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BALTHAZAR'S  
FIRE

THE  
DRAGON  
GUARDIANS  
BOOK 2

HE'LL FIGHT TOOTH AND CLAW  
FOR WHAT BELONGS TO HIM.

# Balthazar's Fire

# *The Dragon Guardians series*

## Book Two

By

Felicity Brandon

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## **Balthazar's Fire (Book Two)**

**Four dragon brothers with a mission.  
One dangerous secret they're sworn to protect.**

### *Balthazar*

Sparks flew when I met Cherie.  
That's why I whisked her away to my mountain retreat,  
To romance the woman who finally spoke to my dragon.  
But then, in a flash, she was gone.  
Snatched by my nemesis, Oliver Monroe.  
I'll destroy the beast who took her,  
Fight tooth and claw to take her back.  
By the time she's in my arms again,  
She'll be mine—*for good*.

### *Cherie*

Taken by a monster,  
I awake dazed in the darkness,  
Captive to the beast who'd once been my boss.

My only hope is freedom,  
But to get away from his clutches,  
I'll have to trust in another man,  
Balthazar Vaughn.  
And his twisted secrets are buried deeper than most.

# Prologue

## *Balthazar Vaughn*

Heart pounding, Balthazar rocketed toward town, his intention focused on one thing: finding Cherie Flynn. He didn't think through his plan, or the potential repercussions of whatever he decided, and he intentionally avoided dwelling on the words of his late father, Michael.

Since his demise, Michael Vaughn had reached out regularly to his eldest son, sometimes meeting him in spirit on the mountains and communing with the same telepathy he'd taught his four boys in life. Balthazar had heard his warnings about Monroe. He knew the danger, but it didn't matter. His only concern was Cherie.

As the cityscape loomed, he allowed the breeze to guide him to the ground, his violet wings folding seconds before the transformation overcame him. Well-practiced, the change was almost instantaneous, his human form emerging where the dragon had once stood before he sprinted onto the property his family kept on the outskirts of the town.

Elevated and isolated, the house was the perfect spot for dragons to land, and for men to exit in one of the shining sports cars lined up in the underground parking lot. It was a system that worked well for the Vaughns, but never had Balthazar known such urgency as he tore from the grounds behind the wheel of his Aston Martin.

“Call ‘brothers’.”

Giving the order to the microphone above his head, Balthazar stared out at the road ahead, tensing as the car's system called all three of his brothers via their What's App group.



“Balthazar?” Sebastian connected first, his voice etched with concern. “How are you?”

“On my way.” Ignoring Sebastian’s query, he pressed down on the accelerator.

“That wasn’t the question,” Sebastian chided. “Are you healed?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered, his gaze flitting briefly to his chest before his attention returned to the increasing traffic.

The injuries he sustained the night before, thanks to his long-time rival, Oliver Monroe, had mended, but the effects of Monroe’s attack were deeper felt. The bastard had taken Cherie and turned into a chimera to assault Balthazar. He shuddered at the disturbing memory. Monroe had long been Balthazar’s nemesis but discovering that the cretin was also a shape-shifter had rocked the foundation of Balthazar’s world.

For so long, he and his brothers had assumed they were the only ones with such hybrid abilities, as though the magic in their genes were a lofty ideal held only by the Vaughn bloodline. But they’d been wrong. Oliver Monroe shared the same magic, and now he had his hands on the only woman Balthazar had ever truly wanted.

“Are you, though?” Sebastian asked.

“No.” Balthazar’s jaw tightened with the confession and reflexively he checked to see if either Draco or Cole had joined the call yet. “I’m worried sick about her.”

“We’ll find her.” Sebastian’s resolve thundered through the ether, shrouding his older brother in the one thing he had to hang onto—hope.

“I know we will.” Balthazar had never been more grateful for his brother’s support.

“Hey.” Cole’s voice filled the air. “Where are we, Balthazar? Do we have a destination?”

“Monroe’s offices.” Balthazar had no way of knowing why, but his instinct told him that was where the moron was keeping Cherie, and his gut rarely lied. “She told me she was in the basement.”

“You’ve spoken to her?” Cole sounded bewildered.

“Not exactly.” Balthazar blew out a breath. He didn’t have the patience to explain everything to them, but they’d offered—no, they had demanded—to stand alongside him and fight to free Cherie. An explanation was the least that his brothers deserved. “I have some type of telepathic link with her.”

Balthazar was absurdly thankful that Draco wasn’t on the call yet. He could only imagine what the third of the four brothers would make of his woo-woo explanation. Despite the fact that the Vaughns regularly communicated with telepathy as dragons, they’d never known the ability to stretch beyond their family before.

“Telepathic?” Even Sebastian sounded skeptical.

“Yeah.” Balthazar shrugged, although there was no one there to see the gesture. “I heard her in my head and she relayed what she could to me.”

Which wasn’t much. Gazing out at the passing landscape, Balthazar recalled the brief exchange in his head.

*I’m coming to find you, Cherie, he’d assured her. Do you know where he took you?*

*She’d hesitated and for a moment he thought he’d lost her. It’s a basement somewhere. That’s all I know.*

*Don’t worry. He remembered his determination. It was the same tenacity that drove him now. I’ll find you.*

*Thank God. Relief had resounded in her thoughts.*

*Has he hurt you?*

It was Balthazar’s worst nightmare, the idea sending fire to his blood. If Monroe had harmed her, Balthazar would

tear him into pieces. At this point, he might destroy Monroe anyway. Just for kicks.

*Not really.* She'd sounded terrified. *He has me tied up, but that's it.*

Balthazar straightened in the seat at the memory. Whatever happened, Monroe had created that fear in her. He'd come to the Vaughns' mountain lodge uninvited and had transformed into a dangerous beast in order to attack Balthazar and snatch Cherie. Balthazar hated to think what he might have done since.

"Okay." Sebastian sounded unsure but was clearly trying to stay upbeat. "Monroe's offices it is."

"How soon can you be there?" Balthazar checked his speedometer as he cruised around the city's perimeter. "I'm about ten minutes away, assuming I can get through the traffic."

"It's mostly clear at this time of the day," Sebastian assured him. "I'm even closer than you."

*Closer?*

Balthazar's brows knitted as fleetingly, he wondered where his brother had spent the night, but the query didn't materialize. Wherever his brothers were was irrelevant. They would convene to battle Monroe, because deep down they all understood the same important tenet. The Vaughns were stronger together.

"Cole?" Balthazar probed. "How far away are you?"

He was growing more anxious to reach Cherie by the second. Balthazar didn't know what Oliver Monroe had intended when he abducted the brunette, but clearly it was nothing good. Monroe had a proven track record of being an asshole, and only the day before had dressed Cherie down in public before summarily dismissing her from her role as his assistant. That was how Balthazar had met Cherie in the first place; her presence in Monroe's office had been the only silver lining of his curt and futile meeting with Monroe.

“I’m in the city already,” Cole advised. “Already en route to Monroe’s tower. E.T.A in less than five minutes.”

“Good.” Balthazar was reassured by his brother’s urgent response, but, as usual, there was one person missing. “What about Draco?”

Of course, it *had* to be Draco. Whenever there was trouble in the family, Draco was bound to be at the heart of it.

“What about me?”

Balthazar’s heart skipped a beat at Draco’s sardonic response, his focus flying to the car’s dashboard to confirm that his other brother was indeed already online. “Draco?”

*When had Draco joined the call?*

The last thing Balthazar needed was Draco’s mocking comments when he was already so highly strung about Cherie’s plight.

“I’m here.” Draco’s voice radiated conceit, the sound twisting the knot of nerves in Balthazar’s stomach. “Where are we meeting?”

*Does that mean Draco hadn’t overheard the entire conversation?* Balthazar inhaled at the possible reprieve. It shouldn’t matter what his younger brothers thought, but Balthazar was no fool. It *did* matter. Their parents’ untimely deaths meant that he had taken on a quasi-paternal role, especially to Draco and Cole—the youngest of the four brothers. He cared what they all thought.

“At Monroe’s office tower,” Balthazar told him, fighting to steady his breathing. The trauma of recent events had shaken Balthazar’s normal suave demeanor. “As soon as you can.”

“I’ll be about ten minutes,” Draco confirmed. “Are we just going to march in there and demand your new woman back?”

Draco’s tone was still filled with sarcasm, but for the first time in hours, Balthazar’s lips curled in genuine

amusement as he imagined the scene Draco described.

“No,” Balthazar clarified. “We can do better than that.”

“Care to share?” Cole probed.

“We’ll meet on the corner of Beauford and Grange,” Balthazar instructed, suddenly feeling much more like himself. “We’ll go over the details there.”

# Chapter One

*Cherie Flynn*

Footsteps echoed overhead, the noise reverberating around the dark space Cherie was confined to and ratcheting up the tension in her body. Yanking against the ropes that secured her to the chair, her eyes darted around the shadowy basement for the four-hundredth time.

*Where am I?*

Her heart raced at the unanswered question, her hands struggling futilely against her binds as she grappled for composure.

*Don't panic.* Closing her eyes, she forced her breath to slow. *Think. How do I get out of here?*

“Balthazar’s coming,” she whispered, the words alone enough to conjure the image of her handsome beau to her mind.

But that was ridiculous. Balthazar wasn’t *her* man. They barely knew each other, having had one date together before the insidious Oliver Monroe had ripped their growing chemistry to pieces.

*Balthazar.*

Cherie hoped he was all right, but she could still see him sprawled out on the deck in agony—attacked by Oliver—the man who had transformed into a two-headed beast right before her eyes.

*That can't be right.* She swallowed at the grotesque memory. *I must have imagined it.*

But Cherie hadn't invented the monster. She knew she hadn't. She could still smell its foul breath and feel the ruthless grip of its claws as it collected her and took her down the mountain. A terrified shiver raced along her backbone. At some point during the journey, she must have passed out with terror, because she didn't remember arriving in whatever dark pit he had her holed up in, but she hadn't made the beast up. Nothing so grim existed in her imagination.

Up until yesterday, Oliver Monroe had been nothing but her rude and grumpy boss. Yes, he treated her badly, and a combination of her low self-esteem and low income had compelled her to stay in his employment, but she'd never envisioned that the man who paid her crap salary would be able to shift into the hideous creature. Hell, she hadn't even believed that such things existed.

*Balthazar!*

Concentrating on his face, Cherie called his name in her head, squeezing her eyes shut as she focused on him. She'd managed to reach out to him earlier using this method, or at least she thought she had, but maybe that was all part of the madness that seemed to have seeped into her life since Monroe had fired her.

The mountain date with Balthazar had been something special, but it had ended in disaster. Was she honestly now expecting the same man who'd helicoptered her to the isolated peak and gotten himself injured, to save her? That was truly ludicrous.

"That's not fair," she murmured. "Balthazar did his best. He did everything he could..."

But it hadn't been enough. Oliver had been waiting, and as soon as Balthazar was out for the count, he'd snatched her away. Eyes fluttering open, she glanced around the gloom again.

*I can't put my faith in Balthazar.*

Not because she didn't want to, or because she lacked belief in the tall, dark stranger who'd waltzed into Oliver's office and sent her pulse racing. She trusted that it had been his voice in her head when she'd awoken, but whether or not she'd planted it there herself to give her courage, she wasn't sure.

*I have to be logical.*

She needed to escape, and fast. Oliver had left after providing her with a much-needed glass of water, but he'd already made his intentions clear, and even the drink had been excruciating to endure. The way he'd refused to untie her and let her use her hands, the way he'd brushed his palm over the mounds of her breasts as he slowly tipped the liquid past her lips—it was so dehumanizing. Her skin goosed in disgust as she recalled the evil gleam in his eyes. He clearly meant to do her harm and she couldn't just sit there and wait to play the victim. Cherie had played that role for too long in his office.

*I have to get myself out of here.*

But how?

She considered calling out for help in the vain hope that someone in the building wasn't a self-obsessed narcissist, but fear squeezed her throat closed, an echo of Oliver's warning pinballing around her head.

*'If you scream, baby, then I'll find something useful for that mouth to do.'*

Tears pricked in her eyes at the thought of all the vile things Oliver might have in mind. She didn't want to encourage a single one. She'd never been attracted to the man, not even when she'd first worked for him. Oliver had always exuded the essence of a *spoiled rich boy*—the least alluring aroma in the world. Cherie didn't want him and she never would. The disturbing thing was, until she'd told him



to shove his job up his ass and walked away, he'd never shown any interest in her, either.

Exhaling, she studied the shelving erected on either side of the basement as best she could in the half light. There was nothing obvious she could use to help her pursuit and without the help of her hands, there was only so much she could achieve. Frustration simmered inside her, sending the first tear sliding down her cheek.

*I can't give up! I don't belong to Oliver bloody Monroe.*

As if the villain had read her mind, the sound of footsteps started overhead, the noise growing louder on the steps.

*Shit, Oliver's coming back.*

Brow creasing, she stared into the dark abyss, her heart accelerating as she tried to decide how to manage whatever came next, but however hard she tried, it was impossible to quell the suffocating panic clawing its way to her throat. Tied up in the dark, she was Oliver's for the taking—bound to play whatever role he'd cast for her.

*Balthazar!*

She'd wanted to say the word aloud, but terror kept it trapped inside.

*Balthazar, if you can hear me, he's coming. Help me. For God's sake, help me!*

\*\*\*

*Balthazar*

Sunlight bleached the sky above them as the four Vaughns crowded on the busy urban street, but the labyrinth

of skyscrapers rising from the earth blocked most of its rays. To the untrained observer, the men looked like any other group of city bankers, finely dressed and exhibiting the spoils of their wealth, but those closer to the huddle of suited men might have garnered the odd compromising word as they passed, and a sense that not all was well with those well-dressed gentlemen.

Running through the details with his three brothers one more time, the rescue plan slowly cemented in Balthazar's head, and the more he heard it, the more he liked it.

*Yes.* He smiled as his confidence grew. *This is going to work.*

Sebastian would be the decoy. He had a natural air of calm about him and could dupe Monroe into believing there was discord amongst them regarding Monroe's recent and insulting business offer. While Sebastian kept Monroe busy above ground, Balthazar and the others would find Cherie and free her. It was as genius as it was simple, and in Balthazar's opinion, that meant it was going to work.

"It'll never work." Draco shook his head with a sigh. "Do you really think Monroe will fall for the old decoy trick?"

"Yes," Balthazar replied flatly. "I've met the guy and he's absurdly arrogant and not very bright. If he believes Sebastian wants to discuss his offer behind my back, then Monroe will piss himself to listen."

A low growl escaped Balthazar's throat as he considered the fate. He wanted more than only Monroe's denigration to make him pay for what he'd done to him and Cherie.

"It's worth a shot." Cole shrugged. "At least it means Monroe will be distracted. After that it's just us, and Balthazar's woman—"

"And the armed militia that moron likely has stashed away in the bowels of the building." Draco motioned behind

them to the tallest high rise of them all—Monroe’s tower block.

“He won’t have militia.” Sebastian laughed wryly. “He’s a businessman, like us.”

“He’s nothing like us,” Balthazar corrected. “And Draco’s right to be wary. We have no idea what security the family has, but there’s bound to be some, and yes, they could have guns.”

An eerie quiet fell over them as each man considered Balthazar’s warning.

“It’s just as well I stopped to collect a few arms of our own then.” Draco lifted the sports bag he was carrying into the air, a dark glint gleaming in his blue eyes. Although he bore the same distinctive height and high cheek bones as his brothers, Draco was the only blond of the four. It had made him stand out in a group of already noticeable men.

Balthazar’s gaze fell to the leather bag. “What did you do, Draco?”

“I brought supplies.” Draco’s lips twitched. “And you’re welcome.”

“Seems sensible to have back-up of some sort,” Cole suggested, glancing between his brothers. “We’re stronger and faster than most, but even we can’t outrun bullets.”

“I don’t like it.” Balthazar ground his teeth as he eyed the bag. He understood Draco and Cole’s point, but weapons never boded well. Balthazar was used to outwitting and out moving his opponents without guns. He was faster, stronger and usually, smarter. Walking into the building armed meant they had an intention to use weapons and that didn’t sit well with him.

“What’s to like?” Draco’s brow rose. “We’re marching in there to rescue a woman you barely even fucking know, Bal. I’m not losing my life because of your most recent hard-on.”

“Now, hang on...” Balthazar’s heart thundered at Draco’s thinly-veiled criticism. “I wouldn’t do anything to

put any of you in danger. As I recall, I never even asked any of you to help me.”

“No,” Sebastian interrupted. “*I* insisted, and I stand by the assertion. We’re stronger together and we know it.” He paused, pulling in a deep breath as if he expected any of the others to argue. No one did.

“Draco’s point wasn’t so eloquently put, but it’s fair, Balthazar.” Sebastian turned to his older sibling. “Forewarned is forearmed, or, in this case, forearmed is better than wandering in there with no defense whatsoever.”

“Okay.” Balthazar sighed, wishing they could just get on with it already. “We’ll take the guns, but I strongly urge restraint.”

Peering back at the ominous tower, anxiety contracted in his stomach. Cherie was trapped in there and she needed his help.

*Balthazar!*

As though Balthazar had conjured her voice in his desperation, he swore he heard her call his name in his head. His brows knitted as he focused on her voice. Was he inventing it in his frantic anguish, or was their telepathic connection growing stronger again?

*Balthazar, if you can hear me, he’s coming. Help me. For God’s sake, help me!*

Pulling in a sharp breath, Balthazar turned back to his brothers who were still discussing the merits and disadvantages of armed encounters. Draco in particular, seemed hellbent on conveying which gun was his favorite, but Balthazar wasn’t listening. He’d definitely heard Cherie that time and there was no doubt she was in trouble.

“... if you cock it properly, then it’s by far the most efficient weapon,” Draco went on. “And it handles nicely, too. You can—”

“Let’s just go!” Balthazar blurted, effectively ending his brother’s sentence. “She’s in there and he’s doing gods only know what to her.”

Their three stunned expressions showed just how out of character Balthazar's emotional outpouring was, but he didn't care. He loved his brothers and appreciated their support, but standing around talking wasn't expediting the plan. Only action could pull Cherie back from Monroe's grasp.

"Okay." Sebastian reached for Balthazar's shoulder as he glanced up at Monroe's fortress. "Okay, we hear you. I'll head inside and lure out Monroe."

"Thanks." Meeting Sebastian's kind eyes, Balthazar managed a small smile. He'd essentially ignored Sebastian when they'd met for coffee yesterday and today he was drawing him and the others into a complicated web of abduction and danger. So much for being the dependable big brother.

"And that goes for all of you." Balthazar glanced at Cole and Draco. "I owe you."

"Too right you do." Draco laughed darkly. "Don't worry, Bal. When it's time to pay up, the added interest will be huge."

Smirking, Draco spun and wandered in the opposite direction, followed quickly by Sebastian, who overtook him in an attempt to reach the office entrance first. Watching them go, Balthazar was struck suddenly by a premonition that Draco was right. That one day soon Draco would land himself in jeopardy and have no idea how deep he was in the mire.

"Ready?" Cole prompted, motioning after Draco.

"Yeah." Balthazar met his youngest brother's knowing gaze. "Let's do this."

## Chapter Two

### *Cherie*

“How are you doing, beautiful?” Oliver Monroe’s sneer cut through the gloom as he loomed in the doorway. “Did you miss me?”

*Missed him?*

When she got out of the chair he’d tied her to, she’d happily show him just how much she’d missed him by shoving her knee straight into his testicles.

“Hmmm?” He moved closer until he was near enough to stroke the underside of her chin.

“Yes, sir.”

Choking out the words, Cherie lowered her gaze and avoided his eyes. How long had she been here? How long did she have to abide his sickening attention, and where the hell was Balthazar? Hadn’t he told her he was on his way and coming to help?

*I made the telepathy up. She swallowed with dismay. There’s no other explanation.*

“Good.”

His fingers grazed the side of her neck before skimming her nape, promising other, more sinister intimacies to come. Tensing at the provocation, she willed the image of Balthazar into her mind. If she’d been able to hear his voice earlier, even assuming that it had only happened in her head, then she needed the power of that

tonic again. Whatever was about to happen required her to block out reality more than ever before.

“It seems we finally have some time we can spend together, baby.”

Cherie shivered at his knowing tone. Had anyone ever made a sentence sound so ominous before? Wandering a small circle, Oliver came to a standstill behind her and she twisted to look at him. “At last.”

*Oh, crap.*

That wasn't how Cherie would have put it. All she wanted to do was get the hell out of wherever she was.

“I'm sorry about the accommodation.” He stared around the shadowy basement thoughtfully. “I want to keep you somewhere better, but...” Edging closer, his finger brushed over her collar bone before playing idly with the top of her dress. “You were so resistant to the idea of coming with me.”

“I... didn't expect any of this.” That was the understatement of the millennium.

“What?” His hand snapped to her throat, cupping her neck tightly as he glowered over her.

Struggling for air, her eyes widened. “Sir,” she added quickly, recoiling as far as the uncomfortable chair allowed.

“Let's not forget our manners, baby.” Gaze narrowing, he dropped his hand to her breast and groped at her nipple. Completely unable to resist his unwelcome advance, she heaved in a shaky breath. “You should know how much it irritates me.”

“S-sorry, sir.” She cringed, loathing both her plea and the way he manhandled her in equal measure.

*I should be stronger than this*, she admonished herself. *I shouldn't cede...* But what choice did she have? Oliver held all the cards and Cherie didn't even know where he'd taken her.

“You weren’t a bad little worker, you know.” His dark chuckle rebounded as his palm lowered down her body between her legs. With her ankles bound to the chair legs, there was no way to halt his pursuit and the dress she’d donned for Balthazar made it all too easy for his hand to slip beneath and to her panties. “A little slow, but... we could work on that.”

“Please, sir,” she croaked in a breath, disgusted at the liberties he was taking. “Stop.”

In all the time she’d worked for Oliver, Cherie had never so much as even gazed his way. She’d never given him any impression that she was interested in him, because she wasn’t. Oliver was the worst kind of man and any aesthetically pleasing features he had were blotted out by his callous arrogance and greed. She hadn’t wanted him then and she sure as hell didn’t consent to his fingers between her thighs now.

“Is that how you like it?” His tone goaded. “Want to pretend you don’t want me when we both know you do?”

*Wait, what?*

How was he managing to misconstrue her direct response?

“No,” she rasped, struggling in vain to be free of his touch.

“No?” He laughed at her predicament. “When you’re dressed so wonderfully for me? But then, I forgot, you didn’t dress up for me, did you, baby?” His tone deepened as his fingers pressed harder against her sensitive flesh, her heart rate gathering speed as panic burgeoned. “You wore this dress for that asshole, Balthazar.”

“I-I didn’t know you felt that way about me, sir.” Closing her eyes, she fought for breath as he stroked her tiny panties out of his way.

“I’m not blind,” he muttered. Leaning over her shoulder, his breath smelled of stale whiskey as his vulgar rant continued. “I notice nice pussy when it passes by my



desk every day.” His breathing grew labored as his fingertip brushed over her clit and all of her muscles stiffened at the same time, determined to stop his progress in a silent act of defiance.

*Oh, God.*

She wanted to cry out, to scream, but what would be the point? Yelling would no doubt only anger Oliver, and there was no one there to hear her.

*No one.*

The word echoed hastily in her head, reinforcing her miserable fate. When Balthazar had collected her from her house yesterday, she’d had no idea that this was how she’d end up, a bound captive forced to endure Oliver’s crude touch. As though her captor was reveling in her desolation, his free hand snaked around her helpless body, feeling the weight of her left breast through her clothing.

*I can’t do this.* Unable to articulate her misery, the claim ricocheted in her mind, heightening her woe as his fingers attempted to coax her to life. *Please don’t make me do this!*

*‘Cherie!’*

Just like that, Balthazar’s voice exploded in her mind.

*‘I’m coming. We’re close.’*

*‘Balthazar!’* She’d wanted to say the word aloud, but fear held it at bay. Of course, as Oliver’s digits continued their unsolicited exploration, she considered that Balthazar’s reassurances originated in her subconscious, like a lifeboat her brain had dispatched to get her through the ordeal to come, but in her despair, she didn’t care. Any beacon of hope in the darkness was welcome. *‘Please hurry. I can’t hold on much longer.’*

She and Oliver both leaped at the shrill ringtone of Oliver’s phone, his fingers withdrawing as he straightened behind her.

*Thank God.*

“Who the fuck is that?” he growled, presumably to himself since the grateful Cherie had no idea who was on the other end of his device. “I told them not to disturb us.”

“Maybe it’s important, sir,” she proffered, physically willing herself not to tremble as he yanked the phone from his pocket.

“It fucking better be,” he retorted.

Inhaling the stale air, she listened as he answered.

“What did I tell you?” Oliver snapped at whomever had dared to call his phone. “This had better be good.”

She could just make out the voice of the other man.

“What?” Snorting, Oliver spun, his voice unexpectedly animated. “Here? Which one?” He paused as he listened. “Sebastian?” Oliver’s laughter was insidious. “Which fucking one is that?”

*Sebastian?* Cherie twisted in Oliver’s direction. That was the name of Balthazar’s brother—the one she’d met briefly the day before. Could he be talking about the same man?

“Right.” Oliver shook his head. “There are too many of them.”

He paused, glancing her way and winking as he listened.

Horrified to have met his eyes, she turned away in a hurry, wishing she could at least close her legs now he’d shimmied her underwear to one side. This was turning out to be officially the worst day of her life.

“Seems a bit of a coincidence doesn’t it?” His voice reverberated around the damp space. “That Sebastian should turn up at my door the day after I knocked out his brother.”

Time lapsed as the man on the line gave his opinion, but all Cherie could do was focus on not making her excitement too obvious. The brother Oliver was referring to

was Balthazar, which meant that Sebastian was definitely the one she'd fleetingly met. She didn't know how, but that was a good omen—a sign that somehow, Balthazar was acting in her favor and would help her. After all, the call alone had been enough to halt his molesting hands.

“I suppose so,” he answered eventually. “You're right. What difference does it make? One man can't do shit and this Sebastian has no way of knowing his brother's piece of ass is even down here.”

Cherie's eyes squeezed closed at his callous description of her. What had happened to Oliver to make him such a heartless piece of shit with no regard for women at all? Sitting there, she couldn't recall why she'd stuck it out as his assistant for so long.

“Whatever offer he has, I'm tempted to make the fucker wait.” Oliver walked back to her, snickering as his free hand dangled past her neck to her breast. Finding her nipple, he pinched the bud, eliciting a pained gasp from his captive. “I'm a little busy down here.”

“Oh, God,” she whimpered, unable to hold back her reaction to the sudden hurt.

“But yeah, you're right.” His laughter was quiet as his hand rose to her throat, silencing her as he held her in place against his hip. “This little bitch isn't going anywhere. I guess my cock can wait twenty minutes.”

A well of nausea knotted in her belly at his inference, fresh tears brimming as her fear escalated. It was one thing to guess what he had in mind, and to be subject to his roaming hands, but another to hear such base insults coming from the man who'd failed to show her respect even before he'd kidnapped her.

“You can tell him that, though.” Oliver's digits tightened at her throat, forcing her closer to his suit trousers. Rising to her cheek, his fingers compelled the side of her face against the fabric, and to her horror, her cheekbone grazed along the outline of what felt like his erection.

The well of bilious unease rose in giant waves, threatening to make an appearance if he didn't stop, but with her limbs restrained, there was little she could do to prevent his disgusting approach. Grinding his excited cock through his pants and along her face, his breath quickened as he listened to the caller.

"Yeah..." He sounded close to the edge as he answered. "The prick can wait until I'm ready."

*Oh God!* Blinking away her emerging tears, she fought for composure, to not let him see how much his depravity disturbed her, but Cherie sensed she was failing. At this rate, not even the phone call would be enough to save her from his assault.

"He only has twenty minutes though."

Couldn't the other guy tell how aroused Oliver was? The scent of his excitement wafted through the fabric, provoking the bile that was edging closer to her throat

"Yes, twenty!" he barked. "Probably only fifteen by the time I've got back to my office and am ready. I don't have an assistant right now, so I've got to make my own damn coffee!"

Chortling, he finally moved away, allowing Cherie's head to fall free as she blinked away tears.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, breathing deeply as he presumably fought to quell his grotesque ardor. "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

Ending the call, he slid his phone away as he bent and planted a kiss on the top of Cherie's hair.

"Sorry, baby," His fingers tugged at her hair, drawing her head back. "I gotta go."

Gulping down her fear, she couldn't even bring herself to reply to the sick bastard, her eyes closing as he released his grip on her tresses. She'd thought the way Oliver treated her couldn't get any worse than the office, but she'd been so wrong. If she didn't get away from that dark place, she might be destined to become his private

concubine for as long as it suited him, and frankly, even a slow and painful death sounded like a better option than that.

“Seems I might be able to score that Vaughn deal after all—the one your lover boy called about yesterday.” Running his hand through his hair, he actually had the audacity to grin as he met her gaze. “But don’t worry. You sit tight. I’ll still take you as the sweetener and once I’m finished upstairs I’m going to use your pretty mouth and come all over your face.”

She quivered at his sickening laughter, praying to God, to Balthazar, or to anyone else who was listening, for help.

*Get me out of here!*

“And that’s just for starters. Maybe I’ll video the scene and send it to loverboy. I bet he’d like that.”

*Please.* Cherie wasn’t even sure if she’d said the word out loud or if it only echoed amongst the alarm in her head. *Please, someone!*

“Or, at the very least,” he purred as he finally relented and retreated toward the only door to the basement. “I can use your pussy until a younger, better model comes along.”

## Chapter Three

### *Balthazar*

Balthazar was nervous. Standing outside the sunlit glass front of Monroe's empire, his heart was thundering as he waited for word from Sebastian.

"He's taking his time," Draco muttered, articulating the exact sentiment that Balthazar felt, but was too tense to say.

"He's probably just waiting to see Monroe," Cole offered. "He didn't have an appointment, after all."

"Maybe Monroe didn't take the bait?" Draco's brow rose, his eyes demanding an explanation from Balthazar.

"He'll take it." On that point, Balthazar was certain. "I don't know why, but he's desperate to get his hands on Drakon Finance, and if he thinks Sebastian is going behind our backs, it'll only make the deal sweeter for him."

"You really hate him, don't you?"

For once, there was no judgment in Draco's tone, only the pursuit of clarity. He wanted to understand where Balthazar's loathing originated. They all did.

"It's mutual." Balthazar dodged the crux of the question. Waiting for the nod to sweep in and grab Cherie was not the moment to delve into his feelings. "And after yesterday, it's possible I detest him even more."

"Wait." Clutching his phone, Cole read the incoming message that buzzed on all of their devices. "It's Seb. He has the meeting and is seeing him in five minutes, but apparently Monroe will only meet for fifteen."

"Then we need to move," Balthazar muttered, glancing around at the passers-by. "One of us heads inside

and distracts the security guards, while the other two go to work.”

They’d already taken the opportunity to recon the place and had found the back entrance to the building. That was the ideal location to launch their rescue bid.

“I’ll go the front way,” Cole decided, staring past his own reflection into the lobby of the tower.

“Are you sure?” Balthazar probed.

“More than,” Cole confirmed. “Draco is better at getting his hands dirty and ultimately, she’s your girl.” He shrugged. “You have the impetus to fight.”

Hesitating, he turned Balthazar’s way. “She *is* your girl, right?”

“Well, yes.” Balthazar’s brow furrowed. “I mean, we don’t know each other that well, but I want her to be.”

Cole nodded, exchanging a glance with Draco.

“That means it’s just you and me, brother.” Draco’s grin revealed his flawless set of teeth. “Are you up for this?”

“I was born ready,” Balthazar replied, for once content to rile the beast that lurked inside of Draco. “Good luck, Cole.”

“Thanks.” Cole straightened his lapels before he wandered away. “But I won’t need it.”

Time stretched out ahead of them as Balthazar watched Cole walk inside, moments where the only sounds he could hear were the pounding of his heart. Cherie’s frantic thoughts had quieted, which was, he hoped, a good sign that the asshole had left her alone to see Sebastian. That meant that now was the time to move.

“Let’s go!” Draco’s prompt snapped Balthazar back to the present, the rushing pace of strangers momentarily bewildering as the door Cole had just passed through closed behind him.

“Yes.” Following Draco, Balthazar moved, feeling in his pockets surreptitiously for the weapons they’d hidden there.

“Everything in order?” Draco’s eyebrow arched as he noticed Balthazar’s stock check.

“Everything’s fine,” Balthazar reassured, “but remember what we said. We don’t use the weapons unless we have to. Nobody needs to die today.”

“Sure, sure...”

Draco shook his head as though his older brother was insane, but he didn’t comment further. Balthazar was glad. The knot of nervous energy in his abdomen was already making it difficult to think. The last thing he needed was a lecture from his younger brother.

“Down here,” Draco called, leaving the main street and directing them down the side of the building. Pulse racing, Balthazar stalked behind, his every sense heightened as they left the throng and made their way toward the tower’s back entrance.

“Service entrance?” Balthazar whispered as he read the sign overhead. “Why would Monroe’s business need goods delivered?”

“Maybe he’s into more shit than we know about.” Draco’s response was equally quiet as they reached the end of the brickwork, and peering around the edge of the building, he blew out a breath.

“Maybe,” Balthazar agreed.

That was entirely possible, as was the fact that whatever those enterprises were, they were probably illegal. Michael Vaughn had been sure he’d picked up the scent of something murky in Oliver Monroe’s father’s dealings. That was why he’d always been reluctant to trade with the family, and had warned Balthazar to be cautious.

“It seems empty,” Draco reported. “No one’s about.”



Draco didn't say it, but his tone inferred what Balthazar was thinking—that things were a little too quiet for their liking.

“So far, so good, then,” Balthazar broke the strained silence. “Let's push on. We don't have much time.”

“Okay, but first...” Reaching into his pocket, Draco pulled out his hand gun. “I'm going to keep this handy—for close encounters.”

For once, Balthazar couldn't criticize Draco's attention to detail. “Good thinking,” he replied, feeling for his own weapon.

He didn't want to fire, didn't even particularly like the fact that they owned them, but he would use them if need be, and as they crept along the rear of the tower, he was thankful that Draco had the foresight to bring the weapons with him. In truth, Balthazar had been so eager to get there that he hadn't thought the process through properly. For the first time, Draco had read the situation better than Balthazar, and he was man enough to admit it—to himself, at least.

Reaching the doors of the alleged service delivery area, they paused, surveying the space for Monroe's men, but there was no one. Balthazar's heart galloped so wildly that he felt as though it threatened to leap into his throat.

“Where is everyone?” he hissed over his brother's shoulder.

“No idea,” Draco whispered back. “Either they've all been called to deal with Cole, or this isn't really a working area at all.”

A clear path into the building should have been a positive thing—the very best they could have hoped for—but something about the ease of the situation rattled Balthazar. Would men like the Monroes seriously just allow anyone to wander in from the street, or were they about to be ambushed by those who were loyal to Monroe's empire? Balthazar didn't want to stick around and find out.

“There,” he breathed, pointing past Draco to the single door that was visible. “What does the sign over the door say?”

“I need to get closer to be sure,” Draco answered without glancing back. “But I think it reads ‘basement’.”

“Stay low and let’s go and look,” Balthazar ordered with as much cordiality as he could muster. For the next half an hour at least, he needed Draco’s help and compliance.

Crouching behind his brother, Balthazar inched forward, crossing the entrance and hovering at the side of a stack of boxes.

“Definitely the basement,” he confirmed as he read the sign over the nefarious-looking black door. “That’s where she is.”

This was going to be much easier than he’d thought.

“Wait,” Draco warned. “I hear someone.”

Lowering behind the boxes, they held their breath as the black door burst open.

“Fucking hilarious!”

Peering over the cardboard surface, Balthazar eyed the bald-headed guy who was talking and his scrawny looking pal. They certainly seemed pleased with themselves, and tensing, Balthazar prayed that wasn’t bad news for Cherie.

*Cherie.* Balthazar concentrated on her name as hard as he could. *Are you okay?*

Nothing.

Radio silence filled his head, the lack of reply ratcheting up the tension in his body.

Was she still held down there? Was she okay?

“Did you see her face?” the bald man asked.

*Well, that answers one question, at least.*

It had to be Cherie they were talking about. How many women did Monroe keep in his basement? Balthazar's breath caught as he realized that he might not like the answer to that inquiry.

"The boss is a lucky guy," the thinner one replied with a throaty cackle. "I'd certainly have a good time down there if I had half a chance."

"Asshole." Balthazar scarcely kept the retort to a whisper, his hand tightening on the handle of his gun. If either of those clowns had so much as touched Cherie, he'd ensure it was the last thing they ever did.

*Calm down, he reminded himself. Remember what you told Draco. No one has to die.*

As he stared at the guys talking about the woman he wanted with such casual disregard, Balthazar knew differently. As a man, he was ever sensible—the one who had shouldered most of the family responsibility since their father had passed. Not too far below the surface, though, Balthazar was an animal, and his dragon took few prisoners. He'd kill them without the damn gun. He'd rip them to shreds with his bare fucking hands. In high-pressure situations, it was difficult to find balance between the man and the beast.

"He's not the boss," the bald one countered as they closed the door. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a single key and turned it in the lock, sealing Cherie into the darkness of her captivity. "He's only the boss' son."

"Whatever." The other one rolled his eyes. "They're all Monroes, man, and that means they run the show."

Draco shot a look in Balthazar's direction, his intent obvious even without telepathy.

*We need that key.*

The thought was branded into Balthazar's mind, his gaze following the metal key's path back into the loser's pocket.

“I’m going for it.” Balthazar mouthed the words at his brother. “Cover me.”

“Go,” Draco hissed, rising with his weapon poised at the same time Balthazar lurched into action.

“Hey, assholes!” Balthazar’s long strides closed the distance between them and Monroe’s men with ease.

“Who the fuck are you?” The skinny one’s brows knitted at Balthazar’s approach. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Wrong answer,” Balthazar replied, grabbing the moron by his hair and slamming him face-first into the wall. Colliding with a satisfying thud, the man slid down the breeze block.

“What the—” started the bald guy, fiddling in his pocket for what Balthazar assumed was a weapon.

“I don’t think so,” Draco interrupted as he approached and shoved his own gun into the man’s face. “Do you?”

“What do you want?” Baldy’s eyes widened as Draco backed him into the wall beside his buddy.

“Your fucking hands up,” Draco commanded.

“And your key,” Balthazar snarled, signaling to the pocket he’d put the key into.

“Now,” Draco emphasized, jabbing the barrel into his chest.

“O-Okay!” Stretching his chubby fingers out in front of them, one hand slowly lowered to his pocket.

“I think not,” Balthazar decided out loud. “We don’t want you reaching into your pocket alone now, so how about I help you out?”

Not that Balthazar wanted to have to get any closer to the guy, let alone reach into his trouser pocket, but he had no choice. He and Draco had no idea what the moron could be concealing there.

Pulling in a breath, Balthazar sunk his hand deep into the guy's pocket, inadvertently breathing in the jerk's foul stench as his finger grazed the metal object. Grasping for it, Balthazar pulled it free, examining it in the light.

"Let me try it while my brother has you covered." Balthazar smirked, waiting as Draco pressed the barrel harder against the guy. The bald guy folded like paper, whimpering as his hands wavered in the air.

Walking to the door, Balthazar slipped the key inside and turned it in the lock, his heart swelling with excitement as the door opened. Balthazar still didn't know for sure that Cherie was down there, but he sensed it was true and that at the bottom of the stairs was the woman who hadn't left his mind since he'd first set eyes on her.

"We're in," he told Draco, who met his eyes briefly before turning back to the bald guy.

"Whatever you're going to do, you won't get away with it," the baldy mewled as he gestured to the corner of the space. "This place is covered in C.C.T.V. We're being watched right now."

"Then we'd better make this fast," Balthazar concurred, nodding to his brother. "Good night, asshole."

"Wait, what?" the stranger's brow creased as Draco lifted the gun from his chest.

Balthazar watched his brother bring the weapon down hard against the bald guy's temple, sending their foe crashing to his knees and ultimately the same hard floor that would see both him, and his chum, out for the count for the foreseeable future.

## Chapter Four

### *Cherie*

Stuck somewhere between her disgusted trauma at the way Monroe had maltreated her and her stark relief at his abrupt absence, Cherie sat quivering in the shadows.

*How am I going to get over this?* Tears fell as the question ballooned in her head. *Maybe I never will. Maybe I'll never get away...*

No. She couldn't think like that, couldn't allow herself to sink so low, but there was little else to focus on in the dark except her desolation and despair.

*Where's Balthazar?* Sniffing back her woe, she tutted at her own madness.

"He's not coming," she muttered, pulling against her binds for the umpteenth time. "He was never fucking coming. It's all just bullshit I invented in my mind. For all I know, he's still passed out on the frozen deck."

*For all I know, he's dead.*

She shuddered at the final, unvocalized thought, the tears coming harder as she tried to dismiss it.

"He's not dead," she declared for the dust and spiders to hear. *He can't be.*

"... she's down here."

Cherie stiffened at the male voice, knowing in an instant that it wasn't Monroe's but unable to decide if she was reassured by the verdict.

"Why is he keeping her down here?" asked another unknown voice as their heavy tread sounded on the steps.

“I dunno,” the first answered. “I guess she’s his dirty secret.”

Repulsive laughter echoed from the staircase, the noise escalating the dread in Cherie’s belly when the men finally appeared in the doorway.

“There she is.” The smaller, chubby one with no hair grinned, revealing a set of wonky teeth. “All pretty like we were told.”

“Wh-who are you?” Cherie demanded, anger flaring despite her tears. It was awful enough that Monroe had taken her and left her there, but now he was, what—showing her off like some exhibit in a zoo? Her breathing accelerated at the humiliating idea. Oliver had no right! He had no right to do any of this.

“Who we are ain’t relevant,” answered the scrawnier of the two men as he neared. “We’re here to babysit.”

“Fuck you,” she spat, unexpectedly emboldened by their presence.

She was still bound to the same chair, still absurdly vulnerable, but as the two cretins approached, there was barely a flicker of fear in her. It was fury that rose in waves, spiraling until it threatened to take her over.

How dare Oliver do this! How dare any of them treat her this way.

“Oh.” The skinny one recoiled theatrically. No doubt he thought that he was amusing. “Not very nice! Maybe we should teach her some manners?”

“Don’t forget what he said.” The rotund one stared at him. “We can look, but we can’t touch.”

“How’s he gonna know?” The lanky one demanded, his hands rising to his hips. “There’s no cameras down here.”

“How do you know?” The other one asked, motioning into the corners of the room. “How do you know this whole conversation isn’t being recorded?”

“He won’t need cameras.” Heaving in a breath, Cherie spat the words at them. “Because I’ll bloody tell him. I’ll tell him you touched me, regardless, and he won’t be happy about that.”

Triumph soared as she noticed the glimmer of unease in the smaller one’s eyes.

“Don’t talk to us like that.” Undeterred, the scraggy one leaned closer, brows knitting as he continued. “You ain’t nothing but his latest fuck, darling. He’ll use you and lose you in no time, and he won’t know if I help myself first.”

Time seemed to stand still as his hand reached for her, Cherie’s gaze following its progress with revolted shock. She couldn’t just have escaped Oliver’s assault to be subjected to one by this vile cretin. Could she?

“Dustin,” the other one hissed, knocking the skinny fool’s hand away. “Don’t!”

“For fuck’s sake,” the skinny one, Dustin answered as he stumbled away. “What was the point in coming down here, then?”

“To do as he asked,” the first one replied, exasperated. “To check on her. That’s all.”

“Fuck.” Dustin straightened, turning away from Cherie. “Then check on her. I came to have a little fun.”

“We can still have fun.” The plumper of the two moved toward her, flashing her an insidious grin.

“Oh yeah?” Dustin asked, spinning to see what he meant.

“Sure.” The first one gestured to her legs, which were still frustratingly bound apart. “Look at her. She’s lovely. It’s like free porn.”

“You need to get out more, man.” Dustin rolled his eyes. “It takes a bit more than a dame in a tight dress to excite me, but hey—be my guest if you wanna use her.”

“Use me?” Alarm grasped at her insides.



“Yeah, darling.” Dustin folded his arms across his thin chest. “My friend here likes you so much that he might need to...” Pausing, he winked as he motioned to his friend. “Sort himself out and come all over you.”

Fresh anxiety knotted in Cherie’s chest at his crude description. What the hell? She wasn’t going to sit here and witness the fat little man doing anything of the sort!

“I would ask if that was all right with you,” Dustin went on. “But as it turns out, we don’t give a shit.”

“What?” she blurted, her fingers flexing with indignation. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m deadly serious,” the plump one answered, his hand lowering to his zipper as he brushed past her left arm. “And the best part is all you have to do is sit there, darling.”

“Well,” Dustin added with a snigger. “Maybe she could open her mouth for you at the end? If you shoot well, no one will ever have to know.”

“No. Fucking. Way!” Cherie screamed, more livid than afraid.

After everything she’d been through in the last few hours, there was no way that was going to happen, although logically she acknowledged there was little she could do to halt their abhorrent behavior.

“Oh, come on,” the fat one jibed. “I’m a pretty good aim.”

His hand reached inside his pants and she turned away, revolted at his show. Was this what men in the city did for fun? No wonder Cherie hadn’t had any luck until Balthazar.

*Balthazar.*

The thought of him twisted in her head until it was painful. He’d had so much promise and yet whatever they might have had was set to be pulverized by Oliver’s monster. Cherie couldn’t believe it had come to this.

“Look at her!” Snickering with delight, Dustin pointed at Cherie’s dismay. “She’s so thick she believes you!”

“What?” Heart racing, her attention flew back to the plumper man on her left to find his cock still thankfully in his pants and his zipper fastened.

*Thank fuck.*

“We were just joking, love.” His fat face looked even rounder when he laughed. “I’m not that desperate.”

“Well...” Dustin hesitated, before throwing his head back with mirth. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Fuck you!” the other guy retorted with a shake of his head. “Looks like she’s fine to me. Let’s get going.”

“I can’t believe she thought you meant it!” Dustin snorted, glancing back over his shoulder as they walked back to the stairs. “She’s even dumber than she looks.”

*Fuck you.* Cherie hoped her glare conveyed her sentiment, but she didn’t bother with the words. She had no desire to prolong their stay, her head falling as they finally made their way up the steps.

This was what she’d been reduced to then—an object that Oliver’s filthy men could come down and mock in their spare time—she shook her head sadly as the sound of the door slamming reverberated overhead, followed soon after by the noise of the key turning in the lock.

*Locked in.*

Her fate resounded loudly in her head, expanding out into the room as though it had become a living, breathing thing of its own. Time protracted as it circled her, deriding and demeaning any chance she had of escape. Of hope...

*You’re locked in and fucked.*

Cherie swore she could hear the cruel, taunting tone whipping past her as she stared frantically around the space again.

“Why am I bothering?” she whispered darkly. “Nothing’s changed, and nothing is going to change. I’m trapped.”

She swore she could hear the noise of the invented creature laughing scornfully at her admission. She knew it was only happening in her head, and yet, just like the exchange that she thought she’d enjoyed with Balthazar, it seemed so real.

“Look at me.” Exhaling, she rounded her shoulders. “So full of self-pity. This is what he wants,” she determined, hoping fleetingly that the odious man had been right and there was a camera down there somewhere, able to see the moment she grappled the beast of self-doubt away. “But he won’t beat me. He won’t win.”

A noise from upstairs drew her focus and for a second, her heart stopped beating altogether. *The lock!* Oh, God, who was it this time? Was Oliver back so soon, or had he sent another group of vermin down to belittle her?

She blinked her tears away as she heard the door thrust open. Whoever it was, she was ready for them. Whoever it was, they wouldn’t break her.

“We’re in.” A man’s voice floated down the steps from above and Cherie’s pulse accelerated at its timbre.

*Who’s that?*

She knew its owner, she was sure she did, but for the life of her, she couldn’t place it.

“Whatever you’re going to do, you won’t get away with it!”

Cherie frowned at the new voice. That one she did recognize, and she was certain that it belonged to one of the morons who’d just come down to insult her. “This place is covered in C.C.T.V. We’re being watched right now.”

“Then we’d better make this fast.” The first voice came again, its smooth tone comforting, although it had no right to be. “Good night, asshole.”

“Wait, what?” The cretin’s voice called out seconds before a loud, sickening thud resonated through the air. Even from her place in the basement it wasn’t difficult to work out that whoever it was had been knocked unconscious; the loud thump that followed reinforcing the idea that a body had just unceremoniously hit the ground.

“This way,” called the suave voice she thought she knew. “She’s down here.”

Cherie glanced at the doorway, half terrified at what was about to transpire and yet, acknowledging that the other half of her was intrigued. She did know whose voice it was, and as illogical as it sounded, excitement swirled in her tummy as the noise of his footsteps grew louder.

“You’d better be right,” answered another unknown man. “We’re running out of time.”

“I am right.” There was such certainty in his tone that by the time he towered in the doorway, his identity was no surprise at all.

*Balthazar.*

His name was right there on the tip of her tongue, but still she didn’t have the courage to say it aloud, as if she worried saying it would frighten her savior away.

“Cherie?”

In the end, she needn’t have worried. It was Balthazar who spoke first, and Balthazar who ran to her, falling to his haunches in front of her.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, God!” Heaving in a relieved breath, she half smiled as the tears began to fall again. “You’re here!”

“Of course.” Leaning closer, his hand rose to her face and gently cradled her damp cheek. “I told you I was coming and I don’t say things that I don’t mean.”

“Thank you.” She whispered the word, mesmerized by the sheer sight of him. After hours of Oliver’s grim face

and unwanted touch, Balthazar was like an angelic being sent to save her.

“I hate to break up this moment of intimacy.”

She leapt at the other voice, peering warily past Balthazar’s face to see another suited giant looming in the doorway. He was holding what looked like a gun.

“But we need to move,” the blond giant concluded.

“Help me get her free,” Balthazar replied without glancing back.

“Sure,” the stranger muttered sarcastically.

“Anything else, brother?”

*Brother?*

Cherie stared from Balthazar’s face to the newcomer. Younger by a few years, he had fair hair and knowing eyes.

“Cherie, this is Draco.” Balthazar nodded in Draco’s direction as he worked on her left ankle. “Draco, this is Cherie.”

“Hello,” Draco barked as his focus fell to her right wrist. “Very nice to meet you.”

“Hey,” she managed, her attention returning to Balthazar as she tried not to think about what a state she must look.

“We’ll get you out of here,” Balthazar told her softly. “Don’t worry.”

For the first time since she’d left his lodge, she realized that she wasn’t worried. Staring into Balthazar’s dark eyes, she’d never been more certain of anything. Whatever her future was, it started and ended with him. The dark clouds of Oliver Monroe were about to be brusquely cleared to make way for Balthazar’s blue sky.

## Chapter Five

### *Balthazar*

Balthazar held her close on the ride back to the Vaughn's townhouse. Their cab driver was thankfully quiet, leaving them in peace as he soothed her. Smothered in his jacket, she reminded him of the excited version of the woman he'd flown to the Fireside lodge; the one who'd wanted to look at the view from the terrace. This Cherie was markedly different from that carefree version, though.

"It's okay," he told her for the tenth time since Cole had flagged them a taxi, and he meant it too. Monroe wouldn't even know she was gone at first, and even when he discovered her absence, there was no way Balthazar was going to fall foul of his chimera again. Monroe had managed to take him by surprise at the mountain lodge. That wouldn't happen again.

The Vaughn brothers had scattered once Cherie was safely in Balthazar's arms, secure that their brother wouldn't be taken off guard for a second time. Draco and Cole had seemed content to go home and rest, while Sebastian appeared keen to get back to their penthouse, although Balthazar wasn't clear why.

*Maybe he has a woman of his own?*

Balthazar's brow rose at the idea. Maybe he did. Sebastian had wanted to speak to Balthazar in confidence. Perhaps that was what had been on his mind. Balthazar hadn't even given him a chance to speak. A pang of guilt ballooned in Balthazar's chest. Once Cherie was safe, he had to be a better brother.

"Thanks." Offering him a grateful smile, Cherie huddled closer and pressed her cheek into his chest. "I won't

forget that you were the one who saved me, Balthazar.”

“It was the least I could do.”

*I was the one who left you with the chimera.*

Brow furrowing, he gazed down at her, wondering how on Earth he should deal with the issue of Monroe’s shapeshifting. Based on the thoughts his father had sent him in their telepathic communication, Cherie had definitely witnessed Monroe’s grotesque change and one day soon she’d want an explanation. She deserved that much, but he also wanted to tell her about his dragon.

*Too soon*, he cautioned, pulling in a breath as the rebuke pinballed around his head. *I hardly even know her.*

But surely, after all of this, he did? Balthazar certainly felt as though he knew her, and whatever he didn’t know, he wanted to learn. Cherie was so beautiful, like a fragile flower. He longed to be permitted to love her, but first he had to deal with the fallout of Monroe’s despicable escapade, and if it turned out that the bastard had hurt her, Oliver wouldn’t know what had hit him.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the police?” he probed, waiting as she lifted her wonderful green gaze to his. He’d already asked her multiple times, but despite her refusals, Balthazar couldn’t shake the feeling that her refusal was an error of judgment.

“No,” she replied in a small, croaky voice. “I can barely explain what happened myself. I don’t want the authorities involved yet.”

“Yet?” he pressed, sensing for the first time that she might be open to the idea.

“I need a little time, Balthazar.” She pressed her palm against his shirt. “To process everything.”

“I understand,” he told her, but how could he?

Balthazar, like his brothers, was a powerful creature. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d ever felt so much as vulnerable, let alone helpless. The closest he’d ever come

might have been the moment Monroe's chimera had knocked him to the ground, but not before the scumbag had made it known he was going to take Cherie for himself. Balthazar's free hand balled into a fist at the memory.

"Did he...?" Voice lowered, Balthazar steeled himself to ask the one question that had haunted him since he'd awoken on the lodge's veranda. "Hurt you?"

"No." She squeezed her eyes closed. "Not in the way you mean."

Relief emanated through Balthazar's body at her admission, although neither had clarified what they meant.

"But he still tied me up down there and threatened me." She gasped as if the recollections caused physical pain. Perhaps, he realized, they did. "He *touched* me..."

*Fuck.* Balthazar drove his fingernails into his palm, biting down on the fury that furred inside his gut.

"Why would he do that?" she rasped, her delicate digits grasping at the fabric of his shirt. "Why would he do any of this?"

"I'm not sure," he replied honestly. "But we will find out, Cherie. We won't let him get away with this."

"Why?" she repeated, but this time she rose from his chest, her eyes drilling into his.

"Why what?"

"Why won't you let him get away with this?" Her brow creased. "I mean, I'm forever grateful, Balthazar, but what has any of this got to do with you? It was me he took, me he..." Her voice trailed away.

"You were with me at the time, remember," he replied. "He attacked me to get to you."

"Of course." Her eyes widened as though she'd been remiss to forget what Balthazar had experienced, even though it was miniscule by comparison. Withdrawing, her gaze traveled over him for evidence of injury. "I'm sorry. How are you? You must be in agony."



“I’m fine, really.” Reaching for her, he squeezed her hand gently. “I heal fast.”

That was one way of putting it.

“I saw what he did to you,” she replied as though after his reminder, she was being forced to relive it all over again. “There’s no way you’re healed so soon.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he reiterated, not wanting to delve into the subject of his rapid healing until he was surer—more certain that she was okay, and that it was safe to share such personal details with her—but gods, how he longed to. He wanted to share everything with her, and was desperate to pick up where they’d left off at the lodge—before Monroe had shattered their bubble of bliss.

“Where are we going?” Her gaze shifted from the window to him.

“To a house I own,” he answered. “If that’s okay? I can ask the driver to take you home if you prefer?”

*But I really hope you don’t.*

He held his breath as she considered her reply.

“I’d like to be with you.” Her voice was tentative. “I feel as though we were *interrupted* last night, but I don’t know how the last few hours are going to impact me.”

“Do you need a doctor?” His gaze looked for evidence of cuts and bruises, but thankfully found none. “I have a good physician I can call.”

“More like a hot bath, a glass of wine, and some sleep.” She laughed, the sound relaxed. “And maybe a counselor somewhere down the line.”

“Okay.” He swallowed, fighting his inner conflict about whether or not to kiss her. He wanted to—badly—but sensed that this was not the right time. “I have a place where you can do all those things, but I totally understand if you want the privacy of your own home.”

“I don’t want to be alone.” Disquiet flashed in her green eyes. “He knows where I live, and...”

“Of course,” Balthazar purred. “He was your boss.”

“Right.”

“Honestly, I’d rather you weren’t alone, either, and I’m happy to keep you company and offer you a hot bath and bed.”

He didn’t mention how much he’d love to join her in the bed, but he wondered if it showed in his eyes.

“What about the wine?” She smirked. “Did you forget that?”

“No,” he sniggered, as she snuggled into his body heat. “I didn’t forget.”

“I could do with a change of clothes,” she admitted. “This dress has suddenly lost its appeal.”

“Shame,” he replied, stroking her hair lightly. “You look phenomenal, but I get it. How about we stop at your place and collect some personal items on the way?”

“Thank you.”

He heard the contentment in her reply.

“That would be lovely.”

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Two hours later, Cherie was padding around the Vaughns’ townhouse in an oversized robe, her hair damp after the long soak she’d enjoyed. Checking on her charging phone, which Balthazar had brought with him from his mountain lodge where it had been left the night before, she replied to her outstanding messages while Balthazar poured the wine.

“Here you go, madam.” He smiled as he carried the glass of red over to her.

“Thank you, sir.”

Her lips twitched at her reply, and Balthazar pondered whether or not she was also reminded of their tryst

the night before. Things had heated up between them, and Cherie had called him ‘sir’ before she had noticed Monroe stalking outside.

“Shall we sit for a while?” He motioned to the huge sofa on the other side of the room. “Or would you rather take your wine to bed?”

“Let’s sit,” she decided, taking the glass from him as she wandered in to take a seat. “Thank you, Balthazar.”

“I still like ‘sir,’ if you do?”

He ensured his tone was wry when he responded, but wanted her to know his feelings hadn’t changed. During their tête-à-tête, she’d inferred how much she liked the idea of power play in the bedroom and Balthazar completely agreed. He wasn’t sure if it was part of the genetic kink that enabled him and his kin to transform into ferocious dragons, but as it transpired, all four of Michael’s sons shared a specific proclivity in the bedroom. They all liked to be in charge.

“I do.” She sounded breathless as he joined her on the couch. “But I’m not sure I’m ready for intimacy after...” Her words dried up as she grappled for the right words.

“Hey,” he replied, encasing her hand with his. “Of course, not. I’m half joking, Cherie, and I promise, there’s no pressure whatsoever.”

“I know.” She swallowed, her eyes watching the way his hand covered hers. “I feel safe with you Balthazar. If I didn’t, then I wouldn’t be here.”

“You *are* safe,” he assured her. “If I’d known how deranged your ex-boss was, I’d have been more vigilant last night, but I never realized how audacious he was.”

*Or that he was another shape-shifter.*

Pressing his lips together, Balthazar held the final thought inside.

“It’s not your fault.” She caught her lip between her white teeth. “None of this is. You’ve been amazing.”

“I put you in danger,” he started.

“No,” Cherie interjected. “You saved me. Not only from the basement, but yesterday when you showed up at Monty’s and helped give me the strength to tell Oliver where to stick his job.”

Balthazar smiled at the memory. “You were fierce.”

“Hardly,” she replied. “But knowing you had my back helped a lot.”

“I do have your back.” He watched as she sipped at her wine. “For as long as you want me to.”

“I do.” Her shoulders fell with the confession. “I think that might be why he took me. He was angry and wanted revenge.”

“Quite possibly,” Balthazar agreed. “Monroe is a twisted son-of-a-bitch.”

“Yeah.” Her gaze flitted to her wine before it rose to meet his again. “Balthazar?”

“Hmmm.” He noticed how she hadn’t reverted to calling him sir, but didn’t push the point. He would only accept her submission if and when it was freely given.

“Something strange happened out there on your terrace.” She pulled in a deep breath.

“What happened?” he asked, although he already knew the answer.

“You’re going to think I’m mad.” Brows knitting, she gripped her wine glass tighter.

“No,” he comforted, squeezing her free hand. “I won’t. Whatever it is, you can tell me. I won’t judge.”

“Okay.”

He sensed how difficult it was for her to go on, but noted how she did regardless. Cherie was stronger than she realized.

“After he...” She hesitated. “Hurt you... and before he snatched me, Oliver changed.”

“Changed?”

“Yeah.” Her voice trembled. “From a man into something else... some hideous beast with two heads.” She pulled her palm free of his hand and rubbed her temple with her fingers. “I sound crazy, but I swear it’s true.”

“It’s all right, Cherie.” Watching her reactions carefully, he placed his wine glass down on the rug at his feet. “I believe you.”

“Y-you do?” She sounded genuinely stunned.

“Yes,” he replied. “I had no idea Monroe was a shape-shifter, but I know you’re telling the truth.”

“How?” she leaned forward, almost spilling the contents of her glass all over his cream sofa.

“Shall I take that for you?” he offered, brushing over her skin as he adjusted her hand.

“Thanks.” A delightful blush bloomed on her cheeks. “I think I’m more tired than I realized.”

“No problem.” He placed it next to his.

“How do you know I’m telling the truth?” she went on. “I mean, everything I’ve told you sounds insane.”

“I know you’re telling the truth because I saw the beast, too.” His heart hammered as he considered what he was about to say next.

*Don’t, his mind warned in what he swore was his father’s voice. Don’t tell her. You barely even know her.*

But before he opened his mouth, he knew what he was about to say, and he didn’t have regrets. She trusted him, enough to take a leap on a stranger for a first date, enough to climb into his helicopter and wind up being snatched by her madman ex-boss. She’d also put her faith in him when she’d come back here with him this afternoon,

just as she was doing right then and there, wrapped in only a bathrobe and admitting what had happened with Monroe.

Cherie had been through one hell of a traumatic event. The last thing she probably wanted was to be around a man, and yet she'd chosen him, *believed* in him, and Balthazar longed to repay her faith. He craved the intimacy that his confession could bring.

“And I believe you,” he continued, stroking the side of her heated skin with his fingertip. “Because he’s not the only shape-shifter I know.”

## Chapter Six

### *Cherie*

“What? I don’t understand.”

Surely, she hadn’t heard Balthazar correctly? He couldn’t have just inferred that he knew other shifters, as if they were a well-known phenomenon in society. Shapeshifting was the realm of fiction. Everybody knew that, including Cherie. She wasn’t sure what she’d seen last night, but obviously Oliver had managed to drug her somehow, and given her the impression that he’d morphed into a monster because those things just weren’t possible in real life.

“The things you saw were real, Cherie.” He sounded so sincere, but surely Balthazar was only trying to soothe her. “I want you to know that. You’re not mad.”

“But...”

Blowing out a breath, she looked into Balthazar’s brown eyes. He was so damn handsome and staring at him, it was as if she’d forgotten that, as though the time she’d spent in the foul basement had stripped her of his greatness. But it had been the thought of Balthazar that had kept her going in that dark place, and ultimately, it had been the man himself who’d swooped in to rescue her.

*He rescued me!*

Her breath hitched as the thought replayed in her head. Balthazar hardly knew her and yet he’d persuaded his brothers to give up their time and put themselves in danger—all for her. It was unfathomable.

“Who do you know?” She reached for his knee, her fingers skimming the expensive material of his suit. Even

now, after everything he had been through for her, he sat there in his Versace suit, looking every inch the poster boy for corporate beauty. It was inexplicable how a man like him could even be interested in Cherie, let alone prepared to rearrange his life for her. “Who else do you know who can do *that*?”

She screwed up her face with the last word, trying desperately to push the mental image of the two-headed creature out of her head.

“That’s less easy to answer,” he purred in that soft, tantalizing tone. “I want to be honest with you, but the truth reveals personal information about other people.”

“Oh.”

*What does that mean?*

“And once upon a time I made a promise to someone I loved that I would never tell another soul.” Balthazar’s eyes darkened, a glint of sadness glimmering in them as his hand fell to hers.

“Okay, I understand.” She didn’t understand at all.

“No.” His lips curled as his warm palm moved to trap her hand on his thigh. “Of course, you don’t. How could you? I’ll need to be a little more forthcoming for you to understand.”

“Like you said, there’s no pressure.” She smiled, surprisingly relaxed considering everything that had happened. In the last twenty-four hours, she’d discovered Oliver was a snarling beast, left his employment, and been kidnapped. It was astonishing that she could smile at all. “Please don’t share anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“That’s the problem.” His brown eyes were knowing as his thumb stroked the back of her hand. “I am comfortable. *Too* comfortable.”

A line appeared in her brow as she struggled to fathom what he was telling her. “I know it’s been a long day and I didn’t get much sleep, but... are you intentionally speaking in riddles?”



He chuckled at her question; low throaty laughter erupting from his tempting mouth. Cherie glanced at his lips, remembering how good he'd tasted at the lodge and how much she'd wanted more.

"I promise I'm not," he assured her. "It's just that what I have to say is intensely private."

"Okay." Hadn't he already said that he couldn't divulge more without betraying confidences?

"I want to tell you something that I've never told anyone before." The tiny tremble in his voice revealed his nerves, but his gaze shone with confidence.

"Even though you promised someone you loved that you wouldn't?" she reminded him.

"Yeah." His brows knitted for a moment as he presumably recalled the details of the vow. "Despite that promise."

"Balthazar." She turned to face him, fleetingly forgetting that it was only his toweling robe offering her any modesty. "I don't want you to break a vow for me." She shook her head as if to reinforce the point. "You've done too much for me already."

"I shouldn't have told you about the vow." A flicker of regret resounded in his tone. "But trust me when I say that part of this secret is mine to tell, and the person I swore to would understand how important it is that I do."

"You're sure?" Tugging her hand from his, she reached for his jaw and ran her fingertips through the soft stubble that had regrown since his last shave. A shiver of desire raced along her spine at the intimate contact, but she noticed how Balthazar never even flinched. "We've both had one hell of a day. I think it would be okay to sleep on your decision."

"Cherie." His voice was deeper as gently, he reached for her wrist and drew her fingertips to his lips. Grazing them with a light kiss, his focus fixed on her face. "You don't know me, so you won't know how cautious I am, or

that I'm the least impulsive of my father's four sons, but I really want to tell you this thing about me."

"All right."

She swallowed at the intensity in his eyes. Cherie had witnessed it a couple of times in the last day. Once, when Balthazar had confronted Oliver in Monty's, and again when he'd rushed her from the basement, but she couldn't recall ever being so close when he exuded it. The man was utterly breathtaking.

"The reason I'm so familiar with shape-shifters is because I am one."

His voice was steady as he delivered the bombshell, but Cherie's heart sped up at the admission, as though it instinctively understood the significance before her brain had processed his words.

"Wh-what?" she stammered, searching his expression for any sign that he was playing with her. "What do you mean?"

For a split second she considered pulling away from Balthazar, but the mesmerizing look in his eyes consoled her. She was safe. Balthazar wouldn't hurt her.

"I mean, I can shift into another creature, as well." His voice was smooth, but strong, like a stiff drink when it was needed.

"Balthazar." She could hardly hear herself over the noise of her hammering heart. "Don't joke around. I think you know how shocking I found Oliver's transformation. He frightened me half to death!"

"I have an idea how much he terrified you, yes." Lowering her hand to his lap, he never broke eye contact. "Which is one of the reasons why I'd never joke about something so serious."

"You mean...?" Staring into his huge brown eyes, her brow creased. "You're being genuine."

"Completely."

“But how?” she demanded, freeing her hand from his. “I didn’t even think shape-shifting was possible until last night, and now you’re telling me it’s something you can do, too.” Her tone rang with disbelief.

“I was born with the ability,” he told her, watching her palms as they fell to her lap. “I’ve been shifting since I was a boy.”

“Balthazar.” His name was scarcely even a whisper as she struggled to catch her breath. “Are you saying that you turn into a thing like *him*?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not like Monroe. He’s a chimera, an ancient beast that I didn’t even know existed until last night.”

“It’s huge and ugly.” She shuddered at the unwelcome memory.

“Yes,” Balthazar agreed, meeting her gaze.

“I can’t believe I’m asking this.” She shook her head, unsure if she was on the verge of tears or laughter. “But, if you’re not like him, then what do *you* morph into?”

“Something equally as powerful.” There was no arrogance in his tone. “But hopefully nothing so grotesque.”

“Go on.”

Cherie couldn’t wrap her head around any of the conversation. She was struggling to believe that the man who’d played her hero was truly some sort of salivating monster, but she couldn’t understand why Balthazar would lie to her—especially about something as preposterous as changing into a beast. What did he have to gain from such an incredible untruth? Surely, she would discover the lie and confront him? He seemed to have too much integrity for something so base and ridiculous. Plus, she had seen Oliver’s transformation with her own eyes, and though she had tried to convince herself it was only an invention of her petrified mind, she knew that wasn’t true. The two-headed beast had been real.

“A dragon.” He straightened with the admission, reaching down for both of their glasses and passing Cherie hers. “Here.”

“A dragon?” she parroted, certain that she must have heard him incorrectly as he pressed the glass into her open hand. Wrapping her fingers around the glass, she met his eyes.

“Yes.” Lifting his glass to his lips, he sipped at the wine, watching her from over the rim.

*Balthazar’s a dragon.*

The words ricocheted around her head, repeating themselves as if the more she heard it, the more sense they would make, but they didn’t. None of this made sense. Ever since Balthazar had bowled into the office, nothing had ever been the same.

“What color?” She didn’t know why she asked, but she had to say something and none of the other questions flitting around her head seemed even vaguely intelligible.

“What?” Lowering his glass, he laughed.

“What color dragon are you?”

Now, there was a question she never thought she’d ask. Gripping her wine glass tighter, she waited for his answer.

“Purple,” he answered with a grin. “I’m violet with the faintest hint of blue.”

“Wow.” She had no idea what the correct response to that was. The man who was not only turning her head, but who had swooped in to save her, could mutate into a dragon. Her head ached with the possibility. “That sounds beautiful.”

Of course, it was. Look at Balthazar—nothing he morphed into could be ugly.

“Are you okay?” Leaning closer, his gaze drilled into her. “You’re taking this remarkably well.”

*Am I?*

“I...” Peering down at her wine, she stumbled over her words. “I don’t know what to say, Balthazar.”

“I know how you feel.” His lips twitched. “Looking at you in that robe is rather taking my breath away.”

“Stop it,” she teased, sniggering as she sipped at her drink and inched along the sofa toward him. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I.” Waiting until she lowered her glass, he clinked his goblet gently against hers. “I imagine it’s a lot to take in.”

“Yes.” Breathing in, she inhaled the aroma of his spicy scent, the fragrance merging with her nerves to make her head spin. Focusing on her glass, she noticed her fingers were trembling, another demonstration of the effect Balthazar had on her.

His good looks and charm were doing nothing to quell her growing ardor. She’d asked him to give her some space before they resumed their burgeoning intimacy, but being this close to him was making it difficult to remember why. She longed for Balthazar in a way she’d never acknowledged in herself before, craved the touch of his lips, and apparently finding out that he was really some shape-shifting dragon wasn’t enough to dissuade her. On the contrary, it might have piqued her interest even more.

The discussion churned in her head. She wanted him, yearned to throw caution to the wind and surrender to her desire, but she sensed it was too soon. She had barely taken a breath since she’d been liberated from Oliver’s basement, and now Balthazar had confessed to being a dragon. Cherie could scarcely think straight. But the logic did nothing to dissuade her growing passion.

“It’s a lot.”

“Yes.” His voice was soft as his hand reached for hers, steadying her fingers. “It is.”

“Balthazar.” She barely recognized the breathy voice as her own.

She wanted him, but she shouldn't. She needed time, but she didn't want it.

“Hmmm?”

“Is it okay if I change my mind?” she asked.

“About what?” His eyebrow cocked and she swore that he knew precisely what she meant, but played along regardless, perhaps to torment her a little more. She couldn't be sure.

“About you,” she panted. “Us. *This.*”

“Cherie.” Licking his lips, he smiled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I want you.” To hell with the wine, whatever valid concerns she might have, or her inhibitions. Balthazar made her feel alive, and after all the fear, she craved that more than anything else. “I'd like you to kiss me.”

“Kiss you?” Lifting his glass to his lips, he drained the remainder of the wine while she watched, and no one had ever made drinking look so damn sexy. From the salacious glint in his dark eyes, to the masterful way he maneuvered the glassware to the ground, Cherie was hypnotized by his display.

“Yes,” she squeaked, suddenly unsure if her bold admission had been the right plan.

“I'd love to,” he replied. “Ask me properly and I will.”

*Properly? What does that mean?*

But then, staring at the mischievous gleam in his gaze, she recalled the way he'd coaxed her the night before, goading her into calling him 'sir', and how she'd relished every moment of her submission.

“Sir.” She swore his eyes sparkled as he registered the address.

“Yes, Cherie.”

“Kiss me, please.”

As if she'd whispered the magic words, his hand guided her glass to the ground before rising into her hair. Gripping her tresses just hard enough to ensure every ounce of her attention was focused on him, his lips crashed to hers, delivering the punishing caress she craved.

## Chapter Seven

### *Balthazar*

For one blissful moment of unity, time stood still. Holding her against him, Balthazar breathed in Cherie's tantalizing scent as his tongue dove into her warm mouth, imitating the act his cock was desperate to replicate elsewhere. She melted into him, mewling at his commanding caress as her fingernails dug into the back of his shirt.

"Balthazar," she gasped when he finally drew away.

"Pardon me?" he prompted in a playful tone.

He'd been happy enough for her to use his name. Few, after all, had ever made it sound so good, but now that Cherie had decided to address him as 'sir' without provocation, it only seemed right to correct her when her veil of submission began to slip.

"Sir." An exquisite bloom of color blossomed on her cheeks as she ceded and he watched her lips curl.

"You make that sound as sexy as hell," he praised, fisting her hair a little tighter. "What do you need, Cherie?"

"More of you," she replied breathlessly.

"Are you sure?"

Not that he didn't appreciate her sentiment—far from it—Balthazar was more than ready to devour her. Monroe had ruined their groove at the lodge, but the townhouse provided idyllic privacy. If the chimera came within half a mile of the property, Balthazar would sense and destroy him. He was more than attuned to Monroe's filthy presence by now.



“I thought you wanted to wait?” he pressed. “I’d understand if you did.”

“So did I,” she concurred. “But being here with you, like this...” her focus fell fleetingly to her lap, before rising back to his eyes. “It’s driving me mad. This is what I want. You’re what I need.”

“I feel the same,” he purred, tilting her head back so he could kiss the soft skin of her neck. She groaned at the caresses, her fingers tightening at his back.

“I like that, sir,” she breathed, her chest rising and falling as her breathing accelerated.

“Me, too.” He grinned as he straightened, guiding her head gently so her gaze met his.

Cherie was intelligent, gorgeous, and kind, like a shining gem that had been stuck in Monroe’s mud. But she wasn’t buried any longer, and Balthazar would fight tooth and claw to ensure she could shine.

“I want you,” he assured her. “But we haven’t had the chance to talk about our needs.”

“Needs?” she whimpered, her green gaze searching his face. “What do you mean?”

“You mentioned that you liked the idea of calling me ‘sir’?” he started, watching her reactions. Balthazar hadn’t intended to have this conversation tonight. He thought she’d curl up and sleep after everything Monroe had put her through, but he’d been wrong to underestimate Cherie. Despite her diminutive frame, she was powerful and resilient.

“Yes,” she agreed with a seductive smile. “I do.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me,” he told her. “Because when it comes to the bedroom, I insist on being in charge.”

His thumb stroked over her hair, conveying that despite his desire for dominance, Balthazar would still treat her with the utmost respect. It had been a long time since

he'd felt a tangible connection with a woman, but Cherie had captured his attention from that very first moment in Monroe's office. The way she'd blushed at his interest, playing coy while still maintaining her professionalism, and ultimately how Cherie had told her boss where to go—that was the kind of woman that turned Balthazar's head, the kind that got under his skin and demanded his time.

“In charge?” she repeated, her lips twitching as she registered his words.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Of me?” Her breath hitched as her hand rose from his back to his nape.

“Oh, yes.” He couldn't hide his smile as her delicate fingers clasped the back of his neck. “And I want to make sure that you're okay with that, Cherie.”

“I'm more than okay with it, sir.” There wasn't a moment's hesitation in her response. In fact, Balthazar noted how her smile widened. “I'd love for you to take charge.”

“That's good.” It was better than good—a fact his swelling cock was happy to testify to—but he didn't want to frighten her off by being too excited, too soon. Balthazar had told her that he liked to lead, and that's what he intended to do. Any sexual encounter they enjoyed was about more than only his satisfaction. As far as he was concerned, it should be a sensual event, like a musical concerto where he played the conductor. “But since we don't know each other well, we should take things slowly.”

“Okay.” Her eyes gleamed with possibility as she gazed up at him. “What do you suggest, sir?”

“A little light bondage, perhaps?” Releasing his grip on her hair, his hand moved to his tie and tugged it loose.

“You want to tie me up?” Cherie's voice trembled, though he couldn't be sure it was excitement or apprehension swirling in her veins.

“If you're okay with it,” he replied. “I know *he* had you in ropes earlier.” Balthazar regretted the reference, but

needed to know. The last thing he wanted to do was trigger some awful memory in her.

“I...” She pulled in a breath. “You won’t be like him. I trust you.”

“You’re right.” He leaned closer and kissed her cheek, holding her gaze as he spoke. “I will never be like him.”

“I know.” She licked her lips. “I’m safe.”

“Yes, you are.” Pulling his tie loose, he dangled it before her. “Have you ever been tethered by someone you trust before?”

“No.” Her voice was strained as her hand fell to her side. “But I’ve thought about it. I’ve wanted to be.”

“But after last night?” Balthazar inhaled, once again reluctant to refer to Monroe’s murky actions, but knowing it was important.

If Cherie leaped into bondage with Balthazar before she’d worked through the trauma of what *he’d* done, Balthazar might lose her forever, and he couldn’t accept that.

“I don’t want to think about him, sir.” Her eyes squeezed closed for a moment as she presumably remembered Monroe regardless.

“But you have to,” he insisted. “This is important.”

He didn’t want to seem more like her therapist than her love interest, but even in the short time they’d known each other, Balthazar had come to care for Cherie. Her welfare mattered to him.

“I know.” She blew out the air she’d been holding. “I know you’re right. It’s just...”

“What?” he probed as her voice trailed away.

“I just want this with you tonight.” She reached for his hand. “I know I have to work through what *he* did and deal with the anger and emotions, but not now. Tonight, I just want to surrender.”

“Okay.” Balthazar had the sense she meant ‘escape’ as well as submit. Caught between his urge to be her friend, and his desire to bind her, he steeled himself. “Then I have to ask an important question.”

“What, sir?”

Balthazar was usually reluctant to share too much about his desires with a new lover, preferring to play safe with conventional, vanilla sex, but Cherie had inspired something more from him. Despite her trauma, she radiated an urgency that spoke to his beast, inciting the hedonistic streak that he normally kept well hidden. Heat simmered at his core, burning him up inside and threatening to boil over if he didn’t find a way to manage his growing arousal.

“Do you trust me to bind you?” Holding the tie between both of his hands, he snapped the material tight, reveling in the throaty whimper that escaped her throat. He shouldn’t enjoy the flicker of fear in her eyes, didn’t want to think of himself as being in any way like Monroe, but by the gods, the glint in her eyes was delicious.

“Yes.” She seemed hypnotized by the fabric, her eyes fixed on its length.

“Sorry?” Letting one end of the tie fall, he reached for her chin and tilted her face to meet his gaze.

“I mean, yes, sir,” she gasped, fidgeting on her seat as if she was a naughty schoolgirl who’d been discovered doing something illicit. The comparison did nothing to quell his passion. “I’d love for you to bind and fuck me, please.”

Balthazar’s balls contracted at her raspy plea.

“Well,” he replied with a smirk. “I’ll see what I can do, beautiful, but first thing’s first. You need a safe word.”

Her brow creased. “A what, sir?”

“A word you can use at any time to end the session if you feel I’ve overstepped the line.” Not that Balthazar would dream of doing so, but he refused to ravish her without the insurance policy.

“I’ve never heard of one,” she admitted bashfully.  
“What should I choose?”

“It’s up to you,” he told her, cradling her cheek in his palm. Her skin was so supple and wonderful, it made him wonder how many strikes of his palm she could learn to tolerate. But that wish was for another day. Cherie was clearly a novice and would require gentle guidance into the electrifying world of power exchange. “But make it something you’ll remember if you need to.”

“Erm...” She glanced around as if the word she needed could be found on the walls around her. “I can’t think of anything.”

“How about the color red?” he proffered, oddly enticed by her bewilderment. She was so tempting, even when she was stuck for words.

“Red, meaning stop?” she clarified.

“Exactly,” he confirmed, clutching the tie by his side as he brushed his mouth over hers. Gods, she was delightful, her heated cheeks and wide green eyes only escalating his desire. “Not that you’ll need to use it, Cherie. I promise not to push you.”

“What if I *want* to be pushed, sir?”

Balthazar sensed the poignancy of her question, her tone suggesting it was not a flirty quip, but something with far greater meaning.

“Then we’ll talk about that,” he replied, withdrawing a few inches as he towered over her. “But not tonight. Our first time will be about trust and pleasure.” *Especially after everything you’ve been through.*

Her eyes fluttered closed, as though she was considering his assertion.

“Do we have a deal?” he asked. “I won’t do anything unless you agree.”

“Yes, sir.” She leaned into him with a smile. “We have a deal.”

“Excellent.” Swooping with unnerving speed, he claimed her mouth before she could even contemplate what came next.

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## *Cherie*

Fireworks exploded in her mind, making it difficult to focus as his lips commanded her. Balthazar was a virtual stranger, a man who, until yesterday, she had never even set eyes on, and yet today, he was so much more than that. He was the man who'd stepped up to rescue her from the foreboding basement, a place where Oliver intended to do dreadful things to her. She tensed at the unwelcome memory, more grateful than ever for the security and distraction of Balthazar's arms.

Cherie had meant what she told him. She knew that she needed to work through the things that had happened to her, but that would take time, and she refused to let the chemistry sparking between her and Balthazar become a casualty of Oliver's cruelty. Balthazar had become her sanctuary, an oasis of quiet authority and protection in a world where she was unemployed with little savings to keep her afloat. Cherie didn't know if any of the chemistry between them could last, but caught up in the rapture of his touch, she didn't care. She craved the things Balthazar promised, knowing if anyone could deliver them, it was her dark-haired hero.

“Are you ready?” His brown eyes drilled into her as he drew away.

*Ready?* He made the whole thing sound so intense and enthralling. Perhaps, that was the point?

“Yes, sir.”

Rolling back her shoulders, she resolved to go through with whatever he requested, knowing that however

uncomfortable those asks might seem at first, she *did* want to do this. Cherie had stood on the verge of power play with partners before, but never had she found a man so worthy of her surrender, and she refused to let the shroud Oliver had draped over her have control. If she relinquished, it would be to Balthazar.

“Good.” He stroked away the loose strands of hair, the gesture spiking her already elevated heart rate. “In a moment, I’m going to ask you to stand before me.” Motioning to the space between the couch and the roaring fire, he signaled where he meant and she glanced that way, registering the plush carpet.

“Eyes on me,” he ordered, and turning her head to look at him, she acknowledged how that one simple instruction was enough to pool arousal at the apex of her thighs.

She’d never known such a compelling man before. It wasn’t only that he was conventionally attractive with his long limbs and dark, brooding looks, it was something else, as well. Balthazar had an air of authority about him. She’d been aware of it right from the beginning. When he’d held the elevator at Oliver’s building and ensured he had her full attention before he spoke—that had been a man who’d taken charge, but who didn’t need to swear, shout, or be generally offensive to achieve power.

“You’re going to watch for my command,” he continued in the same smooth tone, “and when you see it, you’ll untie the robe and allow it to drop to the floor.”

She shivered at the conviction in his voice, realizing that he fully expected her obedience and understanding that she would do exactly as she was told. She’d never wanted to be naked in front of anyone the way she yearned for Balthazar’s gaze to devour her.

Fighting to control her labored breaths, she watched as he brought his hand in front of her eyes.

“Watch the tip of my little finger,” he instructed, his smile just visible in her peripheral vision as she complied.

“Keep looking,” he encouraged, lifting his fingers a few inches so that she was compelled to raise her focus to follow it.

*What’s happening to me?*

The question floated in and out of her awareness as she kept her focus on his fingertip.

*How is he making this one inane order so fucking scintillating?*

“This is the command, Cherie.”

Balthazar’s voice had taken on an almost ethereal quality, still suave and persuasive, but with a hint of something she’d never heard before, something edgy that spoke of a power she didn’t understand. Staring at his digit, she watched his fingers curl and gesture toward him, as though he was beckoning her in his direction.

“Do you need to see it again?” he asked her.

“No, sir.” Her gaze darted to his face, her pulse racing as their eyes locked. “I saw it.”

“That’s because you were paying attention.” Lips curling, he threw her a wink that sent electricity racing through her body.

It was the damndest thing, but her chin rose at his praise, the way a flower turned toward the sunshine. Balthazar had become the source of her sunlight, and she yearned for more of his compliments... needed them in a tangible way. Catching her breath, she reveled in the weight of his stare and as their eyes connected, a new thought occurred.

*There isn’t a thing I won’t let him do.*



## Chapter Eight

### *Balthazar*

With flushed cheeks and her lower lip caught between her white teeth, Cherie was a vision. Even in Monroe's office and Berrunti's, Balthazar hadn't dared to dream that the beautiful brunette could be so downright sexy, and now, even after everything she'd been through, she'd agreed to let him take charge, for tonight at least.

"Go and stand where I asked you to." He kept his voice low and velvety, suppressing the enormous cheer that rose inside him as she stood and walked to the exact spot he'd indicated.

Balthazar had been turned on by the practice of dominating women for as long as he could remember, but he never took their submission for granted. Relinquishing control to someone else was a huge leap of faith, particularly when those involved hadn't known one another for long, and especially after everything Monroe had put Cherie through. He wasn't blind to what Cherie was putting on the line as she waited for his command, and despite his raging erection and hammering heart, he wanted to treat her compliance with care.

"Watch for my command," he told her, leaving his tie on his thigh and lifting his hand in the same manner he'd done when she'd been sat by his side.

Her gaze was glued to it immediately, her green eyes unblinking as she awaited his verdict. Triumph soared at her obedience, the tiny victory buoying him. She had been listening then, and seemed determined to make him proud. His cock throbbed at the glorious conclusion. She yearned to

submit as much as he longed to take the lead. So far, so flawless...

Wordlessly, he gave the signal, beckoning her with his fingers, and then held his breath to see how Cherie would react. Her hands moved to the sash around her waist, releasing its hold and permitting it to fall to her feet. Time stretched idly around them as the two sides of the robe hung free, revealing tantalizing glimpses of her nakedness, and then, just as Balthazar thought he couldn't take any more, she shrugged it from her shoulders, forcing it to pool at her toes.

*Fuck.*

Just as he'd imagined, Cherie was gorgeous. Her hair fell past her shoulders, barely covering the swell of her pert breasts, and as his gaze lowered, he took in the curve of her hips and the dark thatch of hair between her legs.

"Well done," he cooed, attempting to compose himself as he envisioned all the things he was going to do to her. "You're absolutely delightful, Cherie."

Swallowing, she offered him a nervous smile. "Thank you, sir."

He could tell how much effort it was taking for her to stand there and be observed, sensing how every fiber of her longed to snatch the robe and cover her body. But she didn't. She accepted her fate because it was what he'd asked of her, and Balthazar was utterly enthralled with her capitulation.

"Now," he went on, lifting his hand back into position so her focus reverted to his little finger. "I will soon ask you to take a long, deep breath, and to hold it for a few seconds."

Cherie's brows knitted at his explanation, but she nodded her head regardless. She didn't yet understand that these were often the most precious moments of submission. So many men thought that satisfaction could only be garnered with crops and chains, but Balthazar had learned

that the true connection between a dominant and his submissive was built long before then.

“I will then lower my hand at which time you’ll begin to release your breath and your eyes will stay on my little finger.” His gaze bore into her, acknowledging how fragile she seemed and yet remembering the woman who had stoically dealt with the trauma of the night before. “My hand lowering will cause you to drop gently to your knees.”

This was the crucial instruction, the one her logical mind would try to resist. Why should she fall naked to her knees just because Balthazar’s hand had lowered? Why should she do so at all? Studying her face, he looked for any sign that she might be about to bolt, but none were evident. Cherie’s breathing was fast and regular, her nipples beaded into tantalizing buds and her hands still by her side. If anything, her body language suggested a woman who was willing to do whatever Balthazar instructed, but he couldn’t be sure. Not until he’d tested her.

“Do you understand what I’ve told you?” His voice hardened a fraction, expressing the significance of the moment.

“Yes, sir.” Her attention remained on the tip of his little finger, despite her small, fidgety movements which conveyed that she would rather have moved, or at least made eye contact.

“Good girl,” he said admiringly. “You are doing wonderfully.”

“Thank you.”

“Now,” he persisted. “Take that long, deep breath and hold it for a moment.”

She drew in the air, her shoulders rising at the instruction.

“I’m now passing my hand down to my thigh,” he told her, calmly lowering his hand as he had assured her that he would. Pre-framing the action was important to Balthazar. It enabled him to offer reassurance without the need for

physical touch, or even more words, by relaxing Cherie's conscious mind. Once she understood what would happen and what to expect, she was far less likely to experience fear or want to flee. He'd studied the psychology and understood it well. "As I do, let your knees soften and your body lower slowly toward the floor."

He watched in ecstatic rapture as Cherie fell to her knees in front of him.

"Well done, Cherie," he commended. "I'm so happy with you. You're a natural at this."

Balthazar caught sight of her smile as her gaze fell to her knees, a curtain of her glossy hair falling to shield the rest of her expression.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured.

"Now, lift your hands out in front of you." Rising to his full height, he grabbed the tie still resting on his leg and walked to where she knelt. By the time he was on his feet, she had done as he'd asked, her palms facing up between them. "I will soon use my tie to bind your wrists." His finger grazed an invisible line over the underside of her forearm as he spoke. "If you are no longer content for me to do so, please use your safe word now."

He paused, permitting her time to think and respond.

"I don't want to use it, sir," she answered, lifting her face to meet his gaze.

"Good." Balthazar had never been happier to hear so, but he wanted to give her the opportunity to halt proceedings if that was what she chose. His slow introduction to compliance, however, alongside her obvious longing to be bound, appeared to be paying dividends. "Watch as I use my tie to tether you."

Her gaze fell instantly to her wrists, her breath stilling as he went to work, wrapping the silky fabric of his tie around her soft skin.

"See how I limit your liberty by taking control of your limbs," he explained in the same hypnotic tone he'd

employed throughout.

Swathing her delicate wrists and forearms with the fabric, he tucked the end against itself, creating an effective, but albeit not too restrictive, form of bondage.

“Wriggle your fingers for me,” he ordered as he admired his handiwork. Certainly, his tie had never looked half so good around his neck. “Is it too tight for you?”

“No, sir.” Her breath was raspy as she replied. “It feels okay.”

“Perfect,” he answered, lowering to his haunches before her. “Because until such time as either you use your safe word, or I decide to release you, you’re mine, Cherie.”

“Balthazar.” Her pupils dilated as she croaked his name. “Sir.”

“Hmmm?” he answered, reaching for her bound wrists and tugging her toward him. She went without complaint, inching forward on her knees until they were face to face.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“This is a strange time to ask that very important question.” He chuckled at the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes.

“Y-yes,” she agreed. “I think in my excitement, I forgot to ask before we started.”

“Look at you,” he enthused, shaking his head with astonishment as he did just that. Holding her wrists above her head, he forced her arms to rise, revealing her delectable breasts. “You’re magnificent.”

Locking gazes with her, Balthazar read the emotions flashing in her exquisite eyes with ease. He’d always been able to tell what most people were thinking. Half overwhelmed with need, and half filled with alarm, Cherie appeared to be trapped somewhere between apprehension and arousal.

“Don’t worry,” he soothed. “I’m just going to play with you, while you enjoy being bound.”

She gulped at Balthazar’s verdict, apparently not as comforted by it as he’d hoped.

“Come on, beautiful.” Tugging her tied wrists, he motioned for her to rise. “Up you get.”

She climbed to her feet on shaky legs, following him closer to the fire.

“Stretch out on the rug.” Balthazar’s gaze traveled to the thick pile of the black throw rug that he referred to. “I’m going to ravish you.”

He steadied her as she lowered to the rug, shrugging off his jacket while she settled on to her back.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded as he threw his jacket to the nearby chair. He couldn’t recall being this eager to get between a woman’s legs for a long time, but then he hadn’t ever wanted to save one before either. Cherie, it seemed, belonged to a truly exclusive club. “I want to taste you.”

“Sir, I…” Cherie started, but her sentence trailed away as Balthazar’s stare met hers.

“Do you want to use your safe word, Cherie?”

“No, sir.” She pulled in a breath, her focus flitting between her fettered arms and his face. Now that she’d finally got the thing she claimed to have wanted, she didn’t seem to know what to do with her bound arms.

“Then there’s nothing more for you to say.” His gaze burned into her, daring her to defy his will. “You’re mine to bind, and mine to devour.”

Kneeling over her, he held her gaze as he slowly unfastened one cuff, and rolled the sleeve up his arm. Completing work on the second sleeve, his attention fell to her trembling body, one finger skimming a line from her calf to her hamstring. She was so wonderful. How had they both

lived in and around the same city all this time and yet he'd never noticed her?

"That's better," he praised her silence as his fingertip dipped between her thighs and brushed lightly over her dark hair. "Well done."

He noticed how she held her breath as his finger approached her sex, her eyes squeezing shut as the same finger swept over her other leg, replicating its earlier journey to the back of her knee. A hushed groan left her lips when his finger refused to stay at her pussy, evidence of her disappointment.

"Sir, please." Pressing her ass into the rug, she arched her back before her hips pushed her sex into the air toward him.

"What's this?" Balthazar's eyebrow arched as his concentration settled on her face. Eyes flickering open, her frantic gaze met his. Her hair was strewn over the rug behind her, framing her face in a halo of chocolate brown tresses. "Are you begging me, Cherie?"

"I..." Once more her words dried up before she could make her point. "I need you, please."

He chuckled at her desperation, relishing the magnificent squirming woman sprawled before him. He'd never longed for anyone the way he wanted her, but Balthazar was determined to take his time, to relish every moment and savor her. He would soothe whatever hurt Monroe had caused and give her an evening to remember.

"You shall have me," he confirmed, lowering against the rug as he contemplated the delicacy that awaited him. "But only after I've explored you with my tongue. I'm going to see how much attention you can handle, and after you're soaking with need, then I'll let you beg me to fuck you."

## Chapter Nine

### *Cherie*

“Oh, fuck!”

Feet pressed into the rug, Cherie pushed herself against Balthazar’s face. With her head flung back and her eyes mostly closed, she couldn’t see what he was doing, but she knew she wanted more of it. A lot more.

“Language!”

His hot breath chastised as it tickled her sensitive flesh, and a moment later his palm replaced his mouth, swatting her sex with one hard strike.

“Owww!” she howled, her hips bucking against the impact, but in truth, Cherie welcomed the pain, the sting only fueling her fire now that Balthazar had primed her so well with pleasure.

She didn’t know how long he’d been worshipping her like this for, or how much more she could take before she toppled. She only knew each lap of his tongue was paradise, lifting her ever closer to the most wonderful climax, if only he would keep going. Time was a meaningless measure as she lay stretched out by the fire, the crackling embers of the logs only a vague distraction as he devoured her. Over and over his tongue goaded, nudging her closer to ecstasy, and every time she neared the brink, Balthazar slowed, allowing the thrum of hedonism to ease before resuming once again. Struggling against the binds created by his tie, she was caught in the frenzy of contradiction. She wanted to come fast and hard, yet she didn’t want Balthazar to ever stop, she longed to be free from the fetters, but never wanted the wonderful restriction to end, and as the paradoxes weighed heavier in her head, his tongue lifted her higher and ever closer to nirvana.



“You are gorgeous,” he growled from between her legs, pausing again just as she feared he would. “So fucking tasty.”

“Oh, God!” she groaned, frantic for her orgasm. She’d never known an urgency like it. One moment he had her on the verge of splintering, while the next he wanted to whisper soft words to her instead. It was as frustrating as hell, but she had to hand it to him, he was driving her crazy with passion.

How was Balthazar able to play her body so well? It was as though he’d known her for months, but this was the first time she’d ever had the pleasure of his company.

“Please, sir.” She was content to beg regardless, knowing he had her just where he wanted her. “Please let me come.”

“Mmmm.” His chuckle reverberated from between her thighs. “I’m thinking about it, beautiful.”

“P-please!”

What else could she say? She was so close, yet every time, he skillfully held her back, hovering her over the brink for his own amusement. Hell, Cherie might have been infuriated with his calm control had she not been so damn desperate for release.

“Okay, okay,” He rose over her like a dark god, wiping her pleasure away from his chin with the heel of his hand. “I’m going to take pity on you, Cherie, don’t worry.” His smile was the very epitome of sin. “But not this way.”

*Not this way—what does that mean?*

“If you’re going to come, you’re going to be riding my cock.” Devils danced in his dark eyes as he went on. “I want to *feel* your orgasm.”

*Fuck.*

No man had ever made the prospect of intercourse sound so appealing before.

“Remember what I told you?” A maddening smirk lit up his face as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom. She followed the silver package with her gaze, wondering how long it had been stored there, just waiting for the opportunity for sex.

“Sir?” Rolling her hips forward, her pulsing clit pleaded silently for more of his attention.

“If you want me.” Leaning forward, his mouth skimmed over hers. Reaching for his lips with her bound hands, she kissed his skin, breathing in the scent of her own arousal still smeared across his face. “You’re going to beg for my cock, beautiful.”

Her toes curled at the ignominy of his suggestion, and yet she already knew that she’d comply. Just as she’d obeyed when he told her to strip, or to kneel—Cherie wanted this—wanted Balthazar to take her over and help her forget the wasteland that had become her life.

“Balthazar, please.” Cherie scarcely recognized her own needy tone. “I need you. I need to come so much. Please can I have your cock?”

She’d never so much as begged anyone for sex before she’d met Balthazar, and yet imploring him for pleasure turned out to be much easier than she’d imagined.

“You are fucking amazing,” he muttered, reaching down and easing her upright. “It’ll be both of our pleasure for you to ride my cock.”

Stretching out before her, he ripped the silver package with his teeth at the same time his hand unleashed his enormous erection. She eyed his girth hungrily, tingling with need as he slid the sheath over it and eased the condom down his long shaft.

“Come here.” Beckoning her forward with one finger, his other hand supported her as she straddled his thighs, and he positioned the crown of his cock by her wet entrance. “You’re going to ride me, Cherie.”

“Yes, sir.”

After all his sensual torment, she didn't need to be asked twice. Pushing down on his satisfying length, she moaned as he filled her and her clit scraped against his hot flesh. Their guttural mewls combined as she bucked against him, relishing every inch he had to offer.

"That's it," he enthused, reaching past her bound arms to cradle her breasts. Teasing her excited buds, he groaned as she clenched around his shaft. "Just like that and this time when you're close to the edge, you have my permission to splinter."

*His permission?*

The thought ricocheted around her head as her hips found their groove.

*I need his permission to come.*

The thought should have been disconcerting, yet as their passions collided, nothing had ever sounded so fucking sexy. Balthazar was a revelation. A man who could both defend and torment her, and seemed able to read her body language as though he'd written the handbook.

Lost in the flurry of their carnal desire, she leaned over him, resting her bound arms on his muscular abdominals as her hips snapped back and she rode him over and over again. For one glorious moment, their gazes locked, his brown eyes scorching as she clenched around his cock.

"Fuck!" Throwing his head back, Balthazar's jaw tightened as his hunger heightened. "That's magnificent, Cherie. Don't stop!"

She might have snorted at the hypocrisy of his demand, when he had been the one who'd denied her pleasure for so long, but in the throes of fervor she could only concur with his assertion.

*Don't stop, don't stop.*

Whatever happened, she never wanted this to stop.

Her body stiffened at the crescendo, her lips parting reflexively as the wave crashed over her. Staring down at the man who had more than mastered her, she registered the instant he surrendered to his own orgasm. Dazed by the intensity, she soared on their swelling passion until her thighs succumbed to the intolerable pressure of holding her up and she collapsed over his chest.

Panting for breath, her eyes closed as his huge hands grasped her ass. Resting against him, she whimpered as he milked the last remnants of his pleasure, content to be used, just as she'd been happy to be devoured, and as his satiated sighs filled the air, all she could see, smell, and think about was him.

*Balthazar, Balthazar, Balthazar.*

She didn't know who he really was, or why he'd been so fiercely thrown into her life, but her heart was filled with gratitude that their paths had crossed.

"Are you okay?" One of his hands rose from her backside to her shoulder, stirring her gently.

"More than okay, sir." Rising over him, she smiled, contracting around him when their eyes met. He looked even more gorgeous now that he was sprawled and disheveled.

*Mine.*

The word echoed in her mind, although it had no place there. He wasn't hers. She'd only known him for just over a day.

"You're wonderful." Reaching for her cheek, he stroked her skin tenderly.

"Thank you." She didn't know what else to say. None of her prior lovers had been as dominant, as kind or as satisfying. Balthazar had torn through most of her defenses in one fell swoop.

"How did you find this?" He gestured to the tie still wound around her wrists, his fingers lowering to graze over the fabric.

“Incredible.”

There seemed little point in lying to him. She hadn't known him long, but Cherie felt as though they were past the point of needless pretense, as if, in that short amount of time, Balthazar knew her in a way that nobody else did. He'd enabled her to revel in a long-held fantasy by allowing her to become the one thing she had always sought to avoid being: vulnerable.

“Yes.” His grin grew. “You did seem to enjoy yourself, but I'm in no way complaining.”

Sensing embarrassment burning at her face, her bound hands rose to conceal her shame, but Balthazar only shook his head, reaching for her fingers and stopping her.

“Don't.” His voice was consoling; that same smooth tone that had lulled her with such ease. Any trace that he'd lost control in the precipice of pleasure had vanished to the mists of her memories. “Your blush is beautiful.”

“I loathe it,” she admitted, but allowed him to lower her hands to his chest. “It's so ugly.”

“You shouldn't.” His gaze bored into her. “As far as I can tell, Cherie, no part of you could ever be ugly.”

“I...”

Not for the first time, she had no answer for his generosity, but as he pulled himself upright, he only chuckled at her open-mouthed response. She gasped at his change of tack, awed by his strength and agility. Still dressed in his expensive suit and shirt, Balthazar was the picture of every woman's daydream.

“Thank you for all of this.” She eventually managed, motioning around the room. “I don't know what I'd have done without you this last day.”

*I'd still be working for that monster, Monroe.*

She gulped as the answer ran through her brain.

“You're welcome.” Pressing forward, his face neared hers. “I'm enjoying getting to know you, Cherie.”

“Well,” she started, self-conscious now that the urgency of her orgasm had been abated. “You certainly know me well, now.” Nibbling her lower lip, she brooded on the idea, thinking of the way she’d submitted to his will. “Better than just about anyone actually.”

“You don’t need to fret about that.” Balthazar’s hand rose to the back of her hair, his fingers threading through her tresses. “I’m the master of discretion. No one else ever has to know the things we do unless we choose to share.”

“I’d appreciate that,” she replied, aware of his semi-erect dick still lodged inside of her.

“You’ve got it,” he assured her. “Not that there’s anything to be ashamed about.”

“No,” she added. “I agree.”

Although Cherie couldn’t quite shake the sense that there was something wrong with her, that women in this century shouldn’t get their kicks from relinquishing control to a man.

“I suppose it’s time I freed you.”

Tugging at her binds, his fingers started work on the process of unraveling his tie. She watched, breathlessly as he unwound the silky material.

“There.” Throwing the tie around his collar, he rubbed her wrists gently. “No damage done.”

“It was amazing.” There was a catharsis to the admission.

“No,” he insisted, tipping her chin with his index finger and ensuring she met his eyes. “You are, Cherie, and I meant what I said. I don’t want you to worry, not about your privacy, employment, or that swine Monroe.”

“I can’t ask that of you,” she squeaked, but even as she spoke, she longed for his words to be true, wanted more than anything for Balthazar to play that role. She’d been on her own—surviving—for so long that she was giddy at the idea of having him around.

“You’re forgetting how this works.” His chuckle deepened. “You don’t ask, beautiful. I command.”

“Oh, right.” She giggled, sighing as he kissed her forehead before easing himself from her body and carrying her to the nearby sofa.

Balthazar was so gentle, treating her as though she was a fragile flower he needed to tend to, and she appreciated him so much, but watching him wander to a nearby chair and select a blanket for her, the niggling thought lingered.

*Could they ever replicate such an astonishing evening?*

*It’s worse than that, the paranoid chide grew louder.*

*Can anything ever be this good again?*

## Chapter Ten

### *Oliver Monroe*

“Shit!” Slamming his fist into the desk, Oliver snarled. “How did this happen?”

*How did I let this happen?*

“Good question.” His father, Jonas’ gaze narrowed. “I thought you had things under control here?” Jonas’ attention flitted around the plush office. “I trusted you to handle things.”

“I *am* handling things,” Oliver insisted.

*All* the fucking things. While his father lauded his power all over town with his latest mistress.

“Apparently not, Oliver.” Jonas’ fingertips tapped rhythmically against the arm of his chair, their pace increasing as he went on. “Apparently, you not only failed to close the Drakon Finance deal, but you’re now getting involved in kidnapping.”

Oliver tensed. *How does he know about Cherie?*

“I haven’t failed,” he told his father between gritted teeth as he skillfully avoided the matter of his ex-assistant. “It’s a process, Dad, and we’re in the middle of it.”

“I hope so,” Jonas muttered. “For your sake, Oliver. We need that deal.”

“For my sake?”

Oliver repeated the words, aware of his anger coiling in the pit of his stomach. How dare his father come down there and lecture him about failure. Hadn’t Jonas been the one who’d inherited their so-called empire from Oliver’s



grandfather? All Jonas had done was babysit the growing business, and now that the tide looked set to turn, he was blaming his son? Fuck that! Oliver wasn't putting up with it. Jonas might be able to throw his weight around with women, but he wouldn't get away with it with Oliver.

"That's right." Jonas employed the same patronizing tone he always used on Oliver's mother. "The tap you drink so freely from can be turned off any time, my son."

"Oh, enough!" Spitting the words at his father, Oliver leaned forward. "You've been holding that threat over me since I was a teenager."

"It doesn't make it any less true," Jonas assured him.

"It makes it old."

Buoyed by an unexpected wave of confidence, Oliver grinned as he settled back in his seat. This was *his* office, not Jonas'. Oliver ran the show, and it was just as much his name over the door as his father's. Jonas had no leverage in the building.

"Old and tired." *Just like you, Dad.*

He didn't vocalize the final sentence, but it was there on the tip of his tongue, compelling his grin to widen. The truth was, working at the family business had helped Oliver to acquire enough contacts and skills to take his expertise elsewhere for even bigger bucks. Jonas knew it every inch as much as he did. Oliver was the one there, the one doing the work every day. He guessed that he knew the Monroe business better than his father.

"You're going to have to do a lot better than that if you want to intimidate me, Dad." Hooking one ankle over his other knee, Oliver's gaze bored into his father.

"You doubt that I can?" Jonas' words were bait designed to goad his son into biting, but at thirty-five years of age, Oliver had heard it all before.

"I see no logical reason for you to try." Oliver snorted. "If I don't run things here, who will?"

Oliver had him there, and Jonas knew it. Jonas was well into his sixties, and had already made it clear that he yearned for a lighter workload, not a greater one. If Oliver didn't manage Monroe's portfolio, then Jonas would only have to hire—and pay—someone else to, and given his father's reluctance to invest time in the business, he knew how unlikely that would be.

“You have quite the opinion of yourself, don't you?” Jonas' stare hardened.

“I have.” Oliver beamed with pride. “Guess who I got that from?”

A sly smirk crept over his father's expression, cracking the façade of his unyielding demeanor.

“Touché.” Jonas nodded. “That's fair, but it doesn't resolve the issues. We're no closer to acquiring the financial arm of the Vaughn's company than we were weeks ago, and you're up to your fucking ears in shit.”

“Wrong on both counts, Father.” Oliver shook his head with disgust. Was his father really this out of touch? “Setbacks. That's all they are. We're closer to Drakon than ever. In fact, I had another one of the sniveling Vaughns sit in that exact chair only a few hours ago, wanting to discuss the deal.”

“Really?” Jonas' brow rose. “Who?”

“Sebastian,” Oliver told him smugly.

He didn't mention however, that Sebastian had been sitting there at the exact time that another two of the Vaughn fuckers had been rescuing his ex-assistant, Cherie. He didn't mention his suspicion that Sebastian's presence had likely been nothing but a ruse designed to distract Oliver, and he had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. Oliver was counting on the fact that his dad's sources—whoever they were—weren't that up-to-date on contemporary events.

“He was interested in our offer?”

Jonas' perky tone confirmed that Oliver's hunch was correct. His father didn't yet know that Cherie had slipped

through Oliver's fingers, or that Cherie was the same woman he'd kidnapped. Although he'd seen her on the rare occasions he visited the office, Jonas hadn't even known her name. Relief washed over him. It was one less argument he'd have to have today, and after everything that had transpired, he was glad.

He'd been so close to enjoying the fruits of his labor in the basement, so near to enjoying the woman who'd skirted his advances, only to see his opportunity grasped away by the same bastard he'd taken her from. Oliver's fingers furred into a fist as the thought lingered. He'd been so tantalizingly near to having her.

Cherie had been afraid in the shadows, her labored breathing and desperate mewls making him hard. Sure, she'd fought not to show it, but Oliver's heightened senses had discerned the truth easily, and he'd loved the fear radiating from her. It had been intoxicating. He wanted that back. Not because he especially wanted her. She was slim and pretty enough, with what had always seemed like a decent pair of tits stashed beneath her cheap attire, but he could get that from just about anywhere. No, it was the disgust flickering in her gaze that drove him wild, the certain knowledge that when he had her, she'd have detested every moment.

Of course, the fact that Balthazar Vaughn seemed to have taken a shine to her just made it all the better. Screwing the woman that his greatest rival craved would be the icing on the fucking cake, and Oliver hadn't given up on eating it. The Vaughns' interference earlier was only an irritating delay.

"Yeah, he was interested," Oliver replied, conveniently leaving out the crucial information that almost everything Sebastian had said at the impromptu meeting was probably bullshit. A fresh surge of fury spread through Oliver as for the umpteenth time that day, he was forced to swallow down the scam he'd fallen foul of. "It seems not everything in the Vaughn ranks is cordial."

That might still be true, and Oliver held onto the thought that Sebastian's rancor at Balthazar hadn't only been

for show. Oliver had never believed the four brothers got on as well as they liked the world to think they did. It made sense to him that the second eldest brother might harbor resentment against the oldest. A warm feeling swirled inside him as he considered the possibility.

“Excellent.” Jonas rubbed his hands together. “Then maybe I have judged you too harshly, Oliver.”

*No shit.*

His father had been judging him strictly from the moment he was born. As the only son and heir to the Monroe legacy, the weight of the family name had all fallen to him. Jonas seemed content to let Oliver’s sister, Rebecca, do nothing, while he shouldered all of the responsibility. It was bullshit. He’d never had the chance to do what he wanted. Never had the opportunity to be anyone different from the man he’d become.

“What’s all this I hear about you abducting some unsuspecting woman, though?” Jonas’ brows knitted. “Is it true?”

“It was.” Oliver let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, some of the tension and anger he’d been holding on to releasing with the air. “I let her go.”

“Why?” Jonas asked.

“Why what?”

“Why take her?” His father pressed, asking the question Oliver was sure that everyone would pose. “When you can have anyone you want?”

“Because I’m bored of easy prey.” Oliver shrugged, expressing his nonchalance. “I’m a hunter, Dad. I don’t like easy women.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are.” Jonas chuckled. “You have money and sex on tap.”

“Damn right,” Oliver retorted. It was no more than he deserved.

“Is she going to be a problem?” Jonas’s tone was suddenly serious. “The girl you let go? Does she need to be paid off, or... disposed of?”

“No,” Oliver answered. “I’m not done with her yet. I only let her go to give her a false sense of security. I’ll have her again soon.”

“And then?” There wasn’t a flicker of disapproval in Jonas’ voice, only a concern that his son might leave a loose end that he would be required to tidy. “Will you get rid of her when you’re finished?”

“Maybe.” Oliver hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I don’t know.”

“Make sure you don’t leave any mess.” His father warned, blissfully unaware that Cherie had also witnessed Oliver morph into the chimera. No doubt he’d have been even more annoyed had he realized that. Jonas never spoke much about their abilities, but he made it clear that no one else should know. Even the Monroe women were oblivious to the men’s power. Oliver cared less about the confidentiality, knowing he was powerful enough to get away with almost anything, but he could do without another lecture from his father.

“I won’t,” he assured Jonas.

Oliver couldn’t recall precisely when he’d realized he had the ability to shift into the chimera, or that his dad had been doing so his whole life. It was as though Oliver had always had the knowledge, a sense of knowing that he was stronger, faster, and better than the next man, and Oliver had always reveled in it. He would have his way—he always did—and if Cherie and the Vaughn brothers were under any illusions about that, they had another think coming.

“I want your focus on the company, not your cock.”

“I can focus on both,” Oliver reminded him.

“Hmmm.” Jonas sounded unconvinced.

“Trust me.” Even Oliver had to snigger at that demand. “I’ll manage.”

“Okay.” Jonas nodded knowingly. “I need to get to another meeting.” Rising from his chair, Jonas yanked down his lapels.

“And by *meeting*, you mean ‘young floozy with a cracking rack,’ right?” Oliver’s tone was dry as he wandered around his desk to see his father out.

“Maybe later,” Jonas replied. “It depends how the first meeting goes.”

Oliver laughed at his father’s veiled denial. Everybody knew how many affairs he’d had, including Oliver’s mother, Gloria, who seemed content to let her husband do just about anything he wanted. It was the one area where Oliver envied his father. He wasn’t a mad advocate of marriage, but if he had to have one to pass on the family’s assets and their special genetics, then he’d choose one like his mum; a quiet, subservient woman who had looked all right in her day and was content to drink herself to death rather than make waves.

“What happened to that nice-looking piece of ass you used to have out here?” Jonas asked, glancing around at the office Cherie had once frequented.

“I had to let her go,” Oliver lied, his gaze flitting to Cherie’s empty desk. He wouldn’t bother to enlighten his father that the woman who’d worked for him was the same one who’d seen his chimera as he seized her for himself, nor that the real truth was that the rival family they both loathed had helped her to escape. Oliver would have both of those matters ironed out soon enough. “She didn’t work hard enough, I’m afraid.”

“Shame,” his father murmured as he headed for the exit. “I always fancied having a piece of her, myself.”

“Never mind,” Oliver cooed. “There’s plenty more fish in the sea, Dad.”

Watching his old man disappear into the corridor, an image of the wide-eyed Cherie bound and afraid formed in

Oliver's head. Unlike his father, he *was* going to have a piece of her, and sooner than she realized.

## Chapter Eleven

### *Balthazar*

Cherie fell asleep beneath the purple blanket he'd laid over her, barely stirring when he carried her through to his bedroom and not even rousing when he later climbed into bed with her. Balthazar had considered sleeping on the couch. It would have been the gentlemanly thing to have done, but he reasoned that they were beyond that point in whatever relationship was developing between them. After all, she had willingly submitted to both his psychological and physical commands, and had trusted him enough to crash out while she was still naked. He would never do anything to wreck the faith she had put in him, and he hoped that she knew that.

Nonetheless, he kept his distance in the bed, resisting the overwhelming urge to spoon her and press his swelling cock into her perfect little behind. Even though every fiber of his being told him to give in and snuggle her, and he sensed that Cherie would not have an objection, his incessant need to do *the right thing* won out. If she was unconscious, then she couldn't consent, and consent was everything.

Stretched out beside her and in an attempt to focus his attention on something other than the scintillating naked woman at his side, his thoughts returned to Monroe. Not only was the useless son-of-a-bitch prepared to snatch the woman Balthazar was dating away for his own vile agenda, but he was also a shifter. His brow furrowed as the final thought resonated.

*Oliver Monroe's a fucking shifter!*



For so long Balthazar and his brothers had believed they were alone with the gift. That's what their father, Michael, had always led them to think and it's what they'd assumed. The fact that Monroe had been able to morph into the snarling chimera changed everything. Now, there was the proof that another man shared their hybrid status, albeit turning into a different creature, and there was still the question of the Monroe bloodline in general. What if Oliver wasn't the only one?

*What if every one of the vermin can change into a chimera? What if there were a whole nest of chimeras just waiting to be unleashed on an unsuspecting world?*

He shivered at the dark and unwelcome idea, thinking again of his father. If Michael was there he would know what to do. Whatever his flaws, Michael had always been a comfort and a fountain of great knowledge. Blowing out a breath, Balthazar focused on his father's face in his mind, wishing he could draw on that source now.

*'Father.'*

Balthazar called out in his head, the same way he did on the mountain tops when Michael sometimes visited. Over the years since Michael had passed, Balthazar had learned that he could still commune with his dad that way. Somehow, Michael's telepathic thoughts were as clear as they had been in his living years.

*'What am I going to do?'*

Balthazar had no expectation that his query would be received, let alone answered, but as the thought left his mind, he relaxed. Just the ability to ask someone else for assistance helped, even though that person would never be able to reciprocate in the conversation.

*'Balthazar?'*

He tensed at his father's voice, glancing right to see if the beauty sleeping beside him had stirred, and uncertain for a moment if he'd truly heard the response or if he had only invented it for his own well-being. Reassured that at

least Cherie didn't seem to have heard Michael's response, he stared at the ceiling in the half-light, trying to calm his racing heart.

*'Balthazar, is that you?'*

There was little doubt that time. The voice definitely belonged to his father, and it came to Balthazar in the same way their telepathic communication always had. Was it possible that he could link with his dad without the backdrop of the peaks to amplify their interaction? The thought was as exciting as it was disconcerting.

*'It's me, Dad.'*

Once more, Balthazar peered over at Cherie, concerned that she'd somehow intercept the messages and decide he was crazy. After all, maybe he was? There was still a chance that the voice in his head was of his own making.

*'I do not see you on the crags around Fireside, my son.'* Michael's voice was every bit as soothing as Balthazar recalled. *'Where are you?'*

*'I'm at one of our houses,'* he replied, anxious not to reveal too much about his location in case his father was able to put in a celestial appearance. *'I didn't know we could speak anywhere but the mountains.'*

*'It is also new to me.'* The astonishment was clear to hear in Michael's tone. *'How go things with you, Balthazar?'*

*'I have Cherie back,'* he announced proudly, as though the beautiful brunette beside him was little more than a trophy he'd won in fifth grade.

*'From Monroe?'* Michael queried.

*'Yes,'* Balthazar confirmed. *'She is unharmed.'*

*'You still like her, then?'* Michael sounded as hesitant as he had after Balthazar had woken from Oliver's attack.

*'Yes, Father.'* On this point at least, Balthazar was emphatic. *'I like her a lot, and I'm happy she's safe.'*

*'Then I am happy for you,'* Michael answered, although he didn't sound overjoyed at the prospect.

*Strange.* Balthazar's brow creased. *Isn't that what he always wanted? To see his sons settle down and produce heirs? Isn't that what Michael's contract was all about?*

*'But what calls me to you at this hour?'* Michael added.

*'I was just thinking of the chimera.'*

A cold shiver traveled along Balthazar's spine as he recollected the monstrosity that Oliver had transformed into.

Balthazar had always been thankful for his dragon genes, reveling in the power and elegance of his kin, but seeing the chimera with his own eyes had only reinforced the point. Monroe's monster was drooling and ugly. It was a wonder that when faced with its hideous snout, poor Cherie hadn't had a heart attack.

*'If Oliver Monroe can shift into the beast,'* Balthazar mused, *'does that mean there are others in his family who can also do so?'*

*'I have pondered this myself,'* Michael told him. *'And am afraid I have had to decide that yes, it almost certainly does mean there are others.'*

Tension knotted in Balthazar's stomach as his father articulated the same awful fate he had decided himself.

*'The father?'* Balthazar queried. *'Do you think it runs in the male line as it does with our family?'*

*'I do not know,'* Michael admitted. *'If there is a daughter then it is possible she also shares the genetic mutation. Your mother and I never had a daughter to test the theory for ourselves.'*

*'There is a daughter.'* Balthazar remembered reading about her during the brief internet research he'd completed on his rival.

*'Then we should assume she, too, can shift,'* Michael answered.

*'How could we not know about this?'* Balthazar sighed, running his fingers through his dark hair as he lay in the bed. *'Another family of shifters so close to ours and they didn't even trigger our radar.'*

*'We were wrong to assume it was only us.'* The regret in Michael's voice perfectly embodied the way Balthazar saw the subject. The Vaughns had been so caught up in their father's legacy that they had taken their eyes off the ball. While aware of the Monroes and cognizant that their empire was as immoral as it was illegal, Balthazar and his father had never really viewed them as a credible threat. Their business choices were, in their opinion, weak and poorly thought out, and although Oliver had always been a loose cannon, even Jonas' son had rarely troubled them. It was only when he'd made an aggressive move to take over Drakon Finance that Oliver had been elevated in their minds. Before then, he only floated in their peripheral vision, little more than an annoyance. *'Now we must hope they are not as dangerous as we fear.'*

*'Do you think they know about us?'* Heart hammering, Balthazar contemplated what it might mean if Oliver and the rest of his clan knew that the Vaughns could shapeshift into dragons. *'If they do, then the fallout could be catastrophic.'*

*'I do not know, my son.'* From wherever he was, Michael let out a long sigh. *'I also fear this outcome, but we must hope the secret is still secure. You have not told your new lover about your hybrid status, I assume?'*

Anxiety churned inside him at his father's question.

*'She had to discover it one day,'* he answered. *'For the terms of your contract to be honored.'*

*'You have told her?'* Shock radiated in Michael's voice. *'I expected you to tell your wife one day, but not a lady you have only just met.'*

Balthazar frowned. He understood what his father meant, but feared Michael's explanation was rather too simplistic.

*'I trust her, Dad,' he told Michael. 'And I cannot wait until I am married. I needed to be honest with her now.'*

*'I did not tell your mother until after our wedding.'* His father suddenly sounded distant, as if the mere mention of his wife had affected his ability to communicate.

*'These are different times,' Balthazar rationalized. 'A woman deserves to know what she is committing to long before she says yes.'*

Silence filled the space between them and Balthazar imagined his father struggling to come to terms with his son's decision. Michael was from another generation, and Balthazar respected that, but despite his father's disapproval, his instinct assured him that he'd done the right thing.

*'Father?'* Rubbing his temple, Balthazar wondered if his father had intentionally halted their conversation. *'Are you still there?'*

*'I am,' Michael answered. 'Although I cannot say I agree with your logic.'*

*'Like it or not, it is sound,' Balthazar assured him. 'And since you have insisted each of us marry in order to inherit, you can be sure that my brothers will align with my way of thinking.'*

Balthazar had no way of knowing that for sure, of course, but he knew all three of his siblings well and felt sure at least Sebastian and Cole would concur. Draco was a different matter, but then, Draco was always a different matter.

*'You know them best,' Michael sounded sad. 'They have grown since I departed your world.'*

*'They are good men,' Balthazar hoped his words were soothing. 'And they will do right by your memory, Father, but one day we must accept the Vaughn secret will be revealed—to a select few, at least.'*

*'I know,' Michael paused. 'All we can do in the meantime is keep an eye on the Monroes. Oliver's father, Jonas, was a bad apple, and his son is no better.'*

*'I will.'* Balthazar turned toward Cherie, yearning to reach out and hold her. *'Especially since Oliver seems to have taken a liking to Cherie.'*

*'Take care of yourself, Balthazar.'*

Balthazar shivered at his father's cautionary tone.

*'I fear for your safety, and that of your new lady.'*

Balthazar couldn't help but smile at the way his father made that sound. *His* lady. Cherie was his.

*'I will,'* he promised. *'And now that I know I can reach out to you this way, we can speak more often.'*

*'Yes.'*

*'Good night, then,'* Balthazar sent out the thought, picturing his dad in his mind.

*'Good night, son.'*

Dismissing his father from his mind, Balthazar finally succumbed to his need and reached for Cherie, running one finger lightly across her bare skin. But even as he enjoyed the feel of her soft skin, his father's warning echoed in his mind.

*Jonas was a bad apple, and his son is no better*

Deep down, Balthazar sensed Michael was right. Balthazar had struck back at Oliver and rescued Cherie, but the war with Jonas Monroe's son was far from over.

## Chapter Twelve

### *Cherie*

Rousing from her slumber, Cherie stretched her limbs and smiled. Finally, she'd managed to get a decent night's sleep and had woken feeling refreshed—a rare feat indeed. Rolling toward the center of the bed, she saw the reason for her satisfaction dozing peacefully at her side.

*Balthazar.*

Her grin widened as she took in the look of him.

*Christ, he even looks good when he's fast asleep.*

Nearly black hair falling past his enviably long eyelashes, the man was all high cheekbones and strong jawline.

*Gorgeous.* Her heart sped up at her silent verdict.  
*He's absolutely gorgeous and last night he brought some of my wildest fantasies to life!*

Catching her breath, she closed her eyes and remembered, surprised and reassured by how easily the memories they'd made together drowned out the grim recollections of her time in Oliver's basement. Balthazar had been magnificent, curating a climax for Cherie that had rarely been rivaled, and he'd accomplished it all with that same smooth and sexy tone, the one that assured her that she was safe. He was in charge and had everything under control.

She clenched the muscles at the apex of her sex as she recalled just how exquisite his control had been. Cherie had waited her entire life for a man who was kind, assertive, and attractive, let alone one who would risk his own safety and that of his brothers for a woman he hardly knew.

Balthazar was too good to be true, yet there he was, fast asleep next to her. She didn't know how she'd manifested such a flawless man, but she was absurdly grateful that she had.

*But I don't even know him.* A crease appeared in her brow as the perturbing thought resounded. *I can't put my faith in a man I don't know.*

Blowing out a breath, she realized she was right. However perfect Balthazar seemed, he was still a stranger. Yes, he'd put his neck on the line for Cherie, but there was no onus on him to do so again. She was pushing thirty, living in a tiny apartment she could barely afford, had no job and seemed to be the target of her creepy ex-boss.

*Who's also a fucking shifter!*

Her heart accelerated at the acknowledgement. There was definitely something strange and grotesque about Oliver. She'd seen him change in front of her own eyes, and yet still she wanted to persuade herself that she'd only imagined the monster, that it was the trauma of his attack on Balthazar and his ill-intent which had conjured the vision. Cherie wanted more than anything to believe it wasn't true, but when her new lover had announced that he was also a shape-shifter, there was no choice but to face reality.

Pulse quickening, she opened her eyes to look upon Balthazar once more. She hadn't imagined his confession as well, had she? Thinking hard, she envisioned their conversation the night before, recalling his exact words.

*"The reason I'm so familiar with shape-shifters is because I am one."*

He'd seemed so serious when he'd said it, and she couldn't understand any reason why he'd fabricate such a colorful lie, so it had to be true. Didn't it? Swallowing hard, Cherie wrestled with the competing ideas. Could there really be a world of men who transformed into powerful mythological creatures out there? One that she, and presumably most of the population, were entirely oblivious to?



“Good morning.” Breaking her train of thought, his husky voice resonated in her ear.

“Hi,” she managed nervously, conscious of the animated butterflies in her belly all stretching their wings at the same time.

Cherie had scarcely ever woken up in a stranger’s bedroom before, let alone naked, but with Balthazar, it was excitement rather than apprehension that stirred inside her. She’d loved the intimacy they’d shared the night before and had no regrets about her choices, but staring into his big brown eyes, she longed for more. She had no right to demand it from him, but that fact didn’t quell the growing yearning.

“How did you sleep?” He rose on one elbow, the cover slipping down to reveal his well-developed chest and the beginning of his honed abdominals. Balthazar was like one of those models Cherie had sometimes seen in men’s magazines.

*Definitely too good to be true.*

“Well, thank you,” she replied. “Though I think I did pass out on you, so... sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” he murmured, reaching for her hand and squeezing gently. “After everything you’d been through, it was understandable.”

“Thank you for looking after me.” Her pussy tightened at how that sounded, reminding her of how Balthazar had felt inside of her. “And putting me to bed.”

“You’re welcome.” He flashed her a stunning smile, throwing back the cover and swinging his legs from the bed. “Let me make you a coffee.”

“No, I couldn’t ask you to go to any trouble,” she insisted, eyeing his pert backside as he strode around the bed. “I should get out of your hair.”

Though every fiber of her body wanted to stay, locked up in his tower, and in his bed, for as long as he’d have her.

“Don’t you dare.” Striding toward her, Balthazar was the picture of masculinity, all hard lines and inviting soft hair. “Have you forgotten who’s in charge so soon, Cherie?”

If it was possible, her heart rate sped up at his feigned caution.

“I...” She couldn’t help but gaze longingly at his semi-erect dick. She recalled just how splendid it had been fucking her into submission. “I thought that was only for last night.”

“Oh, no.” Falling to his haunches by the side of the bed, his smirk was the embodiment of every delicious sin she had imagined playing out with him. And ever since he’d strode into Oliver’s office, she *had* imagined. “I told you last night, I make the rules, beautiful. Unless...” His voice trailed away as he peered around at the door. “You genuinely want to leave, in which case, I’ll make you coffee to go.”

“I don’t want to,” she admitted in a rush.

The truth was she had nowhere to be, no one waiting for her, and not even a job to go to. If Balthazar was game, she was his for the taking.

“I’m sorry?” His eyebrow arched in that fucking scintillating way she’d adored the night before. “What was that?”

The butterflies in her belly fluttered in competing directions, making it difficult to think.

“Sir,” she added, knowing instinctively what he was waiting for and more than prepared to give it to him. Submitting to Balthazar had been the most incredible sexual experience of her life. “I don’t want to go, sir.”

“Then stay.” His smile was easily the most alluring she’d ever seen. “I meant what I said, Cherie. I’m going to look after you. Monroe is still out there, and he’ll be pissed that you’re gone.”

“Yeah.”

Unease shifted in her stomach at the idea that Oliver would be looking for her. He'd already proven that he was determined and quite prepared to inflict harm to get what he wanted. Her disquiet ballooned as she remembered how close he had come to getting what he wanted.

"It's okay." Reaching for her, Balthazar swept her hair away from her face and planted a kiss on her cheek. "You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

Rising to his full height, he turned and walked out of the bedroom. She watched him leave, still in awe of his physique and his apparent need to take care of her, and yet still unsure if she had faith in his words. Not that Balthazar had given her any reason for mistrust—he'd been the consummate gentleman right from the start and she was sure he meant everything he said—but life had taught Cherie not to believe all that glittered was gold. She'd learned the hard way, too, raised by a single mum in a house where there had never been much affluence, and she'd been forced to slog it out in crap jobs despite her education. Cherie had reasons to be wary.

She stared at the ceiling for a moment, mulling things over in her head. Balthazar was everything she'd ever dreamed about and despite the conditioning of her upbringing, she was desperate to believe in him. Gaze settling on the doorway where she'd last seen him, she resolved to bite the bullet and take the risk. If Balthazar was only saying what he thought she wanted to hear, then Cherie would be in for one giant fall, but she knew she had to take the chance. To turn away from him, and the opportunity to develop whatever was sparking between them now, would be crazy.

Slipping from his sheets, she yanked the blanket from his bed and wrapped it around her before padding out of the door. Blinking into the half-light, she followed the sound of his whistling down the galleried staircase to find the kitchen, where she enjoyed the look of him as he worked on what looked like a tray of breakfast goodies. As she stood in the doorway, she enjoyed the smell of something warming

in the oven while the coffee brewed, unable to resist the look of his tempting, tight ass.

“Do you like the view?” Glancing over his shoulder, he chuckled as their eyes met.

“Erm, yes,” she admitted, aware of heat crawling from her neck to her face. How had Balthazar heard her? She’d been silent on the stairs and hadn’t consciously made a sound since. “Sorry. I wanted to come and find you.”

“You found me, all right,” he replied, gesturing to the breakfast bar. “Take a seat. The croissants will be ready in a moment.”

“Croissants?” Wandering into the enormous kitchen, she turned toward the oven. “Wow. You didn’t need to go to any trouble, sir.”

Her lips curled at the final word as if they were amused by how simple it was to use it around him. Oliver had never deserved the accolade, and yet in the short time she’d known Balthazar, he’d ensured that no one had merited it more.

“You’re worth the trouble.” His focus fell to her as she settled on one of the bar stools, tugging the ends of the blanket back around her. “Are you cold?”

“No,” she admitted.

“Then, lose the blanket, beautiful.” The same devils that had shone in his eyes last night danced there again now, goading her into compliance. “I’d love to see your wonderful body.”

Cherie dropped the ends of the cover immediately, surprisingly confident as his gaze devoured her breasts. She’d never been especially self-assured where her body image was concerned, but Balthazar’s appreciative glances reminded her how much he liked what he saw.

“Here.” Crossing the marble floor, he placed one cup of coffee down in front of her before lifting the second to his nose and inhaling the aroma. “Your morning coffee, Madam.”

Was it still morning? In the haze of their attraction, Cherie hadn't even looked at the time.

"Thank you, sir." Smiling, she grasped at the china handle. "I'm amazed that you heard me coming down the stairs. I thought I was as quiet as a mouse."

"Well, I do have extraordinarily good hearing." Taking a sip of his drink, his knowing look burned into her.

"Because you're a..." Somehow, she couldn't quite get the word out, as if saying it aloud was an admission of its reality, but his twitching mouth told her that she was going to have to try. Evidently, Balthazar was entertained by her struggle.

"Go on," he prompted.

"A shifter?"

It sounded ridiculous when she said it, her logical brain refusing to acknowledge what it meant.

"That's right," he answered, sitting on the stool beside her. "My senses are heightened because of my ability."

"I still can't believe it." There, Cherie had said it. "Not that I think you're lying," she added, gripping her coffee cup a little tighter. "But because none of it seems real."

That was the crux of the matter. From the moment Balthazar had walked into Oliver's office, everything that had taken place was like the plot of a paperback she'd take on vacation, but even the books she liked to read rarely involved paranormal creatures, sizzling submission and kidnapping. She pulled in a breath as she tried to rationalize everything that had happened.

"I understand." His tone was predictably kind. "All things considered, you've taken the news incredibly well."

"What's it like, sir?" she asked, lifting the cup to her lips and enjoying the steam on her face. "To transform into something else?"

*Did I really just ask him that?*

“Strange,” he replied. “At first. But you get used to it.”

“Does it hurt?” Putting down her cup, her brows knitted at the idea of Balthazar being pained. He was so caring and handsome, surely no one deserved discomfort less.

“No.” Shaking his head, his smile broadened. “There’s no pain. Only heat that morphs and eventually erupts. If anything, I usually feel euphoric when my dragon emerges.”

“I’d love to meet him one day.” *Wait, what? Did I really just say that?* Balthazar’s eyes widened a fraction, enough to confirm that she had. “I mean, if you think it’s a good idea.”

“Of course.” His voice was warm as he put down his coffee and reached for her free hand. “It’s just no one has ever asked to see my dragon before.” He chuckled knowingly. “Probably, because I’ve never told anyone about him before.”

“Thank you for trusting me with such a huge secret.” That was an understatement. Despite everything Cherie had been through, she couldn’t imagine carrying around such a clandestine part of herself. It was a wonder that he hadn’t gone mad. “I swear to never tell another living soul.”

“I know you won’t.” His warm palm enclosed her hand. “I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t have total faith in you, Cherie.”

“I’m h-honored,” she stammered. “But...” Squeezing her eyes closed, she bit down on the question she wanted to ask. She was going to inquire how Balthazar had known it was safe to trust her, but to question his faith in her seemed counterproductive.

“But what?” he probed. “Whatever it is, just ask me.”

“Is that an order, sir?” She grinned, despite her racing pulse, amused at how it was easier to talk to him

when she was deferred to him with the title.

“It can be,” he assured her, echoing the words he’d told her during that first evening at the mountain lodge.

It was only a matter of days since he’d flown her up there in his helicopter and wowed her with the breathtaking vantage, and yet it seemed like months had passed to Cherie. So much had taken place since then. She’d known so much passion, so much fear—and so much had been shared. Balthazar, this man who should be a stranger, had somehow become so integral to who she was.

“If it means you’ll share how you feel and what you mean, then yes, beautiful.” His hand rose, tapping her fingers lightly. “Consider that a command, and if it helps loosen your tongue, then I can add the threat of a spanking to the mix, as well.”

*Spanking?*

The word pinballed around her head, convincing Cherie she had surely misheard him. No one spanked grown adults. It was preposterous, and yet something about the idea was oddly alluring.

“I just wondered why you chose to tell me that you’re a shifter, sir.” Trepidation curled in her tummy, insisting that she fidget on the blanket-covered stool. She must have misheard Balthazar. There was no way he’d just bandied the idea of spanking her. Absolutely no way. “How did you know you could trust me?”

“That’s easy, Cherie.”

Raising the cup to his lips, he took a long sip while his eyes bored into her. Cherie’s flesh goosed under his scrutiny, her brain unable to interpret his long stare. Was he angry at her for asking? He didn’t seem to be, but then if she’d accepted the man was half-dragon, how could she know? He was an entirely different animal to her and therefore his responses were bound to be unpredictable.

She watched as he put down his cup, feeling his fingers furling around hers.

“Instinct told me to trust you,” he explained. “And my gut feelings are never wrong. From the first time I set eyes on you, I wanted you, but after watching the way Monroe belittled and disrespected you, it quickly became more than that. I need to protect you, too, to make sure you’re safe.”

“I’m so happy that you came into the city for the meeting.” A sudden rush of emotion surged within her, and she blinked back tears as she went on. “We might never have met, otherwise.”

“I suspect we were always going to meet, beautiful.” Clasp ing her hand in his, he lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them. “We just had to wait until the right moment presented itself.”

“That’s a nice way of looking at it,” she mused. “Very romantic.”

“I can be romantic.”

“I’ll say,” she affirmed. “Coffee and croissant definitely qualify.”

“Shit, the croissants!” Leaping from his stool, he dashed to the oven and opened the door. A gush of heat swarmed in her direction as he switched off the cooker and grabbed the tray from inside. “Damn it, they’re almost burned.”

“Nonsense, sir,” she retorted, slipping from her stool and joining him at the oven. She glanced down at the tray and assessed the croissants. “They look fine and they smell great!”

“You’re only being generous.” He scowled, though his smile conveyed his irritation was only with himself. “They’re ruined.”

“I’d love one,” she told him as her hand moved to her tummy. “If truth be told, I’m famished.”

“Sit back down then,” he instructed as he transferred the croissants to a waiting plate. “Charred breakfast coming right up!”



Resuming her place at the bar, she giggled as he presented the plate to her, along with an array of butter, jams and other spreads. It was bemusing to witness such a strapping man fussing about overdone baked goods, but the paradox only made her want him more.

“Thank you, Balthazar,” she enthused. “I appreciate it.”

Turning her attention to the plate, she selected one of the croissants and tugged it into two halves, dropping each piece onto the plate to avoid burning her fingers. Selecting one half of the croissant, Cherie nibbled on the end as he settled beside her. After his enigmatic display of flawlessness over the last couple of days, she had to admit, it was reassuring to know that her *sir* wasn't perfect, after all.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *Balthazar*

“It’s ruined, isn’t it?”

Frustration swirled inside Balthazar as he watched Cherie eat. She was being polite, just as he’d expected her to be, but the truth was the croissants had been baked for too long. His impeccable breakfast idea was wrecked.

“No, sir!” Her reply was emphatic, despite its deference. “It’s lovely. I enjoy them well-done.”

“Hmmm.”

He remained unconvinced, certain that she was only being courteous as the sound of a new message on his phone drew his attention from her.

“Excuse me,” he told her, rising to collect it. “That was my phone.”

“Did I leave mine in your living room, sir?”

He paused at the question, glancing back to see her stuffing another mouthful between her lips. Balthazar had never yearned to be food so much in his life.

*Maybe she does like them burned, after all?*

“Yes,” he told her. “You left it charging, but I’ll collect it for you on my way back.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Peering up from under her lashes, she offered him the coy smile of a much younger girl, but her wonderful assets assured him that was not the case. Cherie was all woman. He had clarified that much for himself last night.

Emboldened at the thought, he turned and strolled back to the staircase. His cock swelled at the memory of devouring her sweet pussy, his desire obvious as it rose between his legs.

“Not now,” he muttered as he ran up the steps and back to the bedroom.

Throwing open the blinds, he found a pair of joggers, which he pulled on to conceal his growing arousal before he grabbed his phone and opened the new message.

*Good morning, Balthazar.*

Balthazar’s brow rose as he realized it was from Sebastian, the familiar echo of guilt tingling in his chest. His brother had wanted to tell him something when they’d met at Berrunti’s, but Balthazar had been too focused on Cherie to offer him the time.

*Do you have time to talk today?*

*There’s something important I want to tell you.*

Important? Balthazar pulled in a breath at the puzzling statement, wondering what was on his brother’s mind. Perhaps his feeling had been right yesterday, Maybe Seb had a new woman, too?

Heading for the door, he started a reply to Sebastian.

*Hi Seb, sure.*

Hesitating at the head of the stairs, Balthazar’s thoughts returned to Cherie. As much as he wanted to make amends and be there to listen to his brother, Balthazar had her welfare to consider as well. The threat Monroe posed was as clear as it was dangerous, and having lost her once, he’d never do anything to put her in peril again.

*I’d love to meet, but I’ll have Cherie with me.*

*I can’t risk leaving her alone until Monroe is dealt with.*

He tensed at what Sebastian might make of his answer but concluded it didn’t matter. Cherie was in

Balthazar's life now and she was a priority. His family would have to come to grips with what that meant, and there was no one better to introduce the idea of Cherie being with him than Sebastian. Calmer and generally more reasonable than the younger two of their brothers, Sebastian was the other dependable Vaughn. If anyone could be trusted with Cherie's situation, it was him.

Starting down the stairs, Balthazar turned into the living room, his gaze settling over the expensive rug where Cherie had squirmed as he ravished her. Striding to her phone, he disconnected the device and carried it to the kitchen. Walking through the door, he noticed Cherie had polished off two of the croissants he'd baked.

"Your phone." He placed the device down by her head, leaning to kiss her crown.

"Thank you again." She looked up with a smile. "You really are looking after me."

"Get used to it." Collecting her hair in one palm, he swept it to one side and lowered to kiss her nape just as his phone registered another incoming missive. "I said I'd take care of you and I'm a man of my word."

Glancing at his phone, Balthazar perched on the neighboring stool and read Sebastian's reply.

*Things are serious between you and Cherie, then?*

It was impossible to infer tone on a device, but Balthazar knew Sebastian well enough to know his brother never judged. If there was any intonation in his query, it was likely to be intrigue, rather than disapproval.

"Is everything okay, sir?" Cherie asked as she supped at her coffee. "I see you got dressed?"

Her slim eyebrow cocked, suggesting resentment at the disparity that he'd asked her to be naked while choosing to don his joggers.

"Not dressed," he corrected. "Only half dressed, and don't give me that expression, young lady, or the threat I mentioned earlier will come to fruition."

“Wh-what does that mean?” she stuttered.

Balthazar grinned, enjoying the panic flashing in her wonderful eyes. “It means you might find yourself over my knee.”

It had been an eternity since Balthazar had delivered a punishment to a beautiful woman, but the prospect of Cherie breaking the dry spell was mesmerizing.

“Young lady?” she parroted, apparently intentionally ignoring his threat as she placed down her cup.

“Absolutely.” Balthazar grinned. “You’re younger than me.”

“Am I?” she queried, looking him up and down.

“Almost certainly.” Balthazar didn’t know for a fact, but one look at the gorgeous woman in his kitchen verified his accuracy. “I’m thirty-seven, and I’m guessing you’re around ten years my junior.”

“Thirty-seven?” Her eyes widened. “I’d have put you around my age, sir.”

“Which is?” he probed, conscious that he would never normally ask a lady for her age, but now that the matter was raised, he was keen for clarification.

“I’ll be turning thirty years old soon,” she answered.

“Then your answer is very kind.” Reaching for her face, he stroked the side of her cheek. “I’m definitely older.”

“Okay, but…” Pausing, her cheeks burned with fresh heat as his fingers grazed over them. “What did you mean by the rest of your sentence?”

*This will be interesting.*

It was the first time Cherie had even acknowledged Balthazar’s spanking inference, and while he hadn’t set out to mention corporal punishment over breakfast, Balthazar was glad that he had. He’d always relished the chance to tan the backside of a rueful but consenting woman and couldn’t think of anyone better to spank than Cherie.

Putting down his phone on the counter, he ensured he had Cherie's full attention.

"I mean, I have a proven track record of spanking the bottoms of willful women who don't demonstrate the appropriate level of respect."

"What?" she demanded breathlessly. "You've spanked them?"

"That's right," he confirmed, gazing into her eyes and trying to decide if she was merely stunned by his statement, outright disgusted, or secretly enthralled. Of course, there was the tantalizing possibility that Cherie could be all three. She had shown a great willingness to cede to him last night, but suggesting a physical rebuke was another step down the path of her submission, and even for those women who openly enjoyed being spanked, Balthazar had certainly known some who were confused and conflicted by their desires.

He would do well to take his foot off the gas and judge her responses carefully, and yet as her breaths became labored it was obvious that Cherie was at least interested in the idea.

"And they just *let* you?" Her brow rose as though it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

"Yes, he replied. "They let me, but only in a calm and controlled way. For some of us, giving and receiving a spanking can be as alluring as it can be painful."

"I think, sir..." She sounded unsure as she met his eyes. "That's easy for you to say because I'm guessing you like to give, rather than receive."

His balls contracted at the way she made that sound — all breathy and full of promise.

"Also true," he agreed. "But I handle corporal punishment with the same grace I manage pleasure. You'll get what you need, when you need it."

"I will?"

Her tone spoke of defiance, but her beading nipples and flustered appearance conveyed a woman who was fascinated by the idea of his spanking but too embarrassed to say so.

Lowering her gaze, her hands came together, her digits threading between each other.

“If it’s what we agree to,” he admitted. Clasping her chin between his thumb and forefinger, he tilted her chin and insisted her gaze met his again. “I hope you know I would never do anything to you against your will, Cherie.”

“Yes.” Her voice was hardly even a whisper. “I know, sir.”

“Good.” His thumb caressed her skin as he spoke. “But equally, if you want to submit, then you need to understand there are consequences for your actions.”

“My actions?”

He noted how she didn’t draw away from his fingers.

“We never even spoke about consequences before, sir. I had no idea.”

“And I understand and acknowledge that,” he replied. “If I spank you now, it would only be to give you a taste of what life could be like if you agreed to stay as my submissive.”

“I...” Her eyes fluttered closed as she struggled for what to say. “I don’t know what to think. This is all happening so fast.”

“Yes,” he concurred. “I realize.”

Balthazar could barely believe it himself. Only a few days ago he’d never even heard of Cherie Flynn, but now her welfare and happiness had become integral to his peace of mind. He’d heard colloquialisms about how falling in love hit people hard and fast, but he would never have dreamed it was possible until now.

“Listen, I’m not going to force you into anything,” he reiterated. “I’m not like *him*...” Tension furled in his

chest as an image of Oliver Monroe exploded in his mind.

“I know,” she reassured him, reaching for his free hand and squeezing it. “I know you never would, it’s just that I’d never even thought about being spanked and—”

“And you hate the idea,” he interrupted, determined to handle the disappointment with grace.

If physical punishment wasn’t Cherie’s particular cup of tea, then that was fine. He would deal with it and move on. She’d already shown an inclination for other types of submission and had responded beautifully to his prompts for compliance. He would find other wonderful ways to dominate her.

“No,” she replied, though he noted how her brow creased with the response. “I don’t hate it, sir; I just...” She rolled back her shoulders as though she was steeling herself for whatever was to come. “I’ve never put that much trust in anyone before.”

“But could you?” he pressed, sensing that the spanking might be a path Cherie wanted to walk down, but was only too afraid to try. “Would you want to?”

The question hung in the air between them.

“I think,” her voice wavered as his fingers tightened. “I want to with you.”



## Chapter Fourteen

### *Cherie*

*How did this happen?*

One moment, Cherie had been demolishing the delicious croissants that Balthazar had warmed for her, and the next, she was somehow agreeing that he spank her? Tensing at the acknowledgement, she noticed how her pussy clenched at the prospect. The idea of being sprawled over Balthazar's lap and submitting to a physical penance at his hand was far more tempting than it had a right to be.

“Do you mean it?” Balthazar's voice had taken on that smooth liquor-like quality again, the kind that she knew could lead her straight into hell with a smile on her face. “I don't want to coerce you into anything, beautiful, and honestly, there are plenty of other ways we can play.”

His wink sent a rush of heat through her body, culminating at her core and seeping south to soften her sex. Cherie had wanted him last night, but that was nothing compared to the surge of need she experienced then. Balthazar could give her everything she'd ever wanted. It was all right there for the taking.

“I mean it.” Her voice was hardly even a whisper. “But it's scary, sir.” Her heart raced as she contemplated the hundreds of possible scenarios that could play out. “How will I know if I like it, how will *you* know, and how will you know when enough is enough?”

“Hey.” Releasing his hold on her hair, he slipped from the stool and stood before her. “I'll know because we'll communicate. You'll have a safe word, and I'll always respect it.”

“Yes.” It made sense when he put it that way. Balthazar had proven how considerate he could be, while still giving her the time of her life. She had no reasons to doubt him. “I know.”

“It’s about trust,” he went on, nudging her knees apart and moving between her thighs. “And that takes time. That’s why I wouldn’t do anything extreme at first.”

“Wh-what would you do, sir?”

She couldn’t believe she was even asking.

“Administer a few swats to your perfect little ass.” His focus fell to her backside, which writhed on the stool right on cue. “And see how you find the experience.”

*Fuck. How does he make that sound so hot?*

Being spanked wasn’t sexy. Being in pain shouldn’t be arousing, so how was Balthazar making both sound like the ultimate aphrodisiac?

“Okay.”

How did Balthazar talk about this stuff so calmly? Heat bloomed in her cheeks at the mere idea, and lifting her palms to her face, she tried to cover her obvious embarrassment.

“You know you really shouldn’t do that.” His eyebrow arched in that intoxicating way he seemed to employ when the moment called for such a gesture.

“Sir?”

Pressing between her legs, he buried both of his hands in her hair and eased her attention back to his gaze. Her hands fell to her lap as his focus pierced her.

“Conceal your face like that.” His lips twitched. “I told you, you’re too beautiful to be covered.”

“Oh.” Her heart was hammering so loudly, Cherie was sure Balthazar must be able to hear it.

“So?” He probed quietly. “What do you think, and remember there are no wrong answers. I only want you to be

honest with me. Is spanking something you'd really like to try?"

"Yes." She couldn't even recall instructing her mouth to answer, but her assent was out there, lingering like electricity in the air between them. "I'd like to, sir."

"You are so incredible."

Sincerity echoed in his voice as he swooped for a kiss, the punishing caress stealing her breath until he rose to his full height.

"Balthazar!" Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she remembered to correct herself. "I mean, sir. I can't think when you kiss me like that."

"I don't want you to think," he replied, taking a step back and tugging her from her stool. "This moment is about submission."

"I understand," she murmured, bumping into his hard, muscular body as she stumbled from the seat.

What was it about the man that enthralled her? Naturally, he was tall, dark, and freaking gorgeous, but it was more than only Balthazar's good looks that captivated her. It was his presence, the assuredness of his soothing authority and the fact that she already knew he was prepared to keep her safe.

*And the fact that he's a shifter.*

She gulped at the wild thought. The man she was crazy about was a shapeshifter—part-man, and part-dragon. There was no one like Balthazar in the world.

"You're safe, Cherie." His words washed over her like an ocean of allure. "Don't forget that at any point."

"I won't, sir." Reaching for his chin, she grazed her fingertips over his jaw. "I trust you."

How could she not? They hadn't known each other for long, but in the short time they'd spent together, they'd experienced a multitude of highs and lows and disclosed intensely personal things to the other.

“Do you remember your safe word?” His hand caught her wrist, pausing her exploration of his stubble.

“Yes, it’s red.”

There was no hesitation this time, only a buoyed sense that this was right, that *he* was right and anything he suggested would only be for their mutual benefit.

“Good girl.”

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her fingers, but the way he beamed at her was all the reward Cherie needed. If it was possible, her heart accelerated even faster, pumping adrenaline throughout her body.

*Balthazar’s going to spank me!*

She still couldn’t fathom why the thought was so damn enticing, but as his eyes shone down at her, she decided she didn’t care. Come what may, she was committed to getting through it and perhaps, if she was lucky, finally comprehending why the fantasy turned her on.

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## *Balthazar*

Leading her to the curved edge of the breakfast bar, Balthazar spun her gently to face the counter.

“Put your hands on the worktop,” he instructed, watching as she complied. “Very good.”

Kissing her shoulder, he ran an invisible line along her arm to her toned midriff, enjoying the feel of her soft, alluring skin. He couldn’t wait to explore every inch of her.

“Are you sure you’re not cold?”

Maybe it was just him, but Balthazar thought the room was getting hotter; however, he wanted to be certain. Cherie was wonderfully naked and more exposed to the air.

“No, sir,” she answered in a raspy tone. “The floor is heated.”

“True,” he replied, glancing down at the expensive tiles beneath their feet. The underfloor heating had never seemed like a better choice than at that moment. “Take a step back, Cherie. I want you farther away from the counter.”

Nodding, she obeyed, though her hands remained in place on the worktop.

“That’s better,” he praised. “Now, shift your ankles wider apart.”

Arousal contracted at his core as she did as he asked, the position forcing her delectable ass to stick out from the breakfast bar.

“Bloody hell,” he exhaled. “You’re magnificent.”

He ran his palm over her upturned cheeks unthinkingly. He was amazed at his luck. How he had managed to find a woman as lovely as Cherie was a wonder in itself, but the fact that she liked to surrender to him, and was even prepared to let him spank her— Balthazar had no idea how he’d achieved such a feat.

“To clarify,” he started, ignoring the thrum of his need as he squeezed her ass. “I’m going to give you ten swats and then check in with you. If you think it’s too much in the meantime, you can use your safe word. Do you understand, Cherie?”

Kissing her delightful back, he turned his attention to her face as he waited for her reply.

“Yes, sir.” Twisting to see his face, she managed a small smile.

“Are you ready?” His swelling cock tented his joggers, affirming that he was more than ready, but this wasn’t about his boundaries. It was about Cherie’s.

“Yes, sir. I’m ready.” Turning back to face the counter, she inhaled, and he noticed the tension creeping into

her shoulders.

“Okay, beautiful.”

It was time to test out his theory. Would the wonderful submissive he'd met last night come out to play once he'd warmed up her ass, or would Cherie's arousal be repelled by the notion of his spanking? There was only one way to find out.

## Chapter Fifteen

### *Cherie*

Squeezing her eyes closed, Cherie tensed as Balthazar's palm smacked against her exposed ass, the noise of the impact ringing around the kitchen long after his hand had withdrawn. The spank itself hadn't been that painful, but mentally, she unraveled at the idea. This was happening, and worse, she'd consented to the madness.

*What was I thinking?*

The question rebounded as she gripped the edge of the worktop.

"One."

His voice thundered from behind her and her toes curled as he numbered the swat. If he was going to do that after each one, she might die of humiliation. It was strange enough to be there naked and braced to be spanked, but to have to acknowledge every strike—that was unbearable.

"Are you okay, Cherie?" His hand traced a line over her hip.

"Y-yes, sir."

She forced out the reply, determined to give the act a chance. She had wanted this, and having had the courage to assent, she had to show the strength to see it through.

"Good." Balthazar's touch disappeared in an instant, leaving Cherie's skin cold. "Nine more."

She blew out a breath as he swatted her again, and this time the strike was harder. Not grueling enough to truly challenge her, but hard enough to remind her who of them was in charge, while the other was naked.

*Balthazar*, she reminded herself as he called out the number. *Balthazar's in charge.*

A small smile formed at her lips, the thought more tantalizing than she'd realized. This *was* what she wanted, a man as glorious as Balthazar to push her. It was why she'd done his bidding last night—why she'd stripped and knelt on command—and why she was clutching the kitchen counter, now. Balthazar promised to take her to places she'd never known before, and that was before she tried to conceptualize his shapeshifting confession.

“Ow!” she called out as he spanked her again, jumping from one foot to the other. It wasn't that the third swat had been too taxing. More like in the haze of her thoughts, she had been unprepared for the blow.

“Sorry?” His voice was firmer. “Do you want to use your safe word, Cherie?”

‘No, sir.’

She didn't even need to contemplate the answer. Cherie hadn't come this far to back down after three pitiful strikes.

“Okay.” The softer tone reemerged as his palm grazed over her punished ass. “That was three.”

*Three.* Cherie inhaled. *I can do this.*

“Arch that back for me.” He patted her cheeks disapprovingly until she complied, sticking her ass out the way he wanted. “Better,” he praised. “Now, keep it there unless you want me to add strikes.”

Her gaze lowered at his warning. She was unsure how she felt about the caution. Standing with her backside jutting out was abjectly more embarrassing than her prior position, although she was also aware it made a better target for his hand. More than that though, as she stood clasping the side, she acknowledged just how much the stance was affecting her. Being nude and vulnerable was exquisite. Balthazar could do anything to her while she was so prone



and passive. Cherie's nipples tightened at the tantalizing thought.

*Balthazar can do anything.*

She swallowed back the rising hurt as the fourth strike landed, taking stock of the way the impact spread from where his skin collided with hers and out around her ass cheek. Cherie had no way of knowing what level of force Balthazar was using with each spank or how much more she could take, but one thing was for sure—she definitely wanted to find out.

The heat burning at her ass furred with her shame to produce the most sublime and heightened sensations. She was mortified to find herself there, and yet frantic to see where the experience would take her, embarrassed to be the one yet again naked while he was attired, and yet secretly thrilled at her show of submission. Torn by the competing experiences, Cherie's head spun.

“Change of tack.” His voice was low, the timbre drawing her focus from the floor. “Now you count for me, Cherie.”

Wait, what? He wanted *her* to count?

“How many was that?” The question hung over her like a heavy cloud, goading her into error even though she knew the answer.

“Four, sir?” she offered, unclear why she had phrased the response as a query.

“Very good.” His voice oozed with glee. “You were paying attention.”

*Paying attention?* Was he insane? She was naked and being spanked by the man who'd not only saved her from her vile ex-boss' clutches, but also admitted to being a paranormal creature. Cherie had never been more focused on anything before.

“I'm impressed.” His hand slipped between her legs, stroking the folds of her pussy as he went on. “And I like to reward those who impress me.”

Desire knotted at her core, pulsing at her clit and sending an involuntary whimper to her mouth. Blushing at the sound, she closed her eyes, yearning to focus only on his deft fingertips and not her overarching embarrassment.

“But there’s no pleasure until after your spanking.”

His hand vanished as fast as it had arrived, and Cherie’s disappointment swelled in spite of herself. She knew it was illogical to expect another orgasm. After all, that wasn’t what she’d agreed to, but still, her swelling arousal begged to differ. For some reason deferring to Balthazar was insanely hot, and no doubt when he’d caressed her sex, he’d noticed her response for himself. She yearned for more of that kind of attention, her back arching even further in a silent display of urgency.

*SMACK!*

Cherie’s lips parted as the fifth strike landed, the brunt of the blow much tougher than she recalled, but she held back the plea that lodged in her throat. She wouldn’t call out again unless she meant for him to stop, and she sure as hell didn’t want that.

“Number it, please.”

He sounded so in control, and though she didn’t dare to turn around and see him, Cherie imagined him there with his arms folded across his strapping chest.

“Five, sir.” Her reply was husky, conveying how she really felt about submitting to Balthazar’s spanking.

“That’s right,” he answered, coming to stand in her peripheral vision. “We’re halfway, pet.”

*Pet?* Did Balthazar just refer to her as his pet?

She risked a glance in his direction; his steely gaze confirming that she hadn’t misheard him.

*What the hell is that supposed to mean?*

Did he see her as some small animal he could keep and punish, and if he did, why did that sound so bloody hedonistic to Cherie?

“Something to say, pet?”

There was the strange term again, yet this time his knowing eyes told her it was meant as an endearment.

“No, sir,” she replied hastily, hanging onto the counter for dear life.

“Good,” he continued, moving closer. “These next few are coming hard and fast. Make sure you keep count.”

That was all the warning he gave her. With one stride he was back into position, his huge hand smacking against her defenseless ass, but this time, just as he’d vowed, the onslaught didn’t pause. Instead, Balthazar’s palm rained down on her another three times in fast succession, igniting the ache in her punished skin until all she could think about was its stinging intensity.

She panted at the sudden ordeal, thankful they had nearly reached the agreed-upon limit of ten swats. Goodness only knew how she would have dealt with more than that.

“How many? He barked, rubbing his palm over the afflicted area as he waited for her answer.

‘Six, seven, eight, and nine, sir.’”

She reeled off the numbers breathlessly, conflicted between the rising pain his strikes had inflicted, and her primal yearning to push back against the same palm that had struck her and seek pleasure.

“Very good.” Balthazar squeezed her cheek, eliciting another unsuspecting whimper from her throat. “So, to your last swat, pet.”

Her brows knitted at the disconcerting term, her mind still trapped in the frenzy between how tempting he made it sound and the rational conclusion that she was nothing of the sort.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m not going to hold back with this one,” his fingers skimmed a line across her swollen lips en route to massage her other cheek.

Hold back? He had to be kidding, right? Those last few blows had been anything but restrained.

“Are you ready?”

*Well, am I?*

“Yes, sir.”

Consciously rolling back her shoulders as much as her position permitted, Cherie was resolved to her fate. Gritting her teeth, she focused on her hands. It was only one strike. Whatever he could hand out, she could take.

“Good, pet.”

She shivered at his admiration, both thrilled and disgusted in equal measure. It was awful enough that he should want to call her by such a belittling term, but that she should find it so sexy was downright debilitating.

Her complaints splintered as his palm landed on her backside one final time, touching down with such power that she had no choice but to expel the air in her lungs.

“Fuck, Balthazar!”

She hadn't intended to swear, or to call his name, but as her head fell forward, she realized she felt better for having released the pent up energy.

“Excuse me?” His disapproving tone sent a rush of electricity through her.

“I'm s-sorry, sir,” she added, hoping he wouldn't use her language as an excuse to add swats. “That was ten.”

“That *was* ten,” he agreed, wrapping his arms around her and tugging her toward him. “But I don't like that language from you, pet.”

“I won't use it again,” she insisted, turning for the protection of his embrace. “It just hurt, sir.”

“It was supposed to,” he assured her, catching her chin lightly between his thumb and forefinger as she attempted to bury her burning face into his chest. “Let me look at you.”

*Oh Lord, no.* Unable to recoil from his touch, she closed her eyes as he steadied her face.

“Cherie.”

His deeper tone drew her gaze open once more, compelling her to acknowledge his perceptive expression. As their gazes locked there was no doubt in her mind, Balthazar was impossible to ignore.

“Are you all right?” His thumb stroked her chin as he assessed her reactions.

“I’m...” Focusing on his absurdly high cheekbone, she mused on his question, uncertain how she felt. She didn’t regret having consented to him spanking her, but in truth, the act had allowed a lot of feelings to surface, and Cherie wasn’t ready to articulate most of them. “I don’t know. I think so.”

“Was I too hard on you?” Concern was etched into his voice as he circled her and brushed his palm over her ass.

Twisting around to see him, she noticed how he’d dropped to his haunches behind her. “I have some balm to apply which will soothe your skin.”

“N-no,” she answered, confused at the loss of his body heat. “I’ll be fine, sir. It’s not that.”

“Then, what?” Rising to his full height, his stare bored into her.

“It’s how I feel,” she confessed, realizing that Balthazar was going to coax her into talking however she felt about the subject. His serious expression convinced her of that much.

“*How* do you feel?” he asked, pulling her toward him and capturing her in his strong arms.

“Vulnerable and yet strangely empowered,” she whispered, conscious of the weight of his gaze even though she couldn’t bring herself to meet it.

“I want to empower you,” he murmured, reaching for her hair and tugging her head backward. “But if you enjoy

the vulnerability, then all the better.” He smiled as if he couldn’t believe how lucky he was. “Tell me how else you feel, pet.”

“Why do you call me that?” she asked, unable to meet his eyes properly while his fist held her hair.

“Because it’s true.” There was no malice evident in his voice. Only affection. “You’re so fragile and beautiful, and you’re all mine, Cherie. Like a gorgeous animal I’m sworn to protect.”

“But you’re not sworn,” she countered, unsure why it mattered. Wasn’t she delirious about the idea of Balthazar? That he wanted to defend and devour her just made him all the more miraculous. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Wrong.” His response was clipped, and her heart rate sped up at the resonance. “Your spanking got me so hard that I owe you a damn good fucking.”

Allowing her head to fall forward, he gestured to the erection tenting his joggers. “So, tell me again. How do you feel?”

A dark twinkle shone in his gaze as she finally met his eyes, a gleam there she could well understand. Balthazar’s plan sounded incredible, and the liquefying effect of her spanking ensured she was more than ready for him.

“I’m sore, sir,” she admitted.

“I’ll kiss it better later,” he promised, already tugging the joggers from his hips.

“But there’s something else,” she interrupted, drawing his concentration back to her.

“Oh?”

“Your spanking has left me hornier than I can ever remember being.” She grinned at her brazen admission, aware that she might previously have been ashamed at the words and yet now never feeling farther from shame. The brunt of Balthazar’s palm had stirred something deep inside

Cherie that had slept for too long, and now that it was awake, she could sense it wrestling within her, demanding more. "I'm sore, but so bloody horny."

"Don't worry." He smirked as he leaned to kiss her. "I can help you with that."

## Chapter Sixteen

### *Balthazar*

“Yes, please, sir.” She reached for his freed cock and ran her hands along his shaft, ensuring she met his eyes before she spoke again. “I’m terribly turned on.”

“You are so naughty,” he chastised playfully, catching her wrist and spinning her around to face the counter again. “But I adore you for it.” Spooning her, his cock snuggled between her aching ass cheeks, as he guided her hands back to the counter. Placing them on the worktop, he whispered into her right ear. “Stay right there.”

“Sir?”

Her eyes widened as he strode around the counter to the farthest drawer. Opening it, Balthazar found a collection of condoms for emergency use, and based on how engorged his dick was after Cherie’s spanking, this was definitely an emergency.

“Wait,” he instructed, fishing out a condom and ripping the packaging open with his teeth.

“You keep condoms in the kitchen?” One slim eyebrow rose as he raced back to her and rolled the sheath in place.

“Yes, pet.” He smacked her ass, reveling in the way the impact rippled across her gorgeous skin. “And I’d avoid that sassy expression unless you want another ten swats.”

“Yes, sir,” she gasped, laughing as he settled back between her thighs. “No more now, please.”

“Do you still want this?” Grabbing her hair, he eased her attention his way as his feet nudged her left ankle wider.



“Yes,” she breathed, her pupils dilated as she met his gaze. “Yes, please.”

That was all Balthazar needed to hear. Burying himself in her slick channel, he groaned as he filled her balls deep. He’d been happy to cater to her needs and guide her when it came to pushing boundaries, but as her cunt contracted around his shaft, all he could think was how damn perfect she was.

Cherie, this woman he hardly knew, had woken a part of his dragon that Balthazar barely recognized. When Monroe had taken her, the beast inside Balthazar had roared for revenge, and its cries had only been dampened by the gratifying sexual hedonism he and Cherie had created since.

He couldn’t put his finger on what it was explicitly, or why exactly she captivated him the way she did, but easing from her pussy and slamming back inside, he knew without question that Cherie had become the center of his entire world.

He would dominate and devour her, but once the flames of their passion had been satiated, he knew his dragon would need more. In the end, he would need to finish Monroe.

“Oh my!” Gasping for air, she pushed back against him as he fisted her hair tighter.

“You’re magnificent,” he told her, leaning forward to graze her temple with his lips. “So fucking good.”

“Balthazar,” she whimpered, her fingers paling as she grasped the edge of the counter for dear life. “Please.”

“More?” he barked, pumping himself in and out of her sweet pussy. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes!” Her response was emphatic as releasing her hair, he gripped her hips and picked up his pace. “Yes, please, Sir.”

Pressing her against the counter, he thrust deeper, pinning her in place as they groaned in unison.

“I can’t hold on much longer,” he gasped.

His brow furrowed at the disappointing thought. Balthazar longed to make it last hours for her, to consume every inch of her until whenever she sat down she thought only of her dragon, but his excitement was proving difficult to contain, and much more stimulation would see him soar.

“I don’t care,” she replied, twisting around to see his face. “Please, don’t stop.”

“I’m not going to,” he confirmed, reveling in her heat as his climax approached. “I’m never going to stop, pet.”

Every sinew in his body stiffened as the wave overcame him, his lips parting as her sex pushed him over the precipice and he freefell into ecstasy.

“Fuck, Cherie,” he just managed as he caught his weight against the counter. His orgasm was enormously intense and the last thing he wanted to do was inadvertently hurt her in his throes of passion.

“Sir.” Wiggling free of him, she turned and reached for his hair. Running her elegant fingers through the strands she caught her breath. “You’re amazing.”

*Amazing?* Balthazar liked the sound of her praise, reckoning he could listen to it every day for the rest of his life.

“I’m not done yet, pet.”

Lifting her into his arms, he placed her gently on the counter and narrowly avoided the crockery from her earlier breakfast.

“Balthazar!” she shrieked, clinging to his neck as she found herself offered as the latest delicacy.

“Hush,” he replied with a satisfied leer. He’d relished every second of his pleasure, but it was only fair that Cherie benefited from the same attention. “Lay back now. It’s time I had breakfast.”

“Sir?” she answered, bewilderment flashing in her eyes as she complied.

“I didn’t have any croissants, remember?” he jibed, tugging her toward the end of the counter where he stood waiting. “I’m famished.”

Falling to his knees, he was the perfect height to lap at her gorgeous pussy, and burying his face between her thighs, he devoured her hungrily.

“Oh, fuck, Balthazar,” she gasped, pressing her palms onto the counter as he tongued her swollen clitoris.

“Hey,” he growled, tipping her to one side and smacking her cheek as penance.

“Sorry,” she huffed. “But...”

Her words trailed away as Balthazar’s focus fell back to her intoxicating sex. If she hadn’t just milked every ounce of pleasure from his cock, he was certain it would be swelling as he kneeled on the kitchen tiles.

*You’re going to come, pet.*

The promise echoed in his mind as he splayed her thighs even wider, and dipped one, and then two fingers into her soaking pussy.

“Oh my God!” Her feet pressed into his shoulders as he ran his tongue around her excited nub.

“Don’t fight it, pet,” he growled, easing his digits in and out of her spasming sex as he glanced down the line of her body. Stretched out on his worktop, she was the very picture of sin. “I want you to call out my name as you splinter.”

Burying his face back between her legs, he noticed how, despite his recent gratification, his cock throbbed greedily for more of her. Drenched in the taste and scent of Cherie’s looming crescendo, Balthazar exulted in his goddess. If a man so immersed with pleasure had the ability to grin as he devoured her, then as his name echoed around the kitchen, Balthazar would surely have done so.

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## *Cherie*

Snuggled against his chest, it took a while for Cherie to come to her senses. By the time she lifted her gaze to look around, she noticed that they were no longer in the kitchen, but that Balthazar had carried her back to the living room, where they'd nestled by the fire.

“Welcome back.”

She noticed the triumph laced in his voice, but didn't dispute it. The one thing she could never deny Balthazar was how fucking good he was between the sheets, although ironically the bedroom was one of the few places he was yet to screw her.

“Thank you, sir.” Pressing her palm against his skin, she breathed in the scent of him. “I don't remember coming here.”

“You were rather overwrought.”

She sensed he was doing his best not to sound smug.

“So, I brought us here to chill out.”

“That was amazing.” Straightening beside him, she smiled, grazing his jaw with a kiss. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” he answered, mirroring her grin. “That was the sort of breakfast I'd happily consume every morning.”

Her head reeled at the prospect. The idea of having Balthazar between her thighs every morning left her lost for words.

“I'm glad you've come around though,” Balthazar went on. “Because Sebastian's messaged and we do need to

go out.”

“*We?*”

What was he talking about?

“Naturally.” Balthazar flashed her an even wider smile. “You don’t think I’m leaving you unattended until I have Monroe leashed, do you?”

“But Balthazar,” she started. “I’ll be fine. Especially now we’re both being so vigilant. Oliver took us by surprise last time, but he can’t do that again.”

“That’s true,” he agreed. “But he can use his brute strength to gain access to you and if I’m not around to look after you, then...” Balthazar didn’t finish his sentence, but the knots in her belly concluded his hypothesis. Oliver meant to do her harm—she knew that much already. “I won’t leave you again. Not as bait for that monster.”

“I appreciate you looking after me, sir.” Meeting his dark eyes, she recalled how good he’d looked between her thighs. “I really do.” She clenched at the illicit recollection. “But I’m sure your brother doesn’t want me hanging around when he meets you.”

“I don’t care what he wants.” Balthazar’s voice was firm. “This isn’t about him. It’s about me, and you...” His lips twitched as he mused on his words. “It’s about *us*.”

“Is there an *us*?” Even after everything they had been through, Cherie refused to assume Balthazar’s intentions. He was a good man, as well as a phenomenal lover, but that didn’t mean he wanted her chained to his side for the foreseeable future, and she didn’t expect him to.

“Hey.” His brow furrowed and for a moment, Cherie thought she saw genuine hurt flicker in his chocolate brown gaze. “How can you say that after this morning?”

“I’d love there to be an *us*,” she replied, tracing her fingertip over the lines on his forehead. “But I don’t take anything for granted. I mean, we still scarcely even know each other.”

“I know enough.” The aroma of her arousal goaded on his breath, threatening to distract her from his sincerity, but Cherie remained glued to those large eyes, knowing he deserved that much. Balthazar had been her hero from the first moment she’d set eyes on him. “And I believe you feel the same way, pet.”

“I do,” she whispered.

It was the strangest thing. A couple of days before and she’d been in the midst of the longest sexual drought of her life, and now both her ass and her sex were sore from Balthazar’s attention, and she’d relished both intimacies.

“Although I’m still not sure about my new pet name.” She scowled at him playfully. “It makes me sound like an animal.”

“Oh, but you are,” he murmured. “I’ve heard the guttural cries escaping your body, remember? Maybe you have another creature hidden inside of you that needs to come out?” His eyebrow cocked at the idea.

“You’re the only animal who has been inside of me, sir,” she told him wryly.

“Just as well,” he chuckled, rising to his feet and taking her with him. “Have I told you how jealous and possessive dragons can be?”

“Erm, no,” she squealed as he carried her out of the room and up the stairs to the bedroom. “Something I need to know, sir?”

“Only how much trouble you’ll be in if I discover that some other animal has been inside you.” His stare drilled into her.

“Trouble?” she parroted, enjoying the joking nature of their conversation. “What kind of trouble, sir?”

“The kind that will see your ass bright red and filled with my cock,” he told her matter-of-factly before dropping her gently onto the bed they’d shared.

“Filled with your cock?”

Fresh heat colored her face as she imagined the penance he described. She could never envision any reason to be with another man again, but somehow, the concept of the punishment he bandied sounded scintillating.

“Hmmm.” He nodded, reaching for the bag she had taken from her place and dropping it onto the covers beside her. “You heard me.”

“I...”

*Christ, that sounds amazing!*

“Oh, you like the idea of that?” he probed, chuckling as he dressed himself quickly. “I’ll have to rethink then. It’s not much of a punishment if you’re reveling in every moment.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, watching as his fine-looking ass disappeared inside his pants. “I’ve never had a cock there before.”

That made him pause, and slowly, he peered at her over his shoulder.

“Never?” he pressed.

“No, sir.”

Though she’d wondered many times what the intimate act would be like, Cherie had never found anyone she trusted enough to enact it.

“Well, well, well.” The puzzlement in his eyes faded into salacious intent.

“Wh-what does that mean?” she asked, conscious of the way her heart skipped a beat at his menacing chuckle.

“It means, you’d better hurry up and get dressed.” Balthazar signaled to her bag. “My brother will be waiting.”

“Oh, right.” Unzipping the pack, she searched around the bag for a fresh pair of leggings and a top before finding her underwear. “Are you sure it’s okay for me to come with you?”

“It’s always okay for you to come with me.”

She leapt at the volume of his voice, shocked to see he'd somehow crossed the floor and was perched right beside her.

*I didn't even hear him move, let alone see him!*

“How did you do that?”

Eye to eye with him, she considered kissing his tempting mouth, contemplating what the penalty for delaying him would be. Did she want another commanding kiss, or, as her instinct suspected, was she rather more drawn to the prospect of having his impressive cock pummeling her virgin hole? Her breath quickened as she imagined how that might be.

“How did I do what?” Lifting a hand to her face, he brushed his fingertips over her heated cheeks. “What are you thinking about, pet? You're blushing even harder now.”

“You moved so fast.” Cherie skillfully avoided the mention of her mortified shame. “I didn't see you until you were right with me.”

“That's how it will always be.” His eyes glimmered with whatever devilish plan he was concocting. “Whether you see me or not, I'll always be there, pet.”

“That sounds good.”

Did they really have to go out at all? Couldn't they just stay there and fuck for the rest of the day?

“You didn't answer my question.” His tone was knowing. “What are you thinking about?”

Playing with the lace of her bra, she felt her face flaming under the scrutiny of his gaze. “The punishment you were talking about.” She glanced down at her beading nipples, painfully aware of how aroused he made her.

“Me fucking your sweet ass?” he clarified with his usual sinful smile.

“The very same, sir.”



“It doesn’t have to be a punishment,” he told her, grazing his lips over her mouth. “I’ve already tasted how good it is. If you’re game, I’d love to claim it as mine.”

*Claim it?* Her muscles all clenched at his choice of words. She fucking loved the way he made it sound.

“Will it hurt?” she gasped between his kisses.

“No, little pet.” His laughter deepened. “Not the way I do it, but if…” Pausing, he let the word hang in the air between them.

“If what?” she demanded.

“*If* I was to punish you with anal sex,” he continued. “Then that would be a different story, Cherie.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### *Balthazar*

“Balthazar?” Sebastian sighed. “About bloody time. I’ve been waiting for you to get back to me.”

“Yeah, I got a little waylaid.”

Balthazar glanced in Cherie’s direction, noticing how she refused to meet his eyes as they sped through the streets, but the call with his brother was audible through the car’s speaker. She could hear every word.

“Apologies, but we’re on our way now.”

“On your way?” Sebastian sounded concerned. “Where are you going?”

“To you.” Balthazar smiled, reaching for Cherie’s knee as he shifted the Aston Martin into sixth gear. “You’re at the penthouse, right?”

“Yes, but you don’t need to come here.”

If Balthazar didn’t know better, he’d have sworn Sebastian sounded flustered.

“I’ll come to meet you somewhere,” he went on. “Berrunti’s?”

“Not today,” Balthazar replied and this time Cherie turned to meet his gaze, her lips twitching as her delicate hand slid over his fingers. “It’s too close to where that bastard Monroe is. I have Cherie with me, remember?”

“Oh, yes,” Sebastian answered.

*He definitely sounds flustered.*

“Somewhere else then?” Sebastian pressed, apparently keen to ensure Balthazar re-routed, although Balthazar wasn’t sure why.

The penthouse, like the townhouse, the mountain lodge, and all of their properties, was jointly owned by all four Vaughn brothers. Balthazar had just as much right to be there as any of the others, and Sebastian had never had objections to impromptu visits before.

“Like where?” Balthazar’s brow creased. “What’s the problem, Seb? Why don’t you want us to come over? Have you got a woman stashed there that I don’t know about?”

His laughter filled the car, but as Sebastian’s silence filled the ether, it was tension rather than amusement that settled in Balthazar’s stomach.

*What’s the issue? Maybe he doesn’t like Cherie?*

“I wanted to talk to you about that in person...” Sebastian’s tone was suddenly clipped. “Preferably in private.”

“Oh.”

It wasn’t often that Balthazar was lost for words, but this was one of those rare occasions. Sebastian *had* tried to talk to him, but Balthazar had been too concerned about Cherie to hear him out and Sebastian’s growing frustration was obvious.

“I see.” Balthazar’s jaw tightened.

He’d been so caught up in his own romance, that he’d overlooked Sebastian, yet his brother had still come to his and Cherie’s aid when Balthazar called him for help. The knot of guilt contracted inside him.

“I’m sorry, I...” Peering over at his gorgeous brunette, he wondered how to explain. “I’ve been distracted.”

“With Cherie.” Sebastian’s voice was kinder than Balthazar deserved. “I know, Balthazar and I get it. I’m not

upset. I just wanted to speak to you about the woman *I've* met.”

Balthazar's heart sped up at his brother's explanation. They'd both been single for years and yet inexplicably, they both seemed to have found happiness at the same time.

“I'm happy to go elsewhere and let you two talk,” Cherie added from the passenger seat. “It sounds like it's important.”

“Oh, hi Cherie!” Sebastian chuckled at her input. “No offense intended. I'd love to get to know you better some time.”

“None taken,” she added, leaning into the speaker as though she wanted the point to be clear. “I hate the thought of getting in the way.”

“You're *not* in the way,” Balthazar clarified.

“He's right,” Sebastian confirmed. “It's just been a strange few days.”

He could say that again.

“How about if Cherie waits in another room while we talk?” Balthazar suggested, slowing as they approached the looming cityscape.

“I don't have a problem with that,” Sebastian answered, “but I also have my lady here.”

“Oh, okay.” Balthazar really hadn't expected that. “Well, brilliant. We can all meet each other then.”

“Yeah...” Sebastian didn't sound convinced. “It could be a little more complicated than that.”

Cherie's brows knitted as she glanced to Balthazar for clarity. He wished he could help her, but frankly, he didn't know what the problem was. If the fates had aligned to ensure that both he and Sebastian had met ladies who made them happy, then what was the issue? Shouldn't Sebastian be as keen as Balthazar was?

“Well, there are enough rooms for everyone.”  
Balthazar laughed, trying to keep the conversation upbeat.  
“So long as security is as tight as usual, then I’m happy for Cherie to wait while we talk.”

Truth be told, after this perplexing chat, Balthazar was all the more eager to understand what was going on in Sebastian’s life. Who had he met and what was so *complicated* about her that he’d be reluctant for her to meet Balthazar?

The questions pinballed around his head as he headed toward the penthouse apartment.

“Okay.” Sebastian blew out a breath. “What’s your ETA?”

Checking his dashboard, Balthazar noted the time.  
“Traffic permitting, we should be there in ten minutes.”

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“Wow.” Cherie craned her neck as she peered up at the glass frontage of the apartment. “That’s certainly impressive. How many properties do you have again?”

Balthazar smirked at her inquiry. On another time and day, he might have been able to twist her tone into impertinence, an offense that could easily be punishable with another spanking, but for numerous reasons that wasn’t on the cards right now. Firstly, he and Cherie hadn’t really had much time to debrief after her taster, and he certainly hadn’t had the chance to lay down rules and consequences that could lead to further spankings, but perhaps more importantly after their phone call in the car, something was going on with Sebastian, and Balthazar was determined to discover what—or *who*—it was.

“I’m very lucky to own a few with my brothers,” he replied, taking her hand as she wandered toward him. “This one has some of the best views of the city.”

“The lodge had some incredible views.”

She flashed him a smile as she presumably recalled something of their first date. The chemistry between them at the Vaughn’s mountain retreat had been sparking even then, at least until Monroe had ripped the evening into pieces.

“Yes.” He squeezed her fingers gently as he guided her toward the lobby. “I remember.”

“I’d love to go there again sometime, sir.” Cherie leaned into him with the request, a devilish twinkle shining in her green eyes. “We have some unfinished business at that place.”

“Oh, I agree,” Balthazar purred. “We’ll find some time soon, I promise.”

“Mr. Vaughn.” Hayden, one of the building’s regular security guys, opened the door as they approached. He was on the Vaughn payroll and had been working for the family for years. “Good to see you.”

“Good morning, Hayden,” Balthazar replied, checking his wristwatch to check it was, in fact, not already the afternoon. “Good to see you again. This is Miss Flynn.”

“Lovely to meet you, Miss Flynn.” Hayden nodded in Cherie’s direction as the front door closed behind them. “Did you know your brother is already in residence, sir?” Hayden hesitated, his gaze traveling between Balthazar and Cherie. “He also has a guest.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Balthazar answered, steering Cherie toward the elevator. “He’s expecting us.”

“Very good, sir.”

Calling the elevator, Balthazar turned back to Hayden. “We’ve had some issues with a rival recently and certain threats have been made against us.”

A tiny gasp left Cherie’s lips as she glanced back to the silver doors, and Balthazar wrapped an arm around her.

“I’m sorry to hear this, Mr. Vaughn.” Hayden looked genuinely concerned. “I had no idea.”

“It’s not something we generally want to broadcast,” Balthazar went on as the doors opened behind him. “But I’m telling you because I’d like the entire security team updated and for security to be stepped up at all of our homes.”

Balthazar had known Hayden a long time, and trusted him to ensure Cherie was safe while she was in the building.

“Can you spread the word?” he added. “I’ll call a meeting on the matter soon.”

“Of course, sir.” Hayden nodded. “Please rest assured, we’ll all be extra vigilant.”

“Thank you.” Spinning on his heel, he found Cherie waiting in the cubicle, her finger poised over the button to hold the door.

“Which floor, sir?” Her lips curled as he joined her, his palm straying to the curve of her ass as he gave the command.

“Sixteen,” he whispered. “It has the best vista.”

“Sixteen, it is.” Reaching past him, she selected the floor without leaving the confines of his arms. “Who owns all the other apartments?”

“My family does.” He didn’t take his eyes from her as he replied.

“*All* of them?” Cherie’s gaze widened.

“Yes.”

By the gods, he wanted to fuck her again, and being in the elevator was only making it worse. The restricted silver space reminded him of the elevator ride down from Monroe’s office. It had been the first time he’d really had the chance to speak to Cherie, and despite its association with the fiend, Oliver, he recalled it fondly.

“Wow,” she repeated. “You guys are super rich, aren’t you?”

Balthazar grinned at her obvious innocence. It was true his family was wealthy, but the fact she measured that wealth by the number of floors in their building was as amusing as it was naïve. Like their rivals the Monroes, the Vaughns had accumulated most of the money by buying stocks cheaply and risking big. Balthazar's father, Michael had enjoyed a smart head for business and his gambles had reaped the family rewards.

“We're more than comfortable, yes.”

Aware of the doors sliding closed behind them and the cubicle starting to ascend, Balthazar swooped in for a kiss, taking his time as he breathed Cherie in. In a matter of days, she had become his everything. He'd been waiting for Cherie his entire life, and now that he'd found her, he didn't ever intend to let her slip away.

“Balthazar.” Her voice was raspy when he finally straightened, her hand rising to her temple. “I already told you that I can't think when you kiss me like that.”

“So, don't think,” he instructed, smiling glibly as the elevator came to a halt.

“You're awful, sir,” she chided as he turned to see the doors glide apart. “But I do so appreciate you.”

“It's just as well,” he reminded her as they left and walked the short distance to the huge glossy front door of the apartment. “Because you're not getting rid of me.”

Her chuckle filled the air as Balthazar lifted his hand and knocked twice on the black door. It was the same style of knock he used wherever he went, and he knew that Sebastian would know it was safe to answer the door.

He couldn't wait to get Cherie back to bed, but first was the subject of Sebastian and who he'd been hiding away in their city penthouse. A peculiar mix of nerves and excitement simmered in his stomach. Sebastian had been loving and leaving ladies for years, so whoever he'd decided to hide away up here must be important. It was time Balthazar met this enigmatic woman for himself.





## Chapter Eighteen

### *Sebastian*

Agitated nerves tangled in Sebastian's stomach as he sat by the fireplace. It was preposterous to feel so apprehensive about his brother's imminent arrival, but Sebastian couldn't deny the swell of his trepidation.

He'd managed to keep Rebecca's identity a secret for the last few days, rescuing her from the clutches of her abusive family and enjoying the time with her at the apartment, but he was also no fool. Sebastian had always known this moment would come—the time when she would have to be introduced to his siblings, but Sebastian had hoped he'd have the opportunity to address the matter with Balthazar before his brother swept into the penthouse with his new woman in tow.

“Sebastian?” Rebecca's voice was uncertain as she returned from the bathroom. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, little girl,” he assured her, opening his arms to receive her as she closed the distance between them. Curling up on his lap, her dazzling blue eyes drilled into him.

“Are you sure, sir?” she probed. “You seem tense.”

He smiled at the ease with which she read him. They might not have known each other long, but there was no doubt in his mind that they belonged together. Rebecca was the missing piece of Sebastian's life—the answer to every riddle that had stumped him since his father had compelled him to sign the family contract that ensured Michael's bloodline survived him.

“My brother, Balthazar, is on his way.” He released the words in one long sigh, stroking her flame-colored hair from her face.

“Here?” She stiffened, her gaze darting around the enormous expanse of living space.

“Yes.”

“Does he know about us?” she asked. “Because I remember you told me you wanted to talk to him and iron out his concerns about Oliver, and—”

“Hey,” Sebastian interrupted.

It was true that in the spirit of transparency, he’d confessed some of his anxieties to Rebecca about how Balthazar might react to his union with a Monroe, but then he hadn’t expected his big brother to just show up at their door.

“I don’t want you to worry. I haven’t had the chance to talk things through with him yet, but I will.” Sebastian was relieved to hear that his tone was more convincing than he felt. “I’ll straighten things out with him now.”

“You’re sure?” Her beautiful brow furrowed. “Because I don’t want to cause any trouble between you. It’s great that you have a good relationship with your brothers.”

“No trouble,” he reiterated, having decided long before that Rebecca was his choice no matter what Balthazar, Draco, or Cole had to say about her. He loved his family, and hoped for harmony, but if needs insisted, then he was prepared to go rogue. Each Vaughn brother had an equal share of their father’s wealth, and Sebastian could survive—and flourish—without their help.

“And there’s more,” he continued, running his fingertips along the smooth skin of her arm. Somehow, Rebecca managed to make the short-sleeved tee look red hot, but then he was sure that she could make a trash bag look sexy. “He’s bringing his own woman with him.”

“The one you all went to rescue?”

She sagged against him, presumably still unable to fathom the fact that her own brother had been responsible for Cherie's kidnapping. Sebastian hadn't mentioned the fact that Oliver had previously employed Cherie. Perhaps Rebecca already knew, but he'd decided that Rebecca had been through enough and needed his protection, not to be weighed down by some misplaced sense of guilt on behalf of her brother.

He'd also managed to avoid asking her about Oliver's chimera; the tension in his stomach twisting in recognition. He wanted to find out what she knew, and discover whether the gene was isolated to only her brother, but in truth, he'd been too anxious to probe deeper. Things had been so good since he'd transformed in front of her—they'd been so happy in their bubble of contentment—he didn't want to make waves between them, and her astonishment at his change had already persuaded him that she was ignorant of Oliver's ability. If Rebecca had been privy to the chimera, she'd have been significantly less stunned when her new beau shifted into a dragon. He was confident that she was in the dark about her brother's abilities.

"That's the one," he replied. "So, it seems things are serious between them, *as well*."

"You mean, things are serious between us?" Her eyebrow arched playfully. "I thought this was just great sex in a new swanky building."

"Need another spanking, little girl?" he teased, thankful for the sexy diversion and all too conscious of how his cock throbbed at the idea.

Rebecca had been too upset to play the day before, her father's vile messages ensuring that all she needed was love and comfort, but if she was going to demand his attention, then Sebastian's palm was more than happy to deliver.

"Maybe once your brother has gone, sir." Leaning forward, she ran her thumb across his jaw before she kissed

his skin. “I don’t know if that’s necessarily the best way for you to introduce me to him.”

Sebastian chuckled at the thought. His swelling arousal rather liked the idea of Balthazar arriving to find his gorgeous redhead strewn over his lap, with her ass exposed and reddened, but that fantasy would have to wait for another time.

“You’re right,” he told her between kisses. “I think it’s best we talk alone at first. He’s going to ask Cherie, his new girlfriend, to wait elsewhere in the apartment so he and I can talk.”

“Want me to retire to the bedroom?” She grinned as she met his gaze.

“If you don’t mind,” he responded, aware of how fucking hot Rebecca made it sound. “Until I’ve had time to talk to him.”

The last thing Sebastian wanted to do was offend Rebecca, but watching her reactions, he noticed how at ease she was with the proposal. Evidently, Rebecca knew better than most how complicated familial relationships could be.

“It’s no problem,” she murmured. “I’ll grab a drink and go and hide there.”

“Don’t put it that way.” He caught her wrist as she rose from his lap. “I never want to have to hide you, little girl. I’d just expected to have spoken to Balthazar before he met you.”

“It’s okay, sir.” Turning back to him, she reached down and kissed his brow. “I totally get it.”

“So, you’re not upset?” he inquired, releasing her wrist.

“Not even vaguely.” She dismissed his concerns with relaxed laughter. “I’m sure I’ll find some way to entertain myself in there...”

“Hey, don’t forget who owns your orgasms.” Sebastian employed his most gravelly tone as he twisted to

see her gleeful expression. “No playing with yourself until I say so.”

“I know,” she answered with a theatrical sigh. “I’ll do my best.”

The sound of two hard knocks at the front door splintered the sexy atmosphere he and Rebecca had manifested.

“That’s him.” Sebastian regretted the tension in his voice immediately.

*Only Balthazar knocks like that.*

“Okay.” She flicked her hair back as she moved to the door. “I’ll just run to the kitchen and then I’m out of your hair.”

“I’ll come and get you when we’re ready,” he called out as she raced off in the direction of the kitchen. She could get what she needed and divert straight to his bedroom without running into Balthazar.

Rising from his seat, he checked his reflection in the mirror above the hearth, as though he was expecting a business associate. Sebastian couldn’t ever recall being this nervous where Balthazar was concerned.

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered as he strode to the door.

Releasing the numerous locks he’d secured to prevent the Monroes from getting to Rebecca, he pulled back the door to see Balthazar standing there smiling.

“Sebastian.” Balthazar’s smile widened as he gestured to the brunette at his side. “You remember Cherie, don’t you?”

“Naturally.” Sebastian’s anxiety tumbled away as he answered. Whatever happened, he had everything under control. He’d fallen for the ravishing red head and there was nothing Balthazar could do to persuade him otherwise. “How are you feeling now, Cherie? It’s great to see you again.”

“Hey.” Lifting the hand that wasn’t encased in his brother’s, she offered him a small wave. “I’m okay, thank you, Sebastian. Thanks again for helping to get me out.”

“You’re welcome.” Releasing the door, he motioned for them to come in.

“Yes, thanks,” Balthazar added as he tugged her inside. “I know it was a lot to ask.”

“Nonsense,” Sebastian replied, closing the door and ensuring all of the locks were in place. “We’re brothers, Bal. It’s all for one and one for all, right?”

“Yeah.” Peering back at Sebastian, Balthazar frowned. “I was going to ask you about making sure the place is secure, but it seems like you’ve got it covered.”

“We can’t be too careful,” Sebastian answered, dodging Balthazar’s unspoken question.

*Why are you being so paranoid, Sebastian?*

He would have the answers for his brother soon enough, but first they had to partake in the pleasantries.

“Oh, I agree.” Balthazar nodded. “Thanks.”

“Do you need anything, Cherie, before I steal my brother away from you for a while?” Sebastian looked at the petite woman, noticing her blush at his sudden attention.

“Maybe just a glass of water, please?” she suggested.

“I can get it,” Balthazar stated. “Why don’t you take Cherie to the lounge and we can talk in the dining room?”

“No, allow me,” Sebastian insisted. There was still a chance that Rebecca was loitering in the kitchen, and he definitely didn’t want the two of them meeting until he’d engineered the right moment. “You take Cherie through, Balthazar.”

“O-kay.” Balthazar hesitated, clearly perturbed by Sebastian’s take-charge attitude. Of the four brothers, Sebastian had a reputation for being the most laid back, so

he wasn't surprised at his brother's stunned expression. "I'll see you in the dining room."

"Perfect," he replied, darting past the couple toward the kitchen.

Sebastian had to admit that Balthazar and Cherie looked good together, and he genuinely only wanted all of his brothers to be happy. As he reached for a glass and poured Cherie the chilled and filtered water, he prayed inwardly that he and Balthazar could find a middle ground on the subject of Monroe. Sebastian understood completely why Balthazar loathed Oliver, and he too had reasons to detest the man, but if he was going to tar all Monroes with the same brush, then they would have a problem.

Crossing the elegant hallway, Sebastian returned to the lounge to find Cherie sat by the window. Balthazar was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone to the dining room to meet you," she explained as Sebastian crossed the floor to pass her the water. "Thank you."

"Anytime," he answered. "And thank you for being so cool with this unusual setup."

"It's been an unusual week." Shrugging, she chuckled as she gripped the glass.

"Yeah," Sebastian agreed. "It really has."

"Great view you have here, though." Cherie gestured to the expanse of glass to her left. "It almost makes the city look beautiful."

Sebastian sniggered at how she made that sound. "Almost?"

"Well." Her lips jerked as though she was reliving an unpleasant memory and Sebastian instantly wished he'd had the foresight not to query her. Cherie had been through a lot in the last few days, and even though he was sure that Balthazar had done his best to take her mind from whatever pain Monroe had inflicted, she was only human. It would take time to truly recover, and knowing Oliver was still out



there probably did little to reassure her. “Don’t forget I’ve seen the other side of the city.” She met his gaze. “The parts that don’t glitter.”

“You’re safe here,” he assured her. “No one can hurt you.”

“Thanks.” Lifting the glass to her lips, she took a sip of water.

“I should go and meet Balthazar.” Sebastian glanced in the direction of the dining room. “But holler if you need anything.”

“I will,” Cherie called out as Sebastian walked away. “Thank you.”

Returning to the hall, he peered back toward his bedroom, thinking of Rebecca although his feet took him in the opposite direction. His firecracker of a little girl was in there waiting for him, and she needed Sebastian every inch as much as Cherie needed Balthazar. Whatever Balthazar’s view, it was Rebecca’s plight that drove him.

## Chapter Nineteen

### *Balthazar*

“I gave Cherie her glass of water,” Sebastian told him as he entered the room.

Balthazar noticed how Sebastian closed the door behind him, as though he wanted to make sure that whatever was said between them stayed just that—between them.

“Thanks,” Balthazar replied as Sebastian wandered toward the enormous dining table he was already sitting at. “So, do you want to tell me about this new woman in your life?”

Sebastian inhaled as he reached for a nearby chair and took a seat opposite Balthazar.

“I wanted to talk to you about this yesterday,” Sebastian started, tapping his fingers against the polished wood as he apparently stared anywhere but Balthazar’s face.

*I don’t remember ever seeing Sebastian like this before.*

The thought tightened the ball of apprehension inside Balthazar. What was it about this new romance that had Sebastian so worked up? Balthazar had never cast a negative verdict on any of the women Seb had dated. Not that there had been that many since their father had passed on. Sebastian had become the consummate bachelor.

“I realize,” Balthazar answered. “I’m sorry I cut you off, but I’m here now and you have my undivided attention.”

“Thanks.” Sebastian’s digits stilled, his concentration landing solely on Balthazar, and fleetingly, Balthazar was perturbed by the intensity in his brother’s eyes. Whoever she was, she obviously meant a lot to Sebastian.

“You’ve figured out by now that I’ve met someone.” Sebastian splayed his palm against the table, as though the surface offered spiritual support.

“Yes,” Balthazar confirmed, musing on how long it would take for Sebastian to get to the point. Perhaps if Sebastian was hesitant, it would help if Balthazar showed more of an interest in the new coupling. “Where did you meet?”

“Indigo.” Sebastian’s lips curled.

“The night club?” Balthazar didn’t care if the disgust in his voice aged him. As far as he was concerned, Sebastian and he were too old for fucking night clubs. They’d evolved to better, more discerning experiences.

“Yep.” Sebastian’s brow rose. “I went to have the evening with Cole, but he found other ways to entertain himself.”

“I bet.” Balthazar nodded. Cole might have been the youngest of the brothers, but he was no longer a baby and it seemed his sexual appetite proved it. “What is she like, this lady of yours?”

“Stunning.” Sebastian beamed as he recalled her. “Smart, sassy... you know, totally my cup of tea.”

Balthazar couldn’t help but smile. His brother’s enthusiasm was infectious, and anyway, he knew just how Sebastian felt, having recently fallen head over heels in love himself.

“She sounds amazing.”

“She is,” Sebastian clarified.

“So...” Balthazar prompted.

“So, what?”

“So, why the cloak and dagger approach, Seb?” Balthazar went on. “If she’s so perfect, why am I not meeting her right now?”

“Because of *who* she is.” Sebastian’s stare pierced him, and finally, Balthazar had the sense that they had gotten to the critical juncture of the conversation.

“Who is she?” Balthazar pressed. “Someone I know?”

He searched his mind, trying to think of any women he’d met whose alliance with Sebastian would have ruffled his feathers, but there was no one obvious. In general, Balthazar got on well with women. They all did.

“Not someone you know,” Sebastian answered as if he was intentionally trying to be cryptic. “But the daughter and sister of people you know...” He paused, his brows knitting before he finished his sentence. “And don’t like.”

“What?” Now Balthazar was even more confused. “Who are we talking about?”

“That’s why I’ve been hesitant about telling you.” Sebastian shut his eyes briefly before shaking his head. “I didn’t know how you’d react when you found out about her family, but I have to tell you, Balthazar I’m serious about her whatever you say.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Seb,” Balthazar countered. “Just tell me who she is. All this clandestine shit is giving me a headache.”

“Her name is Rebecca.”

Balthazar noticed the way his lips curled at the mere mention of her name.

“And she’s a Monroe.”

“A Monroe?” The word bounced around Balthazar’s head as if it intended to taunt him.

*The Monroes—architects of all the Vaughns’ misery.*

“Yes.” Sebastian’s tone was serious. “She’s Oliver’s sister.”

“She’s the sister of that useless piece of shit who took Cherie?”

Fury bubbled inside Balthazar, threatening to rouse his dragon as he clenched his hand into a fist to control the anger.

What the fuck was Sebastian thinking, dating Oliver fucking Monroe's sister? Of all the women in the city—in the world—why choose one who was a blood relation of that swine?

“Yes.” Sebastian's answer was unhurried as though he thought he could quell Balthazar's mood by slowing down the pace. “That's what I just said.”

“Why her?”

It was the first polite query that came to Balthazar's mind.

“I didn't know who she was when we met.” Sebastian shrugged. “It was just great sex, but then when I ran into her again, I discovered she was Jonas Monroe's daughter, and I learned all about the horrendous things both he and Oliver have put her through...” It was Sebastian's turn to clench his fist, his tightening jaw a sign of how incensed he was.

“What do you mean?” Balthazar snapped. “What has she been through?”

“Her father is an asshole.” Sebastian shook his head as he recalled the details. “He's coercively controlled her for years, and I mean controlled her, Bal. He manipulates and threatens her, and worse, he's been known to use violence.”

“Fuck.”

Balthazar didn't know how else to respond. Their father wasn't perfect, but he couldn't recall Michael ever so much as raising his hand to any of his children.

“Yeah.” Sebastian sighed, “exactly. I had to get her out of Monroe's house, but her dad has been throwing around menacing ultimatums ever since. He's trouble, Bal. Just like Oliver.”

“He sounds it.” Balthazar’s brow rose as he processed Sebastian’s explanation. It didn’t mitigate the way Oliver behaved, but perhaps it clarified some of the cause. Growing up in an environment like that must have been hell.

“You can’t possibly know how fucked up the Monroe family is,” Sebastian told him. “However much you think you despise Oliver, I guarantee you that she loathes him more.”

“I doubt that,” Balthazar replied, though the resolve in Sebastian’s voice made him wonder if he was right.

“All I’m saying is, I know you hate Oliver, and you don’t trust him or his family, and I get that.” Sebastian blew out a breath. “I’ve seen some of their handiwork first-hand since Rebecca and I have been together, but don’t assume she’s like them, because she’s not.”

Balthazar had the sense that Sebastian had practiced this part of his speech, running the words through his head before he presented them.

“You really like her, huh?” Staring at his brother, Balthazar waited as Sebastian found the right words.

“More than I’ve ever liked anyone, Balthazar, and I know some of what you’re feeling, believe me. I’ve had to keep Rebecca here, out of the way of her blasted father. He’s threatened all sorts of shit since she left. You should see the messages he sends; they’re sick...”

“Shit, Seb, I’m sorry.”

Balthazar didn’t know much about Jonas Monroe, save what Michael had told him, but based on the attitudes and actions of the son, it wasn’t difficult to imagine how repulsive the father was. Plus, he knew how he would feel if someone sent appalling messages to Cherie. He’d want to rip the fucker’s head off with one bite.

“Will you give her a chance?” Sebastian blinked away the angry tears that had formed in his blue eyes. “And not just assume she’s like the rest of them?”

“Listen, if she’s important to you then, of course, I will,” Balthazar replied. “But please understand she still represents a conflict of interest. If I’m sitting around planning a move against her brother, how do I know she won’t call him and give him a head’s up?”

“Because I’m telling you she won’t.” Sebastian’s voice was deadly solemn. “Because I trust her with my life, Balthazar, and she trusts me with hers.”

Balthazar bit down on the instinct that wanted to laugh at Sebastian’s ‘drama queen’ performance, although only a week ago, he suspected he would have chortled regardless. Cherie had changed him. She’d smashed into his life and altered his perspective. Who was Balthazar to laugh at his brother’s passion? Balthazar understood only too well how fast feelings could overwhelm a man, and he knew he would likely react similarly if Cherie was in the same boat.

“What do you want me to say, Seb?” he asked. “That I trust her one hundred percent because you say so?”

“No, of course not,” Sebastian scoffed. “No more than I trust Cherie because you say so. Trust takes time to build, and having partners in our lives is an adjustment we’ll all have to make.”

“What then?” Balthazar demanded, a little riled by the inference that Sebastian didn’t trust Cherie, although rationally he understood why. She was a stranger to him. Hell, *he’d* only known her for a matter of days. Everything had happened so fast.

“I’m just asking that you give her a chance,” Sebastian concluded. “Don’t judge her because of her kin. She’s been through a lot and she makes me happy.”

“Okay.” He lifted his palms in a conciliatory manner. “I promise to give Rebecca a chance.” *But if I get so much as a whiff that she’s feeding our secrets back to her bastard brother, then she’ll have me to deal with.*

He didn’t vocalize the last line, though he wondered if it showed in his eyes.

“Thanks.” Tension eased from Sebastian’s shoulders.  
“That means a lot to me.”

“Of course.” Balthazar and Sebastian had been through so much. He had no intention of letting anyone come between them. “So, when do I get to meet her?”

“Well...” Rising from his chair, Sebastian strode toward the door. “There’s no time like the present.”



## Chapter Twenty

### *Cherie*

Cherie hadn't been lying. The view from the penthouse apartment was beyond impressive, but as she stared at the distant tower blocks, she couldn't help but be reminded of where she used to work and the rollercoaster of events that had happened since she walked away from her job.

Pressing her palm against the glass, she sighed, her breath steaming the pane. She watched as the obscured glass cleared, the slow reveal striking a chord in her head. The haze her breath created was like the life she'd known so far, confused and aimless, mainly running on autopilot. But life since Balthazar had arrived was a far cry from that muddled sense of going through the motions. He inspired sentiments she'd never known before, and a longing for something more. She craved that with him more than she had a right to after so little time together.

Glancing down at her watch, she noticed the time. How long was the impromptu brotherly tête-a-tête going to take? She understood why Balthazar and Sebastian wanted time alone, but staying on her own in the enormous lounge was doing nothing to assuage her growing sense of unease.

Sebastian had inferred that he wanted to tell Balthazar about a woman he'd met, but what if *she* was really the subject of their chat? Cherie realized how close Balthazar was with his brothers—the fact he'd called on all of them to rescue her was testament to their intimacy. If Sebastian had some unknown objection to Cherie, then perhaps he'd talk Balthazar around and her new lover would want to cool things.

“Stop it,” she muttered under her breath. “Stop overthinking.”

Cherie had no reason to doubt Balthazar, and she knew it, but her history of low self-esteem and accepting less than she deserved haunted her, planting the insidious seeds of self-doubt. Whatever happened with her handsome dragon-man, she had to learn to silence that paranoid inner voice.

“Hey.”

Cherie leaped at the sound of a female voice, spinning to see a smiling redhead in the doorway.

“Oh, hi,” she gulped, trying to calm her racing heart.

The woman walking toward her must be the one who’d stolen Sebastian’s heart, and with her flame-haired beauty and broad smile it was easy to see why.

“I’m just waiting for Balthazar and Sebastian to talk,” Cherie explained. “I’m Cherie.”

“Hi, Cherie.” The woman thrust her palm out in Cherie’s direction. “I’m Rebecca.”

“You’re with Sebastian?” Cherie asked as she shook Rebecca’s hand.

“That’s right.” Rebecca’s smile widened. “Although we haven’t been together long, so it feels kinda strange hearing that aloud.”

“Same,” Cherie chuckled, instantly at ease with the other woman. Aside from her best friend, Sarah, who she still had to call and update about the dramatic events that had taken place in the last few days, Cherie didn’t know too many people in the city. Cherie could use a new friend, and if Rebecca and Sebastian were serious, then she could prove to be a useful ally.

“Can I get you a drink?” Rebecca’s focus flitted to the huge expanse of glass, momentarily distracted by the enormity of the view.

“No, thanks,” Cherie answered. “Sebastian poured me a glass of water before he left.” She motioned to the now-empty glass sitting on the coffee table.

“That does sound like Sebastian.” Rebecca’s blue eyes lit up as she thought of him. “Always so considerate.”

A contented quiet fell over the women as they both contemplated how thankful they were to have found men like Sebastian and Balthazar, broken only when Rebecca spoke again.

“So, how did you meet Balthazar?”

“At work,” Cherie replied.

“He was your boss?” Rebecca’s tone was wry.

“Oh no!” Cherie countered. “Nothing as cliché as that, but he had a meeting with the guy who used to be my boss.”

She tensed at the inference of Oliver, fighting to steady her voice.

“Used to be?” Rebecca’s brow furrowed. “You’ve quit since then?”

“I didn’t have much choice,” she explained. “It was either that or he was going to fire me—in front of a bistro full of customers.”

Cherie didn’t know why she was telling a complete stranger about her woes, but strangely it felt good to offload them. The joy she and Balthazar had discovered was incredible, but it hadn’t allowed much time for Cherie to process the myriad of intense things that had transpired. Somehow, talking to Rebecca seemed to help.

“It sounds as though you’re better off without his employment,” Rebecca suggested. “Your ex-boss sounds like a real asshole.”

“Yeah.” Cherie laughed, despite the very real threat that Oliver had manifested in her life. “He is.”

“Listen,” Rebecca shifted from one foot to the other, suddenly conveying a disquiet that Cherie hadn’t noticed before. “I wanted to apologize for—”

“Ladies.”

Rebecca spun at Sebastian’s voice, leaving her apology open-ended, and from over her shoulder Cherie saw both men towering in the doorway.

“I didn’t realize you were acquainted?” Balthazar’s gaze lingered on Rebecca as he walked toward Cherie, slipping a protective arm around her middle.

“We weren’t,” Rebecca replied, eyeing him just as carefully. “Until now.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stay in the bedroom?” Sebastian shook his head, although his tone was teasing.

“You might have done,” Rebecca grinned at him. “But I got lonely without you.”

“Time for a proper introduction then?” Balthazar gestured to his brother. “Will you do the honors, Seb?”

“Sure,” Sebastian responded, tugging Rebecca closer to him. “Rebecca, this is my brother, Balthazar, and Cherie you’ve already met.”

Rebecca flashed Cherie a dazzling smile before her attention returned to Balthazar. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Likewise,” Balthazar replied, although Cherie noted how uncharacteristically stiff he seemed as he stood beside her.

Evidently, whatever had been discussed between the brothers had left a lasting legacy on her lover. The atmosphere in the room had shifted since the men had returned, but Cherie wasn’t sure why. She also wasn’t clear about what Rebecca wanted to apologize for. After all, she didn’t even know the woman.

“And it seems there’s not much for me to do since Cherie has met both of you already.” Balthazar broke her

train of thought. “But for the record, this is Sebastian and his new lady, Rebecca.”

“Did you tell Balthazar who my family is?”

Rebecca’s voice had taken on a harder edge, her gaze sliding from one brother to the other.

“Yes,” Sebastian answered, leaning down to kiss her head. “I did.”

“And?” Rebecca’s tone was clipped, demonstrating a side of the woman Cherie had never seen before.

“Wait,” Cherie interrupted. “What am I missing here?” She addressed the question to Balthazar, but would have been happy for any of them to elucidate for her. “What has Rebecca’s family got to do with anything? I thought we came here for you two to talk, Balthazar?”

“We did.” His brown eyes bored into her as though they were trying to send some unspoken message. “About Rebecca and who she is.”

“O-kay...” Cherie’s concentration turned to Sebastian’s lover. “So, is someone going to let me in on this little secret? Who are you, Rebecca?”

“That’s what I was going to apologize for,” Rebecca said, her jaw tightening as she considered what to say next.

“You don’t have to apologize for your brother,” Sebastian told Rebecca, wrapping his arm around her waist and squeezing her gently. “None of us is responsible for what our families do.”

“Your brother?”

Cherie’s heart sped up, although why the mention of Rebecca’s brother would ratchet up her anxiety was unclear. Rebecca had been nothing but friendly and supportive since they’d met.

*Why isn’t anyone telling me anything?*

“Who is your brother?” Cherie pressed, determined to get to the bottom of the conundrum.

“There’s no easy way to say this.” Rebecca swallowed. “Especially since Sebastian told me what he did to you, but...”

“Who?” Cherie demanded, wiggling free of Balthazar’s hold, although deep down, she already knew the answer.

There was only one man she’d ever met who could induce such apprehension, only one man who’d consistently belittled and denigrated her, and only one who’d snatched her away in the claws of a hideous mythological creature.

*Oliver Monroe.*

She tensed at the verdict, her focus fixed on Rebecca. Oliver must be Rebecca’s brother. She must be a Monroe.

“You already know, don’t you?” Rebecca shook her head sadly. “I can tell by the look in your eyes.”

“Oliver.” Cherie could scarcely even whisper his name. “You’re Oliver’s sister?”

“Yes.” There was no triumph in Rebecca’s voice, only glum resignation. “And I’m so sorry for what he did to you. I don’t know what’s gotten into him, and...” Her voice trailed away as though she’d realized the obvious—there was nothing she could say to compensate for the things Oliver had done.

“It’s not your fault,” Cherie replied. “Sebastian’s right. You’re not responsible for Oliver.”

“I know.” Rebecca wrung her hands in front of her. “But it needs to be said, and I know that Balthazar is skeptical about me being in Sebastian’s life because of my brother.”

“Well, that’s not fair.” Cherie turned to her lover, surprised at his unjust judgment. “How is Rebecca responsible for Oliver’s actions?”

“She’s not.” Balthazar’s soothing voice washed over her. “I only want to protect you, beautiful.”

“I know.” Cherie reached for his hand. “I appreciate that.”

“You both need protection from him,” Sebastian muttered. “Seems like all the men in the Monroe family are monsters.” He exchanged a pointed look with Balthazar, although no one seemed to want to elaborate.

“I hope you won’t hold it against me, Cherie.” Rebecca’s gaze landed on her. “I’d really like it if we could be friends.”

“I’d like that, as well,” Cherie admitted. “And I won’t. I despise Oliver, but he’s not you.”

“No.” Rebecca shuddered at the inference. “He’s definitely not.”

“He was my boss.”

Cherie wasn’t sure why she offered the additional information, after all, it hardly mattered, but her earlier conversation with Rebecca had inferred that the redhead hadn’t known how Cherie knew Oliver, and if their friendship was to have a chance, Cherie wanted all of the loose ends to be tied.

“You worked for him?” Rebecca released a breath, as though things were finally clearer in her head. “He was the dick who threatened to fire you in front of all those people?”

“Among other things, yes,” Cherie replied, conscious of the way Balthazar gripped her hand.

“That makes sense.” Rebecca smiled sadly.

“Why?” Balthazar queried.

“Well,” Rebecca retorted with a shrug. “It stands to reason. Oliver always was an asshole.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

### *Balthazar*

*“Oliver always was an asshole.”*

Balthazar couldn't resist the urge to smirk at Rebecca's reply.

*Maybe I misjudged Rebecca? Perhaps there's more to her than I realized?*

Glancing between the women, he only knew one thing for certain; Cherie appeared to have taken the news about Sebastian's new woman being related to the man who'd abused her with far more elegance than he had.

“We can agree on that,” he answered, meeting Rebecca's blue eyes.

“Shall we sit down and talk some more?” Sebastian proposed, signaling to the multiple expensive couches scattered around the room. “Do you guys have time?”

“I'd like that,” Cherie responded before Balthazar could reply. “If it's okay with you, sir?” She pressed herself against him, as though her sexy curves and seductive smile could persuade him to agree. Which of course, they could.

“Sir?” Rebecca queried with a half-smile. “Does the address run in the family or something?”

“We're trying it for size,” Cherie admitted with a girlish giggle. “I like it, though.”

“I do, too.” Rebecca's grin grew with the confession. “Seems like we have more in common than we realized!”

“The answer to your question is probably yes,” Sebastian interjected. “It does seem as though all us brothers share similar tastes in the bedroom.”



“Wow.” Cherie’s cheeks flamed as she replied. “Who knew that kinks were genetic?”

“If you’re happy to stay and talk, then let’s do that.” Balthazar suggested, steering her toward a nearby couch, and avoiding her no doubt rhetorical question. He was well aware that Sebastian and the others also enjoyed dominating their partners, but that wasn’t the topic of conversation that interested him. At least, not today.

Cherie had taken the news about Rebecca well—better than he had—and he wanted to harness this opportunity to talk to Sebastian’s lady and hear what she had to say. Maybe spending time with Rebecca would allay some of his lingering concerns.

“They can be so bossy, can’t they?” Rebecca joked to Cherie as Sebastian guided her to the sofa opposite. “But don’t we just love it?”

“Erm.” Cherie’s cheeks were an adorable shade of crimson. “Yes, we do.”

Taking his place next to Cherie, Balthazar stared at the woman sitting beside his brother. Sebastian hadn’t been wrong about her sass when he’d described her earlier, and yet he was practically beaming as he reached for her hand. Balthazar couldn’t recall seeing him happier.

“Careful,” Sebastian murmured. “I could deliver that spanking right now.”

Cherie shot Balthazar a nervous look at the mention of the ‘s-word’, and she caught her lower lip between her teeth when he smirked back at her.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Rebecca teased. “You want to make a good impression in front of Cherie and Balthazar.”

“Don’t mind us,” Balthazar replied, motioning for them to go ahead. “I totally understand the need to discipline a wayward woman.”

Despite his reticence about Sebastian’s choices and desire to learn more about Rebecca, Balthazar realized he was enjoying the banter, and while he couldn’t envision Seb

forcing Rebecca over his knee in front of them, it certainly was a titillating thought.

“Balthazar!” Cherie hissed, squirming awkwardly beside him. “Don’t.”

“Sir,” he corrected. “I think we just established that it’s safe to use our formal titles here.”

“Seems like we need to keep our women in line, brother.” Sebastian chortled as Rebecca snuggled closer to him.

“Maybe we’re just out of practice?” Balthazar beckoned Cherie closer, and she inched over to cuddle beside him, resting her head against his chest. “But man, am I enjoying the practice.”

“Same here.” Sebastian stroked Rebecca’s hair as he met Balthazar’s gaze. “It’s good to clear the air. Not being able to tell you about Rebecca had been weighing me down.”

“I agree.”

Watching their interaction, Balthazar could see how comfortable Sebastian and Rebecca were in each other’s company. He acknowledged that he was even more thankful to have found Cherie. With his beautiful brunette, he need never envy their intimacy.

“Maybe we should clear the air of everything that needs to be shared?” Balthazar’s gaze narrowed as he stared at Sebastian, hoping his eyes would convey the subject he referred to, although now Rebecca’s identity and their sexual proclivities were out in the open, there was really only one secret still to reveal. “Does Rebecca know *everything* about you?”

A part of Balthazar couldn’t believe he was inferring their shifter status around a woman he’d only just met and had good reasons not to trust. After all, hadn’t he been the one brother to take their father’s words to heart? The one who’d made the others promise to never reveal their hybrid genetics outside of their family—but then, he’d also already

told Cherie the secret. Michael's contract had always conjectured the coming of this day. If their father was so frantic for his sons to marry, then he had to know that one day they would disclose their shifter status. He'd told his father that much himself.

"Does Cherie know everything about you?"

Sebastian's eyebrow arched, confirming that he, too, could play Balthazar's game of stealth.

"Yes."

Locking gazes with Sebastian, Balthazar ensured that his brother understood how portentous the moment was. For the first time in their lives, one of them had told an outsider about their dragon genes.

"Yes, she knows everything." He was almost giddy at the admission.

"And so does Rebecca," Sebastian told him. "In fact, I've gone one better than that. I *showed* her."

"What?" Balthazar leaned forward on the sofa cushion. "You transformed in front of her?"

"We're talking about dragons, right?" Cherie's brow creased as she looked between Balthazar and Sebastian.

"Yes, beautiful." Balthazar chuckled as he glanced back at his puzzled lover.

"Sebastian's a dragon, as well?" Her alluring green eyes grew larger. "Did I know that?"

"Well," Balthazar exhaled. "We made a promise not to divulge each other's secrets, so... I didn't mention it specifically."

"Sebastian told me." Rebecca's laughter was hearty as Sebastian swatted her hand playfully. "But he did imply it was a secret."

"So, now we all know," Sebastian confirmed, no doubt wanting to draw Balthazar's focus from the fact he'd shifted in front of a woman he barely even knew. "The Vaughn men are dragon-shifters."

Balthazar shook his head at how insane it was that both women knew, but Sebastian was in luck. After everything he'd been through with Cherie, he was inclined to overlook the fact Sebastian had broken their pact of secrecy. Love made people do crazy things, after all, and in reality, he might even be a tiny bit jealous of his brother's audacity. Balthazar looked forward to the moment he could reveal his dragon to the woman who took his breath away.

"Yeah, now we know." He'd speak to Sebastian about it later, but couldn't bring himself to spoil the mood.

"What about Oliver?" Cherie's tone was serious and Balthazar noticed how her breathing had sped up.

"What about him?" Sebastian asked.

"I don't want *anything* to do with him or my father," Rebecca clarified.

"That's not what I mean," Cherie replied.

"Then what do you mean, pet?" Balthazar used the term of endearment he'd established for her in front of his brother and Rebecca intentionally, hoping to enjoy her embarrassment, but to his surprise, Cherie's expression only hardened.

"I mean," Cherie went on, "that if we all know about your dragon abilities, what about Oliver's?"

"Oliver's what?" Rebecca demanded.

"No," Sebastian interrupted hastily, staring pointedly at Cherie. "That hasn't been discussed yet."

"*What* hasn't been discussed?" Rebecca glared in his direction. "I thought we were being open and transparent, *sir*?"

Balthazar flinched at the inflection in Rebecca's use of the address, understanding his brother's concern. Obviously, Sebastian hadn't yet broached the subject of Oliver's ability to shift with Rebecca. The fact that he hadn't surprised Balthazar, but he was in no position to judge. The gods knew the last few days had been hectic for numerous

reasons, and Sebastian had still come running to support him when Cherie had been snatched. Balthazar owed him.

“I think that might be a conversation for Sebastian and Rebecca to have in private,” he told Cherie gently, and in his mind, he conveyed the real message.

*‘She doesn’t know.’*

“Oh.” Cherie’s eyes widened as if she’d heard his words, and Balthazar acknowledged that their new-found telepathy meant that she might have done.

*‘I-I didn’t realize, sir.’*

Her reply echoed in his head as she acknowledged the can of worms she’d inadvertently opened between the couple opposite them. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay.” Rebecca folded her arms across her chest. “Will someone please tell me whatever it is I need to know?”

“Sebastian?” Balthazar didn’t feel right about blurting out the answer. It was Rebecca’s family in question, after all, and by the sounds of it, Sebastian hadn’t even mentioned it to Rebecca. “Do you want to do the honors?”

“Yeah.” Sebastian glared at Cherie, who fidgeted uncomfortably in her place under his scrutiny. “I guess so.”

“Sebastian?” Hurt glimmered in Rebecca’s gaze as she turned to him. “What is it?”

“Nothing between us,” he reassured. “And to be honest, I didn’t know how to raise the matter. I mean, maybe you already know, but I thought you would have mentioned it when you discovered my dragon...”

“What?” she pressed her palms to her temples. “You’re not making sense.”

“What my brother is trying to say,” Balthazar interjected as he glanced Sebastian’s way. He wasn’t usually one to get involved in other people’s relationships, but since Cherie had been the one to unintentionally raise the matter, he felt an onus to help. “Is that on the night I took Cherie to

our mountain lodge and Oliver attacked me, he transformed from a man into a beast.”

“What?” Rebecca cried again, perching on the edge of her chair as she looked between them. “I-I don’t believe this!”

A strained silence landed between them as she grappled with the news.

“What sort of a beast?” Rebecca asked eventually. “A dragon like Sebastian?”

“No,” Sebastian soothed, moving to sit alongside her. “Nothing like me.”

“I saw it.” Cherie wrinkled her nose as she recalled how hideous the chimera had been. “He changed into it and that’s how he *took me*.” Her voice broke on the final two words and wordlessly, Balthazar pulled her into his embrace. It pained him to see the effect Oliver’s actions had on her, but understood it was better to talk the trauma through than ignore it.

“Oh, fuck.” Rebecca shook her head. “I’ve always thought my brother was a monster, but not like this...”

Sebastian held her tighter. “This must be an awful shock.”

“Yeah.” Rebecca pulled in a breath. “It is. What is he? If not a dragon, then what?”

“A chimera,” Balthazar confirmed.

“What’s a chimera?” Rebecca’s gaze widened.

“It has two heads and huge gnarly claws,” Cherie continued. “It’s hideous.”

“And Oliver is one?” Rebecca’s breathing was labored.

“You didn’t know?”

Balthazar asked as gently as he could. It was clear Rebecca was in shock, but he wanted to be sure. Evidently, she didn’t carry the same genes as her brother, which lent

itself to the assumption that just like the Vaughn family, the shifter status only revealed itself in the male line.

“No!” she blurted, outraged at the question. “I mean, I knew he and Dad were fucked up and not like other people, but...” Her eyes closed as she tried to fathom the news. “Not like this! I never imagined anything like this.”

“I’m sorry, little girl.” Sebastian’s arm snaked around her and although she seemed to stiffen at his touch, she didn’t reject him. “I should have told you sooner, but it was hard enough divulging my secret.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Cherie added. “I should have thought before I raised it.”

“It’s okay.” Rebecca wiped her tears away with the heel of her hand, making it impossible to know who she was talking to. “No one here should have told me. It’s my own fucking family that should have done so!”

It was difficult to argue with her analysis, and as fresh sobs overcame her and Sebastian tugged her closer, Balthazar realized for the first time how much he pitied her. Not because she was a Monroe and he had learned to loathe her family, but because of what being one meant.

Being a Vaughn hadn’t always been a bed of roses. They’d lost their parents too young, and there had been endless friction about their father’s wishes for his fortune, but fundamentally they had something that clearly the Monroes had never enjoyed—the ability to talk and trust.

“Let’s get some drinks,” Balthazar instructed, easing Cherie to her feet. “And give these guys some space.”

“Thanks,” Sebastian mouthed as he consoled Rebecca. “We’ll join you soon.”

Guiding Cherie out of the room, Balthazar was struck by how much misery Oliver Monroe had inspired. It was as if everywhere he went, a trail of destruction followed in his wake. A man capable of distributing melancholy with such disturbing ease, he decided, needed to be eliminated.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *Oliver*

Striding along the hallway, Oliver's attention barely flickered from the dark doorway of his father's office ahead of him. He didn't pause to notice the expensive artwork on the walls, nor allow his gaze to dart to the priceless vases on display in the far corner. Just like always, Oliver was fixated on what he wanted, and what he wanted were assurances from Jonas.

His father had tasked him with securing the financial wing of the Vaughn family's business, although Jonas had never said why. He also never told Oliver what a bitch the job was going to be, but so far, any meetings with the irritating brothers had only led to disappointment. Worse, the last time one of them had engaged him in the discussion, the others had snatched Cherie away from right under his nose.

Oliver's jaw clenched at the humiliation. The Vaughns' behavior was outrageous, and it was time that he officially called time on the endeavor. It wasn't as though Oliver hadn't tried. He'd convened with both Balthazar and Sebastian and it had gotten him nowhere.

“Those assholes are messing with me.”

Complaining under his breath, he approached the foreboding door and reached for the handle. There was a time when he would have knocked and waited for his father's approval to enter, but that time was over. Oliver was rushing headlong toward his forties, and he was too old to keep playing Daddy's games.

Grasping the handle, he pushed the door open and glanced around the enormous swanky office. There, at the



far end was Jonas' sleek, black desk, and leaning against it was his father. Eyes closed in rapture, Jonas' hand was guiding the head of an unknown blonde up and down the length of his cock, her gasping and gurgling noises suggesting that she was struggling to breathe.

“We need to talk.”

Folding his arms across his chest, Oliver smirked as his father's gaze flew open and the blonde whore tried to scrabble to her feet.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Jonas demanded, his fingers tightening in the blonde's hair. “Stay until I'm finished.”

“But, sir, I—” Her sentence concluded early as Jonas shoved his organ back down her throat, glaring at her when she tried to resist.

“What do you want?” he asked, not bothering to glance up at his son.

“I just told you.” With one long sigh, Oliver strolled across the office and assessed the array of expensive liquor. “To talk.”

*He has good taste in alcohol. Even if his taste in women is crap.*

“Can't you see I'm busy?” Jonas protested, his voice guttural as the blonde did her best to conclude as soon as she could.

“Oh yeah.” Oliver's tone was wry. “I can see that. Shall I ask Mum to come here and talk, instead?”

The growl that escaped his father's throat might have been perturbing, but it had little impact on Oliver anymore. He'd grown up around Jonas' bullshit, and more to the point, he was a younger, leaner, and crueler version of the man himself.

“Don't fucking threaten me, boy,” Jonas moaned, holding the blonde's head against his groin. “Oh, yes!”

“For fuck’s sake.” Oliver rolled his eyes. “Make it quick, old man.”

Weren’t older guys supposed to have issues with sustaining erections? Trust Jonas to be the exception. As if it wasn’t bad enough to still be taking hand-outs from his dad under the guise of working for the family business, he also had to watch Jonas explode down some random whore’s throat? It was too fucking much.

Choosing the oldest bourbon he could find, Oliver lifted the decanter into the air and surveyed the amber color. He’d help himself to a drink while Jonas finished up. Pouring the whiskey into a glass, he placed the decanter down and lifted the crystal to his nose.

*Perfect.*

Oliver enjoyed a mouthful, relishing the way the liquid burned the back of his throat. By the sounds of the blonde behind him, she was grappling with another liquid down the back of hers.

“Good.” His father’s voice cut through the sounds of sex. “Now, leave.”

Turning just in time to see her scoop up her top and run, Oliver delighted in a second sip.

“I don’t need to tell you how fucking annoying you are.” Zipping up his pants, Jonas glared at his son.

“Chip off the old block, *Dad.*” Oliver sneered.

“Make yourself useful and pour me one, will you?” Jonas motioned to his drink and with a sigh, Oliver turned and prepared a second glass for his father.

“Here.” Crossing the office, Oliver handed him the drink.

“What have you come to say?” Jonas asked in characteristically ungrateful form.

“Your desperate need to own Drakon Finance is over,” Oliver told him matter-of-factly. “I’m getting no joy

from any of them and that fucker Sebastian..." Oliver's hand gripped the crystalware tighter.

"Still smarting over that, are you?" Jonas smirked.

"I'm telling you how it is," Oliver retorted, his jaw clenching as he recalled his father's response when he'd relayed Sebastian's true intentions. Jonas hadn't been surprised that Sebastian had duped Oliver, but he wasn't pleased, either.

"And I told you already, the deal goes ahead," Jonas insisted. "Whatever the consequences."

"Not with me." Oliver drained his glass and slammed it down on the counter. "Not anymore."

"Have you forgotten who pays your allowance?"

His father's piggy little face beamed as he leveraged the same bullshit threats he'd been doing since Oliver was thirteen years old.

"Fuck your allowance." Oliver stared right into his eyes as he told him straight. "I don't need your money anymore. I'll make my own."

"You're nothing without me," Jonas snarled, slamming his fist down onto his desk.

"I've taken everything I need from you." Oliver almost pitied the old man. To have produced a prodigy like Oliver and watch him grow to outshine him must have been painful. The expression on his father's face certainly said so. "I've got your experience, brains and contacts, coupled with Mum's looks. You can go and fuck yourself. From now on, I don't work for you."

Pulling down his lapels, Oliver started for the door, tingling with conceit as it neared. Finally, after all this time, he'd told his father what he thought and he'd never felt better.

"Oliver, wait."

It wasn't the order that caused Oliver to hesitate, but Jonas' imploring tone. His father had been getting frailer and

slower for years, and not even the whores he bedded could perpetuate the illusion of the powerhouse he'd once been. Jonas was old and it showed. He'd had numerous health scares and his personal physician had already told him to slow down.

Oliver slowly turned to face him, aware of the smile on his face as he answered. "What?"

"Don't do this." Jonas' eyes revealed how much he loathed the moment. "Don't leave like this."

"Why not?" Oliver shrugged. "I've said what I've come to say."

"Because..." Jonas' jaw tightened. "I need you."

"What was that?" Oliver prompted, reveling in his father's apparent weakness.

"You heard me," Jonas chided. "You're my only son and I fucking need you."

His words were music to Oliver's ears.

"Need me to do what?" Oliver encouraged him.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for, the one where his father was finally on the ropes, and he intended to exploit it.

"Help me run this shitshow." Jonas gestured to the room around him. "I'm getting too old to deal with it all, too old to deal with the suppliers, the morons who want a cut, the lawyers, accountants, and all the other crooks."

*Finally, the truth.*

"Okay." Wandering a few strides toward him, Oliver stared at his father. "I'll help run the shitshow, but only if you meet my terms."

"What terms?" Jonas's brows knitted.

"No. More. *Allowance.*" He enunciated the words the way he'd done in his head all the times he'd practiced what came next. "I'm your son and I should be your partner. I

want fifty percent of the Monroe empire, enacted by contract within the next forty-eight hours.”

“Fifty percent?” Jonas spat out the words. “No fucking way. I can pay some other clown to take over for less.”

“Then pay some other fucking clown.” Oliver grinned, although he was deadly serious. “If you don’t agree, then I’m out, Dad. I’ll walk away and find somewhere else to play.”

He half expected his father to explode in fury with threats about what would happen if Oliver didn’t comply. That was what had happened every other time someone had stood up to him, but Oliver was serious about walking away because he’d finally realized something—there was a life beyond the murky Monroe empire, and for everything it had brought him, there was also anger and resentment—a thousand conversations that the family had never had, plus all the words that couldn’t be unsaid.

“Oliver!” Jonas squeezed his eyes shut and mentally, Oliver counted down from five, waiting for detonation. He was surprised then at his father’s chuckling tone. “You’re such an asshole.”

“I’m your son,” he reminded Jonas. “Everything you see is what you’ve made.”

“Don’t fucking remind me.” Jonas shook his head. “Okay, Oliver, we can be partners.” His father’s tone was resigned.

“At fifty percent,” Oliver repeated, staring at his father to see how sincere Jonas’ expression was.

“If you insist.”

“I do,” Oliver confirmed. “And I want the paperwork within the next—”

“Yes!” Jonas raised a palm, his free hand moving to rub his forehead. “I heard you. Within the next forty-eight hours.” He sighed. “I have a meeting with my lawyer’s new associate any minute. She can set it up.”

“*She?*” Oliver snorted. “I thought you only worked with Jeffries?” Ron Jeffries had been the family’s lawyer since before Oliver was born. “Didn’t you teach me that women were only good for one thing?”

“Yeah well...” Jonas shrugged. “Seems the world is changing. These days they have women in all sorts of positions.”

“I saw the sort of position you like when I walked in.” Oliver leered.

He couldn’t decide if he loathed his old man or was secretly filled with admiration for him. Once upon a time, he’d disliked his father’s constant cheating and felt sympathy for his mother, but these days he had little time for either of them. He yearned to be unleashed, and taking hold of the family business was the first step.

“Guilty.” Jonas smirked. “And no regrets.”

“The chimera is getting harder to control.”

Oliver hadn’t meant to blurt out the admission, but it was rare that he and his father had any time together, and even less common that they weren’t butting heads if they did. Since their abilities were never discussed unless the two of them were alone, this was as good a chance as any.

“What?” Jonas’ gaze narrowed. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing’s happened,” Oliver reassured, unwilling to share the fact that he’d used the beast to capture Cherie from the Vaughn’s mountain lodge. He was certain his father wouldn’t approve, especially since Balthazar had spotted the two-headed monster. “I’m just saying.”

“The drive was maddening around your age.” Jonas’ piercing stare was disconcerting. “I remember wanting to shift all the time, and it was worse when I wasn’t getting regular sex. That’s when I started keeping multiple mistresses. It kept the chimera at bay.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Oliver replied.

He certainly wasn't averse to the idea of more sex. He'd thought he was going to get his wicked way with Cherie, but since Balthazar had taken her back, he hadn't been able to track down her whereabouts, and she hadn't returned to the postage stamp-sized place she called home. The thought riled him, reminding Oliver how much he loathed the Vaughn family.

"Listen, maybe we can find a way to dupe those bastard Vaughns?" he suggested, once more moving closer to his father.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Oliver continued as the plan started to formulate in his mind. "Let's drop the idea of Drakon Finance for a while and see if we can't lure them in another way?"

"Maybe." Jonas blew out a breath. "But I still want the finance arm. Michael Vaughn left those boys a goldmine, but I'm guessing they have no clue how lucrative it is."

"Get my contract drawn up, and we'll come up with a plan," Oliver promised.

"You kids are going to kill me." Jonas' lips curled as he met his son's gaze. "First your sister and now you."

"What's Rebecca done this time?" Oliver's tone was exasperated.

"She hasn't come home for days." What was that? A twinge of concern from Jonas? "I know she's a bitch, but I want her home."

"She's a whore," Oliver told him. "No better than the one you face-fucked. You know I saw some guy in a Ferrari waiting for her when I came home the other day. I'm sure she's holed up with him right now."

"Ferrari?" Jonas' brow creased.

"Yeah," Oliver concurred. "I didn't catch the plate though. I was driving too fast."

“There aren’t many men around here rich enough for a Ferrari...” Jonas gripped the arm of his chair. “The Fordhams maybe, but other than them, only the Vaughns.” His eyes widened. “You don’t think she’s with one of them, do you?”

“I don’t know.” Oliver admitted. “But nothing about her would surprise me.”

“We have to get this family in order.” His father’s voice was little more than a growl.

“I could send the chimera out to find her.” Oliver liked the idea and if she was hanging around with the Vaughns, he could take Cherie at the same time.

“She and your mother know nothing about the beasts,” Jonas warned.

“Then maybe it’s time they learned?”

“Not now.” Jonas inhaled. “First, let’s draw up your contract and come up with a plan for the financial arm. Then, we can find your sister.”

“Okay.” It didn’t matter to Oliver either way. “I’ve gotta run, but it was good to chat, Dad.”

“Yeah.” His father’s lips twitched in the closest he ever got to a smile. “It’ll be good to finally have you on board, Oliver.”

Turning on his heel, Oliver strode to the door and stepped back into the hall. Things had gone better than he’d hoped, but he knew his father of old, and wouldn’t trust anything he said until the contract was in his hand.

The sound of heels tapping on the hard floor ahead drew his attention, and glancing up, Oliver saw a slim, dark-haired woman in a red pencil suit approaching.

“Excuse me?” she started, peering from Oliver to the doorway he’d just departed from. “Is this the way to Mr. Monroe’s office?”

“It is.” He smiled, drinking in the look of her tight body. If she was the new lawyer, then Jonas was going to



have a field day.

“Thank you.” Nodding, she clutched her black briefcase and carried on walking.

He glanced back for a moment, enjoying the way her hips wriggled as she walked before he went on his way. Let his father have his fun, so long as Jonas had that contract drawn up. Half of the company would be Oliver’s, and once Jonas died, he’d get his hands on the rest. That would make Oliver a very wealthy man, and he already knew that money meant immense power. Coupled with his hybrid genetics, Oliver would be unstoppable.

His father had increased the family’s revenue streams to well in excess of eight digits every year, but Jonas was easily distracted by drugs and pussy. Oliver wouldn’t mess up the way his father had, wouldn’t allow the waters to be muddied by his desires. Oliver was clear about what he wanted—to dominate his family’s empire and destroy the Vaughns—and if pretty little pieces of the puzzle like Cherie got caught in his path, then he’d take them down like dominoes. Oliver would make what happened when he found Cherie at the Vaughns’ elusive mountain lodge look like Christmas.

“God help her,” he murmured, laughing nefariously as the thought buoyed him.

*I’ll fucking obliterate them.* “God help them all.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### *Cherie*

“Was that Sebastian, sir?” Cherie asked as Balthazar wandered in from the veranda. Locking the door to the mountain lodge, he shut out the cold air before turning to her.

“Yes, pet,” he answered, looking absurdly handsome as he strolled toward her, one hand thrust into his pocket.

The muscles between her legs clenched at the sound of her new name, and she smiled at the devilish gleam in his eyes.

A day had passed since they’d met Sebastian and Rebecca at the Vaughn’s penthouse, but Cherie had forgotten none of the haunting details. They’d stayed and listened to Rebecca replay tales of the terrible things she’d suffered at her father’s hands, and the way she’d been largely ignored by both her mother and brother. Despite coming from obvious wealth, it seemed Rebecca’s upbringing had been less happy than hers.

Balthazar had seemed initially unmoved by Rebecca’s memories, but Cherie had sensed him thaw as the visit progressed. It was clear that Rebecca was bringing his brother joy, and she knew Balthazar well enough to know that was important to him.

“How is he?” she wondered aloud.

“Happy.” Balthazar smiled. “I told him that we were here for the day, so to stay away, but I get the impression they’re content at the penthouse for the time being.”

Balthazar had promised to bring her back to the mountain lodge before they'd met Rebecca, but Cherie had the sense there was more to the visit than he was letting on. Excitement simmered in her belly as she contemplated what he might have in mind.

“And what about Rebecca?” she pressed. “Is she doing okay?”

That made him pause. “You really liked her, didn't you?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “I did. Why?”

“I wasn't sure what I'd think of her.” He settled on the seat beside Cherie. “Being a Monroe, I fully expected to loathe the woman.”

“But you didn't?” she probed, pleased that they both seemed to have reached the same conclusion about Sebastian's lady.

“No.” His brow rose with the confession. “I didn't, but I'm reserving judgment until I get to know her better. She's still a Monroe, after all.”

“We are not who our families are,” Cherie reminded him, stroking the back of his hand. “Although yours seems lovely.”

“That's because you haven't met Draco yet,” Balthazar chuckled, glancing around as if he expected his sibling to appear from behind the counter. “What about you? You never talk about your family?”

“There's not much to tell.” Cherie shrugged. “As an only child of a single mum, it was only ever the two of us, and I lost her a few years ago.”

“Cherie.” His brow creased as he tugged her closer. “I'm so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Why would you?”

Cherie blinked away the tears that threatened to rise at his sudden tenderness. She missed her mother, but had learned to bury her emotions a long time ago. She was used

to being on her own, but it meant she was ill-equipped to deal with such honest intimacy. That, she realized, was Balthazar's power. He was the kindest man she'd ever met, and she hoped that would never change.

"No, I'm sorry," she sniffed. "I'm just being silly."

"Hey." Kissing her forehead, he held her closer. "Don't apologize for how you feel. It's okay if you're emotional. You don't have to hide from me, pet."

She smiled through the midst of her tears, grateful that for the first time in her life, his words were true. Finally, she could be herself, and she'd found a man who adored her for just that—who she was.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured, breathing in his scent as she rested against him. "That means a lot."

They sat in silence for a moment, only the sound of Balthazar's strong and rhythmic heartbeat and the crackles of the fire audible as his arms eased her back to solace.

"As for the lodge." His body tensed as he broke the contented quiet, and if she wasn't mistaken, his heart rate sped up. "I brought you back here for specific reasons."

"Because I mentioned how incredible the views are?" she offered, rising from his chest and meeting his eyes. She still couldn't get over how lucky she was to have met him. Not only was Balthazar freaking gorgeous, but there seemed to be nothing he wouldn't do to look after her. "Because they are."

She glanced out of the expanse of glass surrounding the lodge, once again awed by the vista. It definitely beat the penthouse, though how she'd stumbled into a life where she had access to both properties still made her head spin.

"Well, yes," he concurred. "But that wasn't what I meant."

"What did you mean, sir?"

The sudden edge in his voice reminded her of the time he'd spanked her, her pulse increasing at the

recollection. They hadn't spoken about the punishment since, but a part of her longed for more of his dominance. Despite the discomfort, the feel of his palm against her backside had been one of the most electrifying experiences of her life.

"Two things." He leaned back in his seat, his lips twitching as he watched her. "Number one, this is the perfect place to introduce you to my dragon. There's space up here for him to fly."

"Wow." She lifted her hand to her mouth to capture the gasp that escaped. "I would love that!"

"And I'd love to show you." His smile was warm. "Aside from my family, no one has ever seen him before, but he's an important part of me."

"This might sound like a stupid question," she started, curling her toes in her socks as she considered what she was about to say. "But do you guys breathe fire?"

"That's not a stupid question." Balthazar's grin widened despite his reassurance. "You don't normally meet many fire-breathing creatures."

"So, that's a yes?"

"That's a yes." One of his dark, mesmerizing eyebrows arched, momentarily robbing Cherie of her breath.

"Really?" The admission seemed unbelievable.

"Yes," he insisted with a snigger. "Although it's perilously difficult to demonstrate without melting vast amounts of the snow outside."

"I bet." She smiled in spite of herself.

Everything about Balthazar was unreal, from the way he had swooped in to save her from Oliver, to his model-like looks. It made the fact he could transform into a fire-breathing dragon almost plausible.

"What was number two, sir?" she delved.

“Number two was something else for us both to enjoy.” His tone deepened, the resonance sending splinters of energy racing around her. “An opportunity for me to punish you again.”

Cherie’s heart skipped a beat as his words rebounded in her mind.

*Punish you again. Punish.*

“Like before?” Her voice rasped.

Fleetingly, she wondered why she wasn’t countering him. Cherie had done nothing to warrant his so-called punishment, but the idea of receiving one was scintillating. She didn’t protest because it was the one thing she yearned for.

“You liked that, huh?”

The trace of arrogance in his tone should have riled her, but her pulse was racing too fast to care.

“Yes, sir.”

There was no point denying it. Cherie had reveled in the spanking and Balthazar was the only man she wanted to give it to her.

“I can include a few hard swats if that’s what you want,” he decided.

“Include?” Her brow furrowed.

*What does that mean?*

“So, you don’t want to spank me?”

“I’d always love to spank you,” he confirmed. “But I had something else in mind...” Hesitating, he inched closer. “Something we already talked about.”

“Wh-what?” she panted, enthralled at the way he could suspend everything around them and capture her attention so easily. When she was alone with Balthazar, they were the only two people in the whole world.

“Excuse me?” His eyebrow cocked again, that one tiny gesture able to ramp up her desire a hundredfold.

“Sir,” she added, knowing what he wanted without having to think. “What did you have in mind, sir?”

“I want to claim that one place that doesn’t belong to me yet.” His hand slipped around her waist and down to her ass, squeezing her sensitive cheek. “I think you know where I mean.”

She *did* know, and the way her throat dried at the prospect of him screwing her ass told her everything she needed to know. She craved the idea, but had no clue how she would cope with the reality.

“Balthazar!”

She hadn’t intended to say his name as she reached for him, but the visceral intensity between them was messing with her head, making it impossible to think clearly. She should give in and surrender the way she had in his kitchen, and again that first night by the fire in the townhouse, but for some reason, she grappled to resist. Balthazar was talking about the pretense of punishing her with anal sex. They had to talk about this.

“Don’t push your luck, pet.” Lifting his palm, he delivered one hard swat to her cheek, sending a rush of heat through her system.

“I m-meant, sir,” she stammered. “But why punish me that way?”

“Because you’ll love it.” He smirked, tugging her onto his lap. “I’ll make sure of that.”

“Erm,” she corrected him as respectfully as she could. “I’ve seen your cock, sir. It’ll never fit.”

“It’ll fit,” he chuckled, leaning forward and stealing a kiss. “I’ll be gentle.”

“A *gentle punishment*?” Her tone was wry, although she didn’t know why she queried him. If he was thinking of

shoving his not-insignificant shaft into her backside, then gentle sounded just perfect to her.

“It’s only a punishment in name,” he reassured her. “Because I know you love the idea, although...” his voice trailed away.

“Although?”

“You did drop Sebastian in it yesterday,” he replied. “When you revealed Rebecca’s lousy brother was half-man and half-chimera.”

“Oh yeah.” She giggled nervously as she writhed on his lap. “That was inadvertent.”

“I know.” He ran his tongue over his flawless white teeth. “And so does Seb, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be the ideal excuse to punish you.”

“I see.”

As ever, Cherie loved the way Balthazar thought, although the prospect of having him *there* was still perturbing. Fidgeting on his thighs, she tried to imagine what it would be like.

“I’m glad you see.” Balthazar brushed his mouth over hers. “But with your consent, I’m going to make you *feel*.”



## Chapter Twenty-Four

### *Balthazar*

“Don’t look so nervous.” Balthazar stroked away the loose strands of Cherie’s hair. “I’ve said I’ll be gentle, and I will.”

“I know, sir,” she squeaked. “But it just sounds so... intense.”

“Oh, it is,” he affirmed, conscious of his cock throbbing excitedly at the mention of the idea. “Will you let me show you?”

A line appeared in her brow as she contemplated his offer, and for one protracted period, Balthazar thought she might refuse him. He would never make her do anything she didn’t want to do, and he hoped Cherie knew that, but deep down he sensed something else—that she *did* want this but like the spanking, she was too afraid to say.

“Where would we...?” Nibbling her bottom lip, she turned away from him as her words dried up.

“Where do you want to?”

“Not here, sir,” she gasped. “There’s too many windows.”

“No one can see us up here,” he reminded her with a smile. “This is probably the remotest house in the country.”

“Some people know it’s here.”

She stiffened, and even though Cherie never stipulated who she was referring to, Balthazar had the distinct impression that it was the asshole Oliver Monroe flitting through her mind.

*He* had come there.

*He* had attacked Balthazar just outside where they were sitting, and snatched the woman Balthazar was crazy about. Monroe was an ever-real threat.

“You’re safe,” he soothed, wishing he had ended the evil bastard when he’d had the chance, but that wasn’t Balthazar. He’d protect the people he loved, but wouldn’t kill unless it was absolutely necessary.

“I know.” Swallowing, she exhaled. “I just mean that any of your brothers could fly up here and see us.”

Balthazar didn’t think that was what she meant at all, but not wanting to ruin the mood, he didn’t press the matter.

“That’s true,” he replied. “But we each have a bedroom with privacy glass. How about I take you to mine, pet?”

Her gaze flitted to the door, and he noticed the moment her lips curled. “Yes please, sir.”

Ushering her from his lap, Balthazar stood before whisking her into his arms and carrying her to his bedroom. Placing her gently on her feet, he closed the door and added the lock just in case Draco chose to drop by. Turning to face her, he eyed her intently.

“Sir?” Cherie shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she waited for him to speak.

“Do you know the best time for me to fuck your ass?” He grinned at her bemused expression.

“No, sir.”

“I’ll tell you.” Unfastening his cuffs, he rolled one and then the other sleeve to his elbows. “It’s once your pussy is dripping wet for me.”

“Oh.” Cherie’s face bloomed with heat as his arms dropped to his sides and he paced toward her.

“Fortunately, I know lots of ways to achieve that glorious aim.”

“Yes.” She sounded breathless as he reached her, and was no doubt recalling some of those ways.

“And I love them all, pet,” he went on. “Spanking you is heavenly, and devouring your pussy is divine, but today I’m going to use a little help.”

Her brows knitted, but Balthazar noticed she didn’t query him.

“I’ve never brought a woman back here, but I always thought how lovely it would be if I could...” He walked to his closet and opened the door. “I prepared a goody bag of essentials for just this event.”

Reaching inside, he pulled open a drawer and found the items he wanted. Wandering back to Cherie, he showed her what he’d found.

“A vibrator, sir?” Her gaze flitted from the long plastic toy in his palm to his face.

“And ropes,” he prompted, lifting his hand so that she could get a better view. “But only the soft type. Nothing that will hurt your skin.”

“You’re tying me up again, sir?”

Balthazar couldn’t decide if the quiver in her voice was unease or excitement, but her dilating pupils assured him that whatever nerves Cherie felt weren’t dissuading her from the pursuit of pleasure. He realized she’d been bound in rope in Monroe’s basement, and he didn’t want there to be any similarity between the events. But she’d taken to his bondage before, and Cherie was only there with him because she chose to be, not because he’d forced her. Balthazar would make sure she relished every single second of her choice.

“I’m going to tie you up and make you come again.” His balls contracted at the heady idea. He couldn’t fucking wait. “And then we’re going to use all of your wonderful arousal to lubricate your ass, first for my fingers, and then for the rest of me.” He motioned down to his pants,

wondering if she could imagine how turned on he already was. “But don’t worry. I have more lubricant if we need it.”

“Oh my God.” Her eyes fluttered closed. “Is this really happening, sir?”

Cherie was adorable. In the last few days she’d discovered that both he, and his brothers were dragon-shifters, and yet it had taken until this moment for her to vocalize any skepticism.

“This is real,” he told her. “*If* you want it.”

She flashed him a smile. “I want it, sir, I’m just a little scared.”

“Then let’s help you to relax.”

Throwing the toys onto the bed, he reached for her, his thumb tracing a slow line across her chin before he dove for a kiss. Yielding to his need, she mewled as she melted against him, passion swelling between them as their bodies collided.

“I won’t do anything to hurt you,” he whispered as his hand cradled her nape. “That’s not who I am.”

Tears pricked in her eyes as she nodded.

“If you don’t want the ropes, then just say,” he soothed. “They’re meant only to heighten arousal, not to remind you of anything disturbing.”

“I do want them,” she mouthed. “I don’t want what we have to be wrecked by him.”

“Neither do I.” Anger knotted in his chest that Monroe’s name even had to be inferred, but Balthazar recognized it was important. She had been through so much and her assent was vital.

“Then let’s not allow him,” she breathed.

Shrugging away from Balthazar, she shuffled out of her leggings, socks and sweater, discarding them in a pile on the carpeted floor.

“Oh, really?” Balthazar folded his arms across his chest, playing down how bloody delightful she looked in only her underwear. “Are you sure it’s you who makes the rules here, pet?”

“No, sir.” Cherie’s smile widened as her gaze lowered to her feet. “I just wanted to show I’m willing.”

“Thank you.” His hand rose to her jaw and gently tilted her chin toward him. “I mean it, Cherie. Thank you for putting your faith in me.”

“Thank you, too,” she murmured. “For believing in me.”

Balthazar had intended for this moment to be visceral and carnal; a demonstration of his control over her sexual pleasure, and yet standing there in his bedroom, the affection swirling between them was far more intense. It was a hunger he’d never known, a desire far greater than only sex. In Cherie, he seemed to have found everything he was looking for, a woman who could be his equal, as well as ride his cock, and one who, if the gods permitted, might one day become the mother of his children. When he looked into her incredible green eyes, everything made sense.

“I always have,” he told her, suddenly aware that they’d been standing in silence. “Right from that first moment I laid eyes on you.”

Leaning into his hand, she sighed. “I’m so thankful.”

“Time to remove this.” He eased down her bra strap, taking the opportunity to kiss her exposed shoulder.

“Yes, sir.”

“And the other side.” Gesturing to her other arm, he waited as she tugged away the strap, revealing her incredible breasts. “Allow me.” Reaching around her, he unfastened her bra and threw it to join her clothes.

“Will you tie me like this, sir?” Placing her forearms together in front of her, she offered him her wrists.

“You’re doing it again,” Balthazar chastised teasingly. “Trying to top me from the bottom.”

“I’m sorry.” She laughed, though her wrists remained in place. “I think I’m just nervous.”

“I’d prefer the binds to be looser,” he explained, moving to the bed and collecting one long strand of black rope. “Only your wrists need to be tied, not your forearms.”

Her breaths were labored as he wound the rope around her wrists, and lowered them between them.

“That’s better.” Balthazar’s gaze bored into her as he motioned to the enormous bed. “Get on to the covers, pet.”

She dashed away without further encouragement, climbing onto the white sheets before turning to face him.

“Stretch out, arms above your head and spread your legs.” Balthazar growled the order, his hedonism ballooning as she obeyed.

“But, sir,” she gasped. “My panties?”

“Won’t get in my way,” he assured her. “When it’s time for them to go, I’ll take care of them.”

“Yes, sir.” Settling back against the bedding, her chest rose and fell as she waited for Balthazar to take what belonged to him.

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## *Cherie*

Cherie had never known a man like Balthazar, but it wasn’t only his protective streak, or the way he could morph into a dragon that set him apart; it was his skill as a lover. The previous men she’d taken to bed had been more than adequate, but she’d grown used to their pleasure taking

precedence over hers, and had become reliant on her battery-operated boyfriend to offer the necessary relief.

She'd never known any of them to use toys in their lovemaking, let alone own one, suspecting her ex-lovers had seen the vibrating devices as competition. Balthazar, on the other hand, wielded one like a professional, employing it to tip her over the precipice on multiple occasions.

Fighting to catch her breath after the third orgasm, her gaze flitted open to find his handsome face hovering over her.

“How was that, pet?”

Balthazar's arched eyebrow suggested that he already knew the answer. How could he not? Her pussy was drenched with need, her nipples long and stiff where he'd goaded them with his mouth. Cherie was desperate for him.

“Amazing, sir,” she panted, pulling futilely against the weight of his palm at her rope. She couldn't move under its force, but rather than terrify or frustrate her, the knowledge only exhilarated. She longed for him to hold her down and make her yield. Cherie was Balthazar's prisoner, and she'd never wanted anything more. “Thank you.”

“You are gorgeous,” he praised, angling the head of the vibrator over her clit and ripping a fresh jolt of pleasure from her.

“Oh!” she yelled, groaning as her body stiffened.

“And so wet,” he exulted.

“Yes,” she concurred, spreading her legs wider as his fingers skimmed her pussy. Her panties had been lost two orgasms ago.

“Perfect,” he cooed, brushing over her lips to her anus.

“I want you, sir.” She hadn't intended to call out, but the intensity of her desire demanded she did so.

“Where?” His gaze landed on her as his digit circled her rosette.

*Anywhere.* The answer burst into her head.  
*Everywhere!*

But Cherie knew what they were there for, and despite her initial reticence, she craved the deed.

“In my ass, sir.”

Holding her gaze, he slipped his fingertip inside. It went with ease, well-lubricated from her copious climaxes, but somehow, she couldn't resist bucking against it.

“Oh!” she whimpered.

“I know,” he snarled, adding a second finger before easing them both out. Leaning over her, Balthazar pumped his digits in and out of her, stretching her virgin hole.  
“You're magnificent.”

“B-Balthazar?” She yearned to cede and discover this new pleasure for herself, but his fingers alone felt enormous inside of her. How was she going to cope with his cock?

“Cherie.” His voice floated over her as his digits picked up their pace. “It's okay.”

*That's easy for you to say.*

Her mouth widened as she gasped at the intimate sensation, preventing her protest from reaching her lips. But as his rhythm slowed, she realized she didn't want to. He wanted this, but so did she.

*'I know.'* His words rebounded in her head, reminding her that for some curious reason they were able to commune without words. *'But, I want you to be okay.'*

“I am okay,” she told him, staring into his alluring eyes.

“Yes, you are,” he agreed, easing his fingers from her ass and rising onto his knees beside her. Switching off the whirring device by her leg, Balthazar discarded it onto the floor behind him before unfastening his zipper. “You're ready for me.”



She gasped as he tugged down his pants, releasing his eager cock, certain that she'd never seen any man so hard before.

“Legs in the air, beautiful,” he ordered, catching her left calf as she complied and holding it in place as he took his position. His cock grazed her sex on its way to its destination, but as it brushed over her anus, Cherie tensed.

“Sir?” she panted, searching his face for reassurance.

“What did I tell you?” His voice was calm as his gaze met hers.

“That you'd be gentle.” She recalled the promise implicitly.

“And I will,” he reiterated. “Until you want more.”

Exerting a little pressure, Balthazar tipped her hips back, creating the right angle to impale her.

“Ready?” His brown eyes burned into her, their intensity giving her no chance of a reprieve.

“Yes.” She squeaked the reply only seconds before he pushed inside, the tip of his dick splintering her sense of reason.

*'You're too big!'*

The words bounded into her head as she tensed and tried to force him out. “You won't fit, sir.”

*'Breathe.'* His instruction exploded into her mind.

“Stop fighting me, Cherie,” he urged. “Just concentrate on your breath and look at me.”

His voice was steady, his eyes the anchor she needed as he lunged another few inches into her ass.

“Oh. My. God.”

Mouthing the words, Cherie wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. That one small movement had placed Balthazar at the center of her entire universe. She was so

full, his cock pinioning her into place as he gradually withdrew.

“Good, pet,” he enthused, slowly gliding back inside. “You feel astonishing.”

As she acclimatized to the unusual sense of possession, she acknowledged how much she concurred. Having him there was incredible, as was the feeling of surrender with her hands still bound behind her head as he delved deeper. His body skimmed over her clit with every lunge, providing the perfect friction as he went.

“Oh, yes.”

There were no complaints now, only sublime repletion as her eyes closed and she welcomed his intrusion.

“I said, look at me.” Balthazar leaned closer, his breath warm on her cheek when her eyes flew open. Pressing her thighs back to her ears, his hips slowed, lodging his dick deep inside her. “That’s better.”

“Sir.” A swell of unexpected emotion rose as their gazes locked. “Don’t stop.”

“I want to capture this moment.” His voice was softer, his lips lowering to graze her mouth. “Want to remember you just as you are now.”

“And I want you to fuck my ass, sir.” She grinned at her audacity, gasping as he withdrew and slammed quickly back inside.

“Be careful, little pet,” he warned playfully as he filled her up. “You might just get everything you’ve ever wished for.”



## Chapter Twenty-Five

### *Cherie*

Craning her neck toward the sky, Cherie shrieked as the gigantic purple beast swooped overhead. Enormous, powerful, and breathtakingly beautiful, he glided through the air, putting on an awe-inspiring show. The fact that the creature was actually her lover should have been beyond comprehension, but Cherie had seen him shift with her own two eyes. She was there the moment his handsome face changed into the long snout of the dragon, his skin turning from tanned to the bright violet that now swept through the sky, and she couldn't deny what she knew to be true.

Hearing her cry, the dragon turned in her direction, diving through the atmosphere on his return. She couldn't halt her hammering heart as Balthazar landed on the nearby peak, nor deny how breathtaking he was as his claws gripped the rocks, sending loose ice and earth tumbling to their fate.

“Balthazar?”

She shook her head with feigned disbelief, gripping the winter coat he'd loaned her tighter around her body. It was Balthazar, all right. The man who'd mastered her, saved her, and taken her under his wing in more ways than one. He stood proudly on the mountain top, casting an eye over her.

If it were possible for a dragon to grin, she swore she saw his lips curl in an upward trajectory. He could hear her, then?

*Of course. She smiled. He can even hear my thoughts!*

Despite the violent mountain breeze and the distance between them, Balthazar's heightened senses meant that he still heard her call.

Pinioning her with the weight of his intense, golden gaze, he nodded before turning away from her. Huddling in his coat, she looked on as he lifted his snout into the air and let out an enormous, thunderous roar. The noise was deafening, and acting on instinct, she cowered, falling to her knees as her hands rose to cover her ears, but what came next staggered her.

As Balthazar let out another booming growl, a torrent of flames left his lips, spewing over the neighboring summit and thawing the frozen snow straight to water.

"Shit!" she gasped, watching as the water cascaded down the side of the mountain. She hoped that wherever it landed, there weren't people who would drown in the swelling waves, but dismissed the thought as quickly as it arrived. This was Balthazar, a knowledgeable and caring man. He wouldn't knowingly do anything to hurt other people, and anyway, the lodge was literally miles from anywhere. Even the hut where he'd parked his Aston Martin was hours of trekking from the foot of the rocky terrain. No one would be harmed. Balthazar was only showing her his incredible strength.

Reading her thoughts, he peered back at her to see if she was satisfied with the display, and rising to her feet, she clapped her gloved hands together. "Bravo!"

The dragon lowered its head, as if to bow before he leapt from the peak. She watched in silent wonderment as he soared back toward the lodge. As he arrived on the nearby landing pad, she realized the space hadn't only been constructed for helicopters, but for the winged versions of the men who resided there.

"Pet."

The deep, gravelly voice that came when the dragon opened its mouth traveled through her, its resonance drawing her closer. She should have been terrified, but there was no

fear when Balthazar was around, only the knowledge that he could turn into this huge beast and keep her safe. Oliver would never be able to touch her again.

“Hello, sir.”

It seemed ridiculous speaking to the creature that towered high above her head, but she dismissed any embarrassment. Even in the short time they’d known each other, Balthazar knew her better than anyone else. It was only fitting that she knew all the aspects of him, as well.

“You’re amazing.” Moving close enough to touch his scaly skin, she lifted one palm and caressed his front leg before she was brave enough to move closer to his face.

Balthazar purred appreciatively, the reverberation sending tingles through her body and collecting at her throbbing clit. Even as a beast, Balthazar aroused her. That such a mighty monster could also be so tender blew her mind.

“So are you, pet.” Lowering his head next to the place she stood, his gold eyes darted to her. “I am happy you now know what I am.”

“I’m honored you trust me,” she replied.

Staring into his mesmerizing eyes, she wondered how she had ever done without him. Oliver was still out there somewhere, and on some level, she supposed that worried her—she certainly knew what he was capable of—but for the life of her, she couldn’t find the will to care. Cherie had her dragon to protect her now, and the only other person she’d need had been there all along—herself.

Balthazar had rescued her from the terrible basement, but his protection had conjured something even more powerful than Oliver’s wicked intent. It had taken a man who truly valued her for Cherie to realize that she could save herself. She hadn’t needed to put up with Oliver’s crap at the office, and she *did* deserve a life with dignity and respect, but before Balthazar, her eyes had been closed to the possibility. She’d always had the will within her, but

Balthazar had brought it to life, and now she had a wonderful man to share her life with.

“Where will all the water go?” In the end, she couldn’t resist asking as her palm stroked his large purple nose.

“The air is so cold, it will have already frozen again,” he told her. “That is why I must get you back inside before it does you harm.”

“I’m fine,” she told him, savoring the opportunity to spend time with him in such fantastic form. “Really.”

“You shall do as you’re told.”

She shivered, but it wasn’t the freezing temperatures causing the response, but his deep, sexy timbre. “Do you promise to spank me if I don’t?”

“You have my word, pet.” Balthazar’s chuckle danced through the air around her. “You have until the count of five to get into my bed...”

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## *Balthazar*

Watching Cherie run inside, squealing with delight, only fueled Balthazar’s fire as the change came over him. Closing his eyes, he allowed the heat to wash away the dragon and leave the man standing on the cold veranda.

“One...” He started, glancing inside the lodge to hear Cherie’s excited cry and see the back of her disappear toward the bedrooms. “Two!”

He shouted the number loud enough for her to hear as he strode to the door, collecting his coat where she had discarded it.

*‘Balthazar.’*

Turning at the sound of his father's voice, Balthazar saw what he thought was the misty silhouette of Michael Vaughn's blue dragon on the ridge.

*'Dad.'* He nodded in the direction of the beast. *'I've finally found the one who makes me happy. It's early days, but I'm going to ask her to marry me.'*

Staring into the outline of the dragon, Balthazar noticed how the creature dissolved into the ether until it was nothing more than air. His brow furrowed as he realized his father was gone, or maybe, he'd never been there at all.

"Sir?"

He spun to see Cherie half-dressed in the hallway. Crossing the threshold into the lodge, Balthazar closed and locked the door, throwing his coat aside and leaving the rest of the world behind them.

"You've stopped counting?" she sounded half concerned and half excited at the delay.

"Three," he called out, folding his arms across his chest and relishing her expression as she turned and fled.

Cherie was more than he'd ever hoped for in a partner—more than he deserved—but he would spend the rest of his life reminding her how grateful he was that she'd believed in him.

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