed. "You can have whatever you want, Meg. Magic, remember?"

"Right." My chest was still heavy from crying and the tightness because of all that pain. Even as a dancer, my body wasn't used so much. Sex and pain and adrenaline. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"Magic is fun when it's not trying to kill you."

"Yeah," I whispered.

Carrying me into the kitchen, he set me on the counter. It was shockingly modern. "You have a refrigerator."

"Should we not?"

“I just don’t think about things about appliances on a magical island in the middle of the fucking ocean?”

He chuckled, stepping in between my legs to kiss me. “We’ve all been out in the real world at one point or another. Or observed it from a distance. Even Ban, though he’s probably done it the least. We’re monsters, but thankfully we’re not barbarians.”

My cheeks turned pink. “Sorry.”

“It’s a fair assumption. We don’t need electricity because of the magic. But we do have modern things, and you can have anything you like.”

Trin wasn’t wearing a shirt, and up close, I could see the way his lower stomach shifted colors, just like my hands were now. I ran my colored fingers over the edge of his colored skin. “I need more of you, Trin.”

“Don’t worry. I have plans for you, mate. But I need you to eat.”

I lowered my voice. “Is this a weird sex thing?”

He matched my tone, but smiled. “No. You’re human, and you need to eat. Especially with what’s happening to you.”

The thing I didn’t want to think about at all. Yes. Comfort food. That’s what I needed. “I’d like some soup, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Ban walked into the kitchen on two legs and fixed his eyes on me. “I am going to make sure Prospero is where he should be.”

I instantly reached out, and he came. His tail curled around my calf, and his big body enveloped mine. I liked the way he pressed his nose into my neck and inhaled deeply, like I was the best perfume on earth. “Be careful, please.”

He purred quietly. “I will miss you, kitten.”

Form shifting, he collapsed into his feline form and slipped out of the kitchen. I watched him until he disappeared, my stomach now growling at the scent of soup.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CALIBAN

I exited our house and quieted my purr with my mate's scent still in my nose. That sharp sweetness was even richer in this form, and I couldn't get enough. She wanted me—told me to be careful.

The hesitation of earlier rose, and I let it go. She didn't think I was lesser. In this form it was easier to feel it, when I was more instinct than man. But my instincts were already changing, reforming around her and how to protect her.

Speeding through the lush foliage, I ran toward the mountain at the other end of the island. As far as possible from our home. There wasn't a way to know if he would emerge from his den, but if he did, I wanted to know.

He might sense me coming close, but I didn't care. There wasn't much he could do to me that he hadn't already, and he'd surprised us once. Prospero was crafty. He wouldn't stop even if he were trapped.

If he gave me a hint about any other plans, I wanted to know. I wouldn't let her die. She was *mine*.

I slowed outside the mountain, going back to the window of the room where he'd held Meg before. There was nothing here now, just an empty bed and chains. No sign of what he'd done or any hint of anything else.

A thought froze me.

Did Prospero know she was our mate?

When he'd attacked her, he had merely mentioned Kha—Laurent's connection to her. It was possible he thought we were protective of her in service of our friend and not ourselves. Did the fact that he created us mean he could sense such things?

I pushed the door open with my nose and listened, fading into my senses.

The mountain was silent. No scrapes and shuffles of movement, and there were no lingering scents telling me Prospero had been in this hallway recently.

Good.

The way downward was simple, and I kept myself silent as I approached where Prospero's scent was strongest. We weren't permitted to enter the Den, but I knew what the air felt like when he was inside it, and right now he wasn't. But he was in the mountain.

I traced his scent backwards, down hallways which were deeper and closer to the heart. Almost to where I could no longer go.

The room we'd found her in last night was where he was, muttering to himself as he grabbed things off of shelves and mixed things from bottles. His eyes fell on me as soon as I peeked around the frame of the door.

“Come to spy on me, Caliban?”

I said nothing, simply staring at him. He looked like he was older. Heavier in his body, and weaker. There was more weight and gravity pressing down on his shoulders than before.

His face curled up into disdain. “Get out.” He shoved a hand toward me, and only the barest hint of air stirred around me. His magic was truly drained. If I were in my human form, I would smile.

“This is what you three have always wanted, haven’t you. To see me weak and helpless. Well I’m not. Not entirely. I still have *some* magic, Caliban. And the ability to make *Miann* angry.”

Grabbing the bowl he’d been throwing ingredients into, he stalked past me and down the hallway further. Where it led down under the earth to smaller heart of power that lived here. He’d created it long ago so the island’s power was close at hand.

I followed him as far as I could, watching and waiting.

“For once,” he said, “I’m not the one tormenting you.”

It took me a second to realize he wasn’t speaking to me. From my place on the stairs I could see the fiery brightness, and Prospero in silhouette as he approached it.

“It’s her. The girl. The one they took from you last night. They stole her, just when she was about to release all your magic back to me and you.”

Cold dread gathered under my paws. He was speaking to it. I wished I could go closer, but even here the pulsing beat of power was telling me to *run*.

Were we wrong about the island having true consciousness? Or had he simply gone mad? Either could be true.

“She’s the reason,” Prospero said, hurling the bowl straight at the light. My eyes *burned* with the flare of light, and the sound had me scrambling away back up the stairs. It was like the sound of a thousand birds shrieking. Echoing and harmonizing in brutal chaos and pain. Magic rippled outward, and it wasn’t good.

He was provoking it.

I ran up and out the other side of the mountain, driven by pure instinct. Not to the beach, but to the cliffs which looked over it.

The one I chose fell directly into the water, tide churning as it crashed against the rocks below. I didn't like the ocean. Trin teased me about it, but such a vast body of it made every instinct pull away.

I enjoyed smoother, smaller water. Like the small lakes on the island's surface, and occasionally the pools like inside the mountain or our home. The ocean was too unpredictable. Especially now, as the tide was coming in and covering the rocks at the base of the cliff. The water would only get higher.

But there was a ripple going the wrong way. It was a wave rushing *outward* and not inward. Whatever the heart of the island decided to do, it had pushed its power beyond the limits of the island.

What was it trying to do?

Panic was growing in my gut, but I didn't know why. It was as deep as knowing Meg was my mate. Restless energy snaked beneath my skin with the need to go protect my mate. She was in danger. From this island and what Prospero had done.

A growl rose in my throat, and I barely silenced it. If I could, I'd go back to the mountain and rip his throat out. I wanted to taste his blood on my tongue and feel it flow out. I wanted to feel the slackening of his heartbeat between my jaws until I knew he was dead.

At some point, it would come true.

The sun began to fade down into the ocean, but I didn't look at the colors of the sky. Meg would like them, and I hoped to show them to her. But I didn't take my eyes off the ocean, my eyes picking up light even as it faded. I needed to be *here*.

Here, to protect her, and I would obey.

In the distance, I spied a ripple. What was that?

It grew, spreading and widening, like the trail following a boat. As it grew closer, I saw the way the water writhed in its wake. It reminded me of a swirling frenzy of fish.

That's exactly what it was.

Toward a central point they gathered, churning the water and making it choppy and chaotic. I couldn't quite see what they were.

I crept closer to the edge.

A group of birds flew overhead into the sunset, and a flash of violet light sliced through one, making it fall. Out of the water, a creature launched itself into the air, and my feline body froze in recognition of the danger.

Sharks.

So many sharks in the water. I'd never seen anything like it. The island very well may have called every shark in a hundred miles to this one spot.

The blood of the bird was spreading in the water, creating even more of a frenzy. More birds fell, creating nothing but carnage. It was the kind of sight that was once in a lifetime, and the kind of thing nothing could come back from if they were caught in the middle.

Just death.

I turned and sprinted, not worrying about sound or scent. Only speed. Distance disappeared beneath my feet, my lungs raw even in this form as I forced my body to nearly break itself and its limits.

There. The house was there. I crashed through the door just as I saw Meg disappear into a glimmer of magic, and I was moving too quickly to stop as I shifted. They all looked at me, and I huffed out the only word that mattered.

“Sharks.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MEGHAN

The soup was delicious. And Trin made sure I ate all of it.

There may have been some extra motivation, since he wrapped all of his arms around me and kissed me in different places every time I took a few bites. It took way longer than it should have because of that.

“You can’t bribe me to eat every time,” I said. “And I don’t need to be bribed when the food is this good.”

“Who says I’m bribing you?” He asked, the bowl lifted out of my hand by one tentacle and placed on the nearby table. “Maybe I’m just enjoying my mate.”

Heat unfurled and stretched within me, enjoying the way he wrapped around me further. I very much wanted to find out what else his tentacles could do, but I also couldn’t focus on anything because it felt like time was sliding through my fingers too fast. Toward the inevitable.

Though Trin was still in his true form, we were on the couch. Close enough to the water for him to *almost* reach it.

Ban had been gone a long time.

I looked down at my hands, and already the purple magic was advancing. It didn't feel like anything, but it looked like I was slowly absorbing this through the air. If this color were used for a tattoo, it might be beautiful.

"Why is it so pretty if it's so dangerous?" I murmured.

Trin tightened his hold on me. "No matter what, we will find you. Nothing is going to happen to you."

"But—" Fear seized me. That was why they'd mentioned bonding to me. If they did, they'd know where I was. But they weren't going to force me before I was ready. Was I ready? I wasn't sure, but I wasn't ready to die. "You won't know where to find me."

"No," he admitted. "But we know this island and your scent. We will find you, mate."

I smiled at the name. "It's so weird."

"Why?"

"Because..." I shook my head. "The past few years have been hard. And I was watching my best friend with her mates and seeing them be so *fucking* in love. And I wanted it. I was jealous, even if it wasn't fair. And now the four of you are here, and I can't believe it."

Trin slid his hands up my waist, sliding them under my shirt so he could touch my skin. "We understand loneliness. Believe me."

"Yeah." I didn't doubt that. They'd been here, basically alone, for how many centuries? I tried to stop my smile and failed. "I don't know if I'll be able to keep up with that amount of delayed sexual gratification."

"Well, we do have to keep the magic at bay." he pulled the neck of my t-shirt down and dragged his lips over my skin, tasting the hollow of my collarbone. "So maybe we'll have a chance to make up for some lost time."

“What *have* you done all this time?”

He took a second. “When you put it together it doesn’t sound like much. But I learned. Prospero sent me to get things. Ingredients, or to retrieve people for his experiments. I stole books from his library and read them. He always has new ones.”

“Oh.” It sounded like a lonely life. Far lonelier than mine had ever been.

“Don’t feel bad for me, Meg. My time here could have been much worse.”

“That doesn’t make it good,” I said.

“No. It doesn’t.”

I wanted to change the subject and bring lightness back between us. Plus, there was something I was dying to know. “Can I ask you a very inappropriate question?”

“I don’t think there’s much that could be inappropriate, mate,” he said with a laugh.

I was still blushing. “Where the hell is your dick?”

A laugh burst out of him, echoing around the room.

“Please don’t tell me it’s all the way underneath. Like a beak.”

He was turning red with laughter, but he shook his head. “No, it’s not all the way underneath. Give me your hand.”

My eyes went wide, but I put my hand in his. Trin pressed my hand against his chest and dragged it lower. His eyes were locked on mine, and I wasn’t totally convinced he wasn’t just a siren. He could hypnotize me any time he wanted. Down his chest and lower, where his skin shifted color and texture, and where his hips might be if he were human. “Here.”

I didn’t feel anything, and then I *did*. The smallest line on his skin, like a seam. As I was touching it, there was a bulge, and then his cock was slipping between my fingers. Long, hard, and very very real. “It’s inside you?”

Trin chuckled. “I already have eight extra limbs. Might get in the way if it was always there. This keeps it out of the way.”

Squeezing him, I stroked the length between my fingers, and Trin’s eyes closed. “Fuck, Meg.”

“Isn’t that the idea?”

He thrust into my hand. “You’re ready for that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I thought you might need more time to rest.”

I shook my head, squeezing him again. Everything about it felt like a normal, human cock. Looking down between our bodies, it was. If you disregarded the fact that it was blue, purple, and iridescent, just like him.

“You should see it at night.”

“It’s different at night?”

He smirked. “Maybe. Or maybe you can just see my luminescence better.”

I’d forgotten about his lights, and I let out a small laugh. “How much of you glows?”

“Enough.”

Leaning up, I put my lips to his ear. “Does your cum glow?”

Trin turned so his lips brushed *my* ear, raising goosebumps all over my body. “Only one way to find out, mate.”

The chills turned sharp, tingling all over my skin. How long would it take to get used to them?

Magic tingled in the air, and I looked to see if someone was shifting, but it wasn’t. It was on me. The magic was on *me*. My hands were glowing bright, and I suddenly recognized the painful tingles. The island’s magic was alive and it was reaching for me.

Panic gripped me.

I wasn’t ready.

“Trin.”

He heard the difference in tone, and pulled back, suddenly seeing my hands too. “Laurent. Ariel,” he called, hauling me up off the couch. My feet were glowing as well.

They appeared, and Laurent cursed. Ariel was in front of me, magic washing over me, and I felt like he was trying to keep me here. But it wasn’t possible.

It was going to take me and try to kill me again.

“No.” It felt like I couldn’t breathe. “I can’t do this.”

Laurent’s hands gripped my face. “Yes, you can. You can do this, Meg. I’m going to find you, okay? We’re going to find you.”

Ban crashed through the door.

“I can’t,” I gasped. “Wait—”

There was a feeling of a *pull*, and I was yanked out of Laurent’s arms and through what felt like a hurricane of wind and void. The air was filled with thrashing and the sound of water. My balance heaved, and I barely stopped myself from falling into the ocean.

The ocean.

I was on a rock, in the middle of the water. The slimmest of rock ledges, over water that was *teeming* with creatures. Not creatures. Fucking sharks. The water was bloody, and they were feeding on something. Under my feet, the rock was damp and they would be feeding on me in seconds if I slipped.

Painful magic was ripping through me, and I couldn’t even scream. I was too frozen because of where I was.

A splash of bloody water hit me, and I nearly fell. “What the fuck?” There wasn’t a way to survive this. One shark jumping out of the water and knocking me off balance, and I’d be in the water and torn to shreds in this feeding frenzy.

A wave rushed in, raising the water level. Oh my god. There was barely any light in the sky left, and the tide was coming in.

Oh shit.

My body felt like a statue. I couldn't move. If I moved, I might die. The tide was coming in with every wave, and in minutes I would die.

"Please, please, please." I wasn't even sure I was saying the words out loud.

"*Meg*," The cry came from a distance, and I held myself tighter. They were here. They were here, and that was everything. They found me.

Mist formed around my arms, and pain surged through me. "No. Ariel—"

Ariel swore and let me go. Another wave and they might be able to bite me. He floated in the air, lit up with his own silvery light. He looked like a god of wind, the magic swirling around him before it struck out, hard and fast, directly at me.

There was a cracking sound that broke the magic holding me here and sudden wind that was knocking me over, directly into the water. I saw teeth—

Arms formed around, and I swore I felt the impact of jaws that missed me. Wind swirled again and I found myself on the sand.

I sat up and Ariel was kneeling next to me, pale as death. But my eyes went to the water. It was still thrashing, and I saw the distinct shape of a tentacle. in the silhouette of the near-dark sky. "Where's Trin?"

"He's there, he'll be fine."

"No," I said. They were in a feeding frenzy. Hell, they might even be eating each other. Trin would be vulnerable. "They're in a frenzy. There was blood... What if the magic keeps them like that?"

Ariel swore again and stood, disappearing.

I ran to the edge of the beach, and like a homing beacon, the sharks that had been surrounding the rock surged for the edge and for me, nearly hurling themselves onto the sand in a desperate attempt to reach me. Stumbling back, I was caught

by heavy stone arms. They still wanted me. Would they ever stop wanting me?

“They’re going to kill him,” I managed. “They’re going to kill Trin.”

“Stay here.”

Laurent charged into the water in his gargoyle form. I could barely see him now, but it didn’t seem to matter to him. The wet sounds of hitting flesh and the groans of pain made me shudder.

Air moved past me, and Ban sprinted to the water in his feline form, attacking a shark with a vicious growl. I wanted to help. But I wasn’t like them. Even a small one of those sharks could bite my arm off, and then...

The air was chilly in the new absence of the sun, and there was no light here. The moon hadn’t risen, and without electricity I was standing in pitch blackness, shivering, listening to the sound of my mates fighting.

It went on forever, and I hated it. I hated feeling weak and small, even though that was exactly what this had been designed to do.

I wasn’t weak, and until now, I wasn’t someone who needed to be saved. Even after everything with the ballet, I would have found a way to do something after I finished grieving.

All of this had upended those plans.

Sloshing and splashing drew my attention, and I looked up from where I’d sunk down onto the sand to see two shapes coming toward me. They resolved into Ban and Laurent, but it wasn’t silent behind them.

“Where are they?”

“Trin is hunting down the rest. Ariel is making sure Prospero is where he needs to be. Ban saw the sharks and came to tell us. It’s how we knew how to get to you so quickly.”

“Is Trin all right?”

Ban shifted to stand upright, and there was blood running down his chest. I gasped, and his eyes glowed in the dark. “It is not mine, kitten. Well, most of it is not mine.”

“Laurent?”

His mouth was a firm line when he looked at me. “Let’s get you back to the house so I can look at you. Trin will be there shortly.”

“But is he okay?”

“He will be.”

Dread flooded my system. How badly was he hurt? The sharp terror of it was now familiar. But there wasn’t anything I could do. “I hate this,” I said softly.

Ban looked at me. “What?”

“That’s not what she means, Ban,” Laurent said, eyes never leaving me. “She’s not saying she hates us.”

“What? No.” I shook my head. “I hate feeling helpless. I hate not being able to help. I hate knowing you’re hurt because of me.”

“Ban,” Laurent said. “Give us a moment? We’ll see you at the house.”

The shifter dropped into his feline form and rubbed past my legs on his way past. No sign of any offense or hesitation. I ran my hand along his back and tail as he went.

“Are you going to tell me I’m overreacting?”

“Absolutely not.” He stepped closer to me, finding my waist with his hands in the dark. It was clear he could see better than I could.

Around us, the chaos of the water had settled, and the sound was back to the smooth, calming waves of the ocean. “You are not overreacting. Every single feeling you’re having is valid. I just wanted to reassure you.”

“Of what?”

“That being someone’s mate is nearly older than humanity itself. It is an instinct so deep and so sharp there is no turning away from it. I wish you could feel it.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure how it relates?”

In the dark, his lips found mine. His kiss calmed the unsettled feeling in my soul as much as it lit me up under my skin. “It relates because the four of us are ancient, immortal, and harder to kill than Prospero wants to make you believe. And you’re human, fragile, and precious. I love that you want to help.” he pressed his forehead to mine. “Fuck, I love it, Meg. But none of us want you hurt. And being your mate? It is an *honor* to protect you, and we will do it whenever and however needed. And honestly, probably more than you’ll like at some point.”

I laughed, though his words were making me breathless.

“You are the most important thing in the world to us. Please don’t feel guilty for letting us protect you when it’s all we want to do.” His voice dropped lower. “Even the idea of you in danger makes me feral. I would rip the world the shreds to get to you and not give a fuck about the consequences.”

There wasn’t a shred of doubt in his voice. Even Ariel had said I was his to protect. It was just so... alien. I’d been on my own for years, and I’d done everything for myself for longer than I could remember. This wasn’t just about protecting me, it was everything. They were feeding me and keeping me warm. I hadn’t lifted a finger so far except to dress myself.

It felt like I wasn’t contributing, and—

I closed my eyes, the truth hitting me so hard I swayed on my feet. When your only value to people was what you contributed, like to the ballet, then that was how you measured yourself. How I was measuring myself.

These men weren’t doing that. They barely knew me, and they were valuing me simply for who I was. Not what I was giving to them.

Laurent slid his hand into the side of my hair, cradling my face. “What’s going on in there? I lost you for a second.”

“It’s just that...” I swallowed. “I’ve been on my own for a really long time. I’m not used to other people doing things for me or...” Even saying it out loud was hard. “Wanting me without something in return.”

With his hand on me, he pulled me closer, wrapping me up so tightly I could barely breathe. “Meghan Irela, you could do absolutely nothing for the rest of your life, and I would love you. What’s left of my heart is yours.”

The whole world froze. It fucking stopped spinning on its axis with the two of us at the center. “You love me?”

“Yes,” he breathed. “I love you. I love every part of you. The parts I know and the parts I don’t know yet. You were made for me, and I will fight for us until my last moment.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around it—that kind of unwavering confidence. Looking up, I opened my mouth, and Laurent shook his head in the darkness. “Don’t. Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not ready. Don’t forget,” he whispered. “I see you. I’ve seen you in the moments where you’ve tried to hide. And my loving you does not depend on you saying it back.” Lips brushed my cheek. “When you’re ready, it will be the sweetest sound in the world, mate.”

My heart fluttered, and I knew he was right. Even though I *wanted* to be ready. “Okay.”

Scooping me up, he began to walk away from the ocean and back toward where we were safe. “I can walk.”

“Yes, you can.” There was a smile in his voice. “But I’m so much happier with you in my arms.”

It was so dark I couldn’t see anything, but I hoped he could see my smile.



CHAPTER THIRTY

TRIN

The water tasted like blood.

Some of it was mine, but that didn't matter.

Miann had called every shark for miles, and there were still too many in the water. I felt the way they were hunting my mate, and it couldn't stand. My magic was connected enough to the island's power, through my heart, that I could sense the threads still within the creatures.

They wouldn't stop until they tasted Meg's blood. As soon as she went near the water, they would be there.

I hated that I had to kill them. It wasn't their fault, and the ocean would suffer. But they would not harm my mate. End of story.

The others would help if they could. But the remaining creatures were too far and wide now for them to be useful. The water was my domain. I would take care of it.

Ignoring the pain, I wrapped my eight arms around the large shark I was chasing and ended him. Bloodlessly and

quickly. The way the innocent in it deserved.

The waxing moon was starting to rise, giving more clarity to the waters around the island. There were so many things I wanted to show Meg around this place. It was true that I was forced to stay here the majority of the time, but it didn't mean it wasn't beautiful. Especially underneath the island, where the heart of it sometimes shone light into the water and turned it into a living rainbow.

Another shark came to me, following the path of my blood since he couldn't scent Meg's. I took care of him and watched the carcass sink. The bottom feeders would welcome this bounty, but when I could, I would still find some of the sea spirits and see if they could repair the damage.

In the center of my chest, where my heart was missing, I didn't feel the twinge that was normally there. Like the island was distracted because of what it was doing. I wasn't sure what it meant, or if it was a good thing.

The only thing I'd done when Ban had told us sharks was dive into the water. I'd never moved so quickly in my life.

The water knew where we needed to go. It was like the ocean was *screaming* in chaos. Getting a glimpse of her inches away from death had made me blind. The pain and jaws didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was making sure nothing fucking touched her.

But I was flagging now as the waters became more clear. The last few sharks were swimming away from the island, but I couldn't risk them coming back.

I wasn't sure how long it took, only focusing on the scents of my prey and the water in front of me. The last shark was a big one, and the blood I had seeping into the water was more than enough to tempt him. My regeneration hadn't kicked in yet, and it wouldn't until I could truly rest. Still, he was the last.

The shark charged me, jaws wide, and I was too slow. His jaws clamped down on my shoulder, and pain rocked through

me so all I could see was red. He wouldn't let go until he was dead, or I was.

And I hadn't lived eight hundred years to die before bonding with my mate. I formed a fist with my free arm and hammered it into the shark's gills, aiming for a weakness I knew he would protect.

It was enough to get him off me, but not enough to stop him from trying again. I managed to get my arms around him, except for one. New pain spiked through me, and I turned it into strength, squeezing his body hard enough for it to give out.

It saddened my heart to see him sink into the darkness, but the water was clear now, and Meg was safe.

I swam back to the island slowly, my focus now not blinding me to the pain in my body. Sleep was what I needed, so my body could regenerate.

The way back was so rote, I barely remembered getting there. Before I knew it, I was approaching the house, the warm light of it spilling into the water, and I could hear the voices of my brothers and my mate. She was here and safe. That was good.

I surfaced in the living room, collapsing over the side and not moving.

"*Trin!*" My mate's voice was the last thing I heard as I faded down into blessed sleep. And my last thought was relief we weren't bonded, so she didn't have to have to feel this pain.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MEGHAN

“*T*rin!”

He collapsed over the side of the water, eyes closed. The entire pool was red, and he was bleeding. There were teeth marks—*teeth marks*—over his entire torso, with deep gashes on his chest, and in the water that was dying itself red. I saw at least one of his tentacle arms had been bitten off.

I was on my knees next to me. “Trin? Trin, can you hear me?”

Laurent was there as well, and Ariel, and they lifted him, carrying him down a hallway toward his room. “Is he going to be okay?”

He’d been gone for what felt like forever, and I’d been a mess of anxiety wondering when he would come back. I hadn’t been able to think or talk about anything else. And now this.

“He will be all right,” Ariel said. “But it will take some time.”

Ban rubbed against my legs before shifting next to me and pulling me against him. “He will regenerate.”

It wasn't exactly a relief. They laid him on the bed, and it was just a mess of bite marks. Two tentacles were missing pieces, and another had a bite out of it. The biggest set of jaws looked like the animal had clamped down on him completely.

“Ariel, get me something to stop the bleeding.”

The spirit disappeared and was back in seconds with bandages. I watched Laurent work, fully in doctor mode. The bites on his chest were covered one by one, and even blood soaking through bandages looked better than it had been. Turning him over, they repeated the process. But there was no way to bandage his tentacles as they needed to grow.

Laurent wrapped them tightly enough to slow the bleeding down.

Trin's bed was directly next to the water in his room, and Laurent made sure enough of his arms were touching it.

I didn't even realize I was crying until Ban turned me toward him and wiped them off my cheeks. “Come.”

“I can't leave him like that.” I went to him, and Ariel moved out of the way. Trin was paler than normal, and I didn't like that he was so still. Already I knew his lively movement and teasing smirk. And he was like this. For me. Because of me. “Can I touch him?”

“Gently.”

I knelt beside him and ran a hand through his damp hair. What did I do? I couldn't stop myself—I placed my hand over his heart simply to feel it beating. Before I remembered he had no heart. It was stolen. But my mate was breathing. He was alive. “Come back please,” I whispered. “I need you to be here with me.”

Ariel's hands curled around my arms and guided me up. “He'll be fine,” he whispered into my hair. “I promise.”

It still didn't feel right to leave Trin alone like that, but I let Ariel guide me away and back to the living room. He sat me down on one of the soft couches and Ban was there in his feline form, curling behind me and giving me his warmth and comfort.

"Trin will live," Ariel said. "I can't say I've seen injuries this bad, but I have seen him regenerate. He'll come back."

"We'll keep an eye on him," Laurent said, still standing in the hallway to Trin's room. "He's going to be just fine."

I nodded.

Ariel took my hand and kissed the back of it. The purple power was up to my wrists. "I thought it wasn't supposed to take me again so fast."

Ban growled, and it wasn't the sexy kind. It was feral and angry, and it made my hair stand on end. "Prospero angered it."

"How?"

His tail twitched angrily. "He made something and took it to the heart of the island. I watched from where I could. He taunted it, and told it Meg was at fault, then he threw it at the heart in the mountain. I've never heard a sound like that."

Ariel stood and groaned. "No fucking wonder it took you."

"At least he has no power," Ban chuffed out a breath. "He tried to force me away, and it was nothing."

"I'll be back," Ariel said, and began to disintegrate.

I reached for him. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to remove whatever he has in that mountain. He used it to harm you, so it's fair game." His smile was dark. "He needs to feel helpless for fucking *once*."

"Be careful."

Ariel raised an eyebrow before grinning. "Worried about me?"

“Yes. Of course I am.” I pointed at Ban, who also had teeth marks that Laurent had bandaged. “I have two injured mates, and I don’t want a third.”

He disappeared from where he was and materialized in front of me. “I like that you’re worried about me.” His smile was there and gone. “But I’ll be back. Promise.”

“Okay.”

Ariel’s kiss brushed my temple, and he disappeared, the breeze he left behind moving my hair.

I looked between my two remaining mates. “What do we do now?”

Laurent smirked. “That’s the golden question, isn’t it?”

“I will rest,” Ban said, touching his chest. “So when the time comes, I am ready.”

“For what?”

He smiled and purred. “You’ll see.”

I blinked, and he was in his panther form, sauntering down a hall I assumed led to his room.

Laurent was trying to hold in his laughter. I felt weak in my limbs. “I need a drink.”

Turning, I went to the kitchen and grabbed a glass. There was a pitcher of water, and I poured myself some, leaning on the counter.

“We’ve been here before,” Laurent’s voice came from behind me, and my whole body stood on end. I turned, and he was closer than I realized. It wasn’t dark now, and his clothes were wet and bloody, but he was still the same man from that night in his kitchen.

“We have.”

Slowly, Laurent walked to me and smiled. “I think it went something like this.”

He slipped his hand behind my neck and kissed me. This time it wasn’t gentle, and it certainly wasn’t human. He held

nothing back, pressing me back against the counter and moving his knee between my legs, just like he had that night.

“Laurent,” I said.

“Mate.”

“If you’re planning on stopping—”

His mouth slammed down on mine, arms lifting me off the ground like it was nothing. And then we were moving. Away from the kitchen and back toward the bedroom I’d started thinking of as mine.

He was distracting me from reality, and I was going to let him.

“There’s nothing in this world that could stop me right now.” Laurent’s voice was gravel, and his hands on my hips hardened and grew. Heat and desire curled low in my stomach. I wanted him.

I wanted all of them, but this moment between us had been coming for a long time.

Laurent tumbled me onto the bed, and I was left looking up at him. “Is this where you show me how that night should have gone?”

He shook his head before pulling his shirt up and off, revealing the angry red lines that remained from when his heart had been taken from him, and a body I’d been dreaming about. “No, Meg. Because I would have been careful with you. What you needed that night, and at the club, wasn’t a monster. You needed someone to see you. Now? The last thing you need is for me to be fucking *gentle*.”

I shuddered, and he dropped on top of me, taking my mouth in a brutal kiss. My mouth would be bruised later, and I absolutely did not care. Laurent was right. I needed feral. I needed *wild*. I needed a monster.

Like he’d heard my thoughts, Laurent transformed. The sleek wings burst from his back, stone climbing over his shoulders and up his neck. His face turned into a statue, harsh and beautiful. Finely carved.

His hands found the collar of my t-shirt and the fabric tore like it was paper as he pulled it apart, exposing me to him. I wriggled out of it, tossing the fabric aside before he tore my leggings off me.

“You always smell so fucking good.” He was kneeling at the side of the bed and turned that stone face into my inner thigh, biting without breaking the skin. “Lemons and daisies. I kept them in my house whenever you weren’t there.”

“What?”

Laurent hauled my legs apart and didn’t answer my question. He kept—*fuck*. His mouth was human once again, the softness of his tongue swirling over my clit while stone claws held me open.

He wasn’t gentle.

Changing back and forth between stone and flesh, Laurent consumed me with lips and tongue. The rough texture and pure heat had pleasure building beneath the surface. Pure, glorious pleasure. And then he pulled away.

“Laurent.” His name was a desperate moan and a plea. “Please.”

He crawled up my body, eyes locked on mine. My monster was the kind of creature people would be afraid of in the night. Looking into these eyes and seeing a stone body and stone wings? People would be afraid for their lives. I wasn’t afraid for mine.

“I want my cock inside you when you come,” he growled, huge hands gripping my ribs and turning me over. Knees spread me apart, and his claws landed on my hips, yanking me back onto his cock. His human cock.

I fisted the blankets, not at all quiet as he thrust deep. My body was ready, and it wasn’t at the same time. I wanted fucking everything.

The room was filled with the sound of my voice. No words, just me unable to keep quiet while he was inside me. And the sound of our bodies slamming together, the slap of flesh on flesh as Laurent unleashed himself.

He got his wish. I came, unable to hold myself back. *Fuck*, I never came this fast. With anyone.

“That’s because you’re my mate,” he growled. “Your body is made for mine.”

I hadn’t even meant to speak the words out loud, but I didn’t care, because he was still fucking. Yanking my hips onto him just as hard as he was thrusting deep, pleasure flaring behind my eyes. I reached backward, desperate to touch him, and he caught my wrist, pulling my arm across my back and grabbing the other one.

He didn’t miss a fucking beat. Holding me hostage as he drove home, over and over again. I was still moaning. I couldn’t stop. How could anyone get fucked like this and be quiet?

Laurent wasn’t quiet either, the deep sounds of effort with every thrust making everything tighten. I fell over into another orgasm and my body melted into the bed. But he wasn’t stopping, and I didn’t want him to.

Releasing my hands, he lowered his body to mine, curving himself around me so that I could feel every inch while he rocked his hips. He wrapped one arm around me, his forearm against my throat. “You want my *real* cock, Meg?”

He expected me to speak? He rocked his hips again, reaching down with his other hand to push my hips down. Holding them still so he could use my body exactly the way he wanted to.

I shuddered, a smaller orgasm rippling through me and my pussy squeezing down on him so hard I couldn’t see anything. Couldn’t breathe.

“I need an answer, sweetheart.”

“What?” There was a question, but I couldn’t remember it soaked in all this pleasure.

Laurent growled in my ear. “I asked if you want me to fuck this pussy with my real stone cock, mate. You want to feel what it’s like to be taken by a monster?”

“Yes.” I moaned the word into the blankets where it was muffled. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He pulled away far enough to place a hand in the center of my back and keep flush on the bed. And I felt him shift. His whole being grew heavier as he returned to being a gargoyle, holding me down with his weight. But not only that, he got bigger. Every piece of him, from his hand on my spine to his thighs pressing on mine, grew larger. Rougher.

His cock was last.

It thickened inside me and lengthened, the sudden change in fit and texture making me squirm in a good way. I wanted more, but I couldn't move the way he had me.

Laurent rocked his hips, and I realized he wasn't all the way inside me anymore. He thrust deeper, and it was all too much. I came, fire behind my eyes and in my body, balanced on the delicious edge between pleasure and pain.

I now understood everything Christine ever told me. There was joy in pain as a ballerina, and there was joy in this pain too. The rough scratch that heightened every brutal thrust and every sound of Laurent grunting as he worked me. Took me. Made me his plaything and pleased me as his mate.

“One more,” he groaned out. “Give me one more.”

My body shook, and my head shook, and Laurent changed his angle. His legs pinned mine to the bed and every movement suddenly made me see fucking fireworks. But I couldn't...

Could I?

“One. Fucking. More.” His words matched the movement of his body, and down on a level that wasn't fully conscious, I wanted to obey.

The orgasm started deep. Low in my gut and spreading until it was all I could feel, and I was entirely spent.

Laurent pulled out of me gently, and I groaned. I ached in the best possible way. I was going to feel him later.

He pressed a kiss to my spine. “You did so good, sweetheart.” Then he turned me over so I could see him—fully the monster.

Then the monster smiled. “But we’re not done yet.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LAURENT

Meg's eyes were glazed with pleasure. Her body soft in the aftermath of so many orgasms, and all I wanted to do was give her more.

Leaning in, I licked up her center, Meg's back arching when I reached her clit. I laughed. "So sensitive. I like you like this."

All I got was a whimper in return, and I smiled. I loved the raw sound of her voice reduced to nothing but need. I consumed her. Citrus sweet and tart and the deeper fragrance of flowers.

Her hips lifted toward my mouth, chasing the sensation even though she was spent. She was almost done, but the beast in me knew I could take her further. Push my mate to the brink she needed, even if she wasn't aware of it.

I eased my cock into her again, loving the way her body fluttered around me. "Laurent." My name was a moaned whisper, and if I wasn't already made of fucking stone, it would have made me harder.

Her lips weren't nearly swollen enough. I kissed her, tasting the sweetness of her mouth and letting my mate taste her own arousal. "I'm here, sweetheart. And you feel so fucking good."

Rocking into her, I felt her gasp beneath my lips. Now, I could let myself go. I didn't want my knot inside her while she was lying face down. No, I needed to see my mate's face again when she felt it. And felt what I was going to do to it.

Lifting a hand, I wrapped it around her throat. Meg was so deep in her own mind, stripped back to her own instincts—ones she wasn't even aware of because having mates was so new to her. My hand around her throat, the last piece she was clinging to let go.

"Ohhhh..." She let out a soft moan.

I brushed my lips over hers. "Good girl. Good girl, sweetheart."

And I took her again.

Fucking her exactly like I'd wanted to for years. I pulled back and added a second hand to her throat, driving myself deeper. Her hands clung to my arms, pussy clinging to my cock, and I let the pleasure rise up.

"Fuck, Meg." I nearly lost my rhythm because it was so fucking good so fucking good so fucking— "*FUCK.*"

My voice was an echoing roar, and I plunged my cock as far as it could go, my knot locking inside her. Wave after wave of heat rolled through me. The primal need to fill my mate with cum subsided, and my monster receded a bit.

She was so fucking beautiful, spread out and wrecked beneath me. Sated. *Mine.*

I kissed her again. "You still with me, Meg?"

"Mhmm."

Her hand laid on the bed, and I picked it up. Sure enough, the violet magic under her skin receded under my gaze. Not far, and not enough for my liking, but it was good enough for now.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. “I’m good. Super good. I’m great.”

I laughed softly. “I love you not being able to put words together, sweetheart. Means I fucked all of them right out of you.”

She sighed and lazily lifted her arms to drape around my neck. Her gaze was still unfocused, and it was clear her arms were weak, but she was with me. I loved this woman with every fiber of my being, and had for longer than I’d been willing to admit.

“Meg?”

A small sound.

“Did Christine tell you about gargoyle knots?”

Her giggle brought a smile to her lips, but for the first time, her eyes truly focused on me again. “A little. She didn’t share as much as I wanted her to.”

“Did she tell you what happens if I fuck you again while it’s already inside you?”

Around my knot, her pussy contracted. I groaned, pleasure spearing through me. If she did that a few more times I wouldn’t even *need* to fuck her again. I would just come.

“No,” she whispered. “What happens?”

I lowered my mouth to her chest, kissing between her breasts. “It gets bigger. Takes longer to subside. And it gives both of us much more pleasure.”

Meg’s eyes went wide. “How can it be bigger?”

My little mate didn’t even realize the trap she’d walked into. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Bringing my hand to her throat once more, I rolled my hips and began to take my mate.

I leaned against the headboard, Meg wrapped around me. Her head rested on my shoulder, and she was breathing deeply. My little mate had fallen asleep after I was finished with her. I hadn't been able to resist taking her twice more.

My knot ached as much as it felt incredible. But it would take a while for it to calm. In the meantime I was content to hold her. We had so much to make up for on that front.

I'd wrapped a blanket around her so she wouldn't get cold, and even sleeping, she clung to me. Her arms were wrapped around my ribs, and sometimes I would feel her tighten her grip, like she was checking to make sure I was still here.

The soft sound of wind alerted me to Ariel's presence before he looked around the corner. "Safe to come in?"

"She's out," I said quietly. Ariel wouldn't need me to speak louder than a breath to hear me. "It's taken care of?"

His grin was wicked. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to fuck up his shit."

"No," I resisted the urge to laugh. "I have a pretty good idea. But you know he's not going to stop trying."

"No, I don't imagine so." He came closer and looked at Meg's foot where it was sticking out from beneath the blanket. "I thought—"

"It did," I told him. "I watched it recede. It's just moving faster than we thought."

Reaching beneath the blanket, I gently lifted one of Meg's hands away from my skin and showed him. While the magic had been driven back by our sex, it was now back to creeping up her limbs, and quickly. It was halfway to her elbow.

Ariel scrubbed a hand over his face. The spirit looked exhausted. Like I'd expect Prospero to be looking by now. "It could be because we're trying to beat it back, and it's reacting."

Or because Prospero is specifically turning the island against her.”

“Either way,” I said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You can’t think any of us would actually let you sacrifice yourself.”

I smothered the growl in my chest and just barely managed to pivot it into a purr so I didn’t wake Meg. “If it saves her from dying? Or being taken? You won’t be able to stop me, Ariel.”

There was conflict on his face, and I knew why. Like me, the idea of Meg dying or in danger was painful. Literally. And yet he and my other brothers had been on this island for eight hundred years. In no small part to keep Prospero in check. He had his hold on them, but they also knew how to temper his demands and lessen the impact. A Prospero free to terrorize the world was a danger to everyone.

And yet, there was also no world in which I could let Meg die. It wasn’t possible.

“And we’re sure?” I asked. “That he can’t be killed right now?”

“His commands are still in place. None of us can fucking go near him.”

“I could.”

Ariel looked at me like I was the most naive gargoyle alive. “He told you he couldn’t be killed while she holds the magic. And you don’t think he has a trap in place ready for you in case you try anyway? Or even get too close? The minute you try anything, you’ll be trapped like a fly in a web.”

“Can you sense those kinds of traps?”

He pulled up short. “I didn’t reach out search for them, but I could poke around what’s inside the mountain and around the island. But I can guarantee you it’s there. He’s been planning this—for *you*—too long not to have measures in place.”

I was pulling at the thread now, and I had so many questions. “And Prospero is a danger to her, as he’s proven.

Does it negate his commands not to kill him?"

"I wish." Ariel scoffed. "He's been careful there. The only time he *directly* harmed her was when he put the magic into her, and I didn't know she was my mate until after. Since then, he's let the island do it for him. Taunting the island about her isn't harming her, even though I wish it were."

"So I suppose you're not free to use your own magic to trap him further," I said.

"No."

"What about her?"

He looked at me. "Meg?"

"She has all his magic. Is there a reason she can't use it?"

Sinking down on the end of the bed, Ariel looked stunned. "I doubt it. Though he gave it to her freely, it's enchanted to return to him. He probably included some kind of binding to keep her from using it. But honestly? I have no idea."

"Could you guide her? Try?"

Shaking his head, he shrugged. "I could. But doing that might make the magic accelerate. And what would be the aim? If the magic of the island is already hostile—"

I held up my hand as his volume got louder. Meg stirred against me and settled once more. It had been a few hours. My knot was loosening, and soon she would be free. I would have to remember that she had other mates and not immediately pin her to the bed with my cock again.

"Think about it," I told Ariel. "Because waiting him out is a good idea, but we may not be able to."

He glanced at her arm and slowly nodded. "Yeah."

The status quo had never been a good one. If Prospero hadn't created me, he likely would have been freed a long time ago, and none of us would be here right now. I wouldn't be here, holding the woman I loved most in the world.

I couldn't change the fact that I'd been created. Or the fact that my creation had stripped Prospero of so much, like his

mortality. Again, if I wasn't here, he wouldn't be either.

If I were a better man, I would have tried to kill him a long time ago regardless of the risk, to protect the world and end both his malice and his suffering. But no creature wanted to end its own existence. So here we were, struggling against what felt like impossible odds just to survive and be free.

I didn't know the answer. All I knew was that I was going to fight like hell for every second with my mate.

Even if there weren't nearly enough of those seconds.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MEGHAN

I was standing in the middle of a purple cloud.

At least that's what it felt like. Mist brushed my skin, and there was movement in the air. I couldn't see anything in front of me but ambient, violet light. There were four brighter points, like corners, but even walking towards them, they never seemed to get any closer.

The color was now one I would recognize anywhere.

"Hello?"

My voice echoed like I was standing in the middle of a great hall.

"Is there anyone here?"

A soft hissing emanated from nowhere, like the sound of a snake you couldn't see, just waiting to strike.

An image appeared in my head. Myself, where I stood. Clothed in violet light, my hair also dyed that elusive color.

And the tinge to the image was hatred and fear. *Of me.*

I gasped. “No. No, I don’t want to hurt you. I promise. You can see. You can remember I didn’t choose this.”

In this place of nothingness, it was easy to feel which emotions didn’t belong to me. There weren’t words, and I wouldn’t even say it felt like consciousness. Rather, it was raw power. Driven by the instinct to survive.

I wasn’t unfamiliar with the concept.

“See?”

Pulling the memory of those moments, I followed my own instincts and pushed the image outward. “I didn’t want this.”

The surrounding ambience shuddered and writhed, but I felt the anger recede. There was still hesitation and wariness. But not outright hostility.

“Please,” I said. “I don’t want this anymore than you do. Show me what to do. Can I help you? Can I help both of us?”

Another image slammed into my mind with such force it felt like I was falling down. It was Prospero. So much younger than he was now, standing in front of a light much like this, but not the pretty purple color it was with me.

The light pulsed, like it was speaking in a language only he could hear. But I’d never heard the magic speak. Not with words, anyway.

His face was ragged with pain. “I will give you all that I am, and you will give me everything.”

Prospero thrust his arm into the light, and the scream was inhuman. I wanted to look away, but the image was behind my eyes, and no matter which way I turned, I still saw it. Like what I’d seen before, Prospero’s body lit up from within, so bright I could see his skeleton. And the light *filled* him so he was even brighter before the magic dropped him.

His chest was bloody. I recognized the placement on the left side of his chest—knew it well enough by now because of my mates. Prospero’s heart was gone. Given to the island in exchange for power.

Confusion hit me.

“But I thought he was still human before he made Laurent.”

An impression of *yes* and *no*.

I shook my head, looking around me in the infinite glow. “How does this help me?”

All the light was being sucked out of the air, and I was falling again. “Wait,” I called. “How does this help?”

My body jerked awake, and I scrambled, startling and confused about where I was and what I was and how I got here.

“Whoa,” Laurent’s voice settled my mind, and his arm pulled me back against his chest. “You’re okay.”

My heart was pounding, and I couldn’t really breathe. What the hell was that? What did it mean? I felt shaky, like the kind of shaking you did after you trained too hard and hadn’t eaten.

Part of that could be the incredible sex, but it wasn’t all of it.

I was lying on my side, and Laurent wasn’t knotted inside me anymore. He lifted the hair off the back of my neck and kissed me there. “More bad dreams?”

Turning my face down into the bed, I closed my eyes. “Confusing dreams,” the words were a mumble.

Laurent turned me over so he could see my face and gently pinned me to the bed with his body. He was only partially on me, but the weight was enough to bring me back to myself.

He smiled down at me, and my stomach did a flip. How many times had I imagined waking up with him? And now I had *four* men I could wake up with. I nearly teared up at the realization that I wouldn’t have to sleep alone anymore.

“How do you feel?” He asked.

“Physically?”

Laurent's eyes sparkled. "Physically. Mentally. All the above, mate."

When he called me that, joy bubbled up through my chest, and I couldn't contain it. I smiled as I took stock of myself. "I feel good. A bit sore, but I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"Not too much?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Nope." I bit my lip. Too much? No, it hadn't been too much. He'd taken me to a place I didn't even know I could go last night. Somewhere there was no thought or fear. Only him, and pleasure.

Some of it felt like I didn't even remember. "Did you call me a good girl?"

Laurent smirked. "I did."

My stomach swooped. I'd always read it in books, but I'd never really understood the appeal. But what came through the haze of my mind was something I needed to try again. But saying it out loud also felt vulnerable in a way I wasn't used to.

But this was *Laurent*. If I couldn't say it to him, then who? Still, my cheeks flushed.

"What are you thinking, Meg? I can't read your mind yet."

"You'll be able to read my mind?"

He placed his palm in the center of my chest, pressing gently. "Not exactly. But you'll be able to feel my emotions, just like I'll be able to feel yours. So no, no mind reading. But over time, it might feel like that."

"Oh." That was going to be strange. "I'm confused about that."

"Confused?"

"No." I shook my head and placed my hands on his shoulders. "That's not the right word. I'm—" Words weren't usually this much of a problem, but I was still muddled from sex and the dream. "Let's pretend there's nothing happening but the five of us."

Laurent nodded. “All right.”

“Is there any world in which we don’t end up bonded? I’m not saying I don’t want it or anything, I’m just...” I blew out a shaky breath. “If this is all the time we’re going to have—”

A growl snarled out of him, and he froze, transforming it into a purr that was deeper and rougher than Ban’s. “It won’t. I swear it, Meg.”

“Just humor me,” I said. “I don’t quite know what bonding means, and of course I’m nervous. Not scared, just nervous. But if there’s any chance of not being able to have you, I don’t want to wait.”

Laurent pressed his forehead against mine, the purr getting stronger. Fuck, I loved my men and their purrs. It was so soothing. “There are a couple of different answers in there, sweetheart. First, no. If there was nothing happening around us, and we had all the time in the world, I don’t think there would be a world without you being bonded. I certainly hope not.

“Secondly—and I know the others would agree—a bond should never be made out of fear. It doesn’t matter what’s going on around us. A mating bond is something so deep and so... we want you to be sure. Not because you feel pressure.”

It made sense. “And what if I decide I am ready?” I asked quietly. “Are there rules? Do you all have to do it at once?”

“No.” He turned and dropped a kiss on my cheek. “Whenever you’re ready for each of us is enough. Not to say that whoever isn’t bonded won’t be jealous. They probably will be. But normal relationship issues happen with mates, too.”

“You’re jealous?”

His dark chuckle raised goosebumps on my skin. “Not while I have you naked underneath me. But at some point I will be. I don’t ever want to stop touching you.”

I pulled his mouth to mine. He couldn’t say things like that and expect me *not* to kiss him. Shifting, I was suddenly fully underneath his body. Everything lined up perfectly. “And don’t

think I missed you changing the subject,” he murmured in between kisses.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” He purred. “You never told me what thought made you blush.”

Clearing my throat, I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I just never thought ‘good girl’ was my thing. And I was kind of out of my mind last night, so I don’t completely remember you saying it.”

“I see.” Laurent’s eyes went dark, showing me the monster within, and I shivered. “Do you need to be reminded?”

Maybe, but right now I couldn’t even breathe.

“I believe my hand was here.” He lifted a hand and wrapped it around my throat.

The sound that came out of me was completely involuntary. It was needy and desperate. The barest flex of his fingers had everything tightening, and I was wet, which I was sure he knew.

“I know you, Meg,” he whispered. “And I know what an incredible woman you are. Responding to this doesn’t make you weak, and it doesn’t mean anything more than your deepest instincts are waking up. Because I’m your mate, and your *soul* recognizes that.”

Something in me relaxed. It wasn’t a fear that had risen consciously to the surface, but he’d still addressed it.

“And there it is,” he said. “Just like last night, you let everything go for me.”

Mouthing his lips to brush the shell of my ear, goosebumps covered absolutely all of me. “Good girl.”

Pleasure spiked through me, causing me to writhe and stretch underneath him. I didn’t understand it, and I definitely couldn’t explain it. “*Fuck.*” My voice was ragged.

Laurent chuckled again, and I swore I was going to come at the sound of his voice alone. “Good girl, sweetheart.”

“Okay,” I said. “I was very wrong about it not being my thing.”

He was smiling as he kissed me. “Noted, mate.”

I breathed in the rich, spicy scent of him, and we rested together for long moments. “Want to talk about your dream?”

“If I’m going to do that, I’ll need coffee. And a shower. Is there a shower in this house?”

“Yes there is. A very large shower. Room for plenty of people.”

I rolled my eyes, but grinned. “How about you make us coffee so we don’t spend three hours in there?”

“But that sounds like fun.”

Laughing, I pushed him off me, and he went, freeing me. “It sounds like I’d have pruny hands and feet, and I don’t feel like that today.”

I glanced down at my arms and startled. In the midst of Laurent loving me, I hadn’t noticed that my arms were violet to the elbow. Like gloves. My legs too, all the way to the middle of my calf.

There was a mirror in the closet, and sure enough, my hair looked like it was growing out purple. “Wow.”

“It’s all right.”

“Yeah.” I wasn’t sure about that, given the dream. But panicking wasn’t going to help me.

Laurent’s eyes were on me as I went into the bathroom. He wasn’t wrong. The shower was absolutely massive. Enough for all five of us.

Down, girl.

If I started thinking about all of them at once I might ignore what I’d said to Laurent and pull him into the shower with me.

This place would be perfect for Trin as well.

Guilt welled up in my stomach. I needed to go see him, and see if he was all right. It was all because of me, and I'd spent the whole night out of my mind with pleasure.

I went through my shower quickly and threw on some clothes from the closet. Leggings were my comfort zone as a dancer, so I was happy the closet seemed to have plenty of them, given the way my clothes were torn off me last night.

The scent of coffee was everywhere, and I didn't see Laurent. Instead, I went straight to Trin's room. It didn't seem like he'd moved, but he did look better. Already his skin had more color, and the pieces of him that had been bitten were healing.

I couldn't look too closely at those.

But I knelt by the side of the bed near him and took his hand in mine. "I'm sorry."

If I thought it wouldn't hurt him, I would curl up next to him and listen to him breathe.

Wind stirred my hair, and gentle hands touched my shoulders. Ariel. "I feel guilty," I said. "This is because of me, and I didn't even spend the night with him."

"Don't feel guilty," he said. "It's not because of you, it's because of the island's power. And he'll tell you himself not to feel guilty about spending time with your mate. Especially when you were in need of comfort."

I shrugged, and he lifted me to my feet, turning me. "Don't believe me?"

"I do. But it's hard not to feel it. As for the magic, there's something you need to hear."

Both his eyebrows rose into the inky black of his hairline. "All right."

Laurent had coffee ready in the living room, and Ban was lounging on the couch in his feline form, where he hadn't been before. "Thank you." I took the cup from Laurent and sat in a chair where I could see all three of them.

"I had a dream, and it was the island."

“What?” Ariel’s laser focus was on me now. “What happened?”

I told them everything, including what I’d seen of Prospero. “It seems like when he first took the island’s magic, but I thought he was still human.”

All three of them looked shocked.

“Technically, he was,” Laurent said. “He was still mortal. Giving his heart to the island would have bound him here until his natural death. My creation stripped him of his humanity, and therefore his mortality.”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of all the puzzle pieces. “If he wanted to escape so badly, why not just take back his own heart?”

“He can’t.” Ban shifted and stared at me with golden eyes. “It’s one way.”

Ariel leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “The first thing to know about magic is that it rarely makes sense. It’s wild and unpredictable. But there are a few rules. One of those is that taking power requires a sacrifice. It’s not always your life, but the kind of power he wanted?” He shrugged. “He knew the deal when he made it. One of the other rules is that a gift of magic freely given can’t be taken back.”

I stood and began to pace, irritation rising under my skin. “I feel so dense right now. So he had to offer his own life to get the power, and then he had to *take* four lives to get his own back? What is this, a bank that charges interest?”

Laurent laughed softly, but covered the sound as Ariel continued. “Magic doesn’t have reason or logic. It is a force, and for the most part, it can make its own rules. For Prospero, the island gave him its own life, and whoever came before him. It wants more in return. It’s about survival, not punishment.”

I looked at the three of them. “Let’s just say we do exactly what we’re *not* going to do, and he takes Laurent’s heart. And whatever magic he borrowed gets given back. So then he’s just an immortal spirit who can go wherever he wants?”

Laurent nodded. “And he’ll still have power. Giving back the *original* magic isn’t a part of the deal.”

“But you think he’ll die if we can keep this power from taking over me?”

Ariel shook his head. “Not in the mortal sense. But he will fade away without the magic. Like I would if someone ripped the magic out of me.”

“Is that possible?” I looked at him, panic gripping me. It wasn’t something I’d thought to worry about.

“Very few, if any, would be able to do that.” He dissolved and appeared next to me. “Don’t worry about it.”

“At least maybe the island isn’t angry with me anymore? Or at least less angry?” I sat down and took a sip of my coffee. There was a thought that I didn’t think they would like, but at this point, I wasn’t able to hold it back. “I have one more question.”

They all waited patiently.

“What if I give it my heart?”

I thought I’d known silence before, but I hadn’t. Not a breath of air moved. None of my mates breathed, and then Ban was in his feline form growling and Ariel was on his feet. Laurent was so still, I wondered how much of his body I couldn’t see had turned to stone.

“*No.*” Ariel said. “You want to be stuck here for the rest of your life?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. But if I have this magic to trade, then Prospero would fade away, right? Can’t you be free once he’s gone?”

He glared at me. “In theory, yes. Once his consciousness is gone things will be easier.”

“Then what the fuck is the way out of this?” I asked. “If we can’t guarantee that once he’s gone you’re free?”

“None of this is about us, Meg. We’re trying to keep you alive. Everything else is secondary.”

I stood. “Not to me. If I’m going to be your mate, then we’re going to care about *all* of us at the same time. Not just me.”

“That’s not the way it works.”

Rage that wasn’t entirely mine rose under my skin. Frustration and the need to scream, too. Standing, I crossed my arms. “This isn’t a misunderstanding about how mates function, Ariel. I might be the weak one in this situation because I’m human, but I am *not Weak*. And I’m not going to sit here and be the damsel in distress just because you want me to. This is *my* life. I want it to be *our* life.”

“It can’t be our life if you’re dead, Meghan.”

I nodded. “You know what? I didn’t think about that. You’re right. I’m completely oblivious to the fact that I could die, given the fact that one of my mates is unconscious because I was dropped in the middle of a *shark buffet*.”

“Meg,” Laurent said.

“What?” I turned to him and found him watching me carefully.

He sighed. “You can’t give your heart. It won’t fix things.”

I opened my mouth to ask why, and Ariel beat me to it. “And even if it would help, we wouldn’t allow it.”

Looking over at him, I felt calm close over me. “You don’t allow me to do anything, Ariel.” I turned and looked for the door. “If I go outside, am I going to get skewered by something?” I made sure my question was only directed at Laurent and Ban.

“No,” Ban said. “With Prospero in the mountain and the magic calm, the island is safe.”

“Good. I need some air.” I looked at Ariel. “See? I even asked if it was safe. Proof I’m not trying to kill myself just for fun.”

I turned on my heel and headed for the door. There was a possibility one of them would follow me, unable to ensure the

magic wouldn't try something, but they would give me space. I felt it in the silence I left behind.

My head hung as soon as I reached the outdoors and took a breath of fresh air. Normal relationship problems was right. That wasn't the way I'd wanted that conversation to go. Not by a long shot. But it didn't change how I felt. This was all or nothing, and I needed them to understand that.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MEGHAN

I wandered the island for hours, exploring the tropical trees and lush woods. There were little pockets of beauty everywhere. Small ponds and exotic flowers I didn't know the names of.

The temperature was perfect, and without everything behind the scenes, it was paradise. You could create a resort on the island and make a fortune.

Finally, when my legs were tired, I found a perch to look out at the ocean. The sun was already sinking, and I was facing west on a cluster of large rocks. I loved the wind off the sea in my hair, and the never-still surface of the water.

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I wrapped up my arms around them and watched the horizon. My mind was finally quiet, after a long time circling over the same frustrations and the same anger. I didn't want to be angry, and I likewise knew that they were probably right.

But I already felt helpless, no matter if it was an honor to protect me. Telling me I wasn't allowed to do something, when I was just asking a question I thought might help? It pissed me off.

Fine. I knew it wasn't my finest moment, but I wasn't the only one in the wrong. And I wasn't ready to go back yet.

The sky turned to a blaze of orange and pink, almost like a starburst exploding from the horizon. It was gorgeous, and finally the emotions that needed to come rose to the surface.

This was so much. So fast. Even if the magic inside me was amplifying things? It was overwhelming, and I hadn't even really had time to catch my breath except for the last few hours. I didn't feel like myself. Granted, I hadn't felt like 'myself,' in years, but even more so. I felt like every bad blonde and female stereotype. Weak, silly, hysterical, fickle, and foolish.

Deep down I knew I wasn't any of those things. I wished Christine were here. There was nothing like a pep talk from your best friend. If I made it out of here, we were going to have the biggest dish session of all time, but I still wished I could talk to her now.

Something in the air changed, and I sensed I wasn't alone anymore. I looked over my shoulder and saw Ariel standing lower on the rocks. He smiled, but it was tense. "Can I sit with you?"

He was reversing our roles for this. But I didn't have the ability to transform and pin him to the rock, as he well knew. I nodded once.

Slowly, he sat down beside me, fully in physical form. He mimicked my pose and pulled his knees up. We were silent for a while, watching the sun get closer to the horizon. There was so much we needed to say, but I needed him to be the one to speak first.

Ariel looked over at me, and I kept looking at the horizon.

"I'm sorry." The words were quiet.

I did look over at him then, and the sadness in his eyes matched the sadness aching in my chest. My eyes blurred with tears, and he reached for me. I went willingly.

“I’m sorry, Meg,” he said again. “I seem to be saying it to you a lot.”

A tear slipped out of my eye when I blinked. I didn’t know what to say to him. There was so *much* to say that I’d gone mute.

“I could tell you that it was my mating instinct and that I couldn’t fight it. I could also tell you it was because I knew what the consequences would be if you did that. Or that I’ve been stuck with the same people for so long I don’t have any idea how to control my temper. And all of those things are true. But none of them are an excuse for me being an ass.”

Ariel shifted us so my legs were slung across his lap and my head was leaning against his shoulder. “What would really happen?” My voice sounded miserable.

“If you gave the island your heart?”

I nodded.

“The same thing that will happen if the magic you have now reaches your heart. There’s nothing to trade for with the power already inside you. At best you’d be trapped here forever.”

“And at worst?”

“You’d disappear and just become part of it.”

Turning my head further into his shirt, I closed my eyes against the tears. Of course. Of course, I’d suggested something that would kill me and undo everything we were trying to avoid. “I’m sorry too,” I whispered.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for. You were trying to help, and I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that.”

“I’m so tired of feeling like this,” I said, voice cracking. “I hate feeling weak and helpless, and that’s the only thing I am here. And I know—” I swallowed a sob. “I know all of you don’t care. But *I* care.”

Another brutal truth rose, and I held onto Ariel that much tighter. “How can I have mates and still feel like I’m nothing?”

“Hey,” the word was gentle.

I didn’t look at him, but he guided my face to his, regardless. “You are not weak, and you are *not* nothing.” My eyes slid away, and he immediately brought them back. “Do you know how many humans I’ve seen on this island? Who Prospero brought here to try to replace Laurent, or to turn into one of his experiments? They had a fraction of the magic you have in your body and they went mad. Screaming. Broken. Dead in days just like he said. It’s barely even touched you.”

More tears poured over as I blinked, and he wiped them away. “I hate that it’s doing this to me. I don’t want its power any more than it wants me to have it, and all the magic is doing is making me fucking emotional.”

He laughed, but not at me. “It’s true. But you’ve been put into one impossible situation after another, and any normal person wouldn’t be okay. The last thing you are is weak, Meg.”

I wrapped my arms around his ribs and held on, and Ariel held me right back. His lips warmed my temple, and I tried to make my mind blank. To enjoy this and not think about anything else.

Finally, his hand swept down my spine. “Tell me something you love, Meghan,” he said softly. “Tell me something beautiful.”

“This place is beautiful.”

I felt his smile. “Yes it is. But I want to know what you find beautiful. I want to know everything about you. I want to know your favorite colors and your favorite foods. And not just the ones I can conjure with magic. I want to know your favorite memories and the sad ones too. I want to know who you are. And not who you think you should be.”

What could I say to that? It was like my mind went blank of anything I’d ever known. But something... beautiful? “I grew up near mountains. Small ones. In a valley. And in the

winter, when they're all covered with snow, there's this thing that happens at sunset. When the sun hits them at a certain angle, they turn a shade of pink I've never seen anywhere else. And you can never take a picture, because cameras always make it look orange. But it's beautiful, and I miss it."

"Maybe I'll get to see it with you one day."

"I'd like that."

Ariel laid me out on the rocks and hovered over me, looking down. "Will you forgive me, mate?"

Reaching up, I touched his face, tracing his nose and his jaw, taking in the darkness in his eyes. "Yes. If you forgive me."

Tension I hadn't noticed fell from his face and shoulders. He pressed a kiss between my eyes. "You don't need my forgiveness, but if you need to hear me say it, then yes. And I need to tell you, I will do everything in my power to protect you. But you are not my property. You are my mate. I don't doubt that you and I will fight." One side of his mouth tilted into a smile. "And I look forward to it. But you, and this," he pressed one hand to his chest and then to mine. "Will always come first. I promise."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close. "I'm sure we're both going to be assholes at some point," I whispered. "It can't be avoided. It's going to happen."

He laughed once. "Probably not, no. But I promise not to be *that kind* of ass again, no matter how strong my protective instincts."

"Thank you."

He smiled and brushed his lips over mine. "This is the part where I seduce you and make you forget everything else."

I laughed softly to cover the way my breath went short. "Is that why you really came after me?"

"No. I came after you because I fucked up, and it hurts when we're angry. It hurts when we're not together."

Swallowing, I looked up at him and the way he was a silhouette against a gorgeous colored sky. “What does it feel like?”

“What?”

“Me. What do I feel like? To you.”

Ariel’s grin was feral, and he rocked against me. “You feel good, Mate. Like I hadn’t had enough of you.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.” I touched his chest. “Here.”

His brows furrowed in thought, and I brushed a finger between them. “It’s hard to explain. As soon as the magic was in you... have you ever just *known* something? Without a shadow of a doubt? I knew with my whole being that you were mine. If I had to describe it, it’s like there’s a line connecting me to you. Straight from my soul to yours. It’s bright and vibrant, and all I want is *more* of it.”

“How would it be for you? As a spirit. Do you still bite me?”

“I can.” He reached and drew my head to the side. “But my instincts tell me no, that’s not the only way. I can... mark you. Break your skin with my power. Not quite the same as a bite.”

“I’m nervous about it, but I’m also nervous about not getting the chance to experience it.”

“Only when you’re ready,” He said.

I rolled my eyes. “Did all of you get together while I was sleeping and agree that was the party line?”

“No.” He rolled off me and pulled me up to sitting. “Of course not. But it’s irreversible. We all know what it’s like to have something irreversible forced on us, and we didn’t have to talk about it to know we don’t want that for our mate. So, when you’re ready.”

Looking out at the ocean, it stretched into infinity, a living flame with the sunset streaking across both the sky and the water. Ariel was right. It was more than just a normal fight and

normal relief when we came together. It was so much more than that. But how would this have gone if I'd been able to feel him? Would it have made it better or worse?

I was still learning about this. But if Laurent and Ariel and the others were right—and they had no reason to lie—then I had instincts too. So deep I couldn't even sense them. But now? I felt like this fight would have been a lot simpler.

We resolved it easily, but we might not have had to resolve it at all. I wanted this with them, and I knew they didn't want it to be a place from fear, and it wasn't. It was from a place of eagerness. Of *wanting* the life we were trying to achieve.

“What if I'm ready?” I asked.

Ariel's head whipped around so quickly it probably would have broken if he wasn't a spirit. “What did you say?”

“What if I'm ready?”

Disintegrating, he formed himself around me, and we whirled to the sand at the base of the rocks. My back hit the stone, and Ariel's body was aligned with mine once more, but this time there was *intent*.

“You can't say things like that, Meghan. Not if you're not serious.”

“Who said I wasn't serious?”

He blinked, his eyes clearing of the dark and feral ferocity for a moment. “Really?”

“Really.”

Ariel's mouth slammed down on mine, every bit of unbridled passion he'd been holding back. The cloud of who he was surrounded me, cradling me in a way nothing else could—completely.

“Are you sure?” His mouth dragged down my jaw and neck to my shoulder, pulling the shirt aside.

I moaned at the feeling of his tongue on my skin. “Ask me again and see what happens.”

He laughed darkly, and my gasp turned into a scream as we rocketed into the air. Over the island toward some unknown destination. This time it wasn't nearly as bad, since I understood the sensations and that he wasn't going to drop me.

"I've got you," he told me. Just like the first time. But now it was different. Now he *had* me.

"Where are we going?"

"To show you something beautiful." Our momentum slowed, but we didn't touch the ground. "Open your eyes."

The pool of water in front of me was so close to the beach the waves nearly touched it. At high tide, they probably would. But now the surface of the water was perfectly still, reflecting the dying sunset. It was as round as a pearl, and Ariel was right. It was beautiful.

"Wow."

Ariel set me down, my toes touching the edge of the water and setting off a single ripple that swayed the image. The sun was behind us, the sky darkening in front of us, and the moon rising.

"This is my favorite place on the island. Even after all this time. It's no pink mountains."

"It's beautiful."

He wasn't fully corporeal as he wrapped his arms around me. "I'm not asking if you're sure," he said quietly. "But I am asking you if you want me to fuck you first."

"Not after?" I teased.

"Oh, mate." His voice was so low it sent chills across my skin. "It *will* happen after."

I leaned back against him. "Will it hurt?"

"I don't know for sure." There was a smile in his tone. "I've never done it before. But we're binding our souls together. I'm guessing it will hurt some."

Christine said it had. But she also mentioned the marathon of sex she'd had afterwards with all three of her mates.

“I don’t care how,” I said. “I just want it with you.”

Ariel spun me again so I was in his arms. “You’ll always have me.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ARIEL

*M*ine. Mine. Mine.

If I still had my heart, that would be the sound it made.

Meg's eyes were bright. She was breathless, and I could barely think straight. "What should I do with you?" I asked quietly. "Take you up in the air and make you feel like you're falling while my tongue is in your pussy?"

She gasped, clinging to me harder. "Maybe not."

I chuckled. "They say a little fear can make everything better."

"*Ariel.*"

Meg and I were never going to be smooth sailing. I already knew we would butt heads and be assholes. Then we would make up and fuck until neither of us remembered what we were arguing about. But I didn't want it to be like this afternoon, where I'd known I'd hurt her, and that knowledge had felt like fractured glass in my chest. The primal need to

protect her and keep her safe had overridden everything, and it couldn't.

But being able to feel her? We would fight and we would rage, but we would *know* where we stood. I would be able to feel her pleasure and know what made her body sing, even more than I did now.

“Fine,” I said with a laugh. “But know that I do have plans to fuck you in the air one day.”

“You’ll have to break me into that slowly, I think.”

“Slow, fast, long, hard. We’re going to do it all.” I floated us up a few inches off the ground and watched her pupils dilate. “Breathe with me, Meg. I’m not going to let you fall. Stretch and you can touch the ground.”

She nodded quickly, but I could also hear how fast her heart was beating and her breath was coming. “I trust you.”

“Close your eyes for me.”

She did, and I spun her around so she was facing the ocean and the sky. All I wanted was to strip her clothes off and worship her, but first, I was going to smother her in pleasure. We weren't going to be able to separate once we mated.

Gathering my magic, I let it pour over her skin. Through it, I felt everything. Every shudder and breath, the way her body tightened and writhed, feeling everything. “Oh, fuck.”

I let it flow through her skin, brushing through her body and feeling it with phantom hands. I was beneath her clothes and touching her curves. “I’m about to ruin your clothes.”

She laughed, but was still distracted. “You won’t be the first.”

“I won’t be the last, either.” My power disintegrated every stitch of clothing on her, and I was in heaven. Holding my naked mate was how I preferred it. Letting my being disperse into smoke, I surrounded her. If she asked me, I wouldn’t be able to describe how this felt.

Like every part of me was pressed against every part of her. Her scent was *within* me. The heat of her skin warmed me.

Her arousal felt incredible. I was drunk on her, and I was about to be entirely addicted.

Keeping my arms solid, I turned her to me again and buried a hand in her hair, pulling her head back so I could taste her neck. Feel her swallow and gasp. Drench her in magic.

I reached down between her legs and touched her, lining my fingers with silver power. With Ban tasting her the last time, I hadn't touched her like this. I hadn't *tasted* her yet. More. I needed more. No more floating.

Bringing myself back into a fully physical form, I let us down into the shallows of the pool. Onto the sand. Where Meg was laying like a wanton goddess washed up onto the shore.

The magic in her limbs turning her violet was beautiful too, and that magic sang with mine even though I wanted it out of her. Reaching out with my own power, I stroked along the magic I felt inside of Meg.

She arched. "What the fuck was that?"

"What happens when magic plays with each other."

My mate's eyes were as dark as I'd ever seen them. "Do it again."

I had something better.

Sinking into the water, I parted her legs and found the center of everything. My tongue coated with magic, I feasted on the only flavor I wanted for the rest of my eternal existence. Her magic felt curious and eager, but I was more focused on Meg. The way her legs jerked closer together when I licked up under her clit, and the soft moans whenever I sealed my mouth over it and sucked.

Her fingers dug into the wet sand, leaving little craters behind that showed her desperate need for more. So I gave her more. I slipped my arms under her legs and locked them together again over her stomach so I could pull her closer to me—spread her legs out with my shoulders and savor the tart sweetness of her pussy on my tongue.

I once thought it was hard to get drunk as a spirit.

Meg was about to prove me wrong. I was out of my mind. How much had I been holding back, waiting for her to be ready?

Magic flowed from my hands into her core, and Meg's voice echoed off the rocks around us and floated out over the sea. Let it. Let anyone in the vicinity know how much my mate loved my tongue in her cunt.

“Ariel—” her voice was strangled with pleasure.

I didn't stop, mimicking the motion which had made her moan and making it that much more intense. My skin glowed with power, and underneath her skin, Meg did too where I was giving it to her.

Meg's body arched, orgasm breaking over her and body only controlled by the ecstasy trying to be released. The taste of her cum was that much sweeter, and I drank her in to make it last. Though this wouldn't be the last time I tasted her tonight. I was going to breathe her like she was air.

I climbed up her body, leaving handprints in the sand before I kissed her. Meg softened under me, every delicious curve melting into mine in the aftermath. The look on her face was one I could look at every day.

“If all of you keep doing that, it's not going to be the magic that kills me.”

I nearly growled at her, the anger at the idea of her dying slipping into me once more, and she smiled wider. “Too soon?”

“It will always be too soon, mate.” I kissed her again, letting her feel how hard I was for her and the frenzy that would soon take us. “How do you feel?”

“I feel good,” she murmured against my lips.

“I'm glad, and I'm sorry.”

“Why?” She suddenly looked worried.

Leaning my forehead against hers, I followed the instincts I had, forming one hand into a thin point. A spear or a needle. “Because I will protect you from everything,” I whispered.

“But I can’t protect you from the pain of this. I can only make it better once it’s over.”

Now. Every instinct told me. *Now.*

Mark her.

Mate her.

Make her *mine*.

I slammed my mouth down on hers and pierced my mate’s soul with mine, just above her heart.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MEGHAN

The pain felt like it was everything. Worse than drowning, worse than having magic shoved into me, worse than anything. It felt like I was dissolving out of existence, and there was nothing I could do about it.

But just as quickly as the pain shattered through me, I was being rebuilt with a new piece inside me. Bright and silvery, impossibly feeling like dense fog and the open sky all at once. It was Ariel. Ariel was inside me, and I could *feel* him. All awe and wonder. What he was feeling looking down at me...

It was so much bigger than I imagined it could be. All-consuming and deeper than the ocean we were next to. I couldn't breathe, feeling the intensity. And I had three more mates.

"This is... so much more than you described."

"How can you describe this?" He asked, and his voice was entirely genuine. "It's not possible. You're made for me."

Where I have hollow places, you fill them in. Where my edges are sharp, you soften them. And the same for me with you.”

Ariel dropped his head, brushing his lips over the place where he pierced my skin. It was like an orgasm all over again, pure pleasure radiating outward like a star. My sudden need was so great it stole my breath, and of course my mate *felt it*. Felt it and was delighted by it.

“There’s no way to put into words how you can love someone like this. The only way is to feel it.”

His words stopped everything in my tracks, pausing the desire in my brain and replacing it with wonder. “You love me?”

Ariel smiled, and it lit up his whole face. “Yes, I love you. Of course I love you.”

“But—”

He silenced me with a kiss before I could protest that it was too soon, and that we couldn’t possibly. But that argument was difficult to back up since we’d just bound ourselves together for life.

Did I love him? All of them? Everything you were told about love said immediate love wasn’t real. You needed time to get to know someone and make sure it was right and real.

But those were human rules.

What was between Ariel and I—and between me and my other mates—was so much more than human. These men were made for me, and they’d been brought to life almost a millennium ago. And they were mine.

Ariel pulled me off the sand so I was sitting and somehow still in his arms. Cradled and held like I was the entire world. “I loved you the second I knew that you were mine. I love you even though I know we’re going to fight, and I look forward to fucking my apology into you, or fucking one out of you. I love your scent and the way you taste. I love that you have dirty fucking dreams I can steal ideas from.” I flushed, and he flipped me over so I was on all fours, sinking into the damp

sand. “I love so much more than that. But if I’m not fucking you in the next ten seconds, I’m going to lose my mind.”

Desire crashed down on me, both my own and Ariel’s. I could feel how much he needed me, and I wanted every fucking bit of it. I was still wet from Ariel’s mouth, and he didn’t wait, pushing in to the hilt.

“Oh, fuck.”

We both froze, adjusting to the feeling of each other’s pleasure through the brand new bond. It echoed and made mine brighter. And I couldn’t wait anymore. I shoved my hips backwards into him at the same time as Ariel drove himself deeper, both of us feeling the unspoken urgency in each other.

Time ceased to exist. It was just Ariel and pleasure. The light was fading from the sky and the pale light of the moon was beginning to shine. It could have been the middle of the day or the middle of a fucking hurricane and I wouldn’t have cared.

All that mattered was the driving force of his cock and the sounds coming out of him. The sound of his pleasure and the feeling of it in my chest built until I couldn’t take it on top of mine. Pleasure exploded behind my eyes and nearly flattened me. I was made of golden light and sound, every cell rejoicing and shuddering and making it last a fucking eternity.

My head was on the sand, the splashing of the pool’s water around our feet the only sound other than us. And Ariel came, silver light and heat streaking through me. A comet that was only him. I wanted more even as I didn’t think I could come again.

“Oh, you will,” Ariel said, breath ragged. “Yes, you fucking will.”

“You don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Nice try, mate.” Ariel pulled out and rolled me over onto the sand. “I can’t read your thoughts, but I can feel enough. And I’m not finished with you.”

His eyes moved to the place where he’d pierced me, and his eyes darkened. “Do you feel what seeing my mark on you

does to me?”

The sensations coming from Ariel were dark and possessive. So sharp I could almost see the image he was envisioning—similar to my dream, pinning me down and taking me over and over again. “What does it look like?”

In less than a second, I was in his arms and in the air, sailing over the island back toward the house. “I’ll show you.”

We whirled through the house past a very confused Laurent and Ban, and into my bedroom, the door slamming behind us. I giggled in his arms. “Is that your way of telling them to leave us alone?”

“I’ll tell them with my words if I have to. Tonight, you’re *mine*.”

I shivered as he put me down and spun me to face the mirror. We were a mess. There was sand on my hands and legs and in my hair. I was flushed and shining with sweat, and so was he. But I also looked... radiant.

My skin above my heart was different now. A swirling shape that had form and yet it didn’t. But it shone when I moved, a silvery sheen that reminded me of Ariel’s magic. “Wow.”

“Come here.” He turned me around and dissolved into smoke, drawing me deeper into the cloud that was him. “We’re here and we’re safe.” His voice came from everywhere. “If I drop you, the only place you’ll fall is your bed. But I’ll never drop you, mate.”

I was floating in a cloud of silver darkness. My vision was gone like I’d been blindfolded, but there was no fear. I could feel Ariel around me the same way I could feel him through the bond. He had me, and I was safe.

Pleasure spiraled through me as phantom hands stroked down my ribs and at the same time, it felt like tongues on *both* my nipples. And then on my neck. More fingers than were physically possible dragging all over my body at once.

“What? How—”

“Both my forms are real,” he said in the voice that was everywhere. “As is everything in between. I’ll take you in every form, but I want you to know what it’s like to be mated to a spirit.” I swore I felt a smile in the smoke. “And all the benefits that come with it.”

Those infernal phantom hands spread me open, and Ariel entered me. It was his cock, and yet it wasn’t. Solid, and not at all solid. “Fuck, that is so weird.”

He laughed, dark and deep. “Good thing I can feel how much you like it.”

Pleasure rippled through my body in the same way. Maybe more, because he was touching me *everywhere*. A hundred mouths kissing the places that were the most sensitive. More than one tongue swirling over my clit at the same time it was being sucked and oh my *god* my body was on fire.

I rocketed straight into the orgasm I didn’t think I could have. My scream was lost in the nebula of Ariel’s smoke, only for it to be cut off for a different reason. A second cock made of air and flesh slipped between my lips, filling me up to the brink. It tasted like him, like the ocean wind, traces of spices and water and sweetness. Still, it was *physical*.

There were lips at my ear along with everything else. “Will you give me everything, mate?”

I couldn’t speak to ask. Even if my mouth wasn’t full of cock, my mind was scrambled from the best orgasm of my life and the feeling of pure euphoria and possessive satisfaction coming from Ariel.

And then I knew what he meant. Tongues dragging up the backs of my thighs and fingers spreading me open to lead those tongues deeper. I moaned around Ariel’s cock in my mouth, still full with the one between my legs, Ariel holding himself still and deep.

He pulled back, freeing my voice again. “What was that? I couldn’t hear you while you were stuffed full of my cock.”

“How do you have more than one?”

Another tongue licking over my mark and all the way up my neck. “I’m a spirit, Meghan. While I’m incorporeal I can be anything you want. Anything you need or want me to be.”

As if to prove it, one set of fingers suddenly felt like stone, and a tentacle wrapped around my calf. “I don’t want you to be anything but you.”

“Mmm,” he whispered. “But what am I?”

The mimics of my other mates faded away and the phantom hands and tongue went to work on my ass. I’d always been nervous to even let someone’s mouth near it, and yet I was shivering with pleasure. “Will you let me in?”

“I’ve never done that,” I gasped, my eyes closing even though I was already wrapped in his darkness. My pussy clamped down on him, betraying how much my body was responding. As if he couldn’t already feel every single thing I was feeling.

His cock entered my mouth again, sliding as deep as it could go without cutting off my breath. It made me want to taste his physical form. “If you’re not ready, I’m still going to make you come,” he breathed. “But I do love the idea of fucking you in every hole. Impaled on my cock in every way possible. My *toy*.”

My dream. I couldn’t deny the way my body reacted. Everything tightened. I got wetter, and I moaned.

“And it will be perfect practice for when you’re ready for all of us at once. Trin fucking your sweet pussy while Ban uses his tongue on you. Laurent’s stone cock buried in that perfect ass, and my cock in your throat. So I can make sure you only breathe when *we* want you to.”

Lust and need sliced through me like a knife, and I nearly came. I wanted that. I *needed* it. Just like I needed this. Both. Everything.

I nodded, begging him through the bond to do it. To take me.

And he did.

It was impossible—felt impossible—the way he gently entered me from behind. My body was stretched, but it didn't hurt with this physical and non-physical piece of him. I was just fuller than I'd ever been in my life, in every way.

More hands grabbed my wrists and held them above my head, and I surrendered. All three cocks began to fuck me, falling in and out of sync. Between roving fingers and licking tongues, I was beyond conscious thought. There wasn't anything *to* think except to fall through an infinite cascade of bliss. I fell over the edge into a shuddering orgasm, and it wasn't enough.

“Again,” he whispered in my ear, not stopping, not slowing, and not changing anything about what he could feel drove me wild.

The next orgasm came and went in a wave, and I groaned. It was too much, and yet I craved more. The mated part of me never wanted to stop.

“Again.”

I shook my head, lips still stretched around him, and a phantom hand gripped my hair. “You know the other things about this form, Meghan? You don't need stamina when you're a shadow. I can fuck you as long as I want to, and never, *ever* stop.”

My mind went white, his pleasure and mine sending me over again.

He freed my lips, mouth turning physical enough to kiss me, hot and hard. “You want me to stop?”

“Yes,” I moaned. “And no.”

Both of his cocks thrust deeper and harder all at once. “Until it's only a yes, I'm going to make you come. You won't have a choice.” The soft whisper made me shiver and my eyes roll back. I loved that. I didn't want him to stop. The part of me that had been trained to think I took too much and needed too much told me no. That he'd done enough.

Fuck that.

“Don’t stop.”

Molten silver power dripped over me, heightening every sensation. “Oh my god,” I managed, my throat scratchy and voice raw. “Oh *fuck*.”

“Remember,” Ariel said. “Until you tell me to stop.”

One searing kiss had me drowning all over again, and he began to move. I was the center of cocks and lips and tongues, a nova at the center of a star of pleasure.

“Now, mate,” Teeth grazed over my neck. “Scream for me.”

I did.

I stared up at Ariel’s face, dazed. Somewhere in the frenzy of hours I’d slept. But I was still exhausted and still wanting more. I wasn’t sure if I would be able to bond with my other mates separately if it were going to happen every time.

His legs were tangled with mine, but he stroked his fingers through my hair softly, just watching me the same way I watched him. Through our bond, I felt pleasure and satisfaction along with the undercurrent of need.

“I love you,” I whispered.

Ariel grinned. “You sure? It could be all the sex talking.”

“What was it you said last night? Of course I’m sure. I’m not going to pretend the idea doesn’t terrify me. Because it does. For all of you.”

“It would be a pleasure to fuck you every day until you’re not afraid of it.”

I rolled my eyes, but his words lit new heat under my skin. It didn’t seem like it was possible to still be aroused, but I was. And there was something I still hadn’t had the chance to do.

Pushing up on his chest, he let me move him, and he ended up leaning against the headboard, watching me with

amusement. Despite being a dancer, after a night of being pleased within an inch of my life, I was less than graceful, sprawling over his lap before my mouth found his cock.

“Meghan.” I wasn’t sure if my name was a plea or a warning, and I didn’t care. This was so different from the phantom cock he’d teased me with. But in a way, it felt the same—the same shape and thickness—but the true heat of his body made me tingle with anticipation.

Dropping down, I took him deeper. As far as I could go down his shaft, filling my mouth to the brink. His skin was pale and pearlescent, like the mark now on my skin, and it was beautiful.

Phantom fingers teased down my spine and over my ass, to tease my clit. I groaned, drawing a laugh from my mate. “Don’t tell me you’ve had enough?”

I hadn’t. But I wasn’t going to be able to focus on sucking his cock if he were touching me like that. The minute he began to give me pleasure, it was like the functional part of my brain turned off.

Instead, I sucked him deeper, pushed all the way down and felt his own pleasure through our bond. He liked it when I swirled my tongue around him, and I *loved* that I knew that now.

One real hand sank into my hair, gripping firmly near the roots. It was his turn to feel the way the simple movement turned me on. And at the same time those phantom fingers pushed into me, making me rise off him and look. “Do you want my mouth on you? Because I’m never going to be able to get you off with you touching me like that.”

The fingers twisted, pushing firmly into my G-spot and making a delicious burst of light flare behind my eyes. Ariel’s hand tightened in my hair. “Oh, I think we can do both. You just won’t come until I do.”

“I—” Ariel’s smile was wicked. “I don’t like that you can feel what it does to me.”

“We both know that’s a lie.” It was. But it was still going to take some getting used to. “Go on,” he taunted me. The gleam in his eyes was challenging, and I liked it.

“Or what?” I asked. “Are you going to make me?”

The fingers in my pussy thrust deep again, and I had to close my eyes. “Let’s see,” he said. “Does my mate *want* me to make her?”

Even with phantom fingers, he could feel the way I squeezed him. I wanted everything. To take my time memorizing the way his cock felt between my lips. To have him take my mouth and use it the exact way he wanted to. To climb on top and ride him like I was queen of the world.

“Open your mouth,” he said, words soft, feeling what I wanted in this moment.

I did, and he guided me down onto his cock with gentle strength. Farther than I’d pushed myself. All the way, down and down and down until I didn’t think I could go further. And I didn’t have to because my lips met the skin of his stomach.

My eyes flew open. Was that a mate thing? Because I wasn’t about to be humble and say I didn’t give fucking amazing head, but I’d never been able to take an entire cock.

His hand in my hair, I couldn’t pull back. And as he thrust upward with his hips, forcing the tip of him deeper, he moved the wisp of power that was teasing me. Oh my god.

Already my body was learning exactly how to respond to him, and he was learning exactly what made me tick.

Ariel’s other hand joined the first in my hair, hauling me up for a breath. But only for a moment before he brought me back down, driving upward into my throat and almost growling. “I’m not going to last long. Not with the way your throat hugs me, Meghan.”

The way he used my full name when he wanted my full attention or when he was trying to turn me on worked every. fucking. time.

He was teasing me just enough to make me moan and keep my mind split between the two sensations of being fucked in both places, but he wasn't driving me to an orgasm. He was putting me on edge and making me *crave* an orgasm. But he said I wouldn't come until he did, and I didn't doubt he would keep his word.

"Fuck." He moaned the word, fingers tightening and holding me deeper. I was running out of air, but I wasn't afraid of this. "*Fuck.*" He shouted, heat spilling into my throat as he held me still. I could barely taste him as I swallowed him and raised myself, gasping for breath.

"Now." I lifted into the air and shrieked as I was rearranged. Ariel sank back down onto the bed, and my knees landed on either side of his shoulders. "About your turn."

"What are you doing?"

"If it wasn't clear I'm about to make myself drown in your cunt, I need to change some things." He arched his neck and licked me, drawing a gasp. "But I need you to come down here."

My whole face flushed with heat. I grabbed the headboard and resisted the way he was pulling my hips down. "I can't sit on your face, Ariel."

"Why not?" He chuckled. "I'm obsessed with the way you taste, and I don't need to breathe. Even if you could suffocate me, it would be a temptation to die while sucking your clit."

"Ariel—"

"I think Laurent agrees, don't you?"

I looked over my shoulder to find Laurent in the doorway, watching. "I think I can agree with that." He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Need anything?"

"We're good." My voice was too high and strained, and Laurent just smirked at me.

"Actually, our mate is a bit resistant to *sitting on my fucking face*. Help me out?"

I looked down at Ariel. “You think he’s going to help you?”

“Of course I will.” Laurent was behind the bed, and my wrists were in his hands before I could register how quickly he’d crossed the room. Without any leverage, Ariel pulled me down onto his mouth and consumed me. I cried out, heat and desire building under my skin. He’d already primed my body to explode, and now I was just a burning fuse.

Laurent’s free hand curled around my neck and I was staring into my gargoyle’s eyes while my spirit fucked me with his tongue. “Why didn’t you want to sit?”

He was going to ask me that question right now? I shook my head. “I couldn’t.”

“Ariel looks happy,” Laurent said. “Making a meal out of you.”

I whimpered, the pleasure too much, and I couldn’t lift myself even though I wiggled. And struggled.

Laurent kissed the corner of my mouth before moving his lips to my ear. “Talk to me, sweetheart. Tell me what he’s doing to you.”

Ariel’s fingers dug into my hips, and he used his tongue to tease me, licking up under my clit and around it. Little bursts of pleasure that weren’t enough and he damn well knew it. “His tongue is on me,” I gasped out the words.

“You can do better than that.”

“Please,” I begged. “Please.”

The tongue swirling and swirling and swirling and I was so fucking close and wet I was shaking. I tried to pull my hands out of Laurent’s grip and the hand turned to stone.

“He’s licking my clit, *fuck*.”

“Mmm. And which do you like better? When he licks your clit? Or when he sucks it so hard you see stars?”

Ariel did exactly that, and I *did* see stars. Silver stars. Drenched with silver power and the incredible sensation of

Ariel's mouth.

"Or maybe," Laurent whispered. "Maybe you like it when he fucks your cunt with his tongue until it's *coated* with your cum."

Beneath me, Ariel's tongue shifted to follow Laurent's words, and I imploded. Fiery, honeyed heat rolling up and out until I was rigid and frozen with pleasure. There wasn't any voice left to scream with. All I needed was this and them, and I melted back down as they both released me, Laurent laughing softly.

He came around the bed and touched Ariel's mark, but it didn't respond the way it did when Ariel touched it. "This is new."

Suddenly shy, I looked away from him, and he pulled me up and slung my legs across his lap. "How do you feel?"

"I don't think I can describe it." But I was still exhausted. That was for damn sure. My arms were a little less purple after hours of raw sex, but the power was still advancing and already beyond where it had receded. Even now I saw it creeping up my skin like ink absorbing into paper. "And I need a shower."

He kissed my forehead. "Okay. I want to hear about it when you're ready."

Nodding, I let him stand me on my feet. I wasn't hiding from him. I was just... both full and empty at once. Full of happiness and pleasure and satisfaction and empty of energy and reaction and thought.

Ariel caught me around the waist before I made it to the shower. "I love you."

"I love you. I'm just exhausted."

He laughed. "I can feel it. Take a nice shower, and I'll make some coffee. Not summon it." There was a wink over his shoulder before he disappeared and I went into the giant shower.

The hot water felt amazing, but it was still too hot. I kept turning the heat down, and down, and down, but my skin was still burning. And then it was glowing.

Fuck. There wasn't any chance to even step out of the water or yell for help before the island wrapped its claws around me and took me away.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

MEGHAN

I fell onto dirt and rolled, my skin scraping on the packed surface. This place was a combination of darkness and pure brightness.

Where the hell—

Rolling, I came face to face with the blinding light. Pure brightness in the center of this room. It looked like a crystal, but it was so stark and bright, I couldn't really tell.

“It should have killed you by now.” The voice rasped, and I turned to find Prospero leaning against the wall of this room. He looked drawn and gray, like he could barely stand. His skin was hanging off him, and he reminded me of a doll that was old and too worn out.

I'd been pulled out of the shower and didn't have anything on. The dirt now smeared on my skin wasn't nearly enough coverage.

Shimmering light flickered through the air, and there was a sheet draping over my shoulders in a shade of violet I now recognized. I snatched it and wrapped it fully around myself.

In my chest, Ariel's terror and anger surged through me. But for the first time I understood how they were separate from me. I was scared and angry too, but it was good to know my own emotions wouldn't be overrun by my mates.

I couldn't tell him where I was. It didn't matter. He knew. He would be coming. But I tried to send the feeling that I was all right. I wasn't immediately in danger. Prospero looked like he could barely stand, let alone attack me.

"It should have killed you by now," he said again. "Why hasn't it?"

"I don't know," I told him. "But if you weren't sure, you shouldn't have done it in the first place. It's your own fault for trying to fucking kill me."

He staggered away from the wall toward me. "You have no idea what I've been through."

"Actually, I have a pretty good idea. I've heard plenty."

"All lies."

I backed away from him, circling the giant crystal, which was pulsing with power. Whatever was inside it was calling to me like it was one and the same. It didn't feel hostile, but neither did it feel friendly. A curious neutral, much like it had been in the dream.

"Forgive me for believing the people who both rescued me and didn't kill seventy people in order to capture me. Or torture me. Or send the island's magic to once again... what was that? *Kill me.*"

"Come back to me on the wrong side of a millennium and complain. I'm not dying on this fucking island. I'm going to need that power back."

No. The island's magic might kill me, but giving it back to him meant he would kill me anyway. And my mates. That wasn't going to happen. "No."

“You think I’m going to give you an option?”

I kept moving, circling the crystal as he followed me, steps heavy and labored. “I know you can’t take it back by force, and I think you’re struggling to stay standing.”

“I brought you here, didn’t I? Maybe I am weak.” Prospero smiled, and when he did, it was like watching a corpse grin. “Or maybe that’s what I want you to think.”

He lunged faster than I thought possible, not bothering to grab anywhere, just slamming himself into me and taking me back into the crystal. Pain cracked through my spine, and I didn’t see the blade until it was almost too late. “I warned him,” Prospero said. “I told him if he wouldn’t give me back his heart, and the magic used to make him, I would take yours. Just because I can’t take the magic back doesn’t mean I can’t kill you.”

I wasn’t weak—you couldn’t be a ballerina and be weak. The blade was pointing straight at Ariel’s mark, visible above the sheet, and I was holding him back. He’d taken me by surprise, but he *was* weaker than he wanted me to believe. There was no way to hold him forever, but I had a chance, and that was all that mattered.

The bond between Ariel and me was *singing* with death and rage. The instinct to protect me was turning him feral.

“What is that?”

I looked at him, and his eyes were fastened on the mark. Recognition and pure malice entered his eyes. “So that’s why you’re alive. I never should have given you a chance. But you’ll break them even more now.”

The power of the island pulsed behind me and within me. No words, but... something. I threw myself to the side, out of the way of the knife, and released him. I nearly tripped on the sheet, but it didn’t matter. Prospero fell forward, the tip of the blade catching the crystal, and the magic struck back.

He went flying against the wall, the crunch of his body sickening. But he groaned. “See?” The word wasn’t addressed to me. “I told you. She wants to see you hurt, or she wouldn’t

have jumped out of the way. Once I have the power back, I'll protect you."

I was pulled toward the crystal. Toward the place where the knife struck. All I had was instinct. The magic tingled through me, but this time not from pain. It just felt like... *power*.

Reaching, I placed my hand over that spot. Magic surged into me and away from me. It didn't hurt—not like when he'd forced it into me. What felt like an apology echoed through me, but also anger that I still held on to so much power.

I don't want it.

Take it.

It didn't.

Glittering magic surged into my body, my skin glowing where it was painted purple. I had to close my eyes against the matching rise in brightness, and even through my eyelids, the source was almost clear. Another surge and more brightness.

This time I was thrown, a sound like thunder and fracturing glass roaring through me and the room. The world was an explosion, and I was at the center. Streaks of fire painted my arms and face, all the air gone from my lungs. Everything felt dark.

Had the explosion made me go blind?

No. I could open my eyes and see the dim shape of a rocky ceiling. There was no more light. My head pounded and my body ached.

"*NO.*" Prospero roared, the echo filling the space. My body was now numb from the power pulsing through it. I'd been flayed by something that should have killed me, and I was somehow still alive.

Metal scraped on stone, and I tried to move, but still couldn't. Prospero was fighting his way to standing with that fucking knife, and this time I wouldn't be able to stop him.

The magician cracked against the stone wall for the second time, black smoke forming a second later. Ariel was there, and

he had Prospero by the throat. “Didn’t I warn you what would happen if you tried to touch her again?”

Ariel’s voice was death incarnate. An avenging angel who’d come for me and only me, fuck everyone else.

“You can’t kill me,” Prospero laughed. “Even now, when your mate is in danger.”

That same mate went deadly still. His hand was flexed and rigid on Prospero’s throat.

“That’s why she’s alive,” Prospero said. “I should have known.”

“You’re right,” Ariel said quietly. “I can’t kill you. Not yet.” He dropped him, and Prospero fell to the floor.

Ban was suddenly by my side, lifting me. “You must be careful, kitten.”

My gaze fell on the floor, and I understood. The crystal had shattered. The ground was covered with broken bits of it, jagged and dangerous. That was why I hurt. It ripped through me like broken glass.

Laurent stood in the doorway, face like thunder though he didn’t step into the room. In spite of everything, we couldn’t risk him so close to the monster who was in a heap on the floor.

“There’s only so long,” Ariel said, his voice gentle as velvet, sharp as a blade. “You might be immortal, Prospero, but you’ll be gone soon. Your physical form will expire and you’ll just be nothing. A part of this island you hate so fucking much. So I’ll offer you a way out.”

All three of us looked at him. What?

“Make a vow. That you will not harm Meg, nor the four of us. That we are free from all enchantments and spells you’ve placed on us. Ever. And that you will remain here for the rest of your immortal life. Do that, and we’ll give you the magic back.”

“What kind of deal is that?” It sounded like he was breathing through a straw made of rocks.

“One that preserves your consciousness and life,” Laurent said. “One way or another, you are staying on this island. It can be under your own power, or you can be a formless part of the magical mass that makes this place hell. It’s your choice.”

Ban carried me to the stairs, and the others followed.

“She’ll still die. The magic will still take her. Then you’re just as fucked as me.”

There were shadows in my mates’ eyes, but they didn’t let anything show, and they said nothing as we left and crossed the island back to the house. None of us dared to move or breathe until we were fully in the living room.

“Put her down,” Laurent said. “Let me look at her.”

Ban set me down on the couch, but curled around me in his feline form, purring. Ariel was pacing back and forth, and I felt blank. All I needed was to curl up and sleep.

Laurent put his thumb in his mouth and wet it before smoothing it over one of my cuts. It brought me out of the stupor. “What are you doing?”

He smiled. “A quirk of being a gargoyle. We need to be able to heal cracks and such, that power heals small injuries too. Though I admit, I’m having a hard time just using my tongue.”

“Oh...” Heat sank through me, but I also could barely move. It felt like I couldn’t lift my arms.

“What happened?” Ariel said.

I shook my head. “I have no idea.” Slowly, I told them everything. “It felt like it wanted me there. Prospero said he brought me. Maybe he did. But I felt— I can’t explain it. Did I destroy the island’s magic source?”

“No.” Ban sat up behind me and slipped his hands around my waist. “The real one is below it.”

“Prospero made one that was closer to where he was. Made it easier to draw on the power, and in this case, it keeps his physical form alive longer.”

“He’ll never take that deal,” I whispered. None of us were talking about the fact that my limbs were entirely soaked in magic now. Not even a mating frenzy had stopped it, but we could still try.

“He might,” Laurent said, giving in to temptation and using his tongue to heal the last of my cuts. “You’d be amazed what someone will do when faced with extinction.”

“You’re telling me,” a new voice said. “Even self-preservation makes me miss everything.”

I turned, and standing, pure and whole, was Trin.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

TRIN

*M*y mate looked wrecked, and I was immediately on guard. She was wrapped in a sheet, covered in dirt, and there was *blood* on her skin. “What the fuck happened?”

“It’s going to take a while to fill you in on that,” Laurent said.

Meg was trying to get to me, and I got the feeling she would already be across the distance between us, but she was stumbling. Nearly clumsy, which was the opposite of what Meg was. She was grace embodied.

I caught her just before she reached me, wrapping her up in my arms, sheet and all. “I’m sorry,” she murmured into my skin. “I’m so sorry.”

Confusion rolled through me. “Why?”

“Your arms.” Meg’s hands fluttered over my ribs and stomach. “They were—and it looked like you had jaws around you. I couldn’t... You could have died.”

“I’m fine. See?” I asked. The injuries I had were serious, but if they’d been truly life threatening, I would have made sure she knew how much I needed her. “Perfectly all right. I promise.”

“You almost weren’t.”

I tipped her face up and kissed her. Fuck, I felt the time we’d spent apart like I hadn’t been unconscious. I was craving her, and I wanted to know everything that had happened. Missing things pissed me off more than the injuries.

Meg had a new tiny scar on her chest, and I glanced at Ariel to find him smirking. I *definitely* missed something then. I brushed my thumb over the mark, and Meg flushed. There was also something like guilt in her eyes.

“Why do you look like you stole a cookie and are afraid of getting caught?” I glanced at Ariel again, but he pointedly looked at Meg. He could sense her emotions now, but he wasn’t going to interpret them for me.

“You were unconscious, and I—”

“Took comfort and pleasure in your other mates exactly like you were supposed to?”

She swallowed. “I just didn’t want you to think that I didn’t care.”

My mate was the sweetest woman alive. If it didn’t look and feel like she was about to collapse from exhaustion, I would take her back to my room right this fucking second. But she was exhausted, and though I was healed, so was I. “There was no reason for you to sit by my side being sad, uncomfortable, and bored while my body healed. I’m glad you didn’t do that.”

“You say that like it’s going to happen again.”

I smiled. “I hope not. But you’ve got a body full of magic. Something tells me protecting you is going to be a full-time job.”

“I don’t mean it to be.” Her sadness threw me. It wasn’t the reaction I’d expected to my teasing.

“Are you okay?”

Meg leaned her head on my chest. “I’m so tired,” she whispered. “I’m so happy to see you, but my body’s about to say that sleep is no longer a choice.”

I looked at the men who were my brothers, and their faces were grim. More happened while I was healing than they wanted to admit. “Come on,” I turned her and walked her back to the couch. “Sit with me while someone tells me what the hell is going on.”

My little mate was dragging on her feet. Ariel conjured a much thicker, softer blanket to replace the bloody sheet, and she didn’t fight him wrapping her in it. Or when Ban pulled her down onto the couch and held her close, offering his arms and his purr. The dirt disappeared from her skin, Ariel removing it so she was more comfortable.

It wasn’t a moment to be jealous of. The light inside of Meg had been switched off, and I hoped it was just exhaustion.

Sitting down, I pulled her feet into my lap and tucked the blanket around them. Whatever it was, I wanted her to feel the presence of her mates.

“What happened?”

I kept my voice lower than she could hear.

They told me. It wasn’t as much as I expected, but I wasn’t surprised that Meg was now breathing deeply and asleep. Stroking my hand up her blanket covered legs, I watched her. It was so strange how everything had shifted.

She was the center of everything now. I didn’t know close to everything about her, and it didn’t matter. Meg was all that mattered.

“The magic in her?” The violet magic swirling under her skin entirely consumed her limbs now, and it was way too close to her heart for my comfort.

“We have to keep holding it back,” Ariel said. “Until he offers the trade or his body dies. I don’t see another option.”

“She has enough power inside her. Do you think she could approach the real heart? Give it back?”

Laurent shrugged. “It’s possible. Maybe you can take her to the edge of the boundary after she’s awake.”

“We need to think about the reality,” I said. “If he doesn’t give in, and it’s about to take her.”

“I’ll kill him,” Laurent said. “Or his body. Risk whatever magic he has left and take him out. He says he can’t be while she has the magic, but he could be lying. Then you’ll be free of his commands, and Ariel can get to the island’s heart.”

If Ariel could get there, maybe he could make a different deal. One that would save her life. Other than that, I didn’t see a way out of this, and that was terrifying. After so long, finding our mate only to lose her? Unthinkable.

“If the magic technically belonged to him, if he dies, any chance the magic dies with him?”

Ban looked at me, and I read pure hope in his eyes. That would be the easiest way.

“*I don’t know*,” Ariel said, pushing to his feet, unable to stay still. “I wish I fucking knew, but I don’t. The island is fucking unpredictable.”

The magic here was a reactive force. It responded, and it took action based on its own instincts. But it didn’t have *thought* as far as we knew. And even after eight hundred years, there wasn’t a sure way to say how it was going to react.

“How long do we have?”

Laurent’s face was grim. “The magic has been moving fast. Even faster after today. It seems to have paused, but we need to watch her to make sure it’s not progressing too quickly.”

“I need to get in the water,” I said, standing. “I’ll be back.”

It should have been the first thing I did. My tentacles had been touching water in my room—I was sure I could thank my brothers for that—but I still felt dry and like I was ready to crack.

Sinking beneath the surface, energy and life flooded into me. Every bit of exhaustion and residual pain melted away, and I stretched, feeling the luxury of healthy skin.

As soon as the pleasure of the sensation faded, I felt it.

The water was different.

Similar to the way the ocean had felt tainted when all the sharks were aiming for Meg, the water's energy was strange. Not in a good or bad way, but in a *distinct* way. What was it?

I dove through the holes and natural tunnels that riddled the bottom of the island, heading for the center. There was only so far I could get. The island's power was too fierce to let anyone get close, but it was the source of the difference.

Something changed while I was unconscious. The energy pulsing out from the bright core of power wasn't as blinding or harsh. But it felt... stronger somehow. I didn't know what the change meant, but I could get much closer than I'd been able to before.

It wasn't much to go on, but I still had a renewed sense of hope. Maybe after all this time, what was needed was simply for *something* to change, and the magic would take care of the rest. But until we knew for sure, I would make sure my mate was safe.

Swimming for the edge of the island, I put on speed. While she was sleeping, I would circle the perimeter to make sure nothing else had changed.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MEGHAN

I was in the violet void. Though I guess void wasn't the right word for it. This vibrant, misty place that was filled with glitter and magic and the curious presence of the Island.

Three bright lights were pinning the points of the world, and just like the first time I'd been drawn into the dream, walking toward them didn't make those bright lights come any closer. But *I* was different.

The image I was shown of myself was deeper. My skin shone where it was purple, my hair almost entirely dyed. I'd never thought purple would be my color, but this was making me reconsider. The energy wasn't hostile in the image, but curious and unhappy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry about the crystal."

But it didn't seem like that was what it was sad about. I couldn't put my finger on the emotion I felt, only that it was

raw. Unfiltered.

“I don’t know how to help you. I can’t get to you without dying, and Prospero won’t let me live if I give the power back. If there’s a way to solve this, we’ll need to know. Please.”

Three lights blazed, burning across my vision, and I opened my eyes to a much darker landscape. My bed.

I’d been sleeping for a while—the stiffness in my body told me that. And the room was darker than it usually was.

A rumbling purr sounded behind me, followed by an arm falling over my waist and pulling me backwards. “My kitten slept a long time.”

“Really?”

“A long time. You needed the rest.”

I pushed myself up to sitting and looked over to the closet. The door was open enough to show the mirror, and I saw myself as I was. The violet tinge to my skin was now taking over my shoulders and hips. “How long?”

“A day,” Ban said. “It is the middle of the night now.”

Fuck. A whole day? No wonder I felt like I’d just woken up after being drugged. But getting full rest was good too.

Ban pulled me back to him, his mouth dragging kisses up my spine. “I have missed you, kitten.”

I turned and stretched, wrapping my arms around him. “You have me.”

He was everywhere, touching me and exploring me with his hands. “I don’t know anything about you,” I said quietly. “I know some, but not enough. About any of you.”

“There’s nothing to know, kitten. I am who I am.”

“But you’ve been alive for so long,” I whispered.

“Yes, and I have been here. Prospero figured out quickly he could not send me into the human world. I do not fit in there. So I have been here. What I’ve seen of the real world

has been through his visions, or what Ariel and Trin shared with me.

“The others are the same. They have been beyond the shores more than I have, but we have simply existed.”

My heart ached for him. “I’m sorry.”

“Where else would I go?” He smiled sadly. “I do not look human, even in this form.”

“There are places you will fit in. Monsters exist in the world, and you belong there too. If we all make it through this, we are leaving this island and you are coming with me.”

He didn’t look sure, but I made sure our eyes were locked. “You protect me. But I will always make sure you’re safe out there. I won’t let anyone look down on you. Ever. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, kitten.” Then his eyes turned gold. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“How much?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”

The low growl in his throat made my hair stand on end. “I still want to hunt you. I intended to days ago.”

“So you can eat me alive?” I smirked.

“I will be eating certain parts of you, yes.”

A laugh burst out of me. “I’m not exactly going to argue with that.”

“Are you sure you want it?”

I moved, draping myself over his body and enjoying the way his tail moved to hold me around my waist. “Is there a reason I shouldn’t? You can’t hurt me, and,” I lowered my voice. “I *want* you to fuck me.”

“Once I hunt you, I can’t stop,” he said. “I will make you mine.” As if I didn’t know what he meant, he touched Ariel’s mark. “I want to see my scar on you.”

My heartbeat sped up, and he heard it. In my chest I felt amusement, Ariel awake and teasing me from afar because of my arousal. I sent back the equivalent of my middle finger, which made his laughter deeper.

Ban released a different kind of growl. “I can scent your arousal.” His voice was rougher. “Are you feeling well, Mate? Because if you are not, I need to calm myself.”

The stiffness I’d woken with was fading, and I was *awake*. His nose brushed my temple, inhaling the scent of my hair, and I shivered. I wanted this. I wanted to meet my mates where they were, and I still remembered the visceral desire for him to do exactly this. Hunt me. Take me.

And a day of sleep after so much pleasure? I was in withdrawal.

“I’m feeling great.” I rocked my body against his. “So good.”

Ban went still as a statue. But not like Laurent. This was the predator in him. His hands on my arms tightened, and I wasn’t sure how much he was human or feline.

I wet my lips, adrenaline spinning through me with excitement and desperation. “I don’t know how to do this. Do I run? Do I fight?”

So fast I barely noticed the movement. I was on my back with him above me, feline fangs at my throat. Ban was hard, his cock pinned between us as he held me down. “Run all you like, mate. I will catch you. But don’t fight me once I do.”

Arching up into him, he growled, and the sound rippled over my skin and left chills behind. Naked as I was, I felt the wetness between my legs grow. “You sure about that?”

“I can’t harm you on purpose, but I don’t want to hurt you at all. Don’t fight me.” His nose brushed mine.

“Okay.”

Later I would ask him how he felt, and if he felt in control, we could try again, and a little differently. I liked the idea of

fighting back almost as much as I liked the idea of being hunted to begin with.

“Call Ariel,” he said.

“What?”

My mate smirked, eyes luminous in the half-darkness. “He’ll take you somewhere on the island so I can’t immediately follow your scent.”

“You already asked him, didn’t you?”

“Yes. But in the end, it won’t matter.”

My stomach tightened. “Why?”

Ban sank down my body with the grace and silence only he could manage, tongue covering my nipple, teasing me. The scrape and roughness of it made me close my eyes. A precursor of what was to come.

“I know every inch of this island, and it won’t take me long to find you. Wherever you are.”

He ripped himself away from me and shifted, dropping into his feline form and disappearing. I stayed still for long moments, catching my breath. I was really doing this, and I couldn’t keep the smile off my face.

Clothes. I needed clothes. They weren’t going to make it through the night, but I also wasn’t just going to wander around the island naked.

How did I call Ariel?

“Like that,” he said, making me jump.

“Fuck, don’t do that.”

“Sorry.” But he was smiling.

Ariel took my hand as we walked to the living room. “When did you agree to do this?”

“While you were unconscious. Snoring.”

“I do *not* snore.”

His eyes were twinkling. “You do a little. But like the soft, cute kind. When you’re down deep.”

If I couldn’t feel the joy and lightness through our bond, I might be annoyed. But he was teasing me, and I loved that I knew that. “Where are the others?”

“Asleep. Ready?”

“I have no idea.”

Ariel scooped me into his arms and dissolved around me, flying us out of the house and into the cool night air. “Where are you going to leave me?”

“On one of the beaches. You can go wherever you want, except the mountain, obviously. But if something happens, call me.”

“I will.”

We dropped to the sand. He kissed me quickly and winked before disappearing like mist. It was so fast, and I was left alone on the beach, drenched in moonlight.



CHAPTER FORTY

CALIBAN

*A*riel carrying her made little difference.

My mate's scent was so distinct I could taste it on the breeze. Little pops and flickers of flowers and lemons, like sparks or bursts of light.

I followed them away from the house, dodging through the trees and over rocks I had memorized.

Meg now knew the truth. There wasn't much to know about me. This had always been my home, and I knew every inch of it. What life I had before Prospero recreated me, I didn't remember. But there wasn't a real history for my mate to learn.

Not the way I needed to learn hers.

A sharp flare of scent caught me and pulled me to the left. Toward the beach. She was like a beacon, and inside I smiled. Her normal scent was powerful enough, but my mate's arousal was like the world's strongest perfume.

Delicious. Addictive. Mouthwatering.

The wind off the sea carried that scent to me, and it was almost too easy.

I froze when I saw her standing on the shore looking out over the water. The breeze tossed her hair and she wiggled her toes in the sand before looking around.

Watching her wade into the water made me happy. I wanted to see her do it in the daylight. My beast wanted to play with her in the shallows.

If I hadn't already found her, the move would have been clever. She might have thrown me off her scent for a few minutes.

But no more than that. I would always find my mate.

Mate.

The need to claim her rose and took over. She was mine.
Mine.

I turned around and doubled back to follow her, weaving myself into the grass to watch and wait and listen. Soon she would try to hide, and I would find her.

Hunt her.

Eat her alive.

I could still taste her cunt on my tongue, and I wanted more.

In the distance, I heard the splashes of her footsteps coming out of the ocean. I suppressed the growl building in my chest and flattened myself to the ground. My mate was going to run, and I was going to chase her.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

MEGHAN

It was easy to see with the moon nearly full, and looking out over the expanse of dark water was calming. I loved the beach at night. This was something I wanted more of.

But I didn't think Ban wanted to be on the beach. He was a cat and a predator. That said trees and shadows to me. He would find me, but maybe I could last a little while.

Trees began a ways down the shore. One of the patches of tropical woods. Perfect.

In all the books, people dampened their scent by using water, and I had plenty of water on hand right now. Wading in, the skirt I threw on was immediately soaked. The water was warm, and when everything was settled, I wanted to spend some time on the beach. Whether it was far from this island or here, the ocean made me happy. I wanted to share it with them.

I walked through the water down the beach until I was across from the trees before I ran for them. It was much darker within the trunks, moonlight pouring through the leaves and creating strange shadows and highlights to pass through.

Ban's animal form was entirely black, and he was unnaturally silent. There was no way I would ever see him coming.

It was like the world came into crisp focus. The sound of the waves grew louder, and the sea breeze through the leaves was a delicate melody. Grass beneath my feet was soft, and I wandered deeper into the woods.

How far from the house was I? How long would it take him to get here? Every shadow began to look like the shape of a cat. Adrenaline sang under my skin, and I was shaking.

I hadn't expected to feel so jumpy. In the silence, every small sound set me on edge. And I knew already that this was what it was like to be prey.

Awareness prickled on the back of my neck. Thinking I was prey unlocked something deep in my brain. Some buried instinct that took my senses out even further. But it also felt *right*.

Dropping low to the ground, I listened. There was nothing I heard out of the ordinary, but I felt it. I was being hunted. Tracked. He knew where I was.

I needed to move.

Splitting away from where I'd been, I ran inland. There was a break in the trees and a swath of grass filled with moonlight. A risk to cross it to the bigger group of trees, but if he was close, it wasn't a risk at all.

Peeking around the trunk of a tree, I looked out across the open space. There was nothing there that I could see. But my skin was still tingling, and an unnamed urgency was screaming at me to move.

Move.

I went and tripped immediately. A rock hidden in the grass that made my foot ache. I cursed and froze, pushing myself up.

There.

In the direction I'd first come from, a dark spot in the grass. Ban's eyes reflected in the moonlight—the only real proof it was him and not another rock.

Low to the ground, I barely saw the movement. He crept toward me, silent as death. Utterly sure of his prey. But he didn't have me yet.

I turned and ran.

The heavy pounding of paws told me he was coming after me, but I wasn't going to make it easy. My mate wanted to chase me? Then I was going to give him a fucking chase. Desire crashed over my body, and I had to push it aside.

Catching a tree, I used it to change direction, and then I did it again and again, zigzagging back and forth a few times in order to mix up my trail as much as I could.

I looked over my shoulder, and there was nothing there. He'd vanished. Shit. Ban could be anywhere. How could I hide from him when he could scent both me and what the chase was doing to me?

There was no way.

Oh.

My entire body flared with need.

Amazing how something you already knew could suddenly hit you differently. I'd already known there was no escaping my mate. But knowing it and suddenly feeling this delicious sense of inevitability?

It stole the breath which was already scarce from running.

Bursting out of the trees, I was on the beach again. I must have curved around—the distance across the island was much larger. Too exposed. Too open. I dove back into the trees and came face to face with a pair of yellow eyes, staring at me from a tree branch.

He was in a fucking *tree*. Just watching.

Oh my god, he was toying with me.

I took off, pushing myself as fast as my body could go for whatever I had left, and he was behind me. His big form hit the ground, and I felt the impact. No looking back.

No looking back.

He was so much faster. I felt him gaining. My legs and lungs burned, and I threw everything I had into keeping up my speed, but it wasn't enough. He was right there. Leaping, catching my skirt with his claws and pulling me to the ground before landing over me, legs on either side.

I turned over to face him and scrambled backwards. Ban followed in that smooth, feline gait, not at all concerned with me trying to get away. And I wasn't going to fight him. Not now. Not when those golden eyes were pinning me to the spot as if I were bound there.

One huge paw landed on my chest, gentle, even with the claws shredding my clothes like they were nothing. The lazy, casual arrogance of the movement sent lust twisting through me.

That was the key.

Magic flickered in the air, and he shifted to his familiar human-like form, demeanor still more animal than man. "Eat you alive," he said roughly, before shoving my legs apart and licking me with that infernal tongue I couldn't get enough of.

I was so turned on, I nearly came at the first stroke. Ban was feasting on me, tongue fucking me, *eating* me just like he promised. I broke open, giving him what he wanted, and he didn't stop. He drank every last drop, the sounds caught between a growl and a purr.

He crawled over me, mouth wet and shining with me, and leaned close. "Mine."

"Yours," I whispered. "But I can still run."

I watched the humanity drain from his eyes, replaced with his beast. "If you run, I will not be gentle."

For the last few moments before he could feel everything I felt, I savored the element of surprise. I knew he wouldn't be gentle.

I didn't want him to be.

What I wanted was who Caliban was in his entirety. So even though it was futile and pointless, I pushed him off me and launched upwards, sprinting away from him. His roar followed me, and I barely made it to full speed before Ban caught me and brought me to the ground.

He was still in human form, breaking our fall before he was on me. Pushing me onto my back and pushing my legs up and back so I was nearly in half before plunging into me. His cock was pleasure and pain. So fast it ached, and big enough to make me shudder. Already so wet, he slammed to the hilt, pinning me to the ground with his cock.

And in one motion, he placed his mouth where my neck met my shoulder and bit down.

Pain like fire ruthlessly tore through me, erasing everything and sweeping me away. The now familiar sensation of unraveling and melting and being remade all together with Ban. I felt him in my chest next to Ariel. But right now he was so much stronger.

The bond was dark and filled with pure, feral need. Desire cut deeper than the fangs in my neck. A hunger that eclipsed everything else. Me. I was his.

Ban didn't release me. Holding me down with mouth and cock, he fucked me.

He wasn't gentle.

Every driving thrust was his entire shaft, hips slamming against mine, the slap of bodies loud in the darkness. Every pull back was a whirlwind of pleasure, spines and ridges of his cock sending me into a place of pleasure as pure as his lust.

Magic shivered against my skin, and just like my gargoyle, he shifted. Partially. His cock changed even as he buried himself to the hilt over and over. Ariel was right. His spines

were bigger now. They dragged against me, torturous, glorious, heaven on fucking earth.

Ban's growls shredded the air and rippled along my skin, spreading goosebumps and contrasting heat.

There was no single orgasm. It was all one long orgasm. Or maybe every time he drove home it was another orgasm. I didn't know and I didn't fucking care. I was drowning in a golden cloud of ecstasy and it was so much more because of him.

His pleasure fed my pleasure and his fed mine. One big circle of it. The marks on my neck healed when he retracted his fangs, but he didn't stop.

Didn't stop.

Didn't stop.

The rough scrape of his tongue rolled over my brand new mark, and I screamed. Heat and light nova-ed beneath my skin. I wasn't in control of my body or the way I moved. Trying to pull him to me and take more. It was me and it wasn't me and I was on the brink of breaking when he came.

Ban's spines locked us together, both of us shuddering together as he filled me.

"Mine." The word was soft now, and through the bond I witnessed him come back to himself and see how we were tangled. Feel me and stumble into flawless joy.

"Hi," I whispered, breathless and smiling. Now both of us eased, my legs coming down to a more comfortable position around his hips, and Ban's body softening onto mine and pressing me into the grass.

"I feel you." The words were awed. "I feel everything."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pulled him down so I could whisper in his ear. Now, in the aftermath, everything was quiet and close and I didn't want to break the spell. "I love you," I whispered. "You're my mate, and there's nothing I would change about you."

The emotions of peace, calm, and happiness flowed through the bond. Love, too, but I'd already known that. Ban showed his love clearly in every touch and every purr. But he buried his face in my neck, right over his mark. Just him *touching* the skin there made fireworks explode inside me.

"Love you." The words were more beast than man. But I would never need Ban to explain himself. The bond painted a picture words could never achieve.

"Was that okay?" I asked. "The hunt?"

He pulled back far enough for me to see his face and the cheeky grin there. "I found you while you were still on the beach."

"You *what?*"

I loved the low sound of his laugh. It wrapped around us like a blanket and warmed me from the inside. "You were aroused."

He said it like that explained everything. "But—"

"If your pussy is wet, I can scent you for miles, mate. I'll always find you."

I made a face. "Next time, I'll make sure I'm thinking about nothing sexy. And you won't be allowed to touch me before."

A growl that made me laugh. "We'll see about that."

Between us, the spines holding our bodies together released. We both groaned as we came apart.

Ban looked at me, and the state of my body. Naked and grass stained. "I should let you call Ariel and have him take you home quickly," he said. "But no one else is touching you tonight."

"No," I said in reassurance. "They're not. Only you."

"Good." He scooped me off the ground and began to walk.

I wanted more, but the frenzy I felt wasn't the same as it had been with Ariel. It was... different. The intensity of the

mating had sated something in my soul, leaving us to simply enjoy each other. But I knew we weren't finished.

"You are right, mate," Ban said into my hair, purr suddenly soothing me. "I am not done eating you. I enjoy your taste too much."

I laughed. "You'll get sick of it."

"No." The word was stark and simple. "I will taste you so deeply you are in the grooves of my tongue. So I can keep tasting you later."

My face flamed and my body heated. Not from embarrassment, but desire. That kind of passion...

No part of me wanted it to stop.

"Ban, I need you to walk faster."

I didn't have to tell him twice.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

MEGHAN

*M*y whole body spasmed with rapture. Ban's spines dragged inside me and I was coming all over again. The water of the shower was still warm, but my mate's body was warmer as he pressed me into the wall.

Our frenzy was slow, Ban thoroughly memorizing me with his tongue, hands, tail, and occasionally, paws. Right now, he licked over the spot where he'd bitten, knowing how it made both of us feel. But the flame of desperation had finally gone out in us.

It was amazing to be clean, and it was more than amazing to see Ban in a towel. He rarely wore anything, so to see his human hips wrapped in cloth was as amusing as it was arousing to see the water run down the lean muscles.

I dried off my hair and sat on the bed in my towel, happily exhausted. This felt blissfully domestic, if it weren't for the magic creeping under my skin. It was taking over my

collarbones and rising up to my belly button. Much farther than it had been when I left last night. Whatever progress we'd rolled back was eclipsed. Like we drove it forward instead of back. If we hadn't done any of this to make it recede, would it have already reached my heart?

A ticking clock I was desperately trying to ignore.

Ban laid behind me, curling around my body in that way he had, though he wasn't in his feline form.

"You feel worried." He tugged my towel down and kissed my ribs. Not to arouse me, just because he loved the feeling of my skin and the way I smelled. The purity of the feelings through his bond was comforting.

"I'm turning purple," I murmured. "For most humans that's a worrying thing."

The scratch of his tongue tickled, and for a moment I thought it would be weird. But it... wasn't. It felt good and normal. Ban was a cat. If he didn't try to groom me at some point, I would have been worried.

"You're beautiful no matter the skin color."

I leaned into him. "You don't mind if I'm all purple?"

His purr rumbled against my back. "I hardly look human. Why would it bother me?"

I hadn't thought it would bother him. But with everything surrounding us being bigger than life, it felt good to have such a soothing response and interaction. "I love you."

"I love you, kitten."

A pulse of pain started low in my gut and spread. The familiar tingling of my skin that felt like burning. But it burned so much more fiercely right now. "No," the word came out as a moan. "No, please."

Ban growled, and I couldn't move. I fell over on the bed, and he was cradling my face. "Kitten? *Kitten*."

"It hurts," I managed, fire building along my spine. "It hurts."

But it wasn't pulling me away. It was just pain, and there wasn't any source to pinpoint or something I could tell them to help. My nerves were on fire.

The door slammed open, and I heard other footsteps before I saw Ariel's face over mine. And then the others. "Meg?" Laurent asked. "Can you talk to me?"

"She said it hurts," Ban said. I could just barely see him rub his chest. "I can feel it."

"Yes," Ariel said.

I wasn't in control of my body. Hijacked by pain and power. My muscles were rigid and flexing. Spasms that nearly felt like I was seizing.

"It hasn't reached her heart," Trin said, but his words sounded like he was speaking through water. "And she hasn't disappeared. What is this?"

"If I knew I would stop it," Ban growled.

My vision flashed dark and light, the pain lessening as I slipped away. Not asleep, but to the place of magic. Light glared down on me from both forward and behind. And there was confusion and aggression pulsing through the pearlescent air. Misery, melancholy, and desperation.

"Please," I begged it. "Please stop."

This time it didn't feel like it was listening. I didn't feel like it knew me or recognized me like it had before. Just blazing flames in front of me and behind me. No matter where I looked, they stayed in front and behind, in front and behind. But they were getting brighter now, eclipsing everything.

I opened my eyes, and I was still on the bed, now laying across Trin. Laurent saw me open my eyes first. "Hey, sweetheart."

The pain was gone. Or at least it was less. It was nearly impossible to tell. "It's confused. Or angry. I don't know." They knew about the other dreams, and none of us knew how to interpret them.

“I’m going to sit you up to show you something, okay?” Trin asked. He guided me up to sitting, and he didn’t have to tell me what it was. My skin was violet all the way up under my breasts and the other direction creeping both up and down my neck and below my shoulders.

A spike of fear went through me. It was so easy to push it aside and focus on everything else. But I couldn’t ignore this. From the two bonds I had, I felt steely resolve and calm. They were holding back their own fear for me.

“How much time do I have?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Trin said. “But we know one thing that could help.”

I smiled even though I wasn’t exactly feeling in my prime. “You sure know how to seduce a girl.”

“I know.” he wrapped an arm around my ribs. “I know. But —”

“It’s okay, Trin. I’m not going to say no to sex, of all things, if it’s going to save my life.” Still, I felt regret and sadness from my bonded mates.

“We’re going to check on Prospero,” Ariel said. “I want to see how close he is to death.”

“And to give us something to do.” Laurent was closing and flexing his hands like he needed something to grip.

This whole situation was awkward, but I nodded. “Okay.”

They left, and Trin shifted beneath me, the rest of his arms curling around my hips and legs. “I’d like to take you down near the Island’s heart,” Trin said. “To see how close you can get, and if anything changes for you when you’re near it.”

The way he said it, and the way they left, there was something that set me on edge. “What aren’t any of you saying?”

He met my eyes in the mirror. “Sex won’t be enough. We need the power of mating to drive this back. It’s moving so fast.”

But the expression on his face... “Why do you look devastated?”

“Because I don’t want to force you into it. It’s not the way this should happen between us. Or with Laurent, when it comes to it.”

When, not if.

I felt better, so I turned to him. “Did you think it wasn’t going to happen?”

“Of course I did, and of course I want it to. But I wanted it to be natural.”

Staring at him, I was suddenly annoyed we *weren’t* bonded because I couldn’t feel what he was thinking. “Why do I sense that’s not the only reason?”

A wry smile came to his face, and the atmosphere lightened instantly. “I suppose I should get used to not being able to hide things. To bond you, I have to use my spikes. And using my spikes will make you like you were that first night.”

“Out of my mind with lust? Doesn’t seem like a bad thing.”

“It’s not, and I look forward to using that particular talent on you again. But I also want you without.”

It dawned on me then. He was the only one of my mates who hadn’t truly fucked me. On top of that, our only sexual experience *had* been under his influence.

“Trin.” I finished turning to him and kissed him. “If you think that I somehow don’t want you without your magical siren aphrodisiac, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

One hand came up to cradle my face. “I didn’t—or I tried not to. I just don’t want to bond you to me for eternity before we’ve been *only* us.”

“Then take me now,” I breathed against his lips. “Fuck me exactly the way you want to, Trin.”

“Exactly?”

“Exactly. I don’t want to think about anything else but you.”

He moved far faster than I thought possible. Tentacles moving me, wrapping around my hips and holding fast. Four of them secured my legs, and the way he had them wrapped, I couldn’t move. Another arm grabbed a wrist and pulled it behind my back, and Trin gave it the other one with his human hand so my arms were immobile too.

I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t thought about this. When he pinned me open that first time, I’d imagined all the different ways he could use his form to tease me. And I couldn’t deny the need growing in my core. A desire for the nameless *something* that only he could give me.

Trin was leaning back on the bed, human arms propping him up while I was fully on display for him. His eyes roved over me, leaving a trail of heat behind him.

“I’m not sure you knew what you were getting into when you asked me that.”

“Or maybe I knew precisely what I was asking for.”

“Are you sure?” An arm looped itself around my neck, suckers pulling at my skin like he was using his mouth. It tilted my head back until I was staring at the ceiling. One more way of putting me where he wanted.

He had two tentacles left, and two human arms. *Fuck*, I couldn’t breathe, and it had nothing to do with the suction on my neck. Trin was overriding all the worries I had. Taking away every thought.

Slowly, a tentacle snaked across my ribs below my breasts. Then upward, until it settled directly over my nipples. The suckers were fucking perfectly placed, and it was no accident.

My nipples hardened under the suction until they ached, and it was so fucking good.

“Did you know, Meg, I can control each sucker individually?”

As if to demonstrate, both of the suckers on my nipples *pulled*, and I cursed, only to be cut off by the suction there too. “Trin.” My voice was a whisper.

“Breathe, Meg.”

“A little hard when you’re doing that.”

He chuckled. “What, this?”

A sucker landed directly from my clit, the one tentacle that wasn’t currently in use. It sucked in slow, luxurious pulses, like his mouth was slowly working it. Tasting like he had all the time in the fucking world.

Delicious agony.

“I could keep you here like this,” Trin teased. “Give you the longest, slowest, deepest orgasm imaginable. But I want to do that when I can feel every flutter of pleasure and how close you are to coming, so I can make sure you *don’t*.”

I moaned. “I didn’t know you were a sadist.”

“Not a sadist. Just a monster who enjoys seeing his mate drift in pleasure.”

The sucker on my clit pulled hard before releasing me, moving down and slipping into me until I was full. There was no end to this arm. As much as I could take, he would give.

The suction inside?

“Oh. My. Fuck.” The sensation pushed me over the edge into a deep, shuddering orgasm just like he wanted. It erased any lingering pain and I felt *better*. I hadn’t even realized how run down I was until the burst of relief.

“Come here, mate.”

His arms lifted me without releasing me, the only change was him pulling the tentacle out of my pussy and bringing it back to my clit so he could pull me down onto his now-exposed cock. Long and smooth, he slid into me easily, drawing out the pleasure and making it bigger.

Trin released my arms, and I fell, bracing myself on his shoulders. “You don’t. Need. The venom.” My words came in

gasps that made him grin. But there were little quakes still rippling through my body, and I needed more of this. My mate fucked me and I fucked him right back, rocking my hips and taking him as deep as I could.

I chased the feeling, finding the one spot that made me shake, and Trin didn't have to feel me to see it and take over, driving into me and hitting the same spot I needed with unerring accuracy.

The tentacle around my neck moved and pushed me down to him so he could kiss me as I came, drenching his cock and crying out into the kiss. It was what I needed, and it was what unleashed Trin.

He moved with intent and purpose, finding his own release. Every tentacle tightened on my skin, throbbing with the waves of his orgasm. I felt every single sucker and every jet of heat inside me.

"You wanted to know," he said, human hand reaching between my legs as he slipped out of me. "If it glowed."

"If what glowed?" My mind was still reeling.

"My cum," he said quietly. "And yes. It does."

He caught what was dripping out of me and pressed a handprint to my stomach. "In the dark you can see it more. And I can't wait to cover you with it from head to toe, so you glow too."

Dragging his fingers up my skin, he reached my lips, tracing the glow onto them with his thumb. "And with venom?" He grinned, and I shuddered. Under his venom I would want to bathe in it. Hell, I wanted to bathe in it right fucking now.

"Do it." I kissed his chest, and left a glowing lip print of *him*. "Bond me. Please, I need to feel you."

I wasn't entirely sure how we made it over to the water, but we were bathed in the warmth of it together. "This won't be easy," he said. "You will panic, but I have you."

"Why am I panicking?"

“This requires you to breathe water.”

I shook my head. “I thought we were bonding?”

“We are. And as soon as we do... you know what happens.”

Swallowing, I nodded.

“For me it will be easier underwater. And,” he smiled, “there are things I want to show you.”

“While fucking me?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Breathing under water did make me nervous, but I’d done it once before when he rescued me from the boat. It would be nice to know how it felt while conscious.

“What do I need to do?”

“Come down with me, and breathe out everything. Past where you think you need to. Past where your body begins to panic. Until your mind is screaming.”

I blinked at him. “That sounds fun.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you. Promise.”

He wouldn’t.

His tentacles were still tangled in my legs, and we submerged together. I obeyed, blowing the breath out of my lungs until my mind told me I needed to push off the bottom and *breathe*.

Trin’s tentacles kept me below the surface, and I blew out more air. I was panicking. There wasn’t any way not to. My mind was flashing back to those moments under the sea, and the boat was sinking in front of me and I was thrashing, trying to get free.

“*Meg*,” Trin’s hands held my face. “You’re safe. Breathe out a little more. You’re almost there.”

I shook my head. This was impossible. How could I breathe out more? I was going to die. I was going to *die*.

Closing my eyes, I forced the tiny last vestiges of breath from my lungs, and felt a sting on my arm. I inhaled, and water flooded my body, but there wasn't any panic. It felt like inhaling pure oxygen. My eyes flew open and found Trin beaming. "Better?"

"Yeah." I coughed, and that was a fucking weird feeling. "But I don't know how often I can do that."

My voice sounded different underwater. A little lower and more resonant. I was talking. Underwater. "This is so weird."

"Hopefully a good weird." Trin's tentacles moved me, turning me around and locking my back to his chest. They wrapped around my legs like that first time I joined him in the water, but his cock pushing into me and making me moan was a big difference. "What—why?"

It felt different. Better. And I wasn't even under the influence of his venom.

"Because this is who I am, mate." A thrust of my hips had me gasping and impossibly on the edge of coming again. "Everything will be more powerful underwater. Including my venom. And including the way this will feel, both good and bad."

My legs were spread for him. It was time. Trin's fingers brushed the inside of my thigh. "Here, I think."

The spike on his wrist lanced deep. Far, far deeper than when he was stinging me for something else. I couldn't stop the scream that came out of me and dizziness swept over me, taking that tiny piece of my soul to Trin and returning his to me. Pain ripping me apart and rebuilding me.

He felt like the ocean. Emotions vast and sweeping, with everything tinged in aqua and blue. And the way he felt about me was the same. As big and infinite as the sea he came from. It was pure, even before the world took on a familiar gold shine. "Venom?" I asked. "Do we need it?"

"No," he whispered in my ear. "I'm glad I know that, and you are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. Especially tangled in my arms. But I want to take my time with you." His

hands slid up my ribs and cupped my breasts. “And you’re exhausted, though the frenzy is going to tell you that you’re not. You’re also scared.”

“Not of you.”

“I know.” A gentle movement of his hips, reminding me of the shining pleasure that would carry me away soon. “But there will be plenty of time for us. For a little while, let me make it easier.”

Peace flooded our bond. Peace and pleasure. I relaxed into his hold and his care. He saved me from drowning when I needed it most, and today I would let him do it again.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

LAURENT

“*H*ow is he alive?” Caliban snarled as we returned to the house. “He should be dead.”

Prospero was barricaded in the mountain, waiting until the inevitable happened. Either he was taken by the Island, or Meg was.

It was a stalemate, and everyone was losing.

Ariel was watching me, and as usual, the spirit saw far too much. “Don’t do it,” he warned me.

“Do you see another way out of this?”

He shook his head. “She loves you.”

“She loves you too,” I told them.

“Yes,” Ban said, tail twitching in agitation. “She does. But she’s loved you longer.” The shifter caught on quickly.

“I think he’s still alive because of the other magic,” Ariel said. “Whatever he’s been hoarding these years from the

experiments he's sold. The way he's kept us in the dark, it could be anything. He could hold out for years."

"We're out of options, Ariel. We can't do shit. We can't risk her life, and we can't get her to the island's heart. If she gives the magic back he can, and will, kill her, hoping to break us. Prospero has orchestrated this perfectly, the bastard."

"I know. But we could—"

"*What?*" I snapped. "Please, if there's another option, tell me. Because I've got nothing."

Closing my eyes, I ignored the stab of pain in my heart. This wasn't what I wanted to do, but if it would save her life, it was the only way.

"It doesn't matter if she's loved me longer," I said quietly. "I've loved her just as long. I'm not going to let her die because of him. If anything, this is long overdue."

"Bullshit," Ban said, glaring at me.

In spite of the conversation, Ariel blew out a laugh. "He's right. It is bullshit. None of this is your fault. This is Prospero bending all the rules of magic to get what he wants."

I ran a hand through my hair. "If they come back and it isn't better, we don't have a choice. We're not bonded yet. It will be better this way."

"Laurent—"

"You have to help me," I told them. "You're right. She's not going to want this. But we all know it's the way it has to be."

They didn't say anything, both gazes fixed on the floor. No one wanted to say that I was right, but I was.

"Okay," Ariel finally said. "I can't say no to this because she's my mate, and I have no choice but to protect her. But if there were any other way..."

I smiled. "I know."

Ban stood and put his hand on my shoulder. "We will not let her forget you."

My jaw ground together, fighting back the rush of emotion, and I nodded once. I turned and went back outside to look at the sky and breathe the air. Prepare myself for what I needed to do.

To be Khalas one last time.



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

TRIN

*M*ate. Take. Mine.

I wanted to drag her down to the bottom of the ocean, pin her down again, and pleasure her until all the worry I could still sense disappeared.

She was a vibrant light in my chest. So full of life and openness, it hurt to feel the underlying fear and concern. I didn't want my mate to feel anything but happiness.

Making sure I held her tight, we sped through the tunnels under the island, and Meg gasped with wonder. Through our bond, it was like seeing it through her eyes.

I couldn't remember what it was like to see underwater for the first time. It was far too long ago. So feeling her joy was intoxicating, all of it enhanced by my venom.

The frenzy was starting, and there was only so long I could hold off taking my mate and making sure she understood how thoroughly *mine* she was. We had one stop to make, because

once I let myself go, there was no telling where we would end up.

The water lightened, turning it an amazing shade of blue. The brilliance of the island's heart rippled outward visibly, and I was allowed even closer than before.

“Wow,” Meg whispered. “That’s...”

“Yes.”

She couldn't see herself, but chills ran over my entire form. Meg was glowing. The light coming from under her skin was nearly identical to the light coming from the heart, other than the color. It felt like it was pulling her toward it and away from me.

No.

I pushed us backwards. Not yet. The violet tinge had retreated on her skin temporarily after our sex, but it was already climbing closer again. I wasn't going to endanger that by taking her directly to the source.

Meg moved, rocking against me, and her pussy around my cock drew my focus. All of it. Nothing else existed outside of her. Her body, her pleasure, the bond between us.

Driving my cock into her again, I didn't stop moving. Deeper, harder, and faster, as we spun through the water. To all the beautiful places I'd been wanting to show her, and would show her again when we weren't both out of our minds.

She cried out in the water. The ecstasy of her orgasm pouring through our bond and into me. It felt like honey sliding through my mind. Delicious and sweet, never enough. I needed more.

“I can't get enough,” I told her, finding her clit with one of my arms and focusing suction there. She came, drenching both our minds with hot desire, and I let myself go. Sharp waves of that same lust contracted through me, filling her with cum until it trailed behind us.

It hit me. This was forever. She was mine *forever*. I would never have my fill of her, but I could always have more.

Down to the bottom we went, into the seaweed and onto the sand. I pushed her down and took her roughly from behind, the sun painting patterns on her skin as we moved.

I took her once more, facing the drop off into the deep. Where it was easy to look out into nothing and lose your mind because you realized how small you really were.

In the shallows full of colorful fish I spread her legs wide and tasted her the way I had the first time we were all together. Everything tasted so much sharper in the water for me. The zing of her sharpness and sweetness of flowers. I would bottle her and drink her, if there were a way to do it.

In the shallow tide pools near the beach, she clung to me as I fucked her into oblivion. Her eyes rolled back, and I reveled in the way her cunt clenched around me. I wrung orgasm after orgasm from my exhausted mate, past the point of delirium.

The magic receding from her skin was a fucking relief.

I lost count of the times I came, and the sun was fading by the time Meg showed signs of needing real oxygen. “Let’s go back,” I finally told her, lifting her into my human arms and kissing her gently. She was limp and soft, curling toward me as we swam.

“Trin.”

“Mate.”

A little energy came back into her, and her mouth was on my neck, mimicking my suckers as I used them on her. “I love you.” She kissed the words onto my skin.

“I love you so fucking much, Meg. You have no idea.”

Her giggle made me hard all over again. “I kind of do, now.”

She was drunk on the frenzy and what was left of the venom. The way she was kissing under my jaw? I never wanted to stop. “Ariel tastes like wind,” she said quietly. “Do you taste like water?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know. I’ve never tasted myself.”

“I want to know.”

“You’re exhausted, Meg. I just fucked you for a full day.”

“One more.” She pulled herself up in my arms and kissed me, turning to me and wrapping her legs around my hips. “I can do one more. Let me.”

“How can I argue with that?”

She grinned, her eyes still shining and glazed. “I don’t think you can.”

“No. Hold on. We need to get you back near the surface, and then you can have your wicked way with me.”

I couldn’t even pull my cock back inside myself because it was so hard. It was raging and aching. “Can you feel that?”

“Mmm. It feels like you’re all coiled up like a spring, ready to be let out.”

“Pretty accurate. And that’s all because of you. Thinking about your mouth and what it does to me.”

We were in the tunnels, and I took the corners almost too quickly until we were back in the pool of her bedroom. “Don’t surface until you’re ready,” I warned her. “Or your lungs will take back your normal air.”

Meg kissed me, making our tongues dance together and sinking her hands through my hair. “Oh, I’m not going to surface for a minute,” she said, and I nearly came as my mate sank through the water and landed on her knees.



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

MEGHAN

I sank through the tangle of Trin's arms until my knees touched the bottom, and I was staring at his gorgeous, alien cock. By all rights it was too pretty to be a dick, but I was still high on his venom, and it *was* pretty.

Trin was barely holding himself back. I felt it through our bond. Three of them were there now, the others in the background while Trin and I worked through the frenzy that came with mating.

Slipping my mouth over the head of his cock, I moaned. He was a fucking lollipop if there was an ocean lollipop. "You do taste like water," I murmured, kissing down the side of his shaft. "So good."

His laugh was strained. "Glad you think so."

"Mmm." I moved back to him and took him deeper. No part of me cared if it was because he was my mate or because I

was high as hell on the aphrodisiac. He tasted fucking incredible, and I was going to swallow him whole.

The lights under his skin were glowing, surrounding me with whirling color that felt like an aurora.

Tentacles and suckers teased the inside of my thighs, some of them kissing right over his mark. I hadn't had a chance to look at it closely, but the barest brush set me on fire. They were taking their time, but I felt where they were going.

"This isn't for me," I said. "It's for you."

"Trust me," Trin said. "It's all for me, Meg. My cock isn't the only thing that loves the feel of your cunt."

The tip of an arm slid into me, a sucker attaching to my G-spot right as another covered my clit. A recipe that could have me coming in seconds, and he damn well knew it.

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the delicious feelings of writhing tentacles and rhythmic suction as I focused on suction of my own. His skin was so smooth, I barely stopped moving because I craved the feeling of him on my lips and tongue. On the sides of my mouth. In my throat.

Opening as much as I could, I dove down onto him and pressed my lips to the flat skin around his cock. He felt just as good here. I felt like I was shimmering. Vibrating with pleasure and need and addicted to the feeling of him and his skin. His taste.

"Fuck, Meg."

I wanted him to always sound like that. Undone.

And the thing I realized about deep throating when you were breathing water? I didn't need to breathe. No need to come back up for air. I could just swallow him, milking my mate's cock with my throat and savor the waves of sheer bliss coming through our connection.

Tentacles moved, wrapping around my head and throat. Covering my eyes and binding me to Trin's body.

"Oxygen is overrated," he agreed.

Pulling back, he thrust his cock down my throat in time with the tentacle inside me. The movement of tentacle, cock, and suction was almost musical, working together and separately to bring us into paradise again.

I didn't care that he'd taken over. I couldn't care about anything except these fucking feelings. He slammed home, the luxurious glide of him over and over again. I was dazed and floating, sinking deeper into Trin and who we were together.

He was close. His pleasure hovered on the horizon, and mine was there too. They crashed into each other and exploded, building and layering and combining into the final blaze we both needed.

The rich taste of the ocean lingered on my tongue, and the rest of me was at once weak and happy. Trin pulled me up, and I broke the surface of the water.

It was a much more seamless transition this way, the water simply vanishing and turning to vapor and allowing air to come back to my lungs with ease.

“Why didn't it feel this way the first time?”

He winced. “Because you were unconscious. Couldn't get rid of the air properly first. It fucks up the whole process.”

“Right.” I placed my palms on the edge of the water and lifted myself out. What did the mark look like? Placing one foot up, I looked, and my eyebrows rose.

“I thought it might be a line or something. Because of your spike.” On my inner thigh, there was now a patch of skin that was distinctly Trin-colored, in spite of my unnatural violet skin. Smooth, a richer shade of purple and some turquoise.

He brushed his thumb over it, and I moaned. “You can't do that.”

“Oh, I will do that. But I wasn't sure what it would be either.”

My wet hair draped over my shoulder, and there was no blonde left. It was like I'd dyed my hair lavender. I think I'd like it better if my body weren't that color too.

“Where’d it move back to?” I couldn’t quite get a good look without the mirror, and I didn’t want to move further right now.

Trin’s fingers brushed my ribs. It wasn’t far from where it had been this morning. I looked at him, unable to speak. His face carried no expression, and I felt him hiding it. “It’s moving very fast right now,” he said quietly. “Already above where I touched you. It will be passed this morning’s mark in minutes.”

“*What?*”

“It’s okay,” he said. “We’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

“You need to take me down there,” I said. “I’ll go right now.”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Make it listen? Make another deal? Give the magic back to the island and not to him?”

“If it hasn’t let you give it back by now, I don’t think it’s going to. And I’m not sure you can pass on magic that belonged to someone else.”

“Fuck all of this,” I said. “The loopholes are maddening. How do you live like this?”

“What choice do we have? Magic is strange and doesn’t follow logic. Normally it isn’t this complicated because we’re not dealing with monsters like him. The Island is just as bound as you are. All of this—all of it—lies with Prospero.”

Rage surged. “There has to be something, Trin. There *has* to be. Because the options of ‘die from being consumed by magic,’ ‘die by maniac killing you to get to your mate,’ or ‘lose one of the loves of your life’? Those aren’t acceptable. He can’t pull the magic out of me, right?”

“No. Not with the power he has left. And even if he had enough magic to do it, he gave it to you.”

“The fact that there’s no magical re-gifting allowed is bullshit,” I muttered. “I don’t want it.”

He chuckled at my joke and kissed my cheek. “I know you don’t. I don’t want you to have it either.”

In the bond I felt the dread he could no longer hide. The magic was surging up my body, and if Prospero didn’t pass soon...

“So I’m stuck,” I whispered. “There’s no way to fix it. It’s going to take me. I won’t sacrifice Laurent’s life.”

It was freeing, the realization and acceptance of knowing there was no other way. The magic would do what it would to me, and I would accept it. Anger and fear struck through my bond with Trin, but before either of us could say anything—

“Yes you will.” The voice came from behind me, and I turned to find Laurent standing there.

I rolled my eyes. “No, I won’t.”

“Meg.”

Trin kissed my cheek again. “I’ll give you two a minute.” He disappeared under the water swam out of sight.

Standing, I went to the closet and pulled on the first thing I saw. A dress. It clung to my still-wet skin. “Laurent,” I said back to him, meeting his eyes in the mirror. “No.”

“The magic will return to him once I surrender.” He closed the distance to me. “You’ll be free.”

“Once you *die*,” I choked on the words. “It’ll go back to him once you die. I can’t let you do that.”

“Yes, you can,” he said gently. “I’ve lived a long life, Meg. I’ve done many bad things, and I’ve been more than lucky to know you were my mate before the end of it.”

“It will kill me,” I said, whirling to face him. “Isn’t losing a mate like a piece of yourself?”

He pulled me to him, crushing me to his chest. The motion was the only thing betraying how this was truly affecting him. “You’re not bonded to me. You can grieve me like a normal person.”

“If you fucking think there would be anything *normal* about me grieving you—”

Laurent kissed me, and it was everything. Every kiss we should have had all this time. He guided me back into the wall, and I couldn't stop the tears. How did we suddenly get here? Only minutes ago I'd been wrapped up in love and happiness.

Now it felt like goodbye, and I didn't want it to be.

Like it knew, pain of magic grew in my gut.

“Meg, listen to me.” Laurent pressed his forehead into mine.

“No,” I moaned. “I can't.”

“Sweetheart, *please*.” His voice was agony too. “Whatever magic Prospero has—the magic you saw him receive from the portal, and whatever he's stored from other payments like it—it's keeping him alive. And you are running out of time.”

“Bond with me,” I said. “Right now. It'll help push it back.”

His hands came up around my face. “It's not enough,” he whispered. “We both know it's not enough.”

A full day with Trin, and the magic was already beyond where it had been when we started. What chance would Laurent have of pushing it back enough to save me?

He was right.

It wouldn't be enough.

My heart cracked, and the pain of it rocked through me. It amplified the pain already growing in my body, and I sagged between him and the wall, my knees giving out.

“Please,” I begged, already feeling what it was like to be without him. It was so much worse than the night I thought I'd lost him in Paris. So much worse than thinking he didn't want me. He would be *gone*. “I can't let you go.” I shook my head. “I can't.”

He'd come with me as I fell, still holding me. “And I can't let you die.”

The sob ripped out of my chest like a jagged edge, tearing me open. “No. No, no, no.” The word came out of me like a chant or a prayer, or neither at all. It was the only thing I could say.

“I love you,” he whispered. “And I’m so sorry I was foolish enough not to tell you.”

“I love you.” The words were broken, buried in his neck. “Please don’t go.” I begged even though I already knew it was too late. He’d decided, and there was no way I could stop him. “I love you,” I whispered.

Laurent’s eyes were glassy as he pulled back to look at me. “Hearing you say that is all I’ve ever wanted.”

He kissed me again softly, and my body felt like it was being pierced with shards of glass. This hurt too much. It couldn’t be real. None of this could be happening. There had to be another way.

A different set of arms circled me from behind, and Laurent shifted me to them before he let me go. Panic gripped me. “No, wait. Laurent. *Please.*”

I no longer recognized my own voice. The pain was too much to get off the floor, but I still tried. Ariel wrapped himself around me, holding me, and I broke further. “Please.”

A jagged whisper.

Trin and Ban were here, close by, ready to hold me too. None of them said anything, but I could feel their pain and their resignation.

Laurent was at the door, and I couldn’t breathe.

I thought I’d known what it was like to die.

I’d been wrong.

Dying was watching the person you loved walk out the door and knowing you were never going to see them again. Dying was carrying pain that felt like poison, knowing it was the only way. Dying was surviving.

Laurent looked at me, and I blinked away my tears, trying to keep my eyes on him as long as possible. I needed to run. I needed to drag him back here and make him stay, and I couldn't move.

His expression was only peace. "He may take my heart, Meghan Irela. But it has only ever belonged to you."

The world blurred with new tears, and when I blinked to clear them, he was gone. Like he'd never existed.

Crumpling the rest of the way to the ground, I let myself shatter.



CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

LAURENT

*M*eg was breaking behind me.

I'd never heard sounds like the ones she was making, and I couldn't bear it. One moment of weakness. That was all I could afford. I leaned against the wall and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes.

My mate would live, and eventually she would be happy. It was enough. It had to be enough.

The one saving grace was that we weren't bonded. She couldn't feel the agony and fear raging through me, and I couldn't feel her pain. If we'd finally forged that connection, I wouldn't be able to do this.

But there wasn't another choice.

Meg hadn't even noticed the way the magic was moving up her body as I held her, curling inward toward her heart. It was surging despite her bond to Trin. If I didn't do it now, she would die, and she *couldn't die*.

I closed my heart to the sounds of her grief and pulled myself upright.

Now.

It had to be now.

Stripping off my clothes, I folded them and left them on the couch. Selfishly, I wanted Meg to have something of me. My scent wouldn't last, but maybe it would bring her some comfort.

Shifting into my gargoyle form, I let myself move with speed across the island to the mountain. Earlier we'd come here, and found Prospero locked in his lair, alive, blockaded, and with enough power to keep himself that way until this moment came.

Khalas.

What the man had named me all those centuries ago. It meant *salvation*, and I was going to make it true. But for Meg. My mate. Not the monster I was sacrificing myself to.

I allowed my steps to fall heavily as I went to his door. Let him know I was coming and wonder whether it was to attempt to kill him or surrender. At the very least he deserved that uncertainty.

"*Prospero.*" I pounded on the door.

It seemed like an eternity to listen before I heard his steps, and the movement of whatever was blocking it. Finally, he opened the door, and I cursed whatever fate had given him just enough power to hold on.

The man in front of me was nearly a zombie. Emaciated and drawn, it felt like he could crumble to dust and surrender his own soul to the island at any moment.

"I see you've finally come to your senses."

I pushed past him into the space. It was crowded and cramped with every bit of magical paraphernalia available. Things were everywhere, bordering on squalid. It was such a far cry from the spacious and bright home I'd left, and it

wasn't because Prospero was dying or in hiding. This was who he was.

"I've finally understood what it means to love someone more than life itself," I said. "Something you'll never know."

"You don't know what I've felt in my life. I had one before you." His smile was both gleeful and grotesque, going around and collecting things.

"Whatever you've convinced yourself, Prospero, my death will not restore your humanity. The magic you spent is gone. The only thing you'll accomplish is to save my mate from dying, and for that, I thank you."

He led me out of the room and into the room with the cage. Where we'd rescued Meg after the magic dumped her here. The work table was cleared off. "There."

I took a breath, and went, fighting the memories of the first time I lay beneath Prospero's tools. I hated the feeling of such helplessness, but it wouldn't last long.

The bastard was taking his time.

"Do it already."

He chuckled, still smiling. Like the old Prospero and not the desiccated husk in front of me. "Never thought I'd hear you beg for death, Khalas."

"And you never will. I'm asking for my mate's life. So get it over with."

"First, I'll take your heart, and then I'll take your life. Then maybe you'll finally live up to your name after all these years."

Prospero placed the chisel over my already broken heart, and I closed my eyes.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

MEGHAN

I was lost in myself.

The pain of everything was crushing me, and I couldn't lift it. Ariel's body was on top of mine. My head was cradled by Ban's paws, and Trin was with me too. He had one of my hands. I couldn't stop the sobbing or the pain. If this was what it was like to lose a mate without a bond, what would it be like to lose a bonded one?

It was unthinkable.

Still, the pain grew. I couldn't move at all. Paralyzed by the magic inside me now. It ached and burned and amplified everything else so I was nothing but a throbbing bruise that life refused to stop pressing on.

"It's going to take her," Trin said.

"He'll make it," Ariel said. "He will."

"He's going to die," I whispered, breath hiccuping.

Ariel pulled me up and turned me to look into my eyes. I still had no control. “You’re going to be all right, Meg. I promise. You will survive this.”

The world blurred. “I don’t think so.”

“You will.” He kissed me quickly. “You will. Whatever you feel right now, it is *more* than you, understand? The grief is yours, but the pain is not. Laurent went to make it go away.”

Pain?

I was in pain.

Everything was pain, and my heart hurt as much as my body. It was so much I was used to it now.

So much pain.

But if Laurent was gone, there would always be some pain. I needed to learn to live with it.

“It should have lasted longer,” Trin said. “Should have *slowed*. It’s like our bond made it surge.”

Ban pulled me into his lap and cradled me. A slow, rolling purr that made my body relax against my will. “For me too,” he said. “It surged after we came back. I saw it recede, but it returned faster than it fell.”

I felt it with a single piece of detached clarity. My mind had separated from myself and my grief in order to survive. And it was in that mind that I had the thought.

Sex. Orgasms drove back the magic’s power. But mating didn’t. Mating made it grow. Like the connection between me and my mates opened my soul to more of the magic, and now it was too late to stop it.

The magic in me convulsed painfully. Something was different. The light I saw behind my eyes was only one bright spot shining directly into my eyes. There was a *knowing* there. A grief that matched my own, and a yearning I couldn’t explain through the agony.

“*Fuck*,” Ariel cursed and whispered. “Come on, Khalas.”

“Meg,” Trin turned my face to his, panicked. “You have to stay with us all right? You have to stay right here.”

“I want to. I don’t know how.”

Ban shifted to pin me down with his feline form, but I was already being pulled away. Not transformed and not killed. Just taken once more, away from the monsters who loved me and who I loved.

I felt it when it happened.

The power simmering under my skin entered my heart, and I was fully a being of power and magic.

I expected it to hurt.

But it didn’t.

Instead, the pain in my body faded though I felt theirs through our bonds. Ban growled in my ear, and I felt the desperation. Trin was kissing the back of my hand, and Ariel...

Ariel’s dark eyes were as desolate as I felt.

My mind was fractured, part here and part gone. And in the part that was still here, I heard them begging me to stay the same way I begged Laurent to stay. And I wanted to.

I did.

But I couldn’t.

It was too late.

I was no longer mine.

“I love you,” I whispered. “I’ll come back.”

And I was transported into a world of violet light.

It was like the dream, and yet this time I was real. There was no more pain in my body as I stood in this infinite mist before the single flaming nova of power.

I was myself, and not. Another presence lived inside me now. The Island’s magic embodied me, and it felt like *I* took a step back.

Relief. That was what I felt, along with the panic from my mates.

I'm alive. I'm here. I pushed the thoughts and love to them, and I felt them calm. Not entirely, but the blind panic slowed. There was a sense of motion and running. Speed and desperation.

Hello, Meghan. A voice sounded in my head. Neither male nor female. It just was. *I am not going to hurt you.*

You took my body. I thought the words because I wasn't currently in control of my mouth.

Only because I do not have my own. I will return it to you, but first, I will make things right. I have been waiting a long time to do so. Thank you, for helping me.

If I'd still had control, I would have blinked. *I helped you?*

You and your mates. And now, I will help you.

The magic moved my body, and we walked toward the brightness. This time when my body moved toward it, we got closer.

Closer.

And closer still until I closed my eyes. My body kept moving.

The clatter of metal brought me back. I was standing in a room in the mountain, Prospero beside Laurent on a table, ready to die. But now he stared at me as I was. Glowing like a spirit and brimming with magic.

When I spoke, my voice was new. A double-timbre that was me and the magic in me. I trusted this voice, because I felt it in my bones. The Island was on my side now. And this man could do nothing to us.

I let the island have full control willingly.

“You will not touch him.”

“Will you stop me?” Prospero asked. “I'm doing this for you. For both of us.”

My body moved faster than I knew it could, crossing the space and grabbing Prospero by the throat. And then we moved *through the stone*.

It was the weirdest fucking thing I'd ever felt, and behind us, I heard the echo of Laurent shouting my name.

We exited into the sunset sky, standing on rocks I hadn't seen before. Near the mountain—it was behind us. But these rocks had a sheer drop to the water.

Water that barely covered more jagged rocks.

The Island deposited Prospero at the edge none too gently, and he pinwheeled, catching his balance.

“*Meg.*”

Behind me, Laurent was charging up the rocks in his stone form, breaking the land in order to get to me. And my other mates were right behind him. They stopped when they saw me and Prospero, staring.

“What are you doing?” The magician barked. “You need his heart. You *demand* it.”

“Is that what I asked of you?” The Island turned back to observe the man who was teetering on death in more ways than one. “Or is that what you imagined I wanted? I knew no want at all until you, Prospero. Without you and your interference, I would have needed nothing.”

Prospero took a step forward, and Laurent was there in a flash, standing between Prospero and my body, still protecting me. The others came closer, ready to intervene. Ariel was half smoke, and Trin clung to the rocks with his arms, ready to launch himself. Ban was already crouched and stalking.

“Your mate is safe, gargoyle,” the Island said. “And she loves you. She loves each of you. I am grateful she has allowed me to speak. It is a long overdue conversation.”

“Meg?” Ariel asked.

The Island released me. “Hi.” My voice was normal, and this was the most confusing thing that had ever happened to

me, but for the first time in forever, I felt *whole*. Laurent was alive, and nothing could stop me.

“I’m so sorry,” I said to the three of them. “I couldn’t stop it, and I couldn’t stay. I love you.”

Prospero took a step toward me, and the Island took control again. She thrust out a hand and power laced together under my skin. I *felt* how she wielded it. So incredibly different from being a vessel. Prospero froze with a groan. “Stay where you are,” the double-voice said.

“I don’t understand,” he panted. “I’ve only been trying to give you what you needed.”

“Of course you don’t understand. Because you didn’t truly listen. Your own desires have always been your compass, Prospero, and nothing more.”

“But—”

“*YOU WILL. NOT. SPEAK.*” The Island’s roar shook the mountain, and through my bonds I felt awe, satisfaction and grim delight. Shades of reassurance and so much love I couldn’t contain it. “All you have done is speak, Prospero. Now, you will finally listen.”

The memory of the much younger Prospero played in my head. *I will give you all that I am, and you will give me everything.*

“I knew nothing before you. Magic is not made to know its own will. It is a tool and a gift, or a phenomenon to be observed. Beauty to be savored. And such was this Island until you came and sacrificed your heart and demanding everything in return. The island gave it to you, because it did not know better. It had no way to know.”

“The bargain...” Ariel said.

The Island snapped my head to look at my mate. “What bargain? There was no bargain. He shoved his heart into mine, and the magic traded, as was natural, one gift for another. And then, suddenly, I understood what it was to *feel*.”

A dawning understanding cracked into me, and my own grief echoed that of the island. Of *Miann*. Prospero had forced consciousness into the island's heart.

"I gave you a gift," Prospero ground out. "You make it seem like I murdered you. I gave you *life*."

"You took with no thought," the island said. "I was a being of *wanting*. Feeling, and nothing else. A creature of reaction and response. Of only instinct. What do you know of the human heart? Nothing except your own. All your anger, revenge, and satisfaction.

"I could not take back your magic, freely given before I knew that it *was* to give, and you could not take back your heart."

For the first time I saw true fear enter Prospero's eyes. "Why did you ask for more if you didn't want it?"

The Island lifted my hand, and a sphere of glowing light floated above my palm. The silence surrounding us deepened as the sphere grew larger and brighter. "No being is willing to surrender their life once they realize they exist. You, of all people, know that.

"All I knew was your heart made me aware. Giving it back, even for the magic you borrowed, would have snuffed me out again. I wanted more. I asked for all I knew to ask for."

"Hearts," Laurent said, in awe. "What you already had."

"Life," The island said. "Four pieces of life. One from each domain. So I could have a form that was mine. We are all made of the same things. Hearts were all I knew. But what did I need with the physical hearts of creatures, but to gain more knowledge of everything I did not have?"

The circle of light encompassed my entire arm now, and within that space, there were three shapes.

"I gave you *what you asked for*."

"No," the Island stood tall in my body. "If you had listened and watched, you would have understood. If you had asked again after time. But you did not."

My body looked out over the ocean, ablaze with fading daylight. “And then you destroyed yourself and took everything else. Bound yourself to me. Your failures gave me knowledge. The ability to think. Each life you forced me into and burned to ashes fed my will. But I wanted completeness. Simply to be whole. Like I tried to give to you.”

“He wanted power,” Trin said. “We’ve known that forever.”

“Have you?” The Island sounded amused. “I did try to give the gift of what was desired, and no one has understood that it is all the same.”

The hand not circled by glowing power reached out, and I felt a shock. Like a silent wave of pressure billowing outward. And in my soul, I felt what it was. My mates did, too.

“To be whole. It is the desire of every living thing. No matter how deep you must search to find it. But you never asked again.” She turned once more on Prospero. “Not once. You spoke to me. Forced reactions from me. Used me and twisted me to do what you wished, preying on my weakness. And none of it was real.

“What I needed was completeness, and all you did was destroy. No more.”

My body snapped its fingers, and three beams of light slammed into my mate’s chests, returning their long-stolen hearts.



CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

ARIEL

*F*ire hit me so hard I nearly fell backwards down the rocks. Pain, and then the deepest shudder as my body came together in a way it had not been...

Since I was created.

My heart.

I hadn't felt the beat of it in my chest in centuries. It was loud. Pounding. The feeling brought me to my knees.

Meg stood bathed in power in front of us. I'd thought more than once that she looked like a goddess. Now? She was one.

I could feel her in the center of my chest. Whole and alive within the magic that should have killed her. I didn't pretend to understand why she wasn't gone, but I didn't care. Love spun through me with every heartbeat.

Everything was different. I felt stronger and freer.

Because I was.

The ties on me were gone. The magic Prospero had bound me with for centuries had evaporated the second my heart slammed back into my chest. Our hearts weren't in the center of a power he controlled anymore.

My smile grew.

"I would have accepted your sacrifice," the island said to Prospero. "After so much time, I forced myself to want the hearts with such fierce passion, if only to be rid of you. Though it could have been so much simpler, if you'd asked."

He stood taller. "I can still give you everything," he said. "The last heart. And once my magic returns, I'll give you whatever else you need."

Meg tilted her head to the side, and it was eerie watching her body make a movement that was so distinctly unlike her. Through our bond, I felt her reach out and touch me—sensed she was doing it to the others as well. She was there. She was with the Island. She supported every step.

"Did you think the request was only for you?"

Prospero's eyes went wide.

"The piece of magic in this woman's body that belongs to you is small, compared to all that I am. And I will never be able to take it back from you." She nodded to Prospero, like she was offering him some kind of grace. "It was freely given. I cannot deny that."

Light sprang from Meg's chest, rushing out of her and back into the magician. It was like watching time rewind. He stood taller, got younger, suddenly looked like he had for all the years I'd known him.

Meg's body was still steeped in the power of the island, like she'd truly been transformed.

"Thank you," he breathed. "Thank you."

"Why?"

He bent over with his hands on his knees, catching his breath. Like the process exhausted him. "You gave me back my life."

“Is that what I did?”

He looked up, and I saw the confusion. Meg was confused too. I felt it.

“What you’ve done is your own making, Prospero. When you let your desperation eclipse your knowledge, you burned your humanity away and bound it to me. Pulling on the only source of power you could find to keep yourself alive. I cannot take back what was freely given to you, but I can take back what was stolen from me.”

Prospero laughed. I knew the sound. He thought he’d won because his power was back in his hands and his immortal form was whole once more. But I wouldn’t count on it. Meg was practically glowing with delight and satisfaction inside my chest. I couldn’t stop my own smile because of it.

“If you could take it back then why haven’t you?” He asked. “You expect me to believe that for centuries you simply existed? Hating me? When you could have taken something from me? No. If you could have, you would have done it.”

Meg smiled, and it was like the sun reversed its setting. “No, Prospero.” She walked toward him, and the air crackled with energy. “Magic is formless. As it should be. It cannot manifest things or resist them. It can only take and give. But magic given form?” She lifted a hand. “That could destroy the world. And yet, I would not, because of what I learned from you.”

“Get to the point,” he snarled. “If you’re going to push me off the ledge, do it. I’m immortal and you know it.”

“Yes,” she laughed, the double tone of the voice absolutely fucking terrifying. “You’re immortal. Nothing more than magic with a form. Soon to be formless.”

“What—”

She grabbed his neck, and his body began to crumble. *Crumble*. Like dust. First his feet and legs and rising quickly.

“Without your body you are like me. And like all those souls you surrendered on the altar of your arrogance. I had no

choice but to accept them, and it would have been the same with you.

“I waited all these centuries to take it back, Prospero, because I wanted no part of you inside of me.”

Prospero gasped for breath and reached, but the magic held him so securely, there was no fighting it. I watched as the man who'd tormented me for a millennium simply disappeared, nothing left but the shimmer of magic that was his immortal soul.

“And now you are formless,” The Island said. Magic swirled around his soul, and it sank into the earth. “And it is where you will stay.”

“Where did you put him?” Laurent asked.

“Where I have lived all this time,” she said. “The island's heart. It is a fitting end for him.”

“An end?” I asked. Prospero *was* immortal. He wasn't going anywhere.

“Yes,” the island turned and smiled at me. “An end. But first, a beginning.”



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

MEGHAN

*M*y body walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down into the water, and I knew no fear. All my mates tensed, but it wasn't the island's idea to kill me. Far from it.

Turning back, she looked at the four of them.

"Four pieces of life," it spoke. "One from each domain. You have given me three."

She gestured to Ariel, Trin, and Ban.

"Only one remains."

The island receded into the background, and I gasped, falling forward as it gave me control of my body once more. Laurent caught me. Clung to me. I held him right back. "I love you," I told him. "I love you, and if you ever try to do that again, I will cut your fucking heart out myself."

He grinned and kissed me. "Noted, sweetheart."

The others were closing in, taking me in their arms. Everything was brighter. Richer colors and scents in the midst of all this power. But I also felt that I wasn't meant to hold it.

It was all right for now, but not for long.

"She means the bond?" Trin asked.

When I'd first dreamed of the island, there had been four lights. Just now when it had pulled me away from them, there was only one left. Four pieces of life. Four hearts that were mine. Life meant far more than a beating heart.

I looked at Laurent. He'd faded into his human form during everything, but now he wasn't. Wings sprouted from his back and formed, claws on his feet scraping the stone beneath us.

The arms around me hardened, and my mate grew taller, staring down at me with the eyes of a monster.

My monster.

"Ready?" He asked.

There wasn't time to warm me up. My body wouldn't last that long. But with all the power in me, I didn't think it would hurt.

I nodded.

Laurent kissed my forehead and guided my head to the side, baring my neck. Opposite from where Ban had marked me.

"I love you," he whispered, and bit me.

Everything I'd thought was wrong. The pain was so much worse. Like my body was shredding itself into little pieces. But even this wasn't the worst I'd felt.

Now I knew what the worst would be.

Losing them.

My soul was swept away and replaced with Laurent's piece, and all of my mates were with me now.

I wilted, no strength left, and he kept me upright. The magic was gone. Torn out of me with the last bite, and despite my weakness I felt incredible. I felt whole and complete...

Just like I'd always wanted.

Laurent's eyes searched me, looking for the source of what had made me melt, and my other mates too. But he was also looking at me like he wanted to devour me. I felt just how much. The frenzy underneath his concern.

I wanted him to rip my clothes off and take me right here on this rock. Hard enough that my back scraped and I could feel it for days.

The purr that rose was all I could hear other than the beat of my my heart.

"Thank you."

The voice was completely new, and alien.

We all turned in unison.

A shape of a woman stood in front of us. She was lined in light, almost like an apparition. Her voice was no longer doubled, but I knew it like I knew my own name.

"Four pieces of life?" I asked.

"You gave me each, and for that, I will always be grateful to you." She came toward me, and all my mates tensed.

The island laughed.

"Sorry," Ban said.

"Do not apologize for protecting what is precious. Your protection and care is what saved everything." She looked at me. "Do not take it for granted."

Then she put her hand directly on my chest.

My body lit up like a fucking firework. My skin was bright with light, blazing higher than what was left of the sunset. So much energy I felt like I could fly. And something deep within me *shifted*.

I couldn't remember the last time I felt this good. Years, if ever. Like I'd gotten to sleep for a week straight and was in the best shape of my life.

She pulled back, and the light faded. The wind off the ocean blew my hair around my head. My purple hair. Deep within me, lower than where my mating bonds rested, there was a core of light. It flickered and glowed like a flame.

Shock froze me, and then disbelief. Reaching out a hand, I turned my hand to the sky and imagined a violet flame hovering over my hand.

It appeared.

I looked at her and shook my head. "What—"

"It is freely given," she said gently.

Ariel stepped forward and pulled me to him. He touched my hair and swept his fingers down my face. There was awe in his bond I didn't understand. Turning us to the Island, he said words I never thought I would hear.

"You made her immortal?"

"A gift." She looked at each of us in turn. "An exchange, as is natural. Be happy."

"Thank you," I whispered. There wasn't anything else to say. How could you thank someone for giving you everything?

She bowed at the waist. "It is you who deserve thanks. Take your joy here as you may. But when you leave, do not look back. I will bind this island so tightly no one—human or monster—will ever set foot here again."

So Prospero would be here forever, trapped in his own mind with no chance of escape. There was a part of me that felt sorry for him.

A small enough part that I dismissed the thought entirely.

She walked to the edge of the cliff, form glittering into nothing. "Do you have a name?"

Turning back, she smiled, and just before she disappeared, she spoke a final time. "I will remain *Miann*."

The five of us were left staring at a darkening sky. Stars were beginning to appear, and it was far too silent. After the sword hanging over our heads for so long, it felt strange to be... free.

“Holy shit,” I finally said.

It broke the silence, and suddenly we were all laughing. My mates passed me from one set of arms to another, and I began to lose track of all the places they kissed and touched me.

There was too much to talk about and too much to absorb, but we needed each other more than we needed words.

“I’m happy to have some good cliff side sex,” I said. “But if you want more, you better take me to bed.”

Laurent scooped me up in his arms. “It would be my pleasure, mate.”

Tumbling into the bedroom together, there was laughter and lust, kisses and a thousand kinds of pleasure. I got lost in them. All of us got lost in each other. Or rather, we found everything we needed. Our deepest desire had been fulfilled.

We were whole.



EPILOGUE I

MEGHAN

I could see Christine on the pier, and she was *bouncing* with excitement. My own fingers were drumming on the edge of the boat, waiting. There was so much to tell, I felt like I was about to burst.

We stayed on the island a few more days, enjoying the sun and the beach and each other, before Ariel conjured a boat big enough to get us all home. The Kings arranged a private area for us to arrive. Mostly for Ban. We didn't want him to hide.

"Ready?" Laurent asked, wrapping an arm around my chest and pulling me against him.

"I don't even know," I said. "I went on a boat to a party and came back immortal. It's a big change. She doesn't even know yet."

We hadn't told them anything about what happened, because it wasn't a story you told over the phone.

Laurent laughed and kissed my hair. It was purple now. Permanently. I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling. Through our bond, he was enjoying my scent, the fact that he could hold me, and he was also thinking about bending me over the railing so he could rail *me*.

“Behave,” I whispered.

“Never.”

The smile I couldn’t seem to shake broke out on my face.

A shrill scream came from my best friend as our boat glided in next to the pier, and neither of us waited until the boat was tied off. There wasn’t a way to know if I tackled her or if she tackled me, but we ended up in a heap on the pier, laughing, and then sobbing.

Because neither of us had known if we would see the other ever again.

Christine’s mates introduced themselves to mine—the ones they didn’t know—while all of them watched us with concern.

Ban crouched next to me, and I smiled at him. I was going to have to get used to seeing him in pants. “Are you all right, kitten?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He bumped my forehead before kissing me, and the men retreated, leaving us at the end of the pier. We moved to the end, swinging our feet out over the water.

“Okay, what the hell was that?” Christine asked. “And your hair? I mean, I love the color, but I didn’t think they had hair dye on magical islands. What the hell is the company going to say when you show up with lavender hair? And the kiss? I thought Laurent was going to sweep you off your feet. These are only the first of the million and a half questions I have, so you better be ready.”

I laughed, pulling her into another hug. “Fuck, I missed you. There were so many times I wished I could call you.”

“Avoiding the questions much?”

Gently smacking her knee, I turned to her and crossed my legs. “Some of the story I can’t tell without them. But I’ll catch you up. The ballet fired me. Those four are all my mates, and we’re all bonded. The hair color isn’t dye, it grows that way now. Oh, and I’m immortal like you.”

Christine’s jaw dropped open so wide she looked like a fish. “What did you just say?”

“I can do this too.” I conjured a miniature firework over my palm.

Ariel was already teaching me to control the magic and use it. We didn’t know how big it was, but learning about it was incredible.

“What. The actual. Fuck.”

I giggled. “I know, right?”

“There’s a lot more for you to tell me than I thought.”

“Christine, you have no idea.”

She looked down. “I’m just really glad you’re alive.”

“Me too. It was close a couple of times.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she took my hand. “We have food and everything up at the house. Rented the whole place, not knowing what shape you’d be in and what you needed. Let’s go. Because I’m impatient and if you’re not going to tell this story without them, then I want to hear it *now*.”

She pulled me behind her so fast I almost tripped, but we were laughing the whole way.

The story took a long time to tell. Food and wine were had. Then coffee and dessert. And by the time we were to the end of it, I was curled up around a cup of tea, and Ban’s tail was curled around me.

Christine sat across her mate Erik’s lap, leaning her head on his shoulder.

Every bit of jealousy I’d ever had toward her was gone. I knew exactly how she felt, and *fuck*. We were the luckiest bitches in the whole damn world.

“He’s really gone then?” Alexandre, another of Christine’s mates, asked.

“No,” Ariel said. “He lives. But no one will ever see, hear, or speak to him again.”

“Good riddance,” Trin said. Ariel and I had remade part of the living room into a pool for him, and he lounged along the edge of it.

Of course, it didn’t go unnoticed by me that the edge of the pool was scalloped... oddly. The dips in the border looked suspiciously like they would fit a person. Like you could be pressed into one of the grooves with someone standing behind you, and no one would ever know you were being fucked by your mate.

I smothered the laugh that almost burst out of me, and my mates were suddenly looking around the room, trying to control themselves. There was absolutely zero chance of stealth when they fucked me. They were too passionate, and I was too loud.

But still, the pool was interesting.

“Meg,” Christine said. “We get to do this forever.”

Her mate Marius laughed and looked at my monsters. “I suppose we should get to know each other? I think we’re going to be around one another a lot.”

Ban nodded. “I would like that.”

Alexandre looked at my feline mate. “The four of us have yet to choose a permanent home,” he said. “But we are looking. If you like, we can find a place where you will be free and welcome.”

I felt a sliver of anxiety in Ban ease. He loved me, and he was happy to be here with all of us, but he also missed the island. More than Ariel and Trin, it had truly been his only home. And the greater world was not made for someone who looked like him.

“Thank you,” he said.

Leaning over, I kissed his cheek, making sure he felt everything I was trying to give to him. Pride and affection, encouragement and peace. We were together, and none of us would ever let him be ashamed of who he was, or let others do the same.

Erik stood and took Christine with him. “I think it’s time we took our mate to bed. The east wing of the house is yours. We’ll see you in the morning?”

I nodded. “Goodnight.”

Christine beamed at me before sticking out her tongue. We both knew what was about to happen to both of us, and neither of us cared about sharing it anymore.

“A whole wing just for us?” Ariel asked.

“We each get a wing so we don’t have to hear either group,” I said.

My spirit dissolved and reformed around me, pulling me into the air. “We can be quiet.”

I snorted.

“*We* can be quiet,” he said again. “You, we’ll have to keep quiet.”

“No need when we have all this space.”

Laurent caught up with us. “I don’t know. Seeing how long you can go before you scream sounds like fun.”

I glared at him. “No.”

“I think yes. And I know just how to reward you.”

We entered a bedroom that looked out over the sea. It wasn’t as big as the one on the island, but it would do. Ariel dropped me on the bed, making way for Laurent to cage me in with his body as Ban moved behind me. “What kind of reward could possibly be worth the torture?”

He shifted his hands into claws, slicing my clothes away from my body and teasing me at the same time. “You know what.”

My nipples hardened under his attention, and I really didn't know. "Laurent—"

"I'll give you your two favorite words."

I froze.

Fuck.

He laughed, low and deep, knowing he had me.

Falling back on the bed, I covered my face with my hands. "Fine."

My pants came off, and the combination of all four of them aroused through the bonds wasn't something I could fight against.

Laurent shoved my legs apart with his knees and leaned over me, wings spread, claws drawing down my thighs. "Good," he said. Then he leaned in so he could whisper. "Now stay quiet while my tongue fucks your cunt. And the rest of us, too."

I whimpered. "That's impossible."

His smirk had my body pulsing with need already. "I know. But you're going to try anyway, right?"

I nodded and bit my lip.

My gargoyle slid down my body, kissing as he went. Slow and fluid movements, tongue teasing in all the right spots before he came back to kiss my lips. His eyes flared with heat, and his claw touched my clit, teasing me. I pressed my lips together, desperately fighting the urge to moan.

Laurent smiled. "Good girl."

I was so fucked.

In spite of the way I struggled not to cry out, I was still smiling. This was exactly where I wanted to be.



EPILOGUE II

MEGHAN

SIX MONTHS LATER

I stared down at the glossy flier advertising the season's new ballets with all the beautiful promotional shots I used to be in. My chest ached with some grief, but it wasn't as much as I expected. The main reason was that tonight was opening night, and I hadn't missed one in years. Granted, I was usually *in* them.

C'est la vie, as Laurent would say.

People knew I was still alive—I wasn't quite ready to abandon life entirely. Janelle and Monsieur Chagny had been overjoyed and bought the story I spun of washing up somewhere and not knowing the language, which made it take forever to get back.

I wasn't ruling out dancing forever, but at the moment I was happy and enjoying my time with my mates.

Ban threw himself down beside me on the sand and grabbed the brochure, tossing it aside. “You don’t need that, kitten.”

“Oh? What do I need?”

His tail twitched back and forth. “I think you need to be chased.”

“An interesting proposition.”

A month ago we moved to another island. This one bought by Christine’s mates. It was bigger than *Miann*. By a lot. And thanks to magic and a little bargaining with some local spirits, we now had houses to die for on each side of the island, with a few more being built.

The Kings wanted to create a place for monsters like Ban, who were too inhuman to exist in society, but didn’t deserve to be banished for merely existing.

And we all loved it here.

They’d helped me get everything from my New York apartment through a portal into our house, and we’d done the same for Laurent. His practice would be missed, but he had no qualms about leaving it behind.

“What can I say to make the proposition better for you?” Ban asked, bracing himself over me.

I wiggled my toes in the sand, listening to the sound of the waves behind him. “You never have to make it better, Ban. I always want to be chased by you.”

The island—which we hadn’t named yet—was big enough to have room for chasing. It was big enough to do anything we wanted, and thanks to magic, we could have any season or climate which came to mind. Which meant there was an expanse of thick, humid forest before our house that Ban prowled in.

“Tonight,” I said quietly. “I think I’ll feel like a walk in the woods.”

He purred, lowering himself on top of me. “Naughty, kitten.” There was no hiding from each other. It made chasing

so much harder, but I loved the thrill of feeling him hunt me.

And everything that came after, too.

“But it cannot be tonight.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Because your mates have a surprise for you,” Ariel said, appearing over us. “And we need to get ready now.”

Ban lifted me up, and I stared out at the glittering sea. I couldn't believe I fucking got to live here. With my best friend and all our mates.

We'd been mated for six months, and it still didn't feel real.

“Am I going to like this surprise?”

“I think so.” He took my hand and helped me to my feet. “If you don't, we'll bring you right back and make it up to you with a night full of orgasms.”

I held back a laugh. “And that's different from every other night?”

He wove our fingers together. “I should make you walk all the way back to the house for that,” he said. “But we don't have that kind of time.”

Given we had all the time in the world as immortal mates, we were definitely leaving the island. Ariel had already given me one surprise recently, taking me to see the pink mountains I'd described to him. I'd never had a view like that before, so far in the air. He promised to take me back when it was colder and there was more snow.

Ban sped past us in his feline form, rocketing back to the house, and seconds later I was in the air, swooping through our bedroom window and landing by the bed.

Where there was a dress laid out. The kind of dress I hadn't worn in a very long time. “Where the hell are we going?”

“Still a surprise,” he murmured. “Just get ready.”

The dress was a deep purple, and entirely made of sparkles. It was the color of my hair, but darker. There were no sleeves, the fabric gathering in pleats over my breasts and flowing down to the floor in an elegant wave.

Christine picked out the dress. I could guarantee it.

A box next to the dress produced dangly earrings and a bracelet that slipped up my forearm.

For a second I thought about putting my hair up, but it had those nice beach waves, and since I didn't know where they were taking me, I would take the risk. Instead I did my make-up quickly with the magic I'd been practicing.

I wasn't very good. Especially since most of my practice sessions with Ariel ended up with us breathless and naked. But I was getting better.

Low, comfortable shoes completed the outfit, and I went in search of my mates. I felt them gathered near the living room, and when I stepped into view, I froze.

So did they.

My mates were all wearing tuxedos. Even Ban. And Trin was in his human form.

“What the hell is going on?”

It was difficult to ignore the bursts of desire from all of them. Laurent was the one who stepped forward. “You look incredible.”

“So do you—” I froze. “Is this a proposal or something? Not that it wouldn't be great, but we're already kind of bonded for all eternity, and I didn't put on waterproof mascara.”

Laurent laughed and put a finger under my chin before he kissed me. “We're not proposing,” he said softly. “Like you said, you're already more our wife than any kind of ceremony could make you. But if a proposal is something you want?”

That took me off guard. Did I want a proposal? “No,” I whispered. “I don't need a wedding to know I'm yours. But a ring wouldn't be out of the question.”

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Good to know.”

Leaning to the side, I pinned my other mates with a stare. They were all standing there far too innocently. “Anyone want to give me a hint? I’m dying here.”

Trin held out a hand, and I went to him. Ariel turned to the wall and began forming something very door-shaped. “Christine mentioned what today is,” Trin said. “And we all know, even though you’re happy, your life is very different now than it was before.”

“Yes...” I suddenly had an inkling of what was happening, but I didn’t want to believe it. Wasn’t sure how to react if it were true.

Ban, who I couldn’t believe was wearing this kind of suit, and who looked fucking *good* in it, took over. “We want you to have everything, kitten. Even the things you used to have.”

“Which is why,” Ariel said, standing and brushing the hair out of his eyes. “We’re keeping your tradition. Just because you’re halfway around the world doesn’t mean you can’t go to opening night.”

The doorway behind him dissolved, and I gasped. Beyond it, I heard the warming of strings and saw the heavy red curtains. The milling of a crowd ready for a show. The door led directly into a box at the Met.

Emotion washed up in a wave, and I blinked away the tears. It was *right there*. My heart ached from missing it so badly, and yet there was peace.

“Was this a bad idea, sweetheart?” Laurent asked.

I shook my head. “No. It’s a very good idea. But it’s still not easy.”

“No,” he said. “I would guess not.”

They led me through the door, and it was like stepping into a memory. The sounds and smells—this was a life I’d lived for so many years. People were backstage warming up and making last minute touch-ups on their make-up. Making sure the ribbons were secure on their shoes and they had fresh toe-

pads. They were teasing each other for the superstitions they used before each performance and repeating inside jokes which had come about in rehearsal.

And they were doing it all without me.

I sat down at the front of the box, and my mates arrayed themselves in the seats around me.

“Are you okay?” Ariel asked.

One deep breath in, and one deep breath out. This was closure. Just because I wasn’t backstage right now didn’t make me any less a dancer. And just because it wouldn’t be a huge part of my life going forward didn’t mean I needed to leave my love of it behind.

“Yes,” I finally said. “Yes, I’m okay.”

In my chest, tension eased as they relaxed. They’d really been nervous about this. But it was so sweet—it was everything.

It was *Giselle*. One of my favorites. And only a few minutes after sitting down, the lights flashed and I was swept up into the story of beautiful love and exquisite heartbreak.

We didn’t make it all the way through the door back into the house before I was taking off my clothes. Toward the end of the ballet they all teased me. Thinking dirty thoughts I could feel and touching their marks if they could reach them, all making sure that when we got home I was ravenous for them.

“Four on one is never going to be fair,” I said, hauling Ban close and kissing him. “You guys will always win.”

“It’s true,” Laurent said mildly. “But you like that.”

Damn it.

Trin pulled me toward the pool in our bedroom, collapsing into the water and releasing his tentacles. They wrapped me up and started arranging me the way he wanted me, along with sliding over his mark. “You know what we haven’t done in a while?”

“Don’t tease me,” I begged. “I can’t take it.”

He simply held up his wrist, showing me the spike. It had been a few months since we’d used his venom for anything. “I promise you,” my voice was breathless. “I don’t need it.”

“Need isn’t the right word,” he said. “But *want*? That’s the one. We want you to be out of your mind tonight.”

“Why?”

The scratch of Ban’s tongue licked over his mating mark, shooting sparklers of pleasure straight down to my core. “Why not?”

“Because we love you,” Ariel said. “And tonight is all about you. In every way.”

Laurent raised his eyebrows in question. If I said no, none of them would be angry or offended. No matter what, I was having the time of my life tonight.

I started to laugh, and my mates looked at me like I lost my marbles. But I couldn’t stop the laughter bubbling up through me.

“What’s so funny?” Ban asked.

“Me,” I said. “I just...”

Wrapping my arms around Trin’s neck, I grinned. “Why the fuck am I hesitating?”

Then they were laughing too. The prick of Trin’s spine met my shoulder, and the world took on a glossy, golden shine.

“*Fuck.*” I whispered.

Ariel chuckled and lifted me out of the water. “I have a plan for you mate.”

“Oh?” I couldn’t resist and couldn’t think with the shimmering haze of pleasure around everything.

“Something I told you about a long time ago, and now your other mates know too. They’re all on board. So hold on.”

“I—”

Tentacles wrapped around my waist and I was flipped, brought down onto Trin's waiting cock. He didn't move, just seated himself deeply and waited, watching me.

Ariel floated up, only physical above his hips, pressing the head of myself to my mouth, and I took him down greedily.

"Laurent," he said. "Your turn."

My mates pleased me together regularly, but this felt different. Usually it wasn't planned. This was coordinated—organized to overload my body and mind.

Laurent's stone hands gripped my hips, and I suddenly remembered what Ariel was talking about. When we'd bonded he'd painted this image for me, exactly like this.

My gargoyle mate took my ass, and I was overwhelmed with the pleasure of it. Trin's venom overcame the need for me to be warm or prepared for it. I could simply exist and they could simply fuck me.

Of all the things we'd done, I hadn't yet had his stone cock in my ass, and it made light flare behind my eyes.

Ban's tongue on my clit and Laurent holding my wrists hostage behind my back were the last pieces of the puzzle, and for a few heartbeats we were all still, holding our breath.

And then my mates took me.

I imploded. Exploded. An overload of sensation that drove me straight into golden pleasure. Slow, heated honey that flowed under my skin and made me moan.

Ariel controlled my breath with his cock in my throat, just like he wanted to. And the lack of air made everything sharper. My mates were the only ones allowed to steal my breath now. They could take me to the edge of darkness and bring me back, and I would go with them every single time.

I didn't know which way was up or down right now, all I could do was feel and breathe when I could. Cherished and fucked, owned and loved, mated and melting beneath all of this glorious attention.

Trin fucked me hard, pulling back just in time to come all over me, painting me with light in the darkness of our bedroom. Ban wasted no time slipping under me and into me, and I realized why. My two mates that could lock me to them fucking me together...

Oh, shit.

Ariel gripped my hair, fucking my throat both hard and slow, exactly the way he knew I liked it. Showing me how in control he was and how much I was not. Through our bond, he was close. But two could finally play at that game.

I reached for him through the mating bond and *pressed*. Shoving my need and arousal toward him and making him lose control.

He swore, coming, fucking my mouth erratically as he came. As soon as he was finished his hands were on my throat and his mouth was at my ear, whispering. “Later, I’m going to make you come only through the bond. Pin you down for *hours* and make you writhe until you’re begging me for it.”

“Good,” I managed, breath heaving. “I’ll give it right back.”

“We’ll see who wins, mate. I’m a very patient spirit.”

Ban and Laurent hit the same place deep inside me, and I cried out, thrust over a cliff so I was falling down into another orgasm. “I can’t,” I breathed. “Even with the venom, I can’t.”

“Can’t?” Trin asked. “Or afraid to?”

They knew me too well, and I moaned, closing my eyes. I was on the edge of the orgasms that frightened me as much as I craved them. A place they only took me to once in a while. Now was one of those times.

It was rushing up, and I couldn’t stop it. My two mates fucked me in sync, driving into me and falling back. The friction of stone and the drag of spines was too much, too much, too much—

They came together, and I was on fire.

Pleasure that made me separate from myself and let go. Like my entire soul was coming undone. Ban's spines locked inside my pussy and Laurent's knot swelled inside my ass. I finally collapsed on Ban's chest, unable to move or think or breathe, body still carrying flickers and flares of orgasmic starlight.

Trin leaned down and kissed me, and I closed my eyes, ready for more or less. Tonight, they could take me anywhere, and I would follow them happily.

"I love all of you," I mumbled against Trin's lips. "And thank you for tonight. I loved it." I was no longer coherent, so I had to get the thoughts out while I could. "I love you so fucking much."

In my chest I felt the words from each of them, and in the flesh, I felt exactly how much they loved me.

The venom still in my system made the world gorgeous. Even the breeze coming through the windows made me shudder. The air was made of gossamer and the water felt like silk. I was a goddess made of light and pleasure, made to be worshipped by these four men.

Four monsters.

I supposed since I was immortal, I was a monster now, too.

It was exactly what I never knew I needed.

We had all of eternity in front of us, and I finally knew what it meant to feel alive.

The End.

*H*ello beautiful readers!

I hope you've enjoyed Meg's journey as much as I did!

As soon as I wrote *The Point of No Return* I knew I wanted to write Meg's story too. I'm so happy it's out in the world! And there will be more books coming your way very soon.

(And if you want to check out Christine's story, [it's here.](#))

In the meantime, I'd love to meet you! [Click here](#) to sign up for my newsletter for updates and sneak peeks, and the occasional dessert recipe!

I also have a Facebook group where we share memes, I share snippets of works in progress, and everything in between. Come join the [Court of Fantasy!](#) I hope to see you there, and there will be more books very soon!

Devyn Sinclair

PLAYLIST

This is a playlist of some of the songs I listened to while writing *All the Devils Are Here*.

I hope you enjoy this! Listen to the full [playlist here](#).

- **Amène-moi** — Gísli Gunnarsson
- **Believe** — Kings & Creatures, William Morris
- **Can You Hear Me Now?** — Owes
- **Care** — Robert Koch, Julien Marchal
- **Carry Me Home** — SOHN
- **Caves** — CLANN
- **Chapter 54** — Kelsey Woods
- **Constance** — Spiritbox
- **Dance for me Wallis** — Abel Korzeniowski
- **The Death of Peace of Mind** — Bad Omens
- **Desert Rose** — Lolo Zouaï
- **Desert Rose (Live Strings Version)** — Lolo Zouaï
- **Desire** — Borrtex
- **Dial Tone** — Catch Your Breath
- **Disarm** — The Civil Wars
- **Don't Let Me Go** — Roniit
- **Drown** — HANDS
- **Elusive Reasons** — Time, The Valuator
- **Empires** — Ruelle
- **Entropy** — Dos Brains
- **Eschaton** — Tony Anderson, Christopher Dennis Coleman
- **Eschaton - Christopher Dennis Coleman Rework** — Christopher Dennis Coleman

- **Eschaton - Tony Anderson Rework** — Tony Anderson
- **Farewell Life (Arn Andersson Remix)** — Nights Amore
- **Gris, Pt. 1** — Berlinist
- **Gris, Pt. 2** — Berlinist
- **Hold Me Like You Used To** — Zoe Wees
- **How Deep Is Your Love?** — ROSE BEAT
- **How Villains Are Made** — Madalen Duke
- **Hundreds** — Lissom
- **If Not Us** — Jeff Rona
- **If We Were Made Of Water** — BANKS
- **I'm Not Okay** — Citizen Soldier
- **Inception: Time - Orchestra Version** — Hans Zimmer
- **Just Pretend** — Bad Omens
- **Lady Caliph: Dinner** — Ennio Morricone, Yo-Yo Ma
- **Lady Caliph: Nocturne** — Ennio Morricone, Yo-Yo Ma
- **Live Like Legends** — Ruelle
- **Lune** — Tony Anderson
- **Lux** — Cyrus Reynolds, Gregg Lehrman
- **Making Your Way Home** — Masatoshi Yanagi
- **Miles Away - feat. Kellin Quinn** — Memphis May Fire
- **My Father Said** — Hurtwave
- **The Night We Met** — Lord Huron
- **Overdose** — Hurtwave, Landon Tewers
- **Playground** — Bea Miller
- **Power is Power (Feat. The Weeknd)** — SZA
- **Renegade** — Aaryan Shah
- **Silent Prey** — Glasslands
- **Singing of Forests** — Blure
- **Suffoctae** — Nathan Wagner
- **To Keep You From Breaking** — Kelsey Woods
- **Will I Make It Out Alive** — Tommee Profitt, Jessie Early
- **Yesterday's Wake** — Son Lux
- **You Are a Memory** — Message to Bears

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Devyn Sinclair writes steamy Reverse Harem romances for your wildest fantasies. Every sexy story is packed with the right amount of steam, hot men, and delicious happy endings.

She lives in the wilds of Montana in a small red house with a crazy orange cat. When Devyn's not writing, she spends time outside in big sky country, continues her quest to find the best lemon pastry there is, and buys too many books. (Of course!)

To connect with Devyn:



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