



THE *Monsters* BALL

*How
The Marquis
Found His
Meow*

NOVA BLAKE

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Dearest Reader



As another Monsters Ball is upon us, I must share with you some of the things expected to occur at Broadstone Hall during these debauched and wicked weekends. Although the rules of society are generally more relaxed at the Hall than in London, it's possible you may be scandalized by some of the reports. Please keep your favorite fan close at hand and prepare for the following:

A violent, creepy father. Knife play. Light bondage. Scandalous behavior. Lewd statuary. Claws. Purring. Consensual sex between a feline monster and a human. Murder. Revenge/Justice. Trauma and healing. Gothic vibes. And no doubt more! Though it strikes me that this list is enough to shock members of polite society.

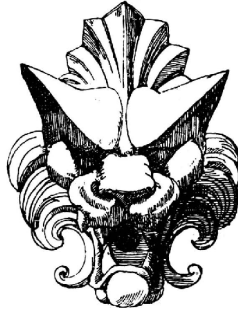
I feel I must also remind you that this is a fantastical version of Regency England, replete with monsters and magic. Therefore, some liberties may have been taken with regard to historical accuracy. Please collect your smelling salts if this is likely to offend your sensibilities.

Enjoy!

Nova Blake

Chapter One

Isabella



Darkness was falling, and her stomach growled. Isabella pressed her hands against it to quell the noise. It wasn't ladylike. Not that there was anyone present in the room to judge her. Just she and her hunger.

And the letter that was delivered earlier that day on behalf of the queen. Isabella's royal decree to attend the Monsters Ball.

Excitement thrummed through her body. And terror.

A bowl of soup—now cold—sat before Isabella. Untouched.

She knew that if she began the meal before Father returned, the servants would hear more than raised voices, though, at this rate there was a good chance that he would be too inebriated to notice if she ate a spoonful.

Still, she waited. Hands clasped in her lap, back straight, wishing that she was anywhere else. Anyone else.

Ever since Isabella's mother had tumbled down the stairs and broken her neck, things had gone from bad to worse. Father's levels of intoxication had increased, and aside from the servants, she was the only one left for him to take his anger out on.

He would be irate enough about the letter, so she had dismissed most of the household staff for the night to avoid them getting in the way of his wrath. The slam of the door proved her point.

Lord Gustav Carmichael barreled into the room "There you are! No one opened the door for me. Where is everyone?" He clattered against his chair before pulling it out and dropping into it. His hair was mussed, and she could smell the alcohol on his breath across the table.

Isabella reached out and clasped the crystal bell, making the silver peals ring out to call the manservant in.

"It is late, Father. I let the butler go for the evening. His wife is unwell." She pressed her lips together, hands twisting in her lap. She probably should not have done that. Should have known that this would raise his ire; but Bartholomew needed to go to his beloved, and one of the Carmichael's needed to show some compassion to the staff.

Maris entered the room carrying trays of food. It smelled very good, even if it was now over cooked. The maid moved to Father's side, carrying a bottle of deep red wine.

"Would my lord like some wine?" she asked, lifting the bottle. Father nodded, and Isabella held her breath, wishing

that Maris had not offered; he clearly did not need more. It was his custom though.

The red liquid poured into the glass and when Maris went to withdraw, Father's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, insisting that she fill it to the brim.

The maidservant did not hide the shaking of her hands well as she placed the bottle back on the table. When she glanced Isabella's way, she flicked her head, telling the maid to finish serving and then make an escape. There was no point asking him what he would like, because at this point, he would consume anything.

Or fall asleep with his head on the table.

It was impossible not to look at him with scorn at times. Hard not to pick up her skirts and flee from this room so that she would not be subjected to his rude manners or embarrassing behaviour. Her heart had broken in so many ways the day her mother died. And it continued even now, three years later.

Maris served, adding green beans to the slices of lamb already on Isabella's plate. She shook her head when Maris reached for the bottle of wine, not trusting what might happen if she gave in to the devil in the bottle.

One of them had to keep their wits. It was a wonder Father hadn't lost their finances in the gambling den, yet, though she knew it was only a matter of time; with no son to inherit, and a daughter that he seemed determined to keep for himself. Where else would he spend his money?

“You look so much like your mother,” Father said.

Isabella glanced up to see that he was gripping his knife and fork. The ends planted on the table made small dents in the linen cloth. His knuckles were white, and his face seemed at war with itself, expression darting from anger to longing and back again.

She sat further back in the seat, spine straightening until it felt like it might snap from the tension. She did not dare to pick up her utensils. Could only wait, poised, breath held, until he finally stabbed his fork into the meat and the moment had passed.

It was happening more and more often, this likening of mother to daughter, and it made her nervous.

Breath escaping her chest, Isabella finally reached for her cutlery and sliced the meat and vegetables into pieces small enough to eat delicately. Her stomach growled as the first sliver of meat reached her mouth and she closed her eyes, mentally thanking the cook for another delicious meal, even if it was now cold.

Isabella ate in silence, waiting to see whether Father would choose to converse. The folded piece of paper that sat beside her plate was a constant distraction, but she was nervous to broach the topic now. Perhaps she should wait until morning when he was sober.

It probably would not make a difference to the outcome.

Her stomach groaned again, but now it was from anxiety.

Better to get it out of the way. Then she could escape to her room, lock the door, and let him take his rage out on the house instead of her. Isabella would be quicker on her feet since he was drunk.

Inhaling deeply, she steeled herself and spoke. “Excuse me, Father. A letter came today.”

Her fingers twitched toward the paper. She could recall the words as if she were reading them again for the first time.

Dear Miss Carmichael,

Your vulgar father and the rumors surrounding your dear mother’s passing have indeed left you unable to secure a suitable match. With no further options, it is Her Majesty’s opinion that you will attract more prospects, where you might mingle without your father’s presence.

Extend yourself, Miss Carmichael. Be brave and take hope, for you are hereby ordered to attend the Monsters Ball.

Countess Stalbridge, on behalf of the Her Majesty, Queen Charlotte.

She should not have brought it with her, she realized, sliding it beneath her plate, hoping that he wouldn’t see.

“Yes?” he asked, his posture still slumped, his fork moving from plate to teeth where he chewed, mouth open, eyes glazed.

“It was from the Queen, regarding my Season.” Isabella swallowed hard and pushed her chair back from the table ever

so slightly. Just in case.

Father tensed, sitting straighter in his chair.

“You failed your Season. Why is she concerning herself with you further?” He dropped his fork and reached for his glass of wine again. Which was not good for her.

“She has ordered me to attend the Monsters Ball, Father.”

He shoved up from his seat so quickly that it crashed to the floor. “She what?”

He planted his hands on the table and she curved her shoulders, trying to make herself smaller. It was too late to hide the letter in her dress. Isabella gripped the seat of her chair and refused to look at him directly least he sense the fear in her.

“It is the Queen’s order, Father. We cannot ignore it.” Isabella hated how weak and pathetic she sounded, hated the fear in her heart.

Hated that she knew he could come for her at any moment.

“She should keep her nose out of our business,” he hissed. “Besides, the countess killed her own husband. She is not fit to host a ball. I will protest this. You belong here with me.” He slammed his fist on the table.

Dread pooled in her stomach. That he spoke like this about the queen, even in the privacy of their home shocked her; as well as his vehemence that Isabella would not leave. She froze, not knowing whether to pick her fork back up and resume her meal. Should she pretend that everything was fine,

that he wasn't looming like the beasts she would be forced to court at the Monsters Ball?

And yet, could they truly be any worse than he?

At least she could escape this house and his rule.

"Isabella."

"Father?" She looked up at him, daring herself to meet his eyes across the table, willing her face not to betray her fear. She needed to be free from this place. Free from him. But he would never understand.

"Do. You. Understand?" he thundered.

Taking a deep breath, Isabella carefully stood from her seat and clasped her hands in front of her. "I understand the Queen has given me an order, and I must see it through."

He stalked toward Isabella, gripping her arm and tugging her around to face him. She could smell his breath, see the bloodshot eyes, his puffy red cheeks. And then he glanced down and spied the corner of the paper. Letting her go, he yanked the letter free. His face darkened further as he read, his hands shaking with rage.

Now.

Run.

Now.

She willed her body to work. Bit her tongue to snap her from the paralysis. Turned, and bolted for the door.

“Isabella!” Father yelled. She heard the pound of his feet, the sound of him tripping over the leg of her chair, heard the thud as he hit the floor, but she did not stop running.

Chapter Two

Isabella



The new day dawned chilly and grey.

Isabella did not want to descend to the dining room and find her father there, his mood terrible, his head no doubt aching from all he had consumed the night before. Most of all, she did not want to know whether he had injured himself after she fled from his presence.

There was a gentle knock at the door.

“Come in,” Isabella called, knowing it would not be Father. It was most likely Maris calling her down for breakfast.

The maidservant slipped inside the room, keeping her gaze down-turned. “His Lordship requests your presence, my lady.”

“I’m sure he does,” Isabella said, her voice full of woe. Had he been up stewing the entire night? Or merely risen early with an unsettled stomach. “Can you tell him I’m not feeling well? Lady troubles.”

Maris ducked her head in a nod and then went to withdraw, none of her regular good humor present.

“Maris?” Isabella called after her, waiting until the maid came back into the room. “Close the door and come here.” Maris might be her servant, but she was also Isabella’s friend. The daughter of her wet-nurse and later nanny, they had grown up together. That bond had not changed over time, though their standings had.

Isabella sat up in the bed, pushing the blankets aside as she swung her feet to the floor. Maris shuffled closer and Isabella stood, gripping the maid’s chin and tilting her face up. With a gasp, Isabella drew back.

“Who did this to you?” The words were out of her lips, and yet she felt like there could be only one correct response.

Maris’s eye was bruised so badly no amount of powder would hide the unsightly thing. The maid pressed a hand lightly to the offending eye.

“I was not quick enough to do as his lordship bid, my lady. It is my fault.”

“He should never raise a hand to you, Maris. It is not seemly.” And yet, he’d raised a hand to Isabella’s mother, and to herself. She’d thought Maris would escape the worst of it, that she might be beneath his notice.

She sank back down to the bed, knowing that she had made it worse. She’d run from him and he’d needed someone else to take his ire out on.

“Help me dress,” Isabella said, deciding that she could not anger him further. If he wished for her presence, then he would

have it. Whatever the outcome might be.

Quickly, she gathered a day dress in pale yellow while Isabella drew on her underthings. Maris did her hair in a simple, demure style. Isabella was ready to face the day. She steeled herself, making her face a cool mask, determined not to let the events of last night tarnish her facade. It would do her no good; and certainly not Maris. She was her only ally in this house and Isabella would not have her come to harm.

If only she could bring her maid to the Monsters Ball with her; yet she knew that was frowned upon. There were maids there to take care of her needs, and it was an opportunity to be free from the shackles of regular society.

Isabella yearned for that. Badly.

Maris hurried away to let her father know of her imminent arrival, while Isabella took a last look in the mirror, assessing what she could see there.

She would never be as beautiful as her mother, nor as charming. But then, she'd been kept away from much of society, her father hovering over every interaction. The one genuine friend she had was Yvaine of Moray, but he had deemed her too unladylike, and not at all a suitable companion. It had been years since they'd last spoke though she had caught the news in the High Tea that Yvaine too was destined for the Monsters Ball. Isabella hoped they would reconnect; that she could guide her on the journey.

But that wasn't going to happen if Father had anything to say about it.

Why could he just not let her go?

She headed for the bedroom door, trying to let go of her irritation before she made it to the dining room. A lady held her composure, no matter what.

At least the ladies in this house did.

In the dining room, she took her seat opposite Father.

“Good morning,” she said, noting that Maris had already buttered and jammed her singular slice of toast. She knew that Isabella didn’t like anything heavy in the morning. Isabella sliced it into smaller pieces, popping one delicately into her mouth.

“Did you sleep well?” Father asked, his eyes on the newspaper before him.

“Perfectly well, thank you.” She sank deeper into the seat, relieved he was choosing to ignore what had happened the night before.

“Have you any plans for the day?” he asked, though he still didn’t look at her.

“I thought I would go to the market with Maris,” she said, thinking she would need a few new pieces for the Ball, but not wanting to mention that topic again so soon. She had time to make plans, and there was no benefit to riling him up.

“Excellent. I’ve got work meetings all day, but I expect I’ll see you for dinner tonight.” With that, he snapped the paper tighter, raising it up to create a barrier between us, effectively

dismissing her. She let her face relax and sighed softly, relieved that the niceties were done with.

She took a few more pieces of toast and chewed quickly, then sipped her tea before excusing herself from the table. Father didn't even look as she left the room.

Maris was waiting in the hallway, and I reached for her hand.

“Come on, I think I need a little more dressing up.” With a wink, I tugged her upstairs.



The ton was humming when they arrived. She let herself be drawn into the crowd, the myriad conversations blending together to create an atmosphere of liveliness. Of industry. Like bees, they flitted from shop to shop, fingers trailing over the prettiest of things.

“What are we searching for, exactly, my lady?” Maris asked. Her bonnet was too big, but that was the only way we'd been able to halfway cover her eye. That, and an over-the-top amount of powder, a few loose curls trailing down that side of her face. It wasn't quite the normal style, but it would prevent questions.

“Ribbons,” Isabella replied, surer of voice than she felt. “I need to look the part if I want to catch a husband.” One who

would welcome Maris coming to join their household, for Isabella could not leave her behind. Father would treat her badly and she would never forgive herself for that.

“It’s a shame you haven’t managed to before now,” Maris said, dropping the ‘lady’ now we were on our own. “I was sure that an eligible bachelor would snatch you up on your first outing.”

“A shame, indeed.” Isabella sighed, thinking back to the poor man that Father had vomited on. No one had wanted to dance with her after that.

“But not your shame. Your fathers,” Maris added, patting Isabella’s hand. “It is hardly your fault that he keeps ruining your matches. Do you remember that dashing young man? I forget his name, but I felt sure he would make you an offer.”

“He did,” Isabella said. “Father said no.”

“On what grounds?” Maris asked, her shock obvious.

Isabella shrugged. “He didn’t deign to tell me. Is it any wonder I have been relegated to the Monsters Ball?” She turned to look at her maidservant and friend, her lips twitching a little. “I wonder what they are like up close.”

“I wonder what they are like beneath their breeches.” Maris’s eyes flashed wickedly, and Isabella could not help but laugh, her cheeks flushing crimson. She glanced around to make sure that no one had overheard that scandalous comment.

Isabella was so unknowledgeable in the way of men, she relied on her maids and the cook for any snippets of wisdom about the ways of men; though even Maris had no experience with monsters. A slight tremble ran through her body at the thought. Not only would she be wed, but to one of the lesser kind. The wicked ones. They had not been removed from all of society, but her father had done his best to keep her away from their kind.

“Come, this shop has the best assortment of ribbons. It is where your mother always sent me,” Maris said, drawing her attention to a small place.

The mention of Isabella’s mother made her heart flutter. She wished her mother could be there to help her through this time. If she were still alive, maybe Father would be less of a beast himself. At least she had Maris. Isabella let her maid lead her to the store with hundreds of ribbons. Her fingers fluttered over some of them, but her mind was too busy fretting over what might happen when she arrived home.

Father gave her a small allowance, but not enough for her to shop for her own clothing for the Ball. He’d barely allowed her a new dress for the Season, and for monsters? No, his Lordship wouldn’t deem that fitting. She picked up a pink ribbon in one hand, and a blue one in the other, comparing the two absentmindedly.

There was too much to think about. She wished deeply for her mother, or even an aunt.

“What color is your dress?” A woman’s voice cut through her thoughts and she snapped her gaze up, setting eyes on a stunning woman with deep bronzed skin and gloriously curly hair. The woman looked out of place here, like she belonged on an island, queen of her own domain. She carried herself with strength and pride—things Isabella could not bring herself to demonstrate.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman said, reaching a hand toward Isabella. “I should introduce myself. I am Baroness Pereira—well, I mean Baroness Lockhart.”

The woman blushed slightly, as though she was still adjusting to her name change. A spark of warmth blossomed in Isabella’s chest; this woman was recently married. Maybe her good fortune would rub off on Isabella.

“I am Lady Carmichael. Very lovely to meet you, Baroness.” She curtsied, hoping that it was low enough.

“So, what is the color of your dress? I see you are having a difficult time deciding.” The Baroness pointed to the ribbons in Isabella’s hands. Little did the lady know her thoughts were of much more important things than ribbons.

“Oh—I—um, yes. My dress will be blue,” she said, picking a color from the air. She had only just received the order to attend. She’d certainly not had time to think about what she would wear. “It is for the Monsters Ball next month. I’m a nervous wreck,” she admitted, though part of those nerves were about Father.

The woman's eyes seemed to sparkle. "The one held at Broadstone Hall?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes! The very same." Isabella smiled, feeling relief to find someone else in the same boat as herself. "Have you been there?"

She smiled knowingly. "Yes, yes, I have. I was at the most recent ball, actually."

It was only then that Isabella noticed the rather monstrous male not far away, presumably her husband, if the slip up regarding her name was anything to go by. She gasped and dropped the ribbons back to the stall, cupping her hands with her cheeks to quell some of the heat that had risen there. "It is all so very nerve-wracking. I don't know how to feel about it, although I am a tad excited."

And that was the truth. Excited.

That Father was not welcome on the premises, the opportunity to find a husband and be free of him entirely.

"But the thought of so many monsters vying for my attention scares me." Isabella bit her lip, surprised to be admitting this to a virtual stranger. "However, does one know who to choose?" She dropped her hands back to the table, letting her fingers flutter over the range of ribbons again.

Would a monster be better than Father? Isabella had to believe than anyone would be. Man, or beast.

The Baroness chuckled. "Sometimes, the persistent ones choose you." She patted Isabella on the shoulder and then she

reached for a white ribbon, holding it up for Isabella to inspect. “Try this one. It will contrast nicely with your dress, no matter what shade of blue it is.”

Isabella blushed, accepting the ribbon that the baroness offered. The woman paused for a moment, her eyes sliding around the store before coming back to rest on Isabella. “You’ll be in good hands. The Master of Ceremonies is a kind gentleman. You’ll love him. And the Countess Stalbridge is there to help as well.”

Isabella widened her eyes and leaned in, double checking that no one was watching them. “I heard she did away with her husband!” she whispered.

The baroness giggled and covered her mouth, then gripped Isabella’s arm, drawing her closer. “You are going to hear something, but this did not come from me.”

Isabella covered her mouth, swallowing a squeak before she copied the baroness, and returned to scanning the ribbons on display.

“I have heard rumor that there is a love note hidden in the Countess’ study from a mysterious admirer by the initial M.”

She left her fingers to feel the softness of a blue ribbon, while the baroness reached for a red.

“And,” the baroness continued, “it just so happens that there was a gentleman conscripted into the military because he could not get her parent’s approval. Now, it is said that his

body was never discovered, but the countess was forced to marry a count.”

Isabella gasped, grief for the poor countess rising in her chest, but at least she had been able to marry; even if it wasn't the man she had truly wanted. “What a sad story.”

“I thought so too.” The baroness dropped the ribbon, glancing at the monster who must be her husband. He was waiting patiently by the door. “It does make one wonder about the rumor of her late husband's death. Did her admirer return? Could that be what happened? Maybe she did kill him, but if so, why is she not with her admirer now?” The baroness flicked her gaze to Isabella. “Whatever happened... Where did this rumor of murdering her husband come from to begin with?”

Isabella shook her head, struggling to understand exactly what the other woman was implying. “Good heavens,” she replied, “you're absolutely right. Where did it start?”

The baroness shrugged, then selected a deep maroon ribbon before giving her a smile.

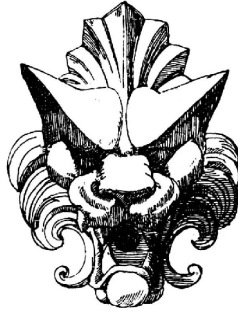
“Well, I had better get going before I bore my husband to death. Do not worry about the ball, Lady Carmichael. I have full faith that you will find your perfect match there.” The baroness squeezed Isabella's arm gently. “If you are nervous, be sure to locate Mister Loren Bow, the Master of Ceremonies. Trust me, you will recognise him when you see him.”

With a last wink, the baroness headed toward to merchant, leaving Isabella to wonder what exactly had just passed.

A letter in the countess' study, a presumably dead admirer now thought to be alive, and several mentions to seek the master of ceremonies; this Ball was hinting at more mystery than Isabella had ever thought possible.

Chapter Three

Isabella



Thoughts of the ball swirled through Isabella's mind as she assessed herself in the window reflection of the living room. This dress would absolutely not do, but the baroness had been right when she said that the white ribbon would go with anything. It looked pristine against her blonde hair, the ends trailing down in a curl that Maris had created.

She had heard there were to be no personal maids or servants in the hall. The entire event created a different atmosphere from normal, but it was her last opportunity to snag a husband, and she needed to look her best.

The front door slammed shut, and she spun away from the mirror, thrusting herself into an armchair and sitting up straight with her feet on the floor. She reached for a book, opening it haphazardly and begging her eyes to connect with the words so that she could give a semblance of proper behavior.

Father walked past the room, and then spun back, the heels of his boots clomping on the wooden hallway as he entered.

“What, pray tell, are you doing?” he demanded.

“Why, Father, I’m just keeping my wits sharp with this book.”

“An order has just arrived in the kitchen. Oversee the maids and ensure everything is as it should be. You are the lady of this house now, least you forget your place.”

She swallowed hard, hating the reminder that her mother was dead, and that her father seemed to think she would always be the lady here.

“Yes, Father,” she said, knowing it was better not to argue. He didn’t seem drunk or angry yet, and there was no need to bait him.

Isabella stood from the chair, placing the book tidily on the side table before crossing the room and brushing past him into the corridor.

“What are you wearing?” he asked. The tone of his voice set her nerves on fire. “And what have you done to your hair?”

She took in a shuddery breath before turning to face him. She could feel her cheeks grow red and she wished desperately that she had not thought to have her hair fixed like this. She should have known.

“Maris helped me try something new, for the Ball. Seeing as she cannot be in attendance, I thought it wise I know what might capture the eye of a suitor.”

Father reeled back as though struck, his own cheeks reddening, his lips moving before any word escaped them.

“No,” was the only word that escaped, and then he tugged at the end of the ribbon, pulling her hair harshly in an attempt to undo the mass of her hair. “You will not be attending the ball. Did I not make myself clear?”

He raised an eyebrow, his jaw clenched and unclenched, as did the fist at his side.

Isabella stepped back, her legs feeling wobbly. They tangled in her dress and she hit her shoulder on the frame of the door, which caused her to tumble to the ground.

“Father,” she tried to say. But he was stepping toward her, looming over her, the same way she had seen him do to her mother on those nights when she should have remained shut away in her room. Fear pounded in her ears, so loud that she could not hear a thing he was saying; though the spittle that flew from his lips, the red fury coloring his face told her all she needed to know.

He would not let her go to the ball. Ever.

She would be stuck in this house for now and always. His daughter. His possession.

No.

No, she could not let that happen.

She must find a way.

Isabella ducked her head, nodded in what she hoped were the right places, uttered stupid apologies although she had done nothing wrong, and waited for him to storm away before she stood.

All the while, a small, defiant plan hatched in her mind.



That night there was a guard at the front and back doors, and the next day Isabella had a new companion. Father said nothing about it, did not so much as introduce the older gentleman who was her shadow if she so much as stepped into the garden, or approached the door. The only escape from him was to remain upstairs.

So that was exactly what she did.

“What are we doing up here?” Maris asked, sneezing as the dust hit her nostrils.

“Mother’s dresses are up here somewhere, and if I’m to attend the ball, I need to have something fitting to wear.”

Maris was silent, and Isabella glanced over her shoulder. The maid’s hands were clasped together, the lines of tension on her face aging her past her three and twenty.

“Say what you need to,” Isabella said, knowing that the sooner it was out, the sooner they could continue their quest.

“What if he finds you?” Maris asked softly. “I want nothing more than for you to escape this place, to find a husband and be free from your father, but if he knew...”

Isabella turned and walked back toward her friend, stepping around the piles of junk between them. She clasped Maris’s

hands and squeezed.

“He won’t. I will perform all of my household duties to a standard of excellence he has never seen before, and when he is out and I am free, I will work on these dresses. And, if he should catch me in the act, I will inform him it was entirely my idea. You advised against it.”

“I did warn against it.”

“Exactly.” She grinned at Maris and then drew her further into the servant’s quarters, where the storage room lay. “Come, you know Mother had some beautiful dresses, and they might not be quite right for me, but together we can fix that. Her sewing kit is no doubt up here as well.”

Maris’s hand slipped from hers and Isabella raised an eyebrow in question.

“I shall clear a space near the entrance so you don’t get covered in dust and cobwebs every time you’re up here. That would certainly raise his lordship’s suspicions.”

Isabella beamed at Maris. “You are so clever. Thank you.” She turned back to searching for the trunks and chests she knew would contain her mother’s belongings.

It had only been a few years since Mother had been found at the bottom of the stairs. Her neck bent at an awful angle, a splatter of blood on the ground where her head had connected to the marble floor of the entranceway. Isabella had not been the one to find her, but Maris’s scream had wakened her from slumber and sent her skidding out into the hallway.

Seeing her mother lying there on the floor of the foyer below had made her blood freeze. It was only then that she'd noted her father on the landing too, his hands gripped tightly around the railing, his face both red and pale, his eyes bulging. Her eyes had been drawn to a smear of blood on his hand, but she'd snatched her gaze away, locking her suspicion up tight.

"She was going to get some water," he said, his voice tight, controlled. "She must have slipped."

Slipped. Fell.

Pushed.

Isabella shuddered, locking that thought back up in a tiny box at the back of her mind. She could not dwell, could not speak those thoughts aloud, or she might find herself in the same position as her mother.

Her eyes landed on a dark blue trunk with copper studs. That was definitely one of her mother's. She picked her way to it, taking in a deep breath before she unlatched it and opened the lid. It fell back with a thunk, and she gasped as she laid eyes on some of her mother's finest clothing. She reached out, fingers touching satin and lace, the finest chiffon, all in colors far richer than Isabella was used to wearing. There were a few paler, more modest designs beneath, but the ones at the top drew her eye and made her heart race.

Well, the note from the queen had said she would need to extend herself. This was just the way to do it.

Isabella picked one up from the top. It was a deep emerald silk, with a pattern of leaves in gold embroidery between bodice and skirt. Small, sparkly gems had been stitched in place of flowers.

Isabella could remember her mother wearing this dress one night on her way out to a ball. It was one she might have worn to take Isabella to her first outing of the Season had she been alive to attend. Grief weighed on her shoulders, folding her in half as she sniffed the fabric to see if there was any trace of her mother's scent remaining.

But there was only the lavender someone had sprinkled through the trunk to stop the clothing from smelling sour. Sniffing back a tear, Isabella forced herself to straighten and set her mind to work. The ball was three days long, so she would need daywear, as well as gowns, for the evening. Her mother had a slightly different body shape, but with Maris's help, they could complete the modifications required. They could work at night by candle if they had to. The ball would be upon her in no time. It was her only chance to be free of her father for good. If she could announce an engagement by the end of the weekend, approved by the queen, then her father would have to approve, too.

But no one would want her in the plain clothing her father made her wear.

"Have you found something?" Maris called. She seemed unwilling to enter the room, and while Isabella knew the maid had good reasons, she wished that there was a little more

support for what she was trying to do. If she could find a suitable husband, she would take Maris with her—her friend had to know that, did she not?

“I have. Give me a moment and I shall bring some dresses over. You have cleared enough space?”

“I’ve done what I can, my lady. Whether you deem it suitable is another matter.”

“Please, Maris. Don’t be so formal with me up here.” Isabella scooped up an arm full of dresses and walked them back to the attic opening. “You are my maid, but you are also my friend and I value you. You stick with me through everything, despite the unpleasantness that occurs within these walls.”

Now she was tiptoeing around the issue, being delicate and formal. Maris had felt the back of her father’s hand on more than one occasion; in that they were equals. The only difference was that Maris had no simple escape, and Isabella had a way out.

She lay the dress on top of a trunk large enough to be used as a table, and then approached her friend, reaching for Maris’s hands. The maid’s skin was cool beneath her touch and Isabella squeezed them. Maris looked in her eyes, the trepidation on her face clear.

“I know this is not the life you want, and once I have a husband, I will call for you. I want you by my side, always, and if I could take you to the ball with me, I would. Perhaps we can fit you inside a trunk and smuggle you in?”

Maris laughed, but her eyes were wrought with fear. “I do not know how I will cope here without you, my lady.”

“Isabella.”

“Isabella,” Maris said with a nod. “Things will be... difficult while you are gone.”

Isabella swallowed hard, though the lump in her throat refused to clear. She felt a wretch for not considering how things might change for Maris while she was at the ball. Father would drink more than normal, his rages may get out of hand, and Isabella would not be there to calm him—or at least, try.

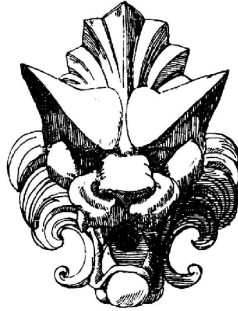
“I am so sorry, Maris. Truly, I am. Let me think about this and see if I can come up with some way to help you. It is only three days, though, surely he will not be too challenging in that time.” Isabella pressed her lips together, hoping that her words were not lies.

She sighed and released her friend’s hand, turning to the pile of clothing.

“Now, let us sort this into some sense so that we can both escape this place.”

Chapter Four

Isabella



Four days later there was another letter, but this time her father intercepted it, storming out of the townhouse to chase down the man who had delivered it.

“Sir! Come back here at once.” Gustav shook the letter in the air between them, as though it were some kind of weapon.

The man spun on his heel, and Isabella noted he was wearing the queen’s colors. Her chest fluttered, and she knew the letter must regard the upcoming ball. She followed her father out of the apartment, staying a few steps behind as Gustav shoved the letter into the man’s chest.

“You can tell her Royal Highness that my daughter will not be attending the ball.”

“My Lord,” the man said, his face free from any emotion. “If her Royal Highness has commanded it, then it must be done.”

Gustav straightened, adding several inches to his already impressive height. Her father seemed to tower over the

delivery man, whose face remained impressively impassive.

“Lord, I am merely the man delivering her Highnesses message. What you do with it is none of my business.” With that, he tucked the letter into the top of her father’s jacket, spun on his heel, and walked off down the street.

Sputtering curses under his breath, Gustav turned back to see her standing on the steps. “What are you looking at, girl?”

She waited for him to close the distance between them before she spoke. “What was that about, Father? What does the letter say?”

“It is none of your concern, Isabella. Now, come inside.” He gripped her arm, tight, but she refused to budge, knowing that once they were inside the house, he could simply ignore her.

“No, I want to know. Was it the ball? It’s almost time for me to depart.”

“You will not be departing,” he snapped. His grip on her tightened, and she could feel the skin pinch between his fingers. She swallowed her cry of pain as he dragged her back into the house before releasing her with a shove. She fell against the marble floor, pain spiking through her body, though it was cool against her heated cheek. It would not soak up the tears she shed, though.

“There will be no ball for you, and no more talk of this. You will not marry a monster. You will not marry until I give my blessing.”

Isabella stayed down until he turned and left, more curses spewing from his mouth, louder now that no nosy neighbors could bear witness to his behavior. Once she was sure he wasn't coming back, she picked herself off the ground and straightened her dress. Hot tears tracked down her cheeks, but she did not try to stop them.

How could he do this to her?

He would not do this.

For even he could not deny the queen.



There was a gentle knock at the door, and then, “My Lady?”

“Come in, Maris.” Isabella set her sewing aside and faced the door.

Maris’s face was paler than normal, but her expression was stoic.

“Whatever is wrong?” Isabella asked, getting to her feet.

“I wanted to let you know your father has doubled the guard around the house. I now have to ask permission to leave, and I fear he will not let you step outside these walls.” Maris’s voice shook a little as she spoke.

Isabella let out a long, low breath, trying to school her features, though a thousand thoughts rushed through her mind.

“Father is serious about his refusal to let me attend the ball, I see,” she said, slumping onto her bed, cradling her head in her hands. “Whatever will I do?”

“Fear not.” Maris moved closer and sat down on the bed beside her. The mattress dipped under the added weight. “There will be a way. If the queen has ordered it, then he must give up, eventually.”

“Perhaps,” Isabella said, though her voice was tinged with sorrow. She wanted nothing more than to be free of this place. It had been bad enough when she knew there was no suitor from the Season, but now Father had further isolated her, restraining her inside the walls of the townhouse.

Knowing him, his next move would be to send her off to a convent; if he couldn’t have her, then only God could.

She would never make it to the ball and never be able to follow up on the information that Baroness Pereira had given her. Who would investigate the mystery of what had happened to M?

“Please, if you wait, I need to pen a missive to an old friend.” She recalled Yvaine was attending the Monsters Ball. She would do it. She had the drive.

Isabella got up from her bed and crossed to her writing table, taking out a piece of parchment and a quill, then sat down to write.

My dear friend Yvaine,

I know it has been some time since we have seen each other, and I was so looking forward to reconnecting with you at the upcoming Monsters Ball. Unfortunately, Father will not permit me to attend. He has me under lock and key, and I fear I might never see the outside world again. I am biding my time, creating new dresses from Mother's belongings, even though I may never wear them for anyone aside from my lovely maid.

It is her that I am entrusting with this letter, for she is the only person true to me in the household.

I met the Baroness Pereira recently, and she imparted on me some information that I deemed necessary to give to you. While I know there are many rumors about Countess Stalbridge, the truth is more complicated than rumor. If you find yourself in the Countess' study, there is a love note hidden within that space from a monstrous admirer who goes by the initial M. I dearly wish that I could view that missive with my own eyes, but I rely on you to take this task upon yourself.

Apparently, when M's offer of marriage was rebuffed by the Countess' parents, he conscripted into the army. While he was presumed dead, his body was never discovered, and some believe that this means he is still out there somewhere. Perhaps pining for the Countess - do you think she might pine for him, now that her husband has departed this life?

For all those who yearn for love, could you please take it upon yourself to delve deeper into this mystery? I would if I could, but alas, my future feels dire. If you do perchance

uncover something, please think of me, and consider sending a return letter.

Yours, always,

despite our years apart.

Isabella Carmichael.

She put the quill back in its proper place and secured the ink lid before sanding the letter to dry the ink. She could not afford for this letter to fall into her father's hands, nor anyone whom might work for him. But Maris could easily leave the house. Isabella could only hope that the letter would be read before Yvaine was whisked away to the ball.

The ache of missing out returned. How much she had wanted to be part of it. To catch up with her bold childhood friend, to allow some of the other woman's brashness to rub off on her. But no, she would be stuck at home, looking out the window, wishing for something different.

With a sigh, she folded the paper and scrawled the address on the outside.

"Please, Maris. You must make sure this reaches Yvaine before she goes to the ball. It is ever so important."

"Of course, my lady. I will set on my errands now and make it my top priority."

"Father isn't having someone trail you, is he?" Isabella asked, clasping her hands together so that she did not wring them in an unladylike fashion. "Even if he did, the letter is meaningless to him. Harmless to our reputation." She shook

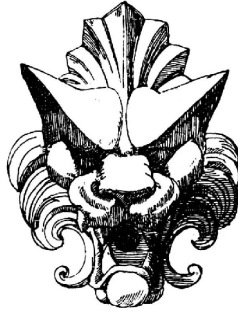
her head. “Never mind me, Maris, go about your tasks and I will make a plan to persuade Father.”

She shooed her maid out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaning back against the wood.

How she could persuade him, she did not know. All she knew was that she had to go to the ball.

Chapter Five

Tyclon



Marquis Tyclon K'var approached Lowvalley Manor from the side, not taking in the shabby appearance, or even giving a moment's thought to how he could improve the place. His banishment had been both blessing and curse, and so long as the roof did not collapse upon his head, he would be quite satisfied. His striped tail flicked from side to side, agitated despite expending his aggression on a kill.

He dumped the bloody boar carcass on the butcher's block; he would have to deal with it himself, but right now he had a thirst. Blood dripped from his paws and he smeared the mess on his torn shirt. There was no saving that after the boar tusks had ripped through the fabric. And no one to repair it, either. His maids had fled upon hearing that he had struck out at his fiancée while in the clutches of the plague.

No one trusted him.

Hell, he didn't even trust himself. And he certainly could not blame the staff for leaving.

Tyclon poured himself a glass of brandy from the decanter and slumped onto the daybed. He'd taken only one sip when there was a rap at the door. He growled, lip pulling up to reveal a sharp fang. He pressed his lips together, hiding it. He could not afford to lose Dudley.

“Come in,” he said.

The man entered. He was an older gent, had been with the family a long time and, for some reason, had stayed by Tyclon's side despite his monstrous new appearance. For that, Tyclon was grateful.

“A letter came for you, my lord. From the queen.”

Tyclon's shoulders sagged, and he knocked back the rest of the brandy before taking the letter from Dudley. “Thank you,” he said, trying to mind his manners. “I do not really wish to see what it says, do I?” He looked up at his servant, raising an eyebrow.

Dudley considered his words before he spoke, and that stung. The man did not want to provoke a rage; Tyclon hated that this fear existed, but he was hostage to his monster.

“You may not like the contents, my lord, but I urge you to read the letter carefully, for it holds weight.” With that, Dudley gave a quick bow and left the room.

Tyclon placed his glass on the floor and steeled himself for what lay inside this single sheet of paper.

Marquis Tyclon K'var,

By order of Her Majesty, you are ordered to attend the Monsters Ball at Broadstone Hall. Failure to do so will result in your title being permanently revoked.

We sincerely hope to see you in attendance; it would be better still should you make a match.

Countess Stalbridge.

Fuck.

He crumpled the page into a ball, claws extending without thought.

He did not want to attend a damned ball. He would not make a match. No woman deserved to be paired with him; he would hurt them, like he had hurt Penelope, and he didn't think he could live with himself if that happened again.

And yet... His title was the only thing left to him, even if it mattered little out here in the countryside. He might be satisfied to live in a manor that was slowly crumbling, but he could not stomach the thought that his mother would finally get her wish to strike him from the family entirely and remove him from his position.

No. She would not win.

He clenched his jaw, sharp teeth digging into his lips, and hurled the piece of paper into the fireplace, watching it burn.

Chapter Six

Isabella



The first day of the ball came and went, but it was not mentioned. Isabella kept waiting for her father to raise the topic, but every time she even opened her mouth, he spoke over her and she knew it was useless. He summoned her to dinner on what would have been the mid-point of the ball—the Saturday night play—insisting she dress well and they eat in the grand dining hall, although there were only the two of them in attendance.

“Maris, you may leave. Tell the others not to disturb us,” he ordered, waving the maid away. He waited until she had closed the double doors behind her, then turned his attention to Isabella.

The evening had a strange level of formality, and for once, he did not appear to be inebriated. His cheeks were not red, and his eyes remained unglazed. He hadn’t so much as drunk a drop from the glass of wine next to his right hand.

“I know you must be disappointed not to be attending the ball this weekend, daughter. It is every young woman’s wish to

be wed and have a household of her own, but you know that this is your home and that we need you here.”

Isabella pressed her lips together, unsure whether she could trust herself to speak. He was perfectly capable of finding a new wife if he was so determined to have someone run his household, but she could not say that; did not want to raise his ire.

“I need you.” His voice was softer this time. He stood up then, pushing his chair back and walking toward her. He clutched a box in one hand. Isabella held her breath, having no idea what to expect.

When he reached her, he placed it on the table and carefully removed the lid, revealing a beautiful double layered pearl necklace with delicate locket as the centerpiece. “This was your mother’s, and I want you to have it.”

“Oh,” was all she could say. Her fingers itched to touch the piece. She could remember her mother wearing it often. It was beautiful enough to have been reserved for the finest occasions, but Isabella’s mother had wanted to make every day an occasion in small ways; it was how she had played down the reality of having a violent, abusive husband.

Thankfully, she had not been wearing it the night she... fell. If that had been the case, Isabella would not have been able to bear wearing it.

Father picked up the necklace and brushed the hair away from Isabella’s neck, clasping it at her nape. His fingers

lingered too long against her skin and when he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“You look so much like her. So beautiful.”

Those words made her skin crawl, made her freeze, although she was desperate to run. Escape. Before he decided she could replace her mother in all ways.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and then straightened before moving back to his end of the table and sitting down again.

She sat there, frozen, knowing that she should thank him for this thoughtful gift; for returning a piece of her mother to her. But all she could hear was ‘you look so much like her’ over and over again. Was *that* why he would not let her go?

Unable to stop her body from responding, she shuddered lightly and shook her head so that her hair fell back into place. Her fingers grazed the locket, and she knew that on the inside would be the tiniest drawing of the two of them together. Her beautiful mother and herself. The ladies Carmichael.

His ladies.

She shuddered again.

“Thank you, Father. This is a most precious gift. I shall treasure it always.” She gripped the locket in her hands, warmth flushing her body though whether it was from the discomfort her father had delivered, or the gift, she could not tell.

“As you should. It cost a small fortune. It sits well on you.” He nodded once, happy with himself, and then ate, lifting his glass of wine and downing half of it in one gulp.

Isabella wished she had her own wine, though the turning of her father’s moods when he has consumed too much kept her well away from such things. It would not do for both of them to lose their manners and behave in unruly ways; they’d be cast out of society in no time at all.

They ate the rest of the meal in silence, though her father’s gaze was fixed on her more than normal and it sent discomfort through her veins.

“Father, may I please be excused?” she asked. She would push her chair back on any other night, but there was a tension in the room she was unfamiliar with. “My stomach aches, as it does sometimes for women.”

His upper lip twisted in a sneer and he waved her away, turning his gaze to the half empty bottle of wine by his side.

With no further encouragement needed, Isabella rose from her chair and turned swiftly for the door, freezing when he called after her.

“No more will be spoken of the Monsters Ball. Understood?”

“Yes, Father.” She dipped her head in acknowledgement, but didn’t turn back. Instead, reached for the door handle and twisted it, escaping into the cooler air of the hallway.



Weeks passed, more engagements were announced in both the regular news and the High Tea, much was made in particular of the matches from the Monsters Ball. Isabella could not help but read them, scouring for mentions of Yvaine. It appeared every woman of eligible age was being matched, but her, and being confined within the house, was boring her senseless.

The only thing she had to keep her mind occupied were the dresses she remade in those weeks, hoping she would eventually get to a ball and find herself a husband, too. She kept her trunks packed for just such an occurrence.

One Friday afternoon, there was a loud rap on the door. Father had finished his business early, and they were sitting in the parlor with tea, reading quietly. It was one of his more pleasant days. He looked up from his papers, waiting for the servant to bring news of the new arrival, but instead of Johnson, two burly orc men breached the door.

They were so tall and strong looking; their skin tinged a green that Isabella would be hard pressed to name. Large, tusk-like teeth breached their lips, creating a visage that was both fearsome and... thrilling, if she admitted it. Her heart beat faster and she could only hope that they would be her salvation.

Gustav shot up from his chair. “What on earth do you think you are doing, busting into my house like this?”

Johnson appeared behind of the orcs, barely visible past their bulk. “I’m so sorry, my lord. They pushed past me and there was little I could do to stop them.” His voice trembled, as if he knew that this failure would lead to punishment later.

“We’re here on the Queen’s orders. Your daughter has a ball to attend, and you will not ignore the queen’s commands a second time.”

“You have no right!” Gustav shouted, though Isabella noted he didn’t move closer to the orcs. Was that a flash of fear on his face?

Was this really happening?

One guard withdrew a letter from his bag and stepped forward to hand it to her father. Isabella held her breath as he snatched it from the orc and stalked across the room to toss it into the fire.

“Father!” she cried out, all her hope turning to ashes. Even with these monsters in their town house, he would still not accept the queen’s command.

“Whether or not you read the letter, Her Majesty has decreed this. Miss Carmichael will attend the ball.”

“Over my dead body,” Gustav snapped back. He moved closer to the orc but did not get within arm’s reach. He was smarter than that.

The second guard—the one who hadn't spoken yet—stepped forward. “That can be arranged.” His lip twisted in a sneer, exposing more of that long tusk on one side. A shudder ran through Isabella, but she could not pinpoint where it stemmed from: this monster's presence, the way he had casually threatened her father's life, or that it might mean she would be free of him.

The first orc turned his attention to her. “Come, gather your belongings. We must get you to the Hall in time for tonight's Ball.” He offered his arm, far larger than her own, green skin and dark nails, thicker than humans. He might terrify her on some level, but he excited her on others, and his gesture was an offer of freedom. Isabella surged forward and placed her hand on the orc's arm, allowing him to lead her from the room.

“Isabella! Get back here at once,” her father shouted.

She glanced over her shoulder to see that the other guard had blocked the doorway with his body and Gustav was keeping a safe distance, though the fury on his face was clear for anyone to see.

“This is where you belong!”

“Ignore him. I am sure he will overcome this small upset,” the orc said. His voice rumbled through her, but his posture and courtesy as he led her to the stairs was a pure gentleman. “Please show me where your belongings are so we can get them to the carriage. Time is of the essence.”

“My Lady?” Maris called from the hallway, which led to the kitchen. “What is happening?”

“Oh, Maris.” Isabella dropped the orc’s arm and rushed to her. “Come and help me. I need to pack and go. They are taking me to the Monsters Ball!” She drew Maris to the stairs. They rushed up, the orc following behind.

“I thought your father would never let you go,” Maris whispered. She glanced behind, clearly unsure whether to trust the guard.

“He still refuses, but... What can he do?” Isabella grinned and squeezed her friend’s hand, unable to keep the elation from her face. Maris didn’t look as happy as Isabella thought she should, though. “Are you not happy for me?”

“Oh, my lady. Isabella,” she added in a hushed whisper. “I am so happy for you. I just fear for my safety while you are gone.”

Her blood ran cold—she had not given this any real consideration, though she had known it was a possibility. But Maris was right; without her there to keep Gustav calm, there was no telling what Father might do. All the words she wanted to say got stuck in her throat. She spun on the stair to face the orc. “Can she come with me? Are attendant’s allowed?”

“No, my lady, sadly, they are not.” He actually looked sorrowful delivering the news, as if he had known the plight of those who lived within these walls. As if he cared.

“What is your name?” Maris asked. Isabella spun to face her friend; an eyebrow raised.

“Caleb, my lady.” He dipped his head, as if Maris were of a higher standing. It impressed Isabella, and she saw a blush creep up Maris’ neck to speckle her face.

“Caleb, thank you for your honesty. I am sure I will be fine, but please, if you are able, ensure my lady is kept safe, too.”

Isabella opened her mouth to protest, but Caleb spoke again, as if he and Maris were alone on the steps. She was not accustomed to being spoken of as if she were absent, but she was curious about the interaction between these two.

“Miss Carmichael will be perfectly safe. The Countess and her staff keep a close eye on the happenings at the Ball and wish for nothing but satisfactory matches as the outcome. She will be well cared for.”

Maris nodded in thanks, then tugged on Isabella’s hand, drawing her back to their task. “We must get you ready to go. Your future awaits.”

Within half an hour, her trunks were packed into the carriage. The guards gave her a few minutes to change into something more appropriate for her arrival. Maris pulled her hair into a beautiful twist, a few soft blonde curls framing her face, and her mother’s necklace clasped around her throat.

“You look beautiful, and I am sure you will find a suitable match easily, Isabella. I do so hope for that.”

Isabella turned in her seat to look up at Maris. “I wish you could come with me. Try your best to stay out of his way, and

if you can do so without getting caught, water his wine, just a little, so he doesn't get as ghastly as he can."

"You'll come back for me, won't you?" Maris asked. She bit her lip and looked overcome by worry.

"I promise," Isabella said, grasping her hands. She had her own concerns, and the fear that struck her in the chest was pure. She searched her mind for anything she could do to help Maris while she was at the ball, but nothing came to mind. If she pleaded with her father to go kindly, then the exact opposite would happen. She felt bad about the favoritism she'd had for Maris, as that might make her a bigger target than the other staff in the house.

But it was only three days, two nights. Surely, in that sliver of time, nothing too bad could happen.

"I will be home before you know it, and I will make it a condition of marriage that you remain in my employ."

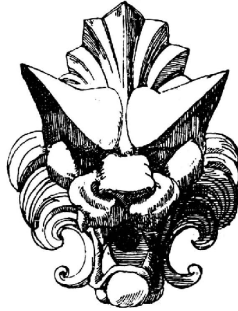
"Oh, Isabella." Maris threw all sense of propriety out the window and threw her arms around Isabella's shoulders, going some way to disheveling the hair she had arranged so perfectly. Isabella didn't care, though. She revelled in the embrace's warmth and wished with all her heart that Maris would be safe while she was gone.

Her friend released her, dabbing at her face to dry the few tears that had fallen free. "You best be away. They'll be waiting, and who knows how long they can hold off your father? Go. I will be well."

How Maris pressed her lips together did not reassure Isabella though, and as she departed her room with one last backward glance, she feared what she might find on her return.

Chapter Seven

Isabella



The carriage passed out of the town and through the country with no issue. The Queen's crest emblazoned on it seemed to make others move aside for them.

Isabella had been trying so hard to ignore her father's ranting that she had barely stopped to notice the details of the carriage as the guards ushered her out of the house and into its enclosure. She'd snapped the curtains shut as soon as she could, unable to witness her departure for fear of what she might see.

Her heart ached for Maris, but as the horses had exited the paved areas of the city and rolled across compacted earth roads, despite the rocky ride she'd relaxed against the cushions and in the end, fallen asleep, only to be awoken by an abrupt stop.

They were at Broadstone Hall. She knew it. Could feel it. The air was fresher and cooler.

And she was free from her father.

Isabella twitched open the curtains so that she could look upon the building where her future awaited. Huge turrets pierced the sky, showing just how enormous the Hall was. The shape of the building was difficult to comprehend; like rooms had been stacked upon each other almost happenstance. Isabella could only imagine there would be many a nook to hide away in should she need it. Or ample ways to get lost on accident.

The carriage door opened, and Caleb was there, a green hand held out to assist her. Isabella's legs were wobbly from disuse, so she gratefully gripped his fingers and lifted her hem with her other hand so that she didn't trip and disgrace herself so soon upon arrival. No doubt the rumours of her father's disgrace had already made it to this place; it was the least she could do to try not to damage her chances further.

"Thank you," she said as she straightened and surveyed her surroundings. There were a few others present, and she wondered if she was the last to arrive. A spritely man dressed in lively greens and lurid blues approached, and from the description the Baroness had given her in the ribbon store, Isabella suspected this was Master Bow.

"Welcome, welcome. I am so glad you have finally been able to come to the ball." He clapped his hands together and then held them out to her. She couldn't stop her body from moving and wondered if he exuded some kind of magic, because she held hers out and let him draw her in for a closer look. "You are a pretty young thing, and I know you've had a difficult time of it," he said, his voice lower now. "But you're

here now, safe, and once we find you a suitable match, you will live a beautiful life.”

He tucked her arm into his and pulled her along, up the steps and into the hall. Everything was mahogany and marble. Thick carpets and lush tapestries. Marble. Gold. It made her own home look positively drab.

“The others are already settled. Allow me to show you to your room where refreshments will be provided.”

He snapped his fingers, and a maid appeared. She was tall and lithe, with dark hair pulled back in a tidy bun.

“Yes, Master Bow?”

“Jane, please gather light refreshments for Miss Carmichael. She’s had a long day and it will be many an hour before she retires. Thank you!” With that, he turned back to Isabella and guided her toward the stairs. “I’ve saved one of my favorite rooms for you, on the third floor. You have a stunning view of the area surrounding the Hall, and a little more privacy. There are fewer rooms up there and I thought you may appreciate the quiet.”

“Oh, yes,” Isabella said, though it came out like a question. “Thank you.” The man seemed to talk endlessly, and she wasn’t sure that anything much was expected of her right this minute.

“Caleb and Dustin will bring your trunks up momentarily. The theme of tonight’s ball is *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I trust you know the play?” He sighed with delight. “Oh, it will

be a beautiful affair, and hopefully you have something fitting to wear? You will find a few bits and pieces in your room, just in case. We want to ensure our guests are comfortable.”

“I...” Isabella trailed off, not knowing what to say. This stranger had done more for her happiness in mere moments than her father had in years. She tried to keep her tears at bay, not wanting to seem ungrateful for the effort, but utterly overwhelmed by it.

“Oh, dear one.” Master Bow stopped them on a landing and turned to her. He dabbed at her cheek with a handkerchief that appeared from nowhere. “Don’t cry. I know this is overwhelming and you are not as prepared because your ghastly father—sorry, but we had to get that out of the way—prevented you from coming the last time.”

“I thought... I thought I would never make it to the ball.”

“Well, you are here now, and in one flight of stairs, we’ll be in your room.” He nudged her gently back into action up the next flight of stairs. When they arrived, she found a hallway with gorgeous paper lining the walls, and more thick runners beneath their feet.

It was lush than their townhouse, but then that was to be expected. The countess was, well, a countess. And this entire estate was hers. Master Bow led her to the room at the end of the hallway. By this point, Isabella did not know which direction they were facing, or what to expect when he opened the door. He flung it wide, gesturing expansively for her to step inside.

Part of her wondered whether this had all been a lavish trick and he would lock her in, but he followed, guiding her to the window directly opposite the door. “See?”

She stepped up beside him, her mouth dropping open at the view of the lake and maze, green hills rolling in the distance, and a lush forest as well. “It is beautiful,” she said. “Thank you, Master Bow, for gifting me this room. But surely there are important ladies here that deserve this more than I.”

He tsked at her and shook his head, a smile lighting up his face. “No one is more important than another, in my books. If anything, you are more deserving of this respite.” He gave a little bow, then turned for the door. “I shall leave you and see you at festivities.” He glanced back, eyes sparkling with mischief. She did not know how to interpret that.

A few minutes later, there was a knock, and she opened the door to find Caleb and Dustin with her belongings. She opened the door wider so that they could fit inside, still impressed by their size and strength, and also the memory of how gentle and focused Caleb had been when he’d spoken to Maris. As if she were the only woman on the stairs.

Perhaps... perhaps she could arrange a marriage for her friend as well.

When they left, she leant against the door for a moment to still the rapid beating of her heart.

She had made it to Broadstone Hall. All the fear and worry that it would never happen, and now she was finally there. Isabella crossed the room to her main trunk and opened the lid,

revealing the dresses that she and Maris had crafted in the hope she would one day wear them.

There was another knock on the door, and Isabella went to open it. Jane stood in the hallway, a tray with tea and biscuits held before her. “My lady,” she said, dipping gracefully into a curtsy.

Isabella stepped aside to let the woman in, following her to two seats with a small table between them. The view from there was across the maze, the top of it visible despite the lower vantage point.

“Have you worked here long?” Isabella asked, wanting to gather information about this place—about what to expect from it.

“A few years now, my lady. The Countess is a good employer, looks after her staff and makes sure that everything is run to a high standard.”

“Well, those scones look delicious, so I imagine that is true.” Isabella sat on the chair, and Jane poured some tea, lifting the milk jug, and pouring that when Isabella nodded. “How many other girls are on this floor?” she asked.

“Only a few. The others are on the next level down. Don’t worry though, you will have all the company you want, or the privacy.” There was a sparkle in Jane’s eyes that sent a blush creeping up Isabella’s face.

“Can you tell me that things will be fine? Please?” Isabella hated the wobble in her voice, but everything was

overwhelming. For so long, she had been sure that no one would want her, that she would never make it to another ball, never find a match. Now here she was at the Monsters Ball. Finally, free from her home, but forced to leave Maris to the whims of her father. And now she was alone. Truly. For the first time in her entire life.

It was too much.

“Oh, Miss. You will be more than fine.” Jane dropped to her knees beside Isabella’s chair and reached for her hands. “You are in good company. There are other girls in similar positions, all with one desire on their minds. And you’ll be looked after, taken care of, in a way that no one at the regular balls is. We are here for you, at any hour of the day for the entire weekend, and if you feel uncertain, ask for me and I will come.”

Isabella squeezed Jane’s hands tight and then exhaled, letting herself sink back into the chair and the surroundings. “Thank you.” She swallowed hard. “I think some tea and scones will set me to rights. How long until tonight’s festivities begin?”

Jane rose to her feet and gave a reassuring smile. “Another few hours, but if you arrive a little later, all the better for making an entrance.” The maid winked. “I’ll return later to help you dress. You’ll find a basin and washcloth in the cabinet.” Jane gestured to the corner behind the door, where there was a screen. “And if you need anything at all, please ring.”

“Thank you, Jane. You are a blessing.” Isabella meant every word. If not for the gentle servant, she might have fallen into sobs, making her face red and blotchy before she’d even made it to the ball.

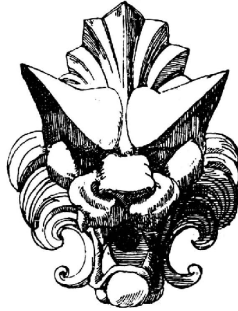
With another duck of the head, the maid departed

Now, being alone did not feel so daunting, for she wasn’t, really. Jane was only a call away, and failing that, someone else would be there to assist.

And for just a few days, she could enjoy the freedom of being away from Father, safe from his rage and fury.

Chapter Eight

Isabella



Isabella had curled up on the bed to rest her eyes for what felt like only a moment, but then Jane was there, shaking her awake.

“Miss, it’s time.” The light had faded from the sky and stars twinkled clearly on a canvas of ever deepening blue black.

“Oh, my goodness, what time is it? Am I late? I didn’t mean to sleep.”

“You will be in time. Do not fear. Come, let us get you ready. The others are heading downstairs, but there is no rush.” Jane stepped back, allowing Isabella to rise in her own time. Jane had lit a few tallow candles on the other side of the room, creating a dressing area. The maid had already pulled out a few dresses as options for the evening, and Isabella let her eyes graze over them as well as her fingers.

“What are the others wearing? I fear I’ve not seen a single soul other than you and Master Bow since my arrival. I do not know what to expect.”

“A rainbow of color, Miss. Whatever you wear will be perfect.” Jane approached and fingered the light green muslin overlay on one of the first dresses Maris had helped Isabella alter. “This one is lovely though, and the green tone fits with the theme of the evening. Master Bow made sure every room had a few items and if we pair it with this.” Jane moved to the dresser, selecting a crown made of white feathers and pearls. “You will be simply ethereal. All the men will have their eyes on you.” Jane ushered Isabella into action, helping her get into the dress and arranging it just so.

The dress was a lower cut than she would ordinarily wear, but there were only a few days to catch a husband, so she had to make the most of her assets. She sat still while Jane tinted her cheeks and lips with red, as though she had just eaten the most delicious, juicy berries. Finally, Jane set the crown upon her head. Isabella’s hair fell in gentle blonde curls around her shoulders, and Jane pinned tiny buds of white and pink into the feathers.

“Jane, I look...”

“Beautiful,” the maid said. “And now we best get you to the ball.”

Isabella stood, smoothing out the lines of the dress before she sliding her feet into her dancing slippers. She only had one pair, but the dress distracted from their sorry state. She gripped her locket for a bit of courage, then headed toward the door, letting Jane lead the way.

Before reaching the bottom of the stairs, the sound washed over her. Laughter and chatter, the clink of glasses and the thrum of music, of feet on the ballroom floor. Dancing.

Oh, she had not danced in far too long and she felt a rush of excitement as she approached. Couples were already gathered out here in the quieter areas, sneaking moments for conversation, snatched kisses in the dark. Her head swum with that, and she did not know what might be expected of her from this night in order to find a monster willing to wed her.

Master Bow stood at the entrance to the ballroom and he opened his arms wide in a gesture of praise for her attire. “You look delightful, Miss Carmichael. Sure to charm the lads.” He drew her in, hooking an arm through hers. “Now, for you, I suggest avoiding the minotaur over there. He loves to dance, but I don’t think he’s your type. You could definitely let him take you for a spin around the room if you were so inclined, though. And those old grumps over there.” He pointed at a table near the back where three different monsters sat; a snake-like man, some creature that looked like it had tentacles instead of legs, and was that a griffon? “I am more than happy to announce you to the room, but there is no need for that should you want a quieter entrance.” He raised an eyebrow, as if sensing her trepidation, her need to take this slowly.

“There is no need for an announcement, Master Bow. I believe I can find my own way.”

“Of course, of course. Enjoy!”

Isabella thanked Master Bow and then moved on her way. Her eyes caught on a range of dresses from the most demure to ones displaying more skin than was the norm in polite society. Isabella felt like her gown fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Definitely more risqué than her regular attire, but not so radical that she was uncomfortable, or could feel the sting of shame.

That said, some looks she was getting from the male monsters made heat rise in her cheeks. They looked more openly at her than any human man had, as though each one of those in attendance knew this was their last chance.

One gentleman peeled away from his small group, dark eyes roving across her body as he approached. He had a reptilian facade, deep green scaling around his eyes, smoothing out toward where a nose and ears might otherwise be. It gave him a flattened effect, one that was not appealing to her. And the lack of eyebrows meant she could only guess at his thoughts.

No. Not him. Isabella turned away, ducking into the safety of a ring of women who had gathered around a servant bearing a tray of drinks.

“Oh, take the last one from this poor servant,” one woman said with a giggle. It sounded as though she had consumed more than one herself. Isabella froze, unsure whether to take the drink. Memories of her father’s drunkenness overwhelming her.

But she wasn’t him. And the queen had said she must extend herself.

Perhaps this would help.

With a tentative smile, she grasped the delicate stem of the wineglass carefully. She could just hold it if she wanted. No one would force her to take a sip, though it might look strange if she didn't. Isabella tried to listen to the conversation. One young lady was talking behind her fan about an elegant man with the wings of a raven across the room. His feet were clawed hooks, though his face was mostly humanoid. There were so many variations of monster, from those who looked entirely their own, to others that could pass as almost human, and everything in between.

More varied even than the gowns of the women.

“Have you seen anyone who takes your fancy yet?” one of them asked Isabella.

She shook her head coyly. “I arrived late, and honestly, there is so much to observe. Where does one begin?”

This elicited a round of giggles, and Isabella felt herself relax a fraction. She lifted the glass and took a small sip. The liquid was deliciously cold and sweet.

“I know exactly where I shall begin.” This lady seemed bolder than the rest, both by the cut of her dress and her manner. She set her shoulders back and sauntered across the floor to a hulking beast with huge horns protruding from his head.

They watched with bated breath, a sigh of relief and perhaps a nugget of jealousy as the monster accepted the woman's

hand and led her to the dancefloor.

“Well, I will not be the last asked to dance,” another woman said, breaking off from the group as well. Isabella did not feel bold enough, though the warmth of the wine in her throat suggested she may soon. She had only ever sipped before, refraining from it in the company of her father, for he drank more than enough for the both of them.

No, she would not rely on alcohol to win herself a man. She would find another way true to herself. With that thought, she separated herself from the small cluster of women and went in search of something else to line her stomach.

Chapter Nine

Tyclon



Tyclon lurked at the back of the room in the deepest shadows, though he felt sure his stripes were visible to all. Marking him out as tainted; not that he was alone in that. Not that he was even the ugliest beast in the room. No, there were those who had turned into creatures he would never have been able to fathom prior to the cursed plague. On the outside, at least.

Beautiful young men and women had streamed into the room, paraded like lambs to the slaughter, he thought. Not a one of them deserved to be tied to such a wretch as himself, and he would do whatever he could ensure he escaped this place untethered.

Not after that night. When he had lost control...

He pushed those thoughts from his mind, not wanting to dwell on his darkness in the glittering lights of the room. The staff had done a good job decorating it to bring the outside in. A Midsummer Night's Eve, indeed. He'd once seen the play

performed, though at the time he had been human and he had a feeling that it would hit differently if he were to see it again.

A young woman caught his eye across the room, moving from a group of ladies toward one of the long tables set up with refreshments. His stomach growled, but he would not step near her; she was exactly the sort of innocent he should stay away from. One like her would not be prepared for his foul moods, and before the weekend was done, he would no doubt have driven her off. Even a full year after turning into... this, he still did not feel as though he had himself under control.

He might never.

“See someone that takes your fancy, Marquis K’var?”

Tyclon titled his head to find that Countess Stalbridge had found her way to his side. How he had missed her was difficult to say, for she wore an enormous pair of gossamer wings, gilded to match the gold in the brocade of her silk gown. She was a fine woman, and while he respected her for her devout inclusion of monsters in society, that did not mean he would be cowed into picking a bride from this group, only to ruin her life.

Despite what his mother believed, he possessed more manners than that.

“No,” he said simply, chasing the word with a low growl. “The only reason I am here is because her majesty commanded it.”

“Least you lose your title, I hear,” the countess smiled, though it wasn’t filled with the gloat he had seen on the faces of others. “I, for one, am pleased you graced us with your presence.”

He huffed derisively. “You heard correctly,” he replied. “My title is the only thing I have left, but as much as I would like to keep it, I would rather lose it than burden any young lady with myself.”

He had only promised to attend—not to marry—yet he had almost declined even that command. What good was a title if you were alone? And what good was a manor home if there was no laughter or love with which to fill it?

His mother had made it abundantly clear that he deserved no love; she had told anyone who would listen that she would rather their line die out than be continued with his taint.

Within weeks, he had been all but removed from polite society. Invitations dried up; business deals only maintained because he had a satisfactory solicitor.

“You know the queen compels us all, Marquis,” the countess said, bringing his attention back to the ball. She placed a gentle hand on his forearm, forcing him to look her in the eyes. “Whatever else has happened in your life, I hope that somewhere in this crowd you can find a suitable match. Many would say it is well past time.”

He could see that she meant no offence with that statement, but she could not know how it stung all the same. For he had

been engaged once before; and he had caused her such great pain, he could never risk that again.

“There will never be a right time to inflict myself upon any lady,” he returned. “But I promise to at least dance with a few willing partners.”

Tyclon dipped his head to the countess and took his leave.

The room was feeling crammed full of too many bodies, and the noise of the string quartet rivaled the noise inside his mind. His nerves jangled, and the many strong fragrances assaulted his senses.

Instead of finding a dance partner, he moved toward the open terrace doors and slipped into the night.

*

note the part/women/monsters/take a special note of Isabella. Countess sidles up to him and asks, he is like, nope.

Chapter Ten

Isabella



Isabella had consumed a few small pieces of food before there was a gentle cough behind her. She turned to find a soft-looking monster waiting patiently for her attention. He was round and, well, soft. It really was the only word for it. She did not know what kind of monster he might be, but there were humanoid features in his face, which was just as gentle as the rest of him.

“Would you like to dance, my lady?” he asked. His voice quavered in the air, as though he were almost too timid to ask, and so she felt compelled to dip her head in agreement and step toward him, hand outstretched.

“Lady Isabella Carmichael,” she said, by way of introduction. “And you are?”

“Sir Conrath of Volren. Utterly charmed by your presence.”

That made Isabella smile, though she kept her chuckle internal. She didn’t want to scare the poor man off. He moved so that she could place a hand on his arm and lead her toward

the dance floor. His steps were graceful, and his size seemed to adapt as they moved so that he was a little taller than before - the perfect height for her. Not only that, but his body morphed ever so slightly, his legs slimming, while his chest puffed up.

She could not help but wonder what he was made of, for it seemed as though if you pricked him with a needle he would burst.

“This must be your first time at the Monsters Ball,” he said, spinning her so that they were face to face. She let him guide her into position for the dance, astounded by the silkiness of his skin. It wasn’t furry; but she could not exactly say what it was. And it bothered her something awful. Like he was a puzzle that she needed to solve, but not entirely the good kind.

It would be rude to simply ask what kind of creature he was, but Isabella had the feeling that would be the only way to obtain an answer. So, she held the question in. It wouldn’t do to be rude to the first monster to ask her to dance.

“You are very graceful, Sir Conrath,” she said demurely, as he danced her around the room, keeping an appropriate distance between them. It didn’t feel like a potential match, and perhaps he knew that too, because when the song ended, he bowed to her and departed. Isabella had the feeling that should there have been any connection, he was exactly the kind of man she should marry. Soft and kind, never likely to raise his voice or his fist against her.

She would not make the same mistake her mother had made. And yet... an escape was what she needed. Was she

prepared to make it at any cost?

A man with wings the color of the sea moved toward her. She accepted his offer of a dance and was swept back into the crowd, spinning around until her head was dizzyier than if she had consumed more wine. She giggled at the sensation, and he dipped his head closer to hers, murmuring in her ear sweet, soft things, promises that he would make her if she would grant him another dance. Isabella nodded, feeling a strange intoxication at his proximity. His hands were firm, regular human hands, holding her steady. His nose was beakish and his eyes wide-set and large, but she could forgive him for that. What was the aroma coming from his body? Something fruity, sweet, heady.

Someone grabbed her arm, dragging her from the fugue state she'd slipped into. Her dance partner protested, and she turned to see who had laid hands on her.

"Father?" she squeaked the word out, surprise and fear warring for position. His clothing was disheveled and his face drawn into a rictus grin of rage as he dug his fingers deeper into her flesh.

Isabella gasped, but no air would fill her lungs. How could he be here? She was meant to be safe for just these few days.

He didn't respond, simply tugged her from the monster's grip. She drew her arm back, trying to free herself from his clutches, but his hold was firm, his cheeks ruddy and red, suggesting he'd consumed many a drink before appearing here.

But what was he doing here? He had no invitation, and surely the countess would not have let him inside.

“You’re coming home,” he hissed, and she could only hear it because the string quartet had stopped and the crowd was parting. Isabella’s cheeks burned with shame and she wasn’t sure which would look worse; if she were to put up a fight, or go with him willingly.

She tried to dig her heels into the floor, slowing the inevitable drag toward the terrace doors and the night. She was here to find a husband, and once again he was ruining her chances. Ruining her life. There was no hope for her now; she would be a shunned woman, stuck in her father’s home forever.

How dare he?

“Stop it, Father!”

He didn’t so much as glance in her direction, instead he pulled her harder, the crowd parting to let him through as if by magic, the force of his rage parting the sea. They were powerless against his wrath.

But there were monstrous men here, and where were the guards? Not a one of them was doing anything to help her. Isabella rushed forward to crash against her father’s back, slamming her free hand down on her arm. “Let me go!” she cried out, hoping to either sway him, or one of those from the crowd.

“Someone alert the countess!” someone finally called.

“Where are the guards?”

“Stop this at once!” came a deep, gravelly voice.

But Father paid them no mind at all.

“Quit fighting, Isabella. You are coming home. Now.” He stumbled over the transition from ballroom floor to terrace, but righted himself without ever letting go of her arm.

“You have no right!” she yelled, casting her gaze about to see whether any of the orc guards were near. “Someone! Help me.”

Father tugged her closer, clamping a hand to her mouth to quiet her. She did the only thing she could think to and bit down on a finger, making him shriek in pain and frustration. He shook his hand out, then drew it back. She knew what was going to happen, but was powerless to do anything about it. The only small satisfaction was the sliver of blood she could see on her father’s finger as he slapped her across the cheek.

Isabella stumbled backward and tripped over a crooked paving stone falling onto her behind. She scrabbled onto her knees as he approached.

“Insolent child! You are mine and you dare to attack me so?” He towered over her. His nostrils flared and the red on his face deepened even further. He reached for her as she cowered, frozen on the ground, and clasped his hand around the locket, scooping some of her dress in his hand too. Spittle flying as he yelled in her face. “You worthless creature.”

He tore it then, the fabric ripping, exposing her chemise. The chain of the necklace cut into her neck before pearls flew every which way, the locket clasped tightly in his hand.

Isabella clutched the torn fabric to her chest. Tears blurred her vision, but she didn't want to see whatever he would do next.

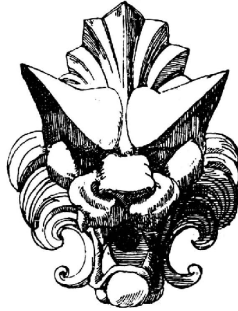
Her mother's necklace...

Broken.

Like her.

Chapter Eleven

Tyclon



Tyclon saw the foul man exit the building with the innocent girl in tow. She looked even more vulnerable now. Her eyes sparkled in the semidarkness, bright and full of fear, but something else as well, a sliver of determination not to let the man win. Her scent, the one that he had caught a whiff of inside, was clearer now, carried on the air and untainted by others. Honeysuckle. Honeysuckle and tears.

What was the man even doing here? A human, far too old for the likes of her. And then he heard them speak, heard that this was her father—the one who should look after her. Something inside him burned, and a low growl crawled up from his belly and out through his lips. He clamped them down, knowing that he needed to be silent now. To take advantage of his beastly nature and stalk the man who was now his prey. On powerful legs, he moved through the darkness, slipping along the railing of the terrace, and when he caught the glimmer of a blade at the man's side, he pounced.

Tyclon hit the man from the side, forcing him to the ground, his larger frame pinning the man to the ground. He kept his claws inside, not wanting to scare the poor woman any further, but he could not stop the snarl, nor the clash of teeth, the dribble of hungry saliva on the man's face. His beast wanted to rend, to cut, to destroy anyone who would treat her so.

But it was not his place. He fought to push the beast down, to keep him caged long enough to escape this place and express his rage in a more private manner.

The clatter of booted feet against the stones made Tyclon raise his head. The orc guards were here, laying hands on the man, ushering Tyclon off his body. It took some effort to unlock his limbs, to release the man who had dared to hit the beautiful young woman who still kneeled nearby, a sliver of her father's blood coloring her cheek.

Tyclon ground his teeth together and rolled his shoulders back, attempting to ease the tension. Then he stepped forward and offered his hand to the lady. Fear danced in her eyes, a dazed look that wavered between terror and relief. Finally, she clasped his hand, her skin on his fur sending a spark jolting through his body.

Before he could say a word, she threw herself against him, her head buried in his chest as a sob wracked her body. One arm went protectively around her, the other went to stroke her hair. It was only then that he looked up to find the eyes of the other ball attendees locked to the scene on the terrace.

To them. To this fragile human woman in his embrace, her dress ruined, her breast practically against his body, and her father still struggling as the guards dragged him from the terrace and into the night.

Fuck.

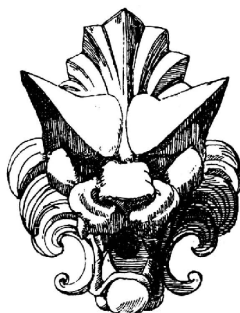
Not a single person or monster in attendance could ignore this, which meant there was only one thing he could do.

One thing that he had to do.

He had to marry her.

Chapter Twelve

Isabella



Isabella heard a muttered curse and drew back from the monster who had saved her from her father. She had taken in nothing about him before; his attack so fast that it was a blur. Now she could see he was some kind of feline, tiger-like, with stripes marking his face. He was so tall, broad, dwarfed her.

And here she was, sobbing into his coat, her dress torn, her honor ruined. The poor man. He was embarrassed by her outburst, and well he should be. This was no way for a lady to behave, and yet, it was all she could do to remain upright, let alone think about the appropriate way to act.

Hushed conversation and whispers reached her ears and she froze, one hand pressed against the monster's chest. She did not want to turn, for she knew what she would find. Her face burned hotter than it had before, and she wished for nothing more than to disappear into the darkness.

Which was exactly what she was going to do.

Isabella pushed herself away from the monster and ran from the terrace, down the stairs and for the tall hedge walls of the maze. She needed to be alone. Away from the eyes that had witnessed her shame. Away from the judgement and gossip that was no doubt passing from mouth to mouth in the ballroom.

How on earth would she show her face tomorrow? Let alone ever, in polite society. No. She could not think of that now. She needed the fresh night air, the quiet stillness of the maze. She stepped into the entrance, a sliver of fear chasing down her spine; though whether that was fear of her father, or a monster, she was not sure. It did not matter.

She ran, taking turns on a whim, wanting to reach the heart of this thing, or at least get far enough away that no one would find her. Soon her breath ran out, and she slowed to a walk. Her slippers were not made for running and she feared she had damaged them beyond repair. She would just have to deal with that tomorrow.

For now, it was enough to be here, away from Father. Safe in the knowledge that she could stay for at least the night.

Her thoughts went to the hulking monster who had come to her defense. He had moved so quickly, and accepted her into his arms without question when she sought comfort. It was so unlike her to do that, but it had felt natural. For the first time in her life, a male had stood up for her.

And he had felt so strong, his arm firmly around her waist, a hand stroking her hair. Isabella put a hand to her chest, trying

to adjust the torn garment. Her appearance had been scandalous.

A statue ahead caught her attention, and she moved toward it, trailing a hand along the pale, cool stone. It wasn't for several moments that she realized what it depicted. She sucked in a gasp of air, surprised, and titillated by the act on display. A woman was posed with her breasts out, a hooved, horned monster's long tongue caressed the nipple, while one hand slid between the folds of her robe, and perhaps other more intimate folds as well by the look on the woman's face.

Who would carve such things? And who would have such brazen statues on display?

Though they were hidden within the walls of the maze, and perhaps the countess did not open this to everyone.

Isabella felt a heat between her legs as she gazed upon the statue, but she tried to force the image and thoughts from her mind. Oh, how she wanted someone to crave her that much, to take her. She had only ever satisfied herself and she could only imagine the pleasure that another body against her own could deliver.

What would it be like if her protector turned his hungry gaze on her?

Thankful for the darkness, as her cheeks were now redder than ever, Isabella dropped her hand from the statue and moved away, leaving the scene of lust behind, and wishing her own would disappear too. Her father had guaranteed that she

would never find a match; she was sure that no one would have her now. Not knowing the stock that she came from.

Not even him. The tiger monster who had saved her. Surely, he had only been doing the decent thing. But even he considered himself foolish for stepping in. That was why he had sworn under his breath. Well, he had been a gentleman, at least, and no one would hold that against him. In fact, he probably had women draped off each strong arm, shoulders broad enough to gather one to each side, if that was what he wanted.

Isabella swallowed hard and tried not to pity herself, but the shame was overwhelming. If her father had not just shown up to drag her home—if that was not the very place she had longed to escape from—she would be begging the countess to allow her to leave early.

As it was, she was stuck here, too afraid to go home and yet too embarrassed to show her face.

She came upon another statue, this one even more lewd. A satyr, his furry bottom-half fully exposed, was bending a woman over, carved skirts bunched around her hips, a look of ecstasy on her face as he gripped her.

Isabella could not help but imagine herself in the woman's place. She stepped closer to it, reaching out to run her hands over the fur of his legs, half expecting it to be warm and soft beneath her fingers.

Like the monster who had saved her...

His fur was so soft, his body so hot and firm, his golden eyes a blaze in the night.

And he had saved her. Her core clenched at the thought of what it might be like if he turned his intensity on her.

But he would never.

This whole evening had been a mess, and she was hot and bothered and frustrated and sad, and she wished there was a way to make herself feel better.

Her eyes moved back to the statue, to the look on that woman's face.

Yet, there was...

One small way. She was alone, and she could make herself feel good. Maybe not as good as the satyr was making his lady feel, but better than she felt now.

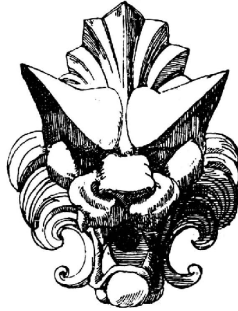
But could she? Isabella glanced around, checking that she truly was alone, listening intently for any sound that was not simply the noises of night-time in the countryside.

Nothing. Just a few crickets, and the mournful call of an owl.

Her nipples tingled, and she could not control herself any longer. She sat down on a bench directly opposite the statue and reached beneath her skirts.

Chapter Thirteen

Tyclon



Tyclon was an idiot.

He was an idiot for stepping in. For laying some kind of claim to the woman by taking her into his arms and comforting her.

She had needed it, but he'd seen in the eyes of all those assembled that the two of them were now intimately intertwined. He might be a beast, but he still had morals. He knew how society worked. And he knew that her virtue was at risk because of him.

When she had taken off into the night, he'd thought perhaps that was for the best, but then Countess Stalbridge had dragged him off to the side of the terrace.

"You must go after her," she hissed.

"My lady, I do not know this woman," he protested.

"Her name is Lady Isabella Carmichael, and as you can see, her father is a giant ass. She is out there, on her own, vulnerable." She cast a look inside. "See how some of their

eyes are alright? She is ripe for the picking, and you, sir, are the only man standing between them and her virtue remaining intact.”

“My lady!” he said, shocked at the bluntness of her words. “She deserves better than I, surely.”

“Perhaps. But then, perhaps you are exactly what she needs.” The countess raised an eyebrow and then swept away from him.

Tyclon scowled after her, repressing the urge to do exactly the opposite of what she’d asked, but he knew the countess was right. Miss Carmichael needed protection; from her father, and from the monstrous men inside the ballroom who could spot the weakest of the herd. He turned on his heel and stomped down the stairs, knowing that the air behind him was tainted with the reek of his frustration with both himself and his situation.

Isabella. It was such a sweet name for a sweet young woman. The scent of her honeysuckle perfume still hung in the air, only faintly soured by the fear that had leached out of her when her father stood over her. It was strong enough that he barely had to think about which turns to take, as though she’d left a trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow.

Or a trail of raw steak.

He wended his way through the maze, catching sight of the lewd statues placed along the way. Each depicted a sexual act between human and monster, standing out starkly against the dark hedges. His night vision made them pop more than they

might for a human with regular vision. As he turned another corner, he heard a cry.

No.

A moan...

His cock twitched and he couldn't help but wonder if he had stumbled upon a couple mating within the maze. It was a good location, many a corner to hide in, the slight risk of exposure adding an extra thrill to the act. He was sure that many would find their way within this space over the weekend. The moan came again, and the scent of honeysuckle got more intense. Along with the smell of her arousal.

Isabella

Was she...

Tyclon prowled down the corridor of the maze, stopping abruptly before he turned the corner. The pants and moans were low and accompanied by slick movements, slick and fast. One person, one set of breaths. And that delicious smell of honeysuckle and lust. The woman moaned again, sending a sharp jolt through his body, his cock thickening with the sound, yearning to burst free from his breeches.

He could smell her pleasure, could practically taste it. Imagined the moisture of it slipping down her thigh, let a low purr emit at the thought of licking it off her skin.

He waited until he heard her final moan of ecstasy, heard the gentle rustle of clothing being drawn back into place.

Waited, and wished that his lust would shrink to a more discrete size before they came face to face again.

When he felt like enough time had passed, he stepped loudly on the ground, mimicking an approach.

“Excuse me, Lady Carmichael?” he kept his voice soft, tried to erase all tension from it as he spoke. “I wanted to ensure you were well. You had a terrible fright this evening and...”

And what?

And the Countess sent me after you, told me not to be such an ass?

And I find the smell of you intoxicating?

And I am afraid I’ve ruined your chances of finding a decent husband, as only the dregs of society will want you after witnessing your father’s outburst, and my rushing to your defence. Not to mention your delectable chest being nearly on display.

There was no response immediately, so he stepped around the corner. She looked disheveled, though he could see the release of tension the orgasm had given her. And the smell of her... It took a great deal of willpower not to step closer.

“I am so sorry you had to witness that. That anyone did... If I could leave this place... If I had another place to go... Then I would.” Her face crumpled.

“You have nothing to apologise for, Lady Carmichael. Nothing at all. If anyone needs to apologise, it is I.”

Her gaze snapped back to him, and he could not help but notice the deep green of her eyes. Like the woods around his manor, they were even flecked with golden brown. He could get lost in them.

“Whatever for? You saved me from that horrible man. It is all I have ever wanted.”

Interesting. Despite his qualms about what he was about to suggest, this might go well for her. If he could keep himself under control.

“I am sorry your home life is untenable, my lady, but I fear I have ruined you for any other. There were many witnesses to tonight’s... kerfuffle. The men who are decent will assume that we have an arrangement, leaving only the worst kind of man to chase you. I...” He trailed off, then cleared his throat. “I don’t feel good about that, so, if you are amenable, I propose we marry.”

Chapter Fourteen

Isabella



Marry?
Him?

Isabella blinked rapidly, trying to understand what had just happened. She had been at the Hall for mere hours and already so much had taken place.

Now she was on the end of a proposal

At least, she thought that was what he was doing. This huge feline who had protected her from her father. Only her mother had ever done that, and now she was gone. There was no one. Had been no one for these past years.

“Yes,” she said, before he had a chance to change his mind. “I will marry you.”

She needed to ensure was no going back, so that she would finally be free from her father and his home. She could whisk Maris away and they could live a much better life. This stranger had been chivalrous enough to step in when she needed him. Surely that meant he would look after her.

It might not be a marriage of love—might only result from his honorable nature—but that was enough. She could make a fresh start. Away from him. Finally. Free.

The feline stepped back, as if shocked at the promptness of her agreement. “Are you sure? I cannot offer much but—”

“Yes. I am sure. You have seen my father. You know what is in store for me if I do not find a match.” She rose from her seat and moved toward him. A low noise emitted from his throat, a purr, a growl? She wasn’t sure, but her core tightened in response. She wanted to be closer to him.

It was only then that she realized he may have heard what she was doing before he stepped into view. He was some kind of cat, his hearing was bound to be good, and his sense of smell... Could he have heard her orgasm, the way she had moaned softly?

Isabella bit her lip, her cheeks flushing again.

“Thank you for being honourable and thinking of my... virtue.”

His mouth opened, a glint of white teeth, sharp, long, reflected in the moonlight. Something inside her trembled from fear or desire, or a strange mix of the two. He could kill her in a moment, yet here he was offering her a kindness that she had not expected. Had barely even hoped for.

Would he be willing to take her virtue if they were to marry? Or would this be a marriage of convenience?

She was not about to ask, for it mattered not. She would wed this feline creature, and be free of her father and then, if she needed, she could come up with another plan.

“I am a monster of honor,” he replied. “It might be the only thing that I have left to my name.”

His words were laced with a mixture of emotions. Isabella wished she could see his features more clearly, but the moonlight only gave her glimpses.

She wanted more.

The thought was foreign. Surely, she had looked upon other men, had found herself attracted to them, but this feline?

It was different.

She found herself a little bolder than normal as she reached out a hand. “And who, my lord, shall I tell people I am to marry?”

He grasped her fingers and raised them to his lips, so unusual against her skin, furry and large as he kissed her. “Marquis Tyclon K’var, my lady.” His voice rumbled against her skin and his nose pressed against the back of her wrist in a gesture that was strangely intimate. Isabella felt a wave of heat rush through her body and she wondered what on this green earth had gotten into her. At no time before had she struggled to keep her yearning under control, but here, now, in the darkness and surrounded by lewd statuary, this simple gesture had her weak at the knees and ready to ask that he take her to bed right now.

With a breathy sigh, she withdrew her hand. “It seems you already know who I am. Far more than I know about yourself. We will have the weekend to get acquainted.”

Marquis K’var nodded, though he looked less than pleased at the prospect.

Well, if all she had to look forward to was freedom from her father, then this would still be worth it.

“If you don’t mind,” she said, moving to his side and placing an arm on his hand. “I would appreciate you leading me out of this maze. I have gotten quite lost.”

And if she wasn’t careful, she might find herself lost for this beast of a man. She had a feeling that there would be no sense in that, and no coming back from it.

Chapter Fifteen

Isabella



As she stood at the terrace doors, Isabella let her eyes scan over the fine folks gathered beneath the verandah, taking tea and breakfast. A few were coupled up, sitting close to each other, deep in conversation, others were gathered by gender—women around tables giggling and chattering merrily. Smaller clusters of men, though their conversations were less bright in the morning air.

She hovered, uncertain. She could not see Lord K'var anywhere, and she felt abandoned by that fact. How could she bear to step outside without him by her side?

A classically beautiful woman with ivory skin and long brown hair waved at her, and for a moment, Isabella thought there must be someone behind her, but the woman locked her light blue eyes on Isabella and gestured to the empty seat beside her.

Isabella could not believe her luck; such a kind gesture after her disgrace last night. Before the other woman could change

her mind, she stepped through the doors and crossed the terrace.

“Would you care to join me?” the woman asked, her smile radiant and inviting. “I’m Miss Emilia Whitehall.”

Isabella sank into the seat with so much relief that it took her a moment to find her words. “Miss Isabella Carmichael,” she said.

“It is lovely to meet you, Miss Carmichael.”

“And you,” Isabella said, dipping her head in a nod. She knew her voice was timid, but it was hard to come out of one’s shell. She thought of what the letter from the queen said. Knew that she had to do better.

“I saw what happened last night,” Emilia said. She leaned even closer, her face lined with sympathy, “and it must have been so terrible for you. It was lucky Marquis K’var could help.”

Isabella felt her cheeks turning pink and wondered if there would be even an hour’s reprieve. There was an almost constant flush to her face. “Yes,” she said, her voice soft as she tried to keep any trace of desire from it. “It was quite noble of him.”

“Were you injured?” Emilia inquired, as though she actually cared. Could she care? It had been so long since Isabella had a genuine friend—one that her father approved of—that she had almost forgotten how it felt.

Maris was the one person who truly cared for her; her father only saw her as a possession.

She shook her head, her thoughts wandering back to how her walk in the maze had shaken off the ache in her behind, and the heat of her desires. The closeness of that feline monster had more than made up for any pain. “Not badly.”

“Well, that is something, at any rate.” Emilia sipped her coffee as she assessed Isabella. Like she wasn’t sure what to make of this woman who had already been involved in a scandal on the first night of the ball. “If I were in your place,” Emilia began, looking as though she were choosing her words carefully. “I would be embarrassed too. It’s never pleasant when a man makes a scene and pulls a lady into it. But it wasn’t your fault, and no one here will blame you for what happened, though I suppose that gossip is unavoidable.” Emilia leaned even closer still. “I hope I’m not being terribly forward, but I want you to know that you have both my sympathy and my friendship, should you be interested.”

A wave of relief washed over Isabella, and she beamed a smile at Emilia. “Thank you. I should like to be your friend.” She relaxed into her seat, feeling like she was no longer out of place at this table. Emilia might be the kindest person here, but if she were the only one to give Isabella the time of day, then she would still feel pleased.

A maid passed by with a platter of toasted bread. Emilia gestured the maid over and requested two slices. Isabella watched, her stomach still knotted with tension about the

Marquis, and shook her head to decline the offer of toast, though she accepted some tea. She sipped, unable to think of anything clever or witty to say to this woman who looked so comfortable in her own skin.

Shortly, another lady strolled up to their table and sat in the remaining chair. “Miss Maggie Phillips,” she announced. “I hope you don’t mind if I join you?” Her words were polite, but as she was already ensconced, the subject was moot.

Emilia gave a polite nod and smiled. “Please do. I am Miss Emilia Whitehall, and this is Lady Isabella Carmichael.” Emilia gestured toward Isabella, and she gave Maggie a small smile.

“Pleasure,” Maggie said, fluffing out her napkin.

While Maggie had the same blonde hair and sparkling green eyes as Isabella, the other woman’s confidence was obvious. She thought perhaps that it was Maggie who had boldly moved out from the group of women the night before, approaching the monsters with ease. Isabella wished she had some of that same manner about her, a sense of place in the world, a sense of security.

Emilia was also confident, but it was tempered with a genuine warmth. Where did these women learn to behave like this? Or was it innate, and she had simply missed that gene?

“Are you enjoying the ball, Miss Phillips?” Emilia asked. She delicately bit into her toast as she waited for the answer, and Isabella’s stomach churned. Maybe she should have had

something to eat, because the nerves were eating her. Tea was good for settling a stomach, but it did nothing to fill it.

“Oh, I always enjoy a good ball,” Maggie replied. “What’s not to love about dancing, food, and finery?” The brazen American winked at a centaur who passed their table, and the monster sent her a bawdy gesture in return.

Isabella blushed, stunned at Maggie’s behaviour. Perhaps it was because she was from the Americas.

“Quite so,” Emilia said. She nodded and her eyes sparkled as though she was as fascinated by Maggie as one might be by the range of monsters present. “Have either of you had success making a match?” she inquired.

Isabella paused, pink flushing her cheeks. Again. She shook her head, hoping that no one noticed her discomfort. If Tyclon had appeared, confirmed that in fact, he intended to marry her, she might have given a different answer. But it felt safer to keep that nugget of news close to her chest.

Maggie gave a chuckle. “No, but that’s fine with me,” she said. “I’m not in a rush to be wed. What about you?”

“Actually,” said Emilia, her smile widening, “yes. I’m to sign a marriage contract with the Marquis of Farrowfall this afternoon.”

“Oh, well done,” Isabella said, pleased her new friend had made a match so soon. She did not know the lady’s background, or how dire her situation might be, but she was glad all the same.

“Which activity are you planning to take part in after breakfast?” Maggie asked. She directed the question primarily at Emilia, who, of the two of them, was far more congenial. Isabella was relieved as she did not quite know how to take the American, and in this company felt too clumsy and naïve to make intelligent conversation.

“I’m too clumsy for riding,” Emilia said with a laugh. “So that leaves archery, which might endanger the other guests, or boating, which should at least be safe. Though I thought I might take a walk and explore the gardens first.”

“I think boating is my pick as well,” Maggie agreed. “I’m not a particular fan of horses or arrows.”

Isabella nodded, as if that was her plan as well. Truly, she was just waiting for the appearance of the striped feline Marquis. She needed reassurance that the offer was real. That her hellish existence tip toeing around the townhouse with her father would be over soon.

Emilia pushed her empty plate aside and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. “It was a pleasure to meet both of you. If you will excuse me, I think I’ll take that walk.” She stood as they nodded and smiled, and Isabella watched as she made her way to the hedge.

It took every ounce of control not to let memories of the night before from chasing the blush back to her face.

Maggie waved over a maid and selected an assortment of toast, jams, and fruit. The idea of eating still did not sit well with Isabella, so she finished her tea and gave a smile to the

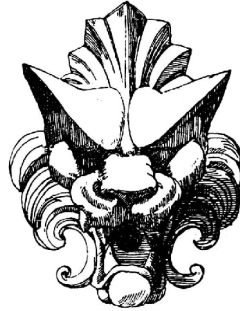
other woman. "I must away, as well. I need to speak with the Master of Ceremonies."

She stood and moved away, not even sure where she might find the man, or if she truly wanted to.

All Isabella really needed was to be alone with her thoughts. Or to find Marquis K'var and confirm their arrangement.

Chapter Sixteen

Tyclon



Tyclon woke to the sound of a fist pounding on his door; it echoed the pounding in his head, though he'd had not a drop of alcohol the night before. He never drank, for it was hard enough to maintain control on a normal day.

“Go away,” he yelled, but raised his head and looked around the room. There were torn curtains letting through more light than he would otherwise wish, and a chair smashed to splinters on the floor. He frowned, his lip tugging back to reveal a sharp canine. Had he done this?

He must have.

He was the only one present, and now that he thought about it, he'd stormed back to his room after escorting Isabella from the maze, all of his pent-up energy, his frustration, his fury with himself resulting in... Well, this.

The knock sounded again, and he dragged himself from the bed, running a hand across his head. He missed his hair, did not like this fur that covered him head to tail now, marking

him so clearly as something other. Not human. Over a year, he had been this way. He wondered if he would ever fully adjust.

“I’m coming!” he bellowed, stalking across the room, careful to avoid the debris as he moved toward the door. He flung it open so hard that it threatened to crack the wall, revealing a startled looking Master Bow on the other side.

“Well, someone rose on the wrong side of the bed today, didn’t they?” the spritely man said as he stepped inside the room. His hands went to his hips as he surveyed the state of the place. “Did you really have to? This will be a nuisance for the staff to clean.”

“Then why not house me in one of the outer buildings? A stable. A barn. I don’t belong here.” Tyclon stalked back to the bed and threw himself down upon it, aware he sounded like a petulant child. He didn’t care.

“Because it is not seemly for a Marquis. You can sleep wherever you want once the weekend is over, but for now, the least you can do is pretend to be a civilized man.” Though his words could have been taken as an insult, Master Bow held no expression of unkindness on his face.

“Monster,” Tyclon stated. “We’re all meant to be a little ghastly, are we not? I am sure half the ladies have opted to come here to coo and cower.”

“But not a certain young lady who is hovering on the terrace looking rather lost...”

Tyclon sat up, scowling at Master Bow. “Lady Carmichael?”

“Well, who else, young man?” Master Bow shook his head, though the tiniest of smiles lurked on his lips. “You saved her from her ghastly father and walked with her in the maze. All who attend the ball are talking about it this morning.”

Something twisted inside him to hear that. He’d known it would be the case, but to have it confirmed... It weighed him down like bags of sand against a dam. He had tainted her.

He’d given her hope.

Both things felt wrong.

“You had best dress and head down. The countess will note your absence if you do not, and I’m sure that you don’t want that.” Master Bow winked with this statement, and while others might find him charming, all Tyclon wanted to do was smother him with a pillow.

“Fine. If you’d be so kind, inform Lady Carmichael that I’ll be with her shortly.” He didn’t ask. Had no desire to feign politeness to this man who had interrupted his sleep and reminded him that he’d made a promise to the young lady.

Master Bow dipped his head in acknowledgement and headed toward the door and then turned back to approach Tyclon again. Master Bow held out a small silk bag, waiting until Tyclon took it.

“What is this?” he asked. It was light, small things rolled inside it.

“These are the pearls from Lady Carmichael’s necklace! I thought you could have them fashioned into something new. A token of your affection, when the time is right.” With that, the man once again turned on his heel and swung the door closed behind him.

Tyclon flopped back down on the bed and stared at the ceiling, wishing he hadn’t felt the need to intercede in matters that had nothing to do with him. If he’d stayed in the shadows, he would not be in this predicament.

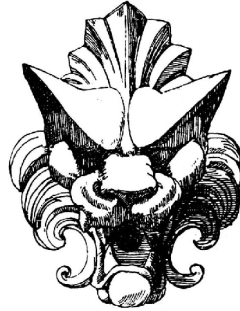
And yet, he could not deny that there was something about Isabella that brought out his protective nature stronger than ever before. Seeing her with that brute of a man—her father, no less—he could no more ignore her plight than he could turn back time and avoid the monster plague.

But how he wished he could...

With a groan, he got up and searched the room for something clean and tidy to wear. He would steel himself and be on his very best behavior so that he did not risk the young woman falling for him, or finding herself in danger.

Chapter Seventeen

Isabella



Isabella felt like a right prat, hovering near a pillar on the terrace, sliding her gaze away from any eyes that seemed to land on hers. A hedgehog lay curled in her belly, threatening to impale her with its spikes if Tyclon did not appear presently.

She didn't notice someone approaching from behind and jumped when a hand touched her elbow, emitting a shrill shriek.

"My apologies, Lady Carmichael." It was Master Bow, his smile wide and genuine, and not at all at her expense. "I wanted to inform you that Marquis K'var will be with you shortly." He looked her up and down, as if assessing her attire.

She had opted for one of the more modest dresses this morning, white chiffon beneath pale green muslin, so thin that it gave a subtle mossy hue. The neckline was high, and her throat felt naked without the pearls. Funny to think that she had only been in possession of them for a few weeks, yet they had become so important to her. The weight of them around

her was like the comforting embrace of her mother. A reminder of better times.

And now they were gone. Yet another thing her father had ripped from her.

She'd barely given a thought to what the orc guards had done to him after she ran to the maze, and she didn't want to dwell on it now either; with any luck, they had thrown him in gaol. The day was sunny and her future husband would arrive presently to take her on a stroll, or out on a boat. Away from others, as she needed to confirm the details of their arrangement.

"Lady Carmichael?" Master Bow was still there, and she realized she had given him no response, not even a thank you for his message.

"I am terribly sorry, Master Bow. Away with the fairies."

"Fairies, or devils?" he asked, his face softening.

"A few of each?" she said with a shrug, hoping that the grief on her face did not show. She should be happy. Serene. Utterly pleased with herself.

And yet... The feline man who had offered his proposal last night had still not appeared. If he did not show himself soon, then perhaps she should attempt to find another suitor who would not disappoint.

She must secure a marriage.

She would.

“I hope the devils leave you alone soon, Miss Carmichael, for I am sure you have done nothing to deserve them.” He glanced over his shoulder, toward the open doors. “With that in mind, I will advise you that your companion is feeling a little... snarly this morning. But ignore that. Underneath the growl, he’s a kitten.” With a wink, Master Bow turned away, quickly finding himself in conversation with another young woman.

Isabella leaned against the pillar, mulling over Master Bow’s words. Surely, she did not deserve the devils, but this was her lot unless she could change it, and change it, she would.

She could only hope that Marquis K’var was not one of those devils in disguise.

“My lady.” A rough voice rumbled behind her and she turned to find Tyclon standing straight, hands clasped behind his back. Everything about his posture was regal; though that could have been in part because of his tiger-like facade. This was the first time she was seeing him in full light, and it surprised her to find he was so large. Something about the shadows of the night had obscured him, because he towered over her and his shoulders were far broader than she recalled. He had a striped tail which twitched behind him, as though it were the only thing he could not keep under tight control.

For that was what she could see without a doubt.

Tyclon was trying very hard to be a figure of restraint.

Yet, she did not know why he felt the need. He had been nothing but a gentleman the night before, stepping in to save her from her father, seeking her in the maze and returning her safely to the Hall.

“My lord,” she replied, dipping her head in acknowledgement. “I hope you slept well.”

“Well enough,” he said, his voice as stiff as his spine. “Will you do me the honor of accompanying me this morning? We could go for a stroll, or partake in some archery. I believe there are other options as well.”

“I would dearly love to go boating. It has been so long since I’ve been on the water.” She opened her mouth, unladylike, and then closed it again, fearing that like a regular house cat, he had a dislike for water. “Unless that is unappealing to you, I mean... I...” She promptly closed her mouth, lips pressing into a fine line to prevent further silly words from escaping.

Tyclon shook his head, the inkling of a bemused smile tugging at his lips for a moment before disappearing. “Water is fine, my lady. Fear not, I was a man once. I can even swim.”

She thought that if his face could relax the tiniest bit, that might have been a joke. Alas, his features remained stern.

“Well, then if you are amenable to that...” Isabella trailed off, not used to being the one in charge. Her father dictated her life, and that Tyclon seemed willing to let her have an opinion felt foreign.

Without another word, he offered her his arm. She placed her hand on it, unable to resist adding a little pressure to feel the cut of his muscles through the fabric of his jacket. She let him guide her toward the lake, the water sparkling in the sunlight. There were already a few boats on the surface, other couples taking advantage of the weather and activities on offer.

They walked in silence, but Isabella felt she needed to acquaint herself with this hulking man who might be her husband.

“The weather looks as though it will hold for the weekend,” she commented, feeling it was a very safe place to start.

Tyclon made a noise of agreement and she wished he would open up, just say something, anything, to her. When he’d greeted her on the terrace, he’d seemed lukewarm, but now he was frozen like a corpse again. For a monstrous man, he was more contained than many of the regular men she had interacted with during her Season.

Perhaps a more direct path was needed.

“So, tell me, where do you live?” she prompted. “If we are to wed you, it would be good to prepare myself.”

If it was possible, his demeanor became even cooler. “I fear you will be disappointed,” he said, his voice a low grumble that seemed to vibrate through his entire body. “I may be a Marquis, but my mother has done all she can to expel me from the family.”

“Surely she cannot,” Isabella said, her brow furrowing. “But even then, I do not care what your family thinks.” She tugged his arm so that he faced her. “You have seen what I deal with daily, so you will not scare me with tales of your own family. Tell me what you have, not what you have not.”

Something shifted in his eyes as he considered her. Isabella’s heart swelled with hope as he nodded once and then led her on again.

“I have a handsome manor, by a lake much like this one.” He gestured to the lake with his free arm. They were approaching the edge now, following the path as it curved around to where the boats were docked. “There is a forest nearby, excellent for hunting.”

For a moment Isabella imagined Tyclon shirtless, running through the woods, blood smeared on his furry chest, his face, as he captured a deer with bare hands, claws raking the side of the creature, spilling entrails.

She missed a step, but he caught her easily. His body was so hot beneath his clothing that it radiated from him. A flush crept up her throat, and she did not know whether she was afraid or aroused, or a strange mixture of both.

It was not the same fear she felt when her father had been drinking, even though some sensations were similar. She should run. Find another suitor, even if they were only willing to make a match with her because she had no other options. But something kept her there, beside this feline man and the strength and energy that was so much a part of him.

“Are you alright?” he asked, a concerned look on his face. It was strange to her that she could still understand that expression on his face, when his features were no longer purely human.

She nodded, unable to find words to describe exactly what was happening to her, but she did not need to bother just yet because they were at the boats and one man of the house was gesturing to a free vessel, helping her step into it and take her seat.

Soon, she would be alone with Tyclon, with no other soul within hearing distance, and she felt a squeeze of excitement at the thought. She could finally make sure that his offer last night had not been a mistake.

But was it his mistake? Or would it be hers?

She felt sure that he was a decent man underneath all that fur—the way he had protected her the night before showed that. He’d not once attempted to take advantage of her vulnerable state either, instead offering her marriage because he thought it was the right thing to do.

Just being in his presence made her question whether she could accept an engagement of convenience. She wanted him to see her as more than a damsel in distress, as someone he might want to take to bed. Someone he could love. Maybe even cherish? Was that too much to ask?

The boat rocked as he stepped on board, and a plan formulated in her mind.

When she had been in distress, he'd felt the need to save her. And that brought them together. Perhaps she should lean into that...

Lean being the operative word.

Tyclon took up the oars and pushed them away from the jetty, out onto the lake. Ducks dotted the surface, quacking and swimming in circles around each other. They darted out of the way easily as the boat cut through the water. Isabella could see the way his muscles moved through his shirt, under his jacket. She wondered whether the fur covered his whole body, or whether there was something else to be revealed beneath his clothing.

The thought made her hot and curious and she fanned herself with a hand, wishing she'd thought to bring an actual fan with her, but she had not even a reticule. Too nervous to plan anything beyond leaving her room and finding this feline monster before her.

"You look like you know what to do with those oars," she commented. "Are you fond of rowing?" She looked into his face, trying to catch his eyes with hers.

"There is a lake near the house, and I've boated from time to time," he replied, though his gaze was averted, focused instead on manoeuvring them into a good position.

She wondered what the point of boating was, whether there was a destination in mind, or whether this was just an excuse to be alone—which was her very reason for choosing this activity. There was a small island they could explore, but she

had a feeling the time was better spent hashing out the details of their arrangement. Isabella steeled herself. She would need to raise the matter.

“Tyclon,” she started, using his name rather than a title, hoping to signal to him that this was more personal between the two of them. “Your offer. Last night.”

He turned his gaze on her, those golden eyes locking on hers, his nostrils flaring. “I understand if you wish to explore alternatives. You have all weekend to decide.”

“No,” she said in a rush. “You misunderstand. I am happy to go ahead with our arrangement. In fact, I am pleased for it.”

Tyclon nodded slowly, and she wished she could read his expression better, know him well enough to interpret the twitch of his whiskers, his ears, that slight flick of the tip of his tail.

“I wanted to discuss a few details, if that would suit?”

“Certainly.” He dipped his head, digging the oars into the water again. His movements were so smooth, graceful even, on the water where no regular cat would be found. But he wasn’t a regular cat. More like a tiger with the way that stripes licked his body.

Isabella felt like she should have asked if he was still happy to go ahead with the engagement, but she didn’t want to give him an opportunity to renege. She needed this. She wasn’t hideous, and hopefully the monstrous plague had not changed

his desires for a human bride. She could not compete if what he really yearned for was another monster.

“I have a maid. Maris. Well, she is more like a friend—my only friend. When we marry, I would like her to live at your manor. I will need her, and... I cannot leave her in that house with my father and his rage. I do not know what he might do to her to punish me.” As she spoke, she twisted the ribbons that tied her bonnet, tugging them just so in order to ensure the bonnet could catch the wind that was skimming across the lake.

Her heart beat faster and she hoped that this small manipulation would be enough to bring them closer together. It was a simple thing. An accident that could happen to anyone.

Tyclon’s brow furrowed. She could tell by how the stripes on his forehead warped. “Is he so foul that he would do something like that?”

Isabella could not restrain her laugh. It seemed to ring out across the lake, bitter and clear. “You saw him last night. He is not a good man.” Isabella paused, swallowing before she said her next words. “Not like you.” She allowed her face to soften and gazed at him, hoping that he could see she was trying, that she wanted this. Duty and honor might have driven his proposal, but this could be more.

So much more.

“I apologise. I thought perhaps...” He trailed off, pressing his lips together. They were so interesting, Isabella thought.

Could they be kissed with a human mouth, or would that be awkward? She'd stolen a few kisses from suitors in the past, and friends before that, practicing for when they inevitably had husbands. All women knew men were inclined to sample the pleasures of other women before marriage, and Isabella had wanted to know how to capture and keep a man of her own.

“Whatever you thought, please put it aside, because I assure you the man is worse than the most violent monster.”

Tyclon rocked back in his seat, his eyes widening. Was he shocked at her outburst, disgusted by the vehement way she had spoken?

Bloody hell, Isabella, you were meant to be playing the damsel in distress, not whatever this is.

“You have not met many monsters, have you?” he said, his voice lower, serious. His eyes flashed with something that made her belly cold, and she suddenly wondered whether this monster was as good as he had originally seemed.

Just then, the wind whipped up and tugged at her bonnet, pulling it from her head and flinging it into the water.

“My bonnet,” she said, shooting to her feet. The boat rocked, but that was exactly what she wanted it to do. She leaned over the side, trying to capture the fabric with her fingers. The bonnet was too far away and with subtle movement, she tipped herself over the edge into the water.

Chapter Eighteen

Tyclon



Tyclon was still feeling shut down by the comment Isabella had made about her father—her assumption that he was not a monster like that man—when the bonnet went flying and within moments, Isabella had followed it over the edge of the boat and into the lake. Cold water splashed up as she landed and flailed around in the liquid. If she didn't look like she was drowning, Tyclon might have laughed. Instead, he flung himself over the side and grasped her around the waist, steadying her in the water.

He had tried so hard to keep a distance between them, not wanting to lose control near her for fear that he would hurt her in the same way he had hurt his last fiancée. Isabella was so sweet and had already been treated badly enough by her father; Tyclon could not be another terrible person for her. To her.

But now here she was, pressed against his body, her legs kicking beneath the water, bumping into his own. He barely felt the chill of the lake through the fur that coated his body.

What he could feel was the curve of her breast, her hip, the way she threw her arms around him to hold her head above the water.

And that smell. That honeysuckle scent tickled his nostrils even through the lake water and made him lean closer to catch a strong whiff of her hair. She smelled so good, intoxicating.

“Thank you,” Isabella gasped, spitting water from her mouth in a most unladylike manner. It didn’t matter to him because she was in his arms and it felt so good. Who cared about the sopping clothes between them? He hoped that some of his warmth would transmit to her, wanted more than anything to protect her from the chill.

How could he have let this happen? If he had been paying more attention, he would have caught her before she went over, but he’d been so adamantly trying not to ignore the effect she had on him.

“You’re welcome, Isabella,” he said, his voice felt rough in his throat, her name coming out tinged with something he couldn’t quite identify.

No, he could, but he did not want to admit that he was falling for this woman who was already troubled enough without the likes of him in her life. What was she even doing here? She could have had so many normal men. Now was not the time to dwell on that, because he had made a commitment to this woman and he wanted her in his life, even if it meant he had to chain himself up at night so as not to harm her. Not a

drop of alcohol would pass his mouth and he would take daily walks in the woods to calm his temper.

So long as he could have her.

Because damn it all, he wanted her. In all ways.

She looked up at him then, their gazes locked. It felt like heat radiated from her now, despite how cold she must be. Her eyes were so green, so deep, like the woods he loved so much. They were speckled with gold and brown in the most satisfying way, and he wondered just how he had managed not to be captured by them before.

Isabella dipped in the water, having forgotten to keep kicking, and Tyclon pulled her up, lifting her higher, delighting in the way her body slid roughly against his. And hoping that the bulge in his pants wasn't terribly obvious to her right now. The cool water would surely dull his member's enthusiasm in no time.

Before he knew, she had leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his in an awkward kiss. Awkward mostly because his mouth was bigger than hers and they had never done this before, but he had a feeling that over time they would find a solution to that. He cupped her buttocks, lifting her higher still.

“It seems we have lost your bonnet, Isabella,” he said softly.

The grin that split her lips was infectious, and he smiled back. “Ah, but I think we have found something else instead. Something far more precious.”

“I think, my lady, that you might be right.” He gave her a last squeeze, a purr rumbling through him at the feel of her, but then a cry from across the lake snapped his attention back to the matter. “Let me lift you into the boat, Isabella. We don’t want you to catch a cold.”

“And you?”

“I am fine. My fur keeps most of the chill from my body, and you,” he purred, “have kept the rest.”

She blushed, her cheeks rosy like apples, and pressed her lips together to stop her smile.

“You may help me back into the boat,” she whispered.

Without another word, he reached one arm out to grab the boat and set one foot against the bottom, hoping to hold it steady enough. It tipped slightly toward them and he moved her around so that she could clamber aboard; her wet skirt sliding up her leg to display pale, smooth skin.

This was too much. His cock throbbed with the wanting of her, and he could only hope that by the time they got back to shore, his member had deflated.

Isabella turned around and knelt in the boat, reaching an arm out toward him.

He shook his head. “No, I will tip the whole thing over. I shall push us back toward the shore.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, a perplexed look crossing her face.

He didn't reply, instead moving to the rear of the boat and extending his claws, locking them into the wood. Then, he kicked, his muscular legs cutting through the water with the grace of the tiger that he so resembled. Isabella shrieked at the movement, and then giggled, the peal like music to his ears. He could not help the smile that breached his normally stormy countenance.

Something inside him had softened, and he did not know if it would ever return to the iced stone wall he had so carefully built around himself.

The thought both thrilled and terrified him.

Chapter Nineteen

Isabella



Isabella watched as Tyclon moved toward the men's accommodations and then turned for her own. She would drip her way up the steps to her room, but there was no way to avoid that. The sunlight had done little to dry her off and it would be completely unseemly to step from her gown out of doors.

However, as she stepped into the entrance, Jane was there, waiting with a towel.

“Come, my lady, you’ll catch the death of you if you stay shivering.”

Isabella let herself be ushered to a room on the ground floor, ignoring the other servant who moved behind them with a rag, mopping up her damp footprints and the drips of water she left in her wake. Jane ushered her into a stone floored room that appeared to be some kind of bathroom, though there was no bath to be seen.

“Remove those, my lady,” Jane said firmly. “We have a robe for you to wear upstairs. You are not the first, nor likely to be the last, to fall into the lake.” The maid’s lips pressed together, though Isabella could see the smile that threatened to escape.

“And why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, I could not help but hear about happened on the lake. I’m delighted for you, of course. Lord K’var is...”

“A lovely man,” Isabella said, finishing the sentence. She did not need to know what the maid thought, but it warmed her to know that the staff seemed to approve of this match. She could only hope that Maris would, too. That her friend would be thrilled with the future Isabella had secured for them.

It was hard to believe that tomorrow afternoon she would be returning home, an engagement - and her future - set up and ready to be taken. There would be a wedding to plan, but Isabella cared not for the pomp and would happily have the ceremony somewhere small and discrete if it meant she could leave her father’s home.

The sooner the better.

“Well, yes, I am sure he is. Though there are rumors he can be...” Jane trailed off, and Isabella snapped her gaze up to look at the maid.

“He can be what, Jane? Please, speak freely with me.” She hoped that the look in her eyes was enough to implore the other woman to divulge the information.

“I know your father is... A rather vulgar man, but there is a rumor that the Lord K’var can be prone to foul moods as well.”

That took Isabella by surprise. She furrowed her brows, trying to think back to their interactions. If anything, he had seemed cold, rather than moody, but perhaps that was his way of holding himself back from doing anything that might raise eyebrows. What moods were they? And would they put her in danger?

The energy felt like it drained from her body at that thought and she sagged down onto a bench near the wall. “He has only ever defended my virtue, my honor.” She bit her lip and then looked up at the maid. “Are you certain?”

Jane closed the distance between them, kneeling on the floor in front of Isabella and gripping her hands. “It is only rumor. I just thought it better that you know. He is not a cruel man, as far as I have heard, just... He struggles with the darkness of the plague.” Jane looked like she was considering things. “I do not think you are in any danger from him. Unless you want to be.” There was a ripple of amusement across the maid’s face.

“Jane!” Isabella blushed and put a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle.

“Well, I am sure he could put his paws to use if that was what you wanted, only in the best kind of way.”

Isabella pursed her lips and then gripped Jane’s hands with both of hers. “Tell me, is it common for couples to... engage

in lewd activities at these balls? What if they are tarnished if their matches do not work out?”

“What happens at the ball, stays at the ball, my lady. I promise. There is no harm in indulging your pleasures if that is what you would like to do.”

Isabella buried her face in her hands, feeling like such a naïve fool. “I have no experience,” she muttered. “I do not even know where to begin.”

Jane pried Isabella’s hands from her face and looked at her with such compassion that Isabella felt herself relaxing. “My lady, I will speak freely, as you asked, so I can assure you these men do not mind. In fact, some of them prefer it that way.” Jane gave a cheeky smile. “Let’s just say that a woman like yourself is much desired, and while sometimes being demure and quiet is a benefit, perhaps it is you who must make the first move and show him you are available for more than just polite conversation.”

Isabella blushed again, the fiery heat flooding her face at the same time as heat seemed to sear her loins. For she wanted more than just polite conversation. She wanted him to be utterly impolite with her, entirely without barriers. And if that meant he was more monster than man, then she would deal with that when she needed to.

Jane handed her a soft slip to wear beneath the robe, and Isabella hesitated at the door, nervous to step out into the foyer wearing barely anything.

And yet, there was a touch of illicit excitement.

“Do you think he wants me?” she asked, unable to keep the note of vulnerability from her voice. She looked into Jane’s eyes, hoping that the other woman would tell it to her plainly.

“Miss Carmichael, every man here would like to bed you! If there is any reservation on Lord K’var’s part, maybe he does not want to lose control of his monstrous side and do you harm.” Jane gave her a firm smile, and then gently took her by the shoulders and walked her to the door, ushering her back into the hall. “Now get changed for riding, and reconvene with your suitor.”

Dismissed, Isabella stepped out and headed for her room.

Chapter Twenty

Tyclon



Tyclon paced his room, knowing that he was dragging his heels. Surely by now Isabella was dressed and no doubt waiting for him. Why had he agreed to that? He was too beastly and there was every chance the horse would scent him as the predator he was and refuse to let him ride. It had taken long months to acclimate his own horse to his new shape and size.

But of course, he had not been thinking. He had only been agreeing because it was the done thing, and he felt like he might say yes to just about anything that Isabella asked of him at this point.

He could not deny the attraction he felt, or how it grew with every moment he was in her presence. Not only was she beautiful and charming, but she was intelligent as well. Beneath her fear and the trauma of her past, he could see her sense of humor, her wry view of the world.

And he was hungry for more of that.

Could he offer her enough solace that she would come out of her shell once and for all—be the person she was born to be?

Well, he could not do that without leaving his room. He snatched a dry jacket off the bed and dragged it up his arm, slipping the other one in before he made it to the door.

All of his clothing had had to be altered after the plague. Everything was bigger, with room for his tail, his ears, and the thick layer of fur that coated his body. In those early days he had tried to shave it from his body, but it grew back too fast for that to be manageable, and he looked even more ridiculous as a bald tiger-man, than one with fur. Not to mention that the stripes that marked him went all the way to the skin.

He shuddered and made his way outside. The day was still warm enough as he walked toward the stables, pondering how he was going to pull this off without making a complete ass of himself. His mood had already soured by the time he got to the stables, made worse when the poor stable boy could not locate a saddle for the only horse they deemed fit for a monster his size.

The black stallion whinnied, his nostrils flaring, ears back, teeth bared; and Tyclon had not even stepped into the enclosure with him.

“Are you sure he will settle?” Tyclon grumbled.

“Yes, my lord, he has carried many a fine monster over the course of the season, and before.” The young man’s words were confident, but the way he delivered them was not. Tyclon

looked him over, assessing him once again. He appeared competent, but...

The stallion whinnied again, rearing up on his back legs and kicking at the railing.

“I don’t think you understand my position,” Tyclon snarled. He must be letting off some kind of scent that was whipping the horse into a frenzy, and he could not say that his own blood wasn’t rising in response. “I’m to ride with Lady Carmichael, and in order to ride, I need a horse.” He hissed these last words, unable to stop the curl of his lips. He knew his sharp canines were on display, could see the young man pale before he scrambled away, muttering something about getting the head stableman to help with the horse.

“Are you quite alright?”

Tyclon spun around to see that Isabella was standing there, her hands clutched together so tightly that they had turned white. She was dressed in a purple riding gown, with a black cropped cape around her shoulders, and sensible brown boots on her feet.

“Isabella,” he said, his voice coming out harder than he had wanted it to. “I...”

“Am struggling to keep your temper?” She raised an eyebrow, no trace of amusement on her face. “If we are to wed, you will not mistreat our staff.”

“I did no such thing!” he said, flinging his arm towards where the man had disappeared. “I was merely frustrated at the

situation.”

“And what is the situation, exactly?” She cocked her head and looked at him, her gaze softening as if she could tell that he wasn’t trying to be a cad intentionally.

Tyclon flexed his hands a few times, forcing his claws to retract. He had not long got used to the sensation; it had taken him far too long to gain full control over that part of his monsterhood.

If he had managed it sooner, then he would not have disfigured Penelope’s face.

He would not be the disgrace he was.

Tyclon looked at Isabella again, the cold stone in his belly forming again. He did not deserve her, and yet here she was, not even put off by this outburst. He had half a mind to let his monster loose and scare her to where she would run screaming from this stable.

And yet...

Even her mere presence seemed to calm his beast, just a little.

“The horse doesn’t like me,” he muttered. He hung his head, shame washing over him. He was such a fool. Of course, the horse didn’t like him. It was no surprise. He’d been a fool to think it would be otherwise. “Look at me,” he said, holding his arms wide. “I am large enough to be a mount myself.”

“Are you suggesting that I should ride you?” Isabella asked. Her words were so softly spoken that without his feline

hearing, he might have missed them. His gaze snapped up and locked on hers. The deep crimson blush that stained her face stirred his blood, his hunger.

But not for food.

He had thought she was a naïve young thing, and yet she had summoned the courage to speak so lewdly to him. The growl that escaped from his chest was almost a purr, full of desire and lust. “Oh, I would kill for that, but I do not want to harm you.” His whole body tensed and his breath came harder. It was a strain not to rush toward her and claim her now. Here in the stable, on a bed of hay or the very dirt of the floor. He did not care.

Her bosom heaved. He could smell desire on her. It was the most delicious scent, and he wanted to lick her, taste her, because the scent of it promised to be a nectar of the gods.

“I do not expect you to trust me,” he growled. “Not yet. We barely know each other and yet...” He stepped forward, one foot, another, his whole body fighting with his mind. Claim her, it said, claim her now.

Isabella opened her mouth, though no words came out.

“Do I scare you?” he asked, forcing himself to stop moving.

“No. And yes,” she whispered. “I want to touch you, though, to feel you.”

He ground his teeth together, causing several to spike against his cheek.

“Can I?”

He nodded, unable to form words. He was so terrified that he might do something rash. It was hard to think past his want. His need.

Isabella stepped forward, hand raised, but Tyclon moved back, bumping into the wall. “Wait,” he rasped out. “I want you to be safe.”

Confusion marred her brow. “Why would I not be safe?”

He could not bring himself to tell her what had happened with Penelope. Didn’t want her to look at him differently, though it was important she knew what she was getting into.

“I cannot always control myself,” he said. The words tasted bitter on his tongue and once again he cursed the plague that had made him this way. He needed to restrain himself. To ensure that she would be well.

But, of course, they were in the stable where there was an abundance of rope and leather.

“Tie me up,” he growled.

Chapter Twenty-One

Isabella



Tie him up?

Isabella balked at the idea.

How could she do such a thing?

“Please,” he growled, traces of need clear in his voice.

How could she not do such a thing when he so clearly wanted her to?

She nodded, not knowing how else to respond. That simple gesture set him to work, and he grabbed robes and reins before offering her a hand and leading her into the rear stalls of the stables.

“Here?” she whispered, glancing around to see if anyone else was near enough to see what they were doing.

“Yes. Here.” He drew her into an unused stall, which looked dusty but clean. She could not imagine being intimate with him in such a place, and yet she wanted to feel him, taste him, know him in a more intimate manner. It had been her greatest

hope that this marriage would become more than just an arrangement to save her honor, and this was the evidence she needed.

Tyclon moved to one side and wrapped a set of reins around his waist, fastening them tightly so that he was firm against the rails. Next, he went to work on his left hand, binding the rope around it.

“Can you tie this for me?” he asked.

Isabella wasn't sure if she could. Well, she knew she could. She tied knots that did not fail in her sewing. This was hardly any different. But there was a tremor of fear in the air; his, and hers.

“How will you touch me?” she asked, stepping closer. The air felt tight. Heat radiated from his body, and she wanted to sink into it. Yet she could tell there was still some barrier between them. Some bridge they had yet to cross. She took the rope from his free hand and went to work, knotting it once, twice, three times for luck. Tyclon tugged at it and though he looked well bound, she had a feeling that should he really want to, he could rip free in a moment.

“It is better if I don't, not yet. Not with these.” He clenched his free hand, releasing it and extending his claws. They were so sharp and she knew that if he lost control of his temper, he could slice her to ribbons.

Isabella reached out and stroked the tips of his fingers, each claw retracting as she got close to it. Tyclon groaned and strained against the leather across his midsection, moving his

hand to wrap around her waist and draw her closer to him. His breath was warm against her cheeks, but she knew the flush she felt was not only because of him.

Or rather, it was purely because of him and the way he made her feel. Bolder, ready to take risks.

He was dangerous, but not like her father. Not to her.

And the thought that he would do damage to someone else to protect her made her core tighten.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, his breath a whisper in her ear. “Be sure because I am very close to claiming you as mine and after that, there will be no escape.”

But she didn't want to escape him, she wanted to escape with him, to run toward him, to tumble into whatever this was. His fingers flexed, claws extending just a little. He could slice the clothes from her body if he wanted, see her naked and vulnerable in moments, and yet he was asking her permission first. Wanting her to be sure.

“Yes,” she said, pressing herself closer, feeling the muscles of his chest on her breasts, that firm body hiding under far too many clothes for her liking.

She had never felt like this before. Never. It felt wild and surreal, and she loved it. Wanted more.

“Bind my other hand,” he growled. “Quickly.”

She could hear the order for what it was - not control, but his desire to know that he was safe for her to explore. That he would do her no harm.

Isabella wondered what had made him believe he was capable of that, for she had seen nothing of it in him. Violence, perhaps, but only in defence. He had more control over himself than any man she'd ever met, though she could sense that he was close to losing that no. She wished that they were wed and behind closed doors, that he could ravish her in the way she'd only ever dreamed of.

She grabbed another rope and bound him to the rail, his arms spread wide so that he could not touch her. No, only she could make the move. He was vulnerable to her, this hulking beast of a man who could kill in an instant, made tame.

For her.

Isabella took in a few ragged breaths, steeling herself for this connection, for she knew he was right. He would claim her. No going back. She could run now, find another man to wed; instead, she closed the distance between them and reached for his shirt, trembling hands fumbling with the buttons until she could peel back the fabric, drag his singlet from his breeches and run her hands against his abdomen.

He was furry there too, furry, and soft, and strong. Lean, like the laborers she saw occasionally when it was hot outside and they'd stripped off their shirts. Typhon gasped at her touch and she raised her gaze to find his eyes closed, his jaw clenched as though she had given him physical pain. Then she looked down, saw the swollen bulge in his breeches and thought perhaps that wasn't too far from the truth. She could

not help the grin that slipped across her lips, but she bit down on her bottom lip, not wanting him to get the wrong idea.

“Look at me,” she whispered, moving one hand up his chest, his neck, to cup his cheek. He leaned into her touch before opening his eyes and staring down at her. Those golden orbs were full of so much heat, so much want, and she had to wonder how long it had been since someone had touched him, let alone like this.

“You will undo me,” he whispered, his voice raw with want. She could see him straining against his bindings, but they would not give, and that made her bolder. She stepped closer too, pressed herself against him, a jolt of elation shooting through her at his ragged moan. She put her other hand to his face and drew him down, forcing herself on tiptoes so that they could meet. This time she was ready for the feel of his mouth, the way his whiskers twitched, the roughness of his tongue as he ran it against hers, the clash of his teeth against hers.

What she did not expect was the feel of something moving against her leg.

She pulled back to see that his tail had curled around his body, reaching for her, and her mind flooded with what that might mean in the future. She felt hot and bothered in so many ways, and at any moment someone might find them here, but she didn't care. She reached for him again, hands roving his chest, tentatively slipping down to stroke the bulge between them, imagining what might lie beneath the fabric, what it

would feel like to have it inside her. Tyclon groaned into her mouth and she swallowed the sound, wanting to keep it with her forever.

“Ah, excuse me.”

With a gasp, Isabella stepped back from Tyclon, one hand going to her face, no doubt ruddy from kissing, the other to straighten clothes that were not even ruffled.

Master Bow stood there, an amused expression on his face, as though this was not even the most intimate scene he had walked in on that day. “I regret to inform you that your father has taken ill, Lady Carmichael.”

“I... Ah... What?”

It was taking too long for her brain to reconnect with the real world, and she did not quite understand what was happening.

“It sounds as though the man is on his deathbed, lady,” Loren Bow added. “I truly wish that was not the case, if only so that I did not have to interrupt you, but we are readying a carriage. You must leave at once.”

“But...”

Father. Deathbed.

It was her wildest hope come true, and yet she would suffer his being in this world still if it meant she did not have to part from Tyclon like this.

“I am so sorry,” she said, stepping toward him again, reaching for the bindings on one wrist.

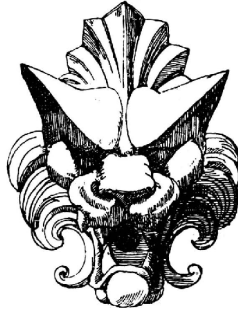
“It is okay. I understand,” he said, though the tortured look in his eyes said that he did not like it one bit. “Go.”

“I will return. We will wed,” she said, desperation making her voice crack. “Promise me.”

He nodded, straining forward to capture her lips in a gentle kiss. “I promise.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Isabella



Isabella rushed back to her room, where Jane was already putting clothing into her trunks. Her body still thrummed with a desire that even the shocking news about her father could not dull. She had been there, with Tyclon, his arousal so clearly desperate to escape the confines of his trousers, and yet it was he who was helpless, and she who was in control.

She had never felt control before; and to have such power over a man like Tyclon...

It made her want to do all kinds of things. Broke through every barrier she'd thrown up that said he wasn't the man for her.

He was.

And she could only hope that her leaving the ball early did not change his mind.

It wasn't like she wanted to rush home to her father's side, but it was the done thing. She was the only family member,

and hell, if he was truly on his deathbed, perhaps she could finally tell him what she truly thought of him.

“How did it go with Lord K’var, my lady?” Jane asked, the hint of a smile on her face.

“I believe that we have come to a mutual agreement on the future of our relationship,” Isabella said in a calm, polite voice, though she could not keep the blush from creeping up her chest, her neck, her cheeks.

All of her burned.

For him.

“If only I did not have to go home. I am sure, though, that our notice of engagement will be announced at the end of the weekend. I just wish I could be here for it.” Isabella let out a sigh and sat down on the bed. Jane stopped what she was doing and approached.

“My lady, he is yours, you know that. Nothing will change. The engagement might not have been announced, but the gossip about the two of you began last night and the chatter has not stopped since.”

Isabella had been so preoccupied with Tyclon that she had barely interacted with anyone else; just those two young ladies from breakfast. And they had seemed nice enough - willing to ignore the debacle from the night before. They hadn’t seemed like the gossipy type, but then, what did she know? Perhaps chatter was a good thing.

“Thank you, Jane. I appreciate that. Now, we best finish packing so I can do my duty,” Isabella said with a sigh, steeling herself for what was to come.



The journey felt like it had both taken too long and not long enough. The further she got from Broadstone Hall, the more she wished she had the power to turn the carriage around, and yet, if her father was truly as ill as the message had made it seem, perhaps this would be the last time she needed to see him. All of her wildest dreams would come true over the course of one weekend.

She froze, aghast at that thought. Did she truly want her father dead? Or was it just that she was so infuriated by his actions this weekend? Not only had he burst into the ball and shamed her in front of everyone, but now he had taken a turn and demanded her premature return.

He could not know that she had secured a match, though, and she would not tell him either. The less he knew, the better.

The carriage clattered over the cobblestones and the buildings got more familiar. Not long now until she was back in the townhouse. With him. Isabella clutched her reticule, wishing she had thought to bring some needlework or a book to occupy her mind with. The closer they got to her home, the more tense she felt her muscles grow. She felt like flinging

open the door and leaping from the carriage, but that was ridiculous. Instead, she sat ramrod straight and waited for the carriage to slow to a stop in front of the townhouse.

Once upon a time, this has been a place she'd loved, but now it only felt like a cage. A lovely one, but a cage nonetheless.

Isabella waited for the door to be opened and then took Caleb's hand as he helped her step down from the carriage. He said nothing as he moved towards the rear and helped the other guard to unload her trunks.

She said nothing either, a wave of ominous energy seeming to wash over her as she gazed up at her home.

Smith opened the door as they approached, his lips pressed into a thin line, his eyes wide. She had only seen him yesterday morning, and yet the poor man seemed to have aged a decade.

"Is your wife alright, Smith?" she asked. He nodded in response, drew his lips into a tight smile that did not reach his eyes.

This only made things feel worse. Had her father somehow turned the staff against her? Or was his condition so dire that it was impacting the servants like this?

Part of her wanted to rush to his room, but she refused. He had embarrassed her. Done his very best to ruin her chances of marriage. She could play the dutiful daughter, tend to him in his time of need, but as soon as the opportunity arose, she

would wed and never lay eyes on him again. But first, she would go to her room and freshen up. It had been a long day, and it was the smallest allowance her father could make.

She headed up the stairs, Caleb and Dustin trailing behind her with her luggage. The place seemed barren and worse for wear after the decadent residence of Countess Stalbridge, and Isabella wondered how she had ever believed that this was a place of beauty too.

All she saw now was darkness.

Until she got to the top of the stairs and caught the flicker of lantern light in her bedroom. Isabella rushed along the hallway, uncertain of what she might find.

“Maris?” she called. It could only be her friend, waiting for her arrival to inform her of everything that had happened since she’d left. When there was no response, her chest constricted. She pushed through the door and saw a lump in the bed, the blanket drawn up over it, and she froze.

“Maris?” she said, quieter this time. There was a murmur from beneath the sheets, an infinitesimal movement.

Isabella braced herself for what she might find, but when she drew the blanket back and saw her friend’s bruised face, she could not stop the wail of grief erupting from her chest. She dropped to her knees on the floor, not wanting to add any pressure to the bed.

“What happened?” she whispered, stroking sweat damp hair back from Maris’s face. One eye was swollen shut, the other

had bruising just beneath, her cheek purple and black. This had happened recently enough that no yellow was coming through yet. “Was it after last night?”

Maris nodded her head ever so slightly, a tear welling in the one decent eye. Isabella wanted to hold her tight, but knew that it would only hurt her friend more.

There was a gentle knock on the door and Isabella glanced up to see that Caleb and Dustin had arrived, but were waiting in the hallway. She shot to her feet and ushered them in, closing the door behind them.

“I need you to take my friend,” she said to Caleb. He had seemed sweet on Maris the other day, and he was a good man. Orc. She could trust him with her precious friend, because Maris would not spend another night in this house.

“No,” Maris said from the bed. Her voice was ragged and low. Isabella could not tell the extent of the damage, but she knew her friend needed help.

Isabella turned back to Maris. “Yes,” she said as she approached the bed once more. “I have secured an engagement, and I told him all about you. You are part of our agreement and he will make sure you are cared for.”

“I can’t leave you alone with that man,” Maris whispered. More tears fell now, and Isabella felt liquid well up in her own eyes.

“It will not be for long, my friend. I’ll be free of him soon, and then we can live happy and safe. Marquis K’var will make

sure of that.”

“I will take care of her,” Caleb said. He stepped up beside Isabella, his large green hand grazing Maris’ shoulder. “Are you able to stand?”

“I do not know,” Maris whispered.

“Oh, Maris.” Isabella clutched her hands to her chest. “Come, let us get her out of here and then I will have a word with my father.” She steeled her resolve as she helped her friend from the bed. The bruises extended beyond her clothing, and Isabella could only imagine what damage lay beneath.

When Maris could not stand on her own, Caleb lifted her into his arms with the most care Isabella had ever seen a man take with a woman. “Please take her to Ty- Marquis K’Var. He knows she is my servant, and he will help. I am sure of it.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want to return to the Hall, my lady?” Caleb raised an eyebrow, and Isabella got the feeling that if it was his decision, that was exactly what she would do. But he was the servant here and she the lady, so she shook her head.

“I will remain to see my daughterly duties, but thank you for your concern. I am sure I will be alright.” She dipped her head in thanks at both Caleb and Dustin, and then stepped closer, pressing a gentle kiss against Maris’ forehead. “And you, dear one, please let them take care of you. You matter so much to me.”

“Yes, my lady.” Maris’ lips twitched, and then she said. “Isabella.”

Isabella gave her friend a smile and clasped her hand one last time before Caleb turned away and took Maris through the door and out of the townhouse. Her heart ached with the loss, but she knew it was for the best. Maris needed medical help and Isabella believed Caleb had a soft spot for the woman; one that her friend had looked like she might return if their meeting on the stairs the other day was anything to go by.

He would take good care of her until they got to the Hall, and after that, she trusted Typhon would make sure her friend was looked after.

And in the meantime, she had her father to visit. Isabella removed her cloak and hung it on a peg, leaving her trunks to be unpacked later, and her reticule lying on the ground where she had dropped it. Nothing else mattered in this moment than storming into his room and telling him what an awful monster he was. To have taken his anger out on Maris so.

Isabella grabbed the lantern and carried it with her down the hallway and along the passage to her father’s room. The door was closed and when she pushed it open, darkness covered the room. She could see his form in the bed, covered in thick blankets despite the warmth of the evening. There was still some light coming in through the open blinds, but the lantern would help her assess just how dire the situation was.

It surprised her that no one was at his bedside tending to him; perhaps the staff had decided that he would fade away

quicker this way.

A groan came from the bed, and Isabella approached. "I'm home, Father," she said, setting the lantern on the side table. It only made a small pool of light, casting shadows to dancing along the wall. "Are you so unwell that you cannot sit?"

Her voice was tense, but she was not sure if he could tell. So many emotions warred inside her. But what she wanted more than anything was for him to sit up so that she didn't feel like an ogre for yelling at him if he truly was on his deathbed.

Although, what better time would there be than when he was utterly helpless and would not remember a thing?

Could never take revenge on her.

She took in a deep breath, letting all of her fury at her father build up. She balled her hands into fists so hard that her nails bit into the skin. "I have removed Maris from the house. You have hurt her too badly, and you will never touch her again. I have secured an engagement and will be married as soon as possible for the less time I spend in your vile company, the better. You are the worst father I could have asked for."

"Is that so, daughter?"

The sound of his voice, so strong and sure, filled her body with stones. She could not bring herself to move, not even when she realized that the voice had not come from the bed, but from behind her.

"Father?" The word was a whisper in the air. The creak of the floorboard was louder, and the sound of his steps as he

crashed toward her, knocking her onto the bed. His knee was on her back as he drew her arms behind her. Isabella was sure they would break with the force he was using, and then came the rough scrape of rope against her wrists as he bound them together.

“Father! What are you doing?” She let out a sob, felt her face pressed against the blanket and the lump in the bed that must just be cushions. Surely, he would not violate her; not his own daughter. He was a twisted man, but that was beyond horrifying. He removed his weight and gripped her, rolling her over so that they were face to face. His was blotchy and red with drink, and he was clearly as healthy as ever.

It had all been a ruse to get her home. To get her away from Tyclon or any other man who might want to claim her.

“I am sending you to the nunnery, where you will stay as pure as the day you were born. Unless it’s already too late.” He sneered at this, speckling spittle across her face. She closed her eyes and turned away, unable to face him when he was like this. “If you will not stay with me, then you will belong to no man.”

“But Father!”

She did not get another word out, as he slapped her across the cheek so hard that she accidentally bit into her cheek, the bitter taste of blood flooding her mouth.

“There is no point in arguing, child. This is the only path you leave me.”

Isabella swallowed any other protest she might have made, knowing that nothing she said would change his mind. He dragged her off the bed and then shoved her toward the door. She gained her balance and rushed ahead of him, not wanting to give him the opportunity to push her down the stairs.

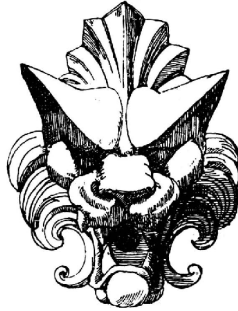
“Guards!” her father shouted. She heard the pound of feet on the floor below and then saw two men stop at the bottom of the stairs. They gestured for her to stop, stony expressions on their faces as she approached. “Take her at once to the nunnery. They are expecting her.”

Isabella looked over her shoulders just once, pushing every ounce of hate that she had for the man into her gaze.

She would find a way to Typhon, or he would come for her. She knew it. And then she would make her father pay for his actions.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tyclon



Tyclon sat by himself in the back row of the theatre, absently watching the rendition of Titania's Bower, when a brawny figure stopped beside him. He glanced to his left, taking in one of the orc guards who could be seen around the Hall over the course of the weekend.

"Yes?"

"My lord," the orc said, keeping his voice low as he bowed to reduce the distance between them. "I have a delivery for you of the utmost importance."

Tyclon's heart raced faster, and he sprung up from his seat, glancing around as though he might see Isabella there; returned to him. The way she had left him, bound and hard in the stable, was not so much embarrassing as it had been frustrating. He longed to get his paws on her, pin her down, and do wicked things to her.

"If you will follow me," the guard said. He gestured with his head toward the doors and Tyclon followed him, eager to

discover what this was about. When the guard manoeuvred them down corridors and to the stairs that led up to the women's quarters, his heart tripped over itself and he charged ahead, reaching the second-floor landing before he realized he did not know which room was hers.

“Where is she?” he demanded, unable to keep the bite from his voice. The orc froze on the stairs. It appeared he could not decide whether to reach for the weapon at his waist, or retreat. Tyclon tried to pull himself back under control, but he could not stop Isabella from leaving once, and he had no intention of letting her slip away again.

“My lord, it is not the Lady Carmichael. I apologise if you feel misled, as that was not my intention. It is a rather... sensitive matter.”

Tyclon felt his brows pull together, the whiskers on his face twitched, and he knew his tail was out of control, but he could not help it.

“Gods, man, lead on then!” He roared the words out, and the guard rushed past him, taking the stairs to the next level.

Tyclon fumed as he walked, hating the suspense, his claws snicking in and out of his fingers in a gesture that was more reflexive than anything. As if this was a threat he could claw to death.

He had the feeling that his claws would do no good here, though.

Finally, the guard stopped outside a door and raised a fist to knock. Moments later, there were footsteps and the door opened. The guard's entire demeanor changed as he entered the room, all of his cool collection leaving him as he stepped toward the bed. Tyclon tried to peer around the man, to see what lay inside, but part of him did not want to know.

"Marquis K'var," a woman said. It was only then that he noticed Countess Stalbridge was in attendance. "Thank you for coming. I believe we have important matters to discuss."

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, genuinely baffled. Tyclon could see that there was a bruised young woman in the bed, but it was not Isabella.

"This is Maris, your fiancée's maid."

At this revelation, Tyclon's gaze went to the countess. "Maris? Isabella mentioned her. What happened?" he demanded, though he could see with his own eyes that the poor woman had been beaten badly. Tension thrummed through his body to think that something might have also happened to Isabella, though there was no evidence of this. She was not here, and surely, she would be if her father had hurt her.

"Lord Carmichael was displeased by his eviction from the Monsters Ball and took his irritation out on Maris. Isabella sent her back with Caleb so that we could tend to her injuries." Only then did the countess look him in the eyes. "She trusts you will take responsibility for the maid because of your impending nuptials."

“Of course,” Tyclon said. “And Isabella?” He hoped that the longing and concern in his voice could not be discerned.

“She remained at the townhouse, as per her father’s request.”

“But surely she is better away from there. What if his health returns and he takes his anger out on her?”

The countess assessed him, as if wondering whether he was really so naïve as to assume that Carmichael had not done so in the past; that Isabella was not strong enough to last one night in his company. “As far as we know, he is so ill that he is no longer capable of violence.”

Tyclon snarled and turned away from the countess, stalking toward the bed. He forced himself to still his tail and try not to twitch as he knelt before the bed.

“Miss Maris,” he said, his voice not as soft as he would have liked.

Treat her like she is Isabella’s dearest friend, you dolt. You’d never want to hurt her; therefore, you would never want to hurt Maris.

He tried again. “Are you able to speak?”

Maris nodded once, though she winced with the movement.

“Is Lord Carmichael well enough to hurt Isabella?”

Maris frowned and opened her mouth, her cracked lips making her wince. “What do you mean?” she whispered.

“Isabella was given a note that said he had fallen ill and her presence was required. It sounded like the man was on or near his deathbed.”

Maris’ eyes went wide, and she shook her head. “No. He is not sick at all!” Her hand shot out and grabbed his arm, her grip strong despite how beaten she was. “You must get her. Please, my lord. She cannot be alone with him.”

Fear shot through Tyclon and he sprung to his feet, heading to the door.

“Marquis K’var.” Countess Stalbridge’s voice cut through the air. “Walk with me.”

He pushed through the door, but slowed his stride so that she could catch up with him.

“I hope you are not planning murder,” she said calmly. How could she be so calm, though? Isabella was in danger and he was hours from her side. Anything could happen by the time he got to her.

“If he has harmed her, then I shall not be responsible for my actions,” he growled.

She reached out and gripped his arm tighter than he thought was exactly ladylike, but he turned toward her all the same. She had a sly smile on her face, which only maddened him more. “I am pleased that your affections for the lovely Lady Carmichael are strong, but I must suggest caution. You are not officially engaged yet, though everyone at this Hall expects that to be announced formally tomorrow.”

“What exactly do you suggest?” he hissed.

“That you seek her out and ensure her safety, but do nothing to jeopardise your arrangement.”

He shook off her arm and paced away, then back, his tail impossible to control.

“I will draw up your engagement papers and beg of you to meet me three nights hence outside the Carmichael residence. Together, we will approach Lord Carmichael and ensure that this marriage goes through. Can you do that for me?”

His claws flicked out, and he forced them back in. She was not the threat here, but it felt like she wanted to get in his way. All that mattered right now was getting to Isabella and making certain that she was safe.

“I will do my very best,” he grumbled. “I will pack a bag. Please have someone ready my ” he called the last over his shoulder as he moved down the hall, already planning the bare minimum that he would require. He could call for the rest of his belongings later. Right now, the only thing that mattered was her.



Tyclon wished that his own carriage had returned to the Hall in time to transport him. His horses were bigger, faster, more used to his weight as well. But they had made

decent enough time, crossing the countryside at speed until the edges of London came into view.

The countess had written Isabella's address and given instructions. He was not to cause a scene; no matter how much he wanted to rip Lord Carmichael's head from his shoulders. It would look good, and he couldn't risk any chance of losing Isabella. She might not like her father, but he was still blood.

The carriage slowed along the narrower streets and then finally pulled to a stop. It felt like all of his muscles had seized up from the tension thrumming through his body. All he wanted was to see her face and make sure that she was safe.

He wanted to throw himself out of the carriage, but he straightened his clothing while he waited for the footman to come and open his door. It grated on him, this needless ritual; he was quite capable of doing it himself, and indeed, when he was on his manor, never asked for this kind of treatment.

Not that there were many servants left in his employ to order around.

Finally, the door was pulled open, and he stepped out into the cooling night air. The townhouse was fairly standard. Nothing too grand, and not freestanding, either, though it was at the end of the row. For some reason, he'd thought the Carmichael's were better off; but perhaps that was all in the way Isabella held herself, and the minor details that adorned her clothing, which spoke of extra care and time invested in them.

What did he know of fashion, anyway? He shook his head and marched up the steps to the front door, raising a fist to batter on the wood.

It took a few minutes before the door opened a crack and the face of an older gentleman appeared.

“Yes, my lord? What can I help you with?” His eyes scanned over Tyclon, growing wider as they took in the size of him, and his monstrous form.

It sent Tyclon right back to just after he had caught the plague. The stares and shock of everyone around him, even his own family members. Strangely, this man seemed to take it better than they had; perhaps he’d come across other monsters in his role.

“I am betrothed to Lady Carmichael, and I have come to ensure that she is well.”

The man paled and shook his head, which immediately drew a growl from Tyclon’s chest.

“No. She is well, please, my lord, don’t hurt me.” The man cowered a little, then turned to glance over his shoulder. “She is just not here,” he whispered the words. “My lord has sent her to the nunnery outside of town.”

“Who is at the door, Smith?” came a voice. Lord Carmichael.

Tyclon could not hold back another snarl.

“Please, I beg of you. Do not cause trouble here.” Smith’s words were so quiet, but Tyclon’s feline ears picked them up

clearly, along with the fear in them - fear for himself, not for Tyclon.

He felt the heat of his anger dissipate. He knew Isabella cared for the staff inside her home, and she would not thank him for making their lives difficult. He clenched his fists, feeling the sting of his claw tips in his palm.

“I will go, but know that your lord has crossed the wrong Marquis. You are not a threat to me, but he is.” With that, Tyclon turned away and stalked back to the carriage. The footman had obviously been watching as he leapt from the front to open the door again. Behind him, Tyclon heard Smith telling Lord Carmichael that someone had the wrong address as the door shut firmly and a lock was engaged.

“The nunnery,” he snarled as he passed the footman and threw himself inside. “Now.”

“My lord,” the man said, his swallow audible. “I hate to say this, but the horses are tired, and it is near full dark. It would be better to wait until morning before we go. I do not think the nuns would appreciate a midnight incursion.”

Incursion. Tyclon almost laughed. He hardly saw it that way, but then the only thing on his mind was finding Isabella and making sure that she was okay.

But he could see the fatigue in the man. Knew that he was right. As much as it irked him.

“Fine. Take me to lodgings for the night. First light tomorrow, we leave.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Isabella



Isabella woke to the first rays of dawn as they crept through the curtain-less window. The room was small and sparse, the bed only bundles of straw beneath a thick blanket; even then she had felt the prick of sticks against her body. She'd slept in the same riding dress that she had worn just yesterday, though it felt like so much longer.

She discarded the blanket, but then drew it around her when the chill of the bare stone floor seeped through her stocking feet. Her bladder was uncomfortably full, but she could not see a chamber pot anywhere in the small room.

Thankfully, there was a knock on the door presently, and she waited for it to open as they had locked it from the outside. She had tested it during the night, hoping to get away from this place. The nunnery would not be bad, but she had plans with Tyclon and she would not let her father stand in the way of them.

This was simply not the place for her.

At any time in the last few years, if her father had sent her here, she might have been pleased, but not now that she had found Tyclon.

A willowy young woman entered the room, her hair tied up in a bun. She had a bundle of brown fabric in her arms, which she offered to Isabella.

“Good morning, Isabella. I hope you slept well.”

“I would have slept better in my bed,” she said, keeping her head held high. “I did not consent to come here.”

The woman pursed her lips together and nodded. “I understand that, but sometimes we must do as we are told. And for now, you are here and they have asked me to help you acclimate to your new environment.” With that, the woman stepped forward and passed the fabric to Isabella.

She took it, shaking it out to reveal a robe much like the one that this other woman was wearing.

“I’ll give you a moment to get dressed, and then I’ll take you to the privy before we attend breakfast.”

Isabella was not used to being awake this early, let alone being told what to do by someone who seemed to be of a very similar age to her. Before she could protest, though, the woman had slipped back out the door and closed it behind her.

“Well,” she huffed, clenching her jaw and considering her options. In the end, she discarded her riding clothes and donned the robe. At least then, if she found an opportunity to slip away, she would look just like the other women in this

place and perhaps no one would raise the alarm. She gave her riding clothes one last sniff to inhale the tiny trace of Tyclon's scent that remained, and then left them on the bed and headed to the door.

After a visit to the privy, which turned out to be a simple hole in the ground in a small shed outside, the woman took Isabella to a long room with a narrow table running the length of it. It was well used; the wood worn smooth from use rather than polish. A few other women of various ages sat along it, bowls of porridge in front of them they silently spooned into their mouths. There was no conversation, so Isabella kept quiet as well, consuming the simple food in silence. Once she was done, the woman took her into the kitchen where they washed their own bowls, and then led her out of the building and into the weak morning sunshine.

Finally, she spoke.

"You did well in there." She gave an approving nod. "I know you might not have chosen this path, but it isn't so bad once you adjust." She pressed her lips into a firm line and then spoke again, "I came from an excellent family, like you. We had money, and I even had a fiancé, but this was the life that called to me." The woman glanced around, a smile that spoke of her contentment spreading across her face. "My name is Penelope, by the way. It is so good to have you with us, Isabella."

Isabella was not used to having a stranger address her by her first name. It was so intimate, and she had not invited that

from Penelope. However, she had a feeling that now was not the time to make a complaint. Here at the nunnery, she imagined that life was very different.

“What called you to this life?” Isabella asked, hoping that this would ingratiate her to the other woman.

“Oh, that is a story for another day.” Penelope turned her attention back to Isabella. “What is more important is how we can make you feel at home here. At peace. Come.” She gestured to Isabella and then headed toward the low stone wall that encircled the main buildings of the nunnery.

Isabella had not been able to take it all in the night before, for it had been far too dark when they arrived. It was a quaint scene, though; stone buildings and thatched roofs, rolling hills behind, and an orchard by the looks of it. There was a well near the main building, and it looked as though the gardens lay just outside the stone wall. There did not appear to be anything nearby. No other houses, no village. The only other building seemed to house a rowdy bunch of hens, and at least one rooster who was crowing about the day ahead.

When they reached the shack, Penelope opened the door and handed Isabella a metal tool and a basket. She looked at each of them, not understanding what she was expected to do with them.

“Follow me. We are to work in the gardens for the morning. It is good to be useful. Idle hands...”

Isabella frowned, not entirely sure what Penelope was getting at. Ever since her mother’s death, their attendance at

church had lapsed somewhat. She was not meant to attend without her father, and often he was still abed when the church bells rang, his head sore from too much drink. Still, she did not complain as Penelope led her into the garden and showed her how to work the soil, pointing out which plants were weeds, and which were food. It was so strange to be doing this work when normally she did not know where her food had come from. It appeared on her plate, cooked to perfections and tasting delicious.

“Did you not have other dreams, Penelope?” Isabella finally asked. The sun had risen properly now, and the day promised to be full of heat. She wished she had a hat to shade herself under.

“I thought to wed. It was a suitable arrangement, and he was a nice man. Kind. Protective. But he fell ill and his mother did not wish me to stay by his side. It gave me the opportunity to follow my true heart’s calling, and I have remained here ever since.”

Isabella stopped what she was doing, rolling her shoulders to release some of the tension there. She was not used to this kind of work, but she had a greater appreciation now for those who did. “And you do not miss that life? Your parents were accepting of this choice?”

Penelope laughed, and it was such a bright, tinkling sound that Isabella had to smile. “Oh no. I have four other sisters for them to marry off. They did not mind one bit that I wanted to seek this life.”

“Well, I am very pleased that you are happy here, but I have a fiancé, and I need to get back to him.” Not to mention Maris and the burning fury that seemed to simmer in her belly. Her father needed to pay for what he had done, and she wanted to be the one to deliver him to justice. His actions were reprehensible, and she could no longer deny the truth of things.

He had pushed her mother down the stairs. It was no accident.

For years, she had tried to pretend that she had not seen what had happened; but she could lie no longer. He was a violent man, a murderer, and she would not let him decide her future. She would decide his.

She just had to get out of this place first.

“You seem like a kind and genuine person, Penelope. And dedicated to the church and your place in it.” Isabella pressed her lips together, trying very hard to find the right words. Ones which would persuade this woman to let her leave this place. To help her set things to rights. “My father tricked me into leaving the ball. He beat my friend and servant. And he sent me here under false pretences. He is not a good man.” She sucked in a breath, wishing that her eyes were not damp with unshed tears. “He killed my mother, Penelope, and he got away with it. I have to go back and make sure justice is served.”

She finally looked at the other woman, imploring Penelope to see the truth in Isabella’s eyes. Penelope’s mouth opened,

her eyes wide in shock, and it seemed like such a strange expression on the other woman's face that Isabella almost laughed, except it came out as a sob instead. Once the first tears fell, there was no stopping the onslaught. It was the first time she had ever said those words out loud, and now there was no taking them back.

Penelope rushed to Isabella's side and wrapped her in a firm hug. "You poor thing. That is such a burden to carry. Let it all out." Her soft words gave Isabella the space to grieve; not since the night her mother died. For, within days, her father had determined that they would return to normal life and she was forbidden from mentioning her mother, or express any sorrow over the loss of her.

They stayed there like that until a new sound intruded. Isabella pulled away to see a horse and carriage rumbling down the road, faster than was probably wise. It slowed but had not even drawn to a stop before the door opened and Tyclon leapt from inside, sprinting across the ground so fast that he was upon her within moments.

"Isabella!" he cried, hugging her tightly to his chest. She sank against him, feeling the comforting strength of his arms around her, and wishing absently that she did not look such a fright for this reunion.

"You came," she whispered. "I thought perhaps..." she trailed off, not wanting to speak the words that suggested she might have doubted his commitment to her.

“Of course, I did. As soon as Maris could tell me that your father wasn’t ill, I rushed to your home.”

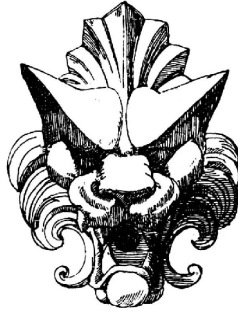
“Tyclon?” Penelope’s voice cut through to Isabella’s ears and she drew back from her fiancé to look at the other woman.

“Oh, my god. Penelope?”

Dread filled her stomach as she realized that this woman was Tyclon’s fiancée.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tyclon



“Tyclon?”

That voice was so familiar, and it threw him back to when he was human, before the plague had struck him down.

“Oh, my god. Penelope?”

He turned toward the voice, his eyes roaming over her face and seeing nothing but the radiant smile she had worn so often. “How? What?” He trailed off, not even knowing which question to ask. “Your face....”

Isabella flinched as if she too had realized exactly what was happening. She seemed to shrink into herself, putting some distance between them.

No. He did not want her to move away. His very core ached for her to be close. He moved with her, wrapping an arm around her waist and drawing her gently into his embrace so that she stood with her back against his chest. The two of them facing Penelope.

“What about my face?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Mother told me I struck you during my sickness,” he said, his voice cooler now, filling with all the shame and self-loathing that had followed him through this past year. “She said I scarred you badly so that no one would ever want to wed you. And you’d left, gone into isolation because of it.”

“Oh, my goodness, no!” Penelope looked aghast. She stepped toward them, placing one hand on Isabella’s arm, and the other on Tyclon’s. “You would never have hurt me, even in your most violent rages. Your mother sent me away, and I came here, for this was what I always truly wanted.” She spread her arms wide then, to encompass the gardens and the nunnery that lay behind her. “It was not your fault, Tyclon.” She pressed both hands to her heart. “I am so sorry that she told you that lie, for that is all it was.”

He felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. Or perhaps it would be a horse that had kicked him because a mere punch would not hurt this much. For all this time, he had believed he was unworthy of love. That he could not be trusted. That he had been rejected because of who he had become.

But it was untrue.

His chest ached.

And it wasn’t pain over losing Penelope. Theirs had been an engagement of convenience, not of love. They had been a good match; childhood friends whose parents believed that the marriage would benefit them all. And he’d enjoyed her

company, even if she was not entirely the woman of his dreams. It would have been good enough. Happy enough.

At least, that was what he had believed until he met Isabella. Until her softness, her gentle nature had wrapped around his heart and stolen it.

“It should not surprise me. The moment I became infected, she all but disowned me. She could not strip me of my title, but everything else? She took.”

“Tyclon,” Penelope said, his name evoking such sorrow and grief. Hers, his. Theirs.

Isabella tried to move away again, but he held her tight. *Mine.*

“It is fine, Penelope. I am pleased you are content here, and I have found my joy as well.” He could feel the way Isabella softened at his words, leaning against him easier then, her breathing evening out.

“I can see that.” Penelope’s smile was broader now, radiant, and he hoped she could sense his happiness as well. Everything felt right with the world now that Isabella was back by his side. He was loath to let her go again.

His old friend glanced over her shoulder, back toward the nunnery. No one else had come out to see what was happening yet. She turned to face Isabella. “Go. Now. I will tell them what has happened and all will be well.”

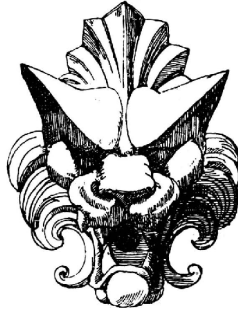
“Oh, thank you!” Isabella rushed toward Penelope and embraced the woman. “Please, do not send word of this to my

father. He cannot know I have left. Not yet.”

Penelope nodded, then released Isabella, the two of them sharing a look he could not interpret. And then Isabella was beside him again, her small hand in his much larger paw, and he led her toward the carriage and their future.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Isabella



Once they were safely inside the carriage, Tyclon pulled the curtains closed tightly, not wanting anything to distract him. He knelt on the floor in front of Isabella, resting his head on her lap as she ran her fingers through his fur. A low rumbling purr filled the small space. And her heart as well.

He had come. He was here. And she had left the nunnery.

Now, she had to tell him the truth about what had happened to her mother and ask him to help her set the wheels of justice in motion.

“Tyclon?” she said, her voice soft. His ears twitched though, and she suddenly realized that he was a feline and his hearing was no doubt far better than her own. One day, she would have to test the distance, but not today.

He raised his head and looked her in the eyes, his almost glowing golden in the dim light. Oh, she could sink into this

sight and swim in it forever; but there was work to be done first.

“Isa,” he said, the shortening of her name sounding strange and yet comforting. No one had ever called her that, not even Yvaine. It warmed her unexpectedly.

“I need your help before we can marry.”

He stiffened as though she had slapped him, then he pulled away, withdrawing both physically and emotionally.

“No. Not like that. I want nothing more than to be your wife and even if you do not wish to help me, I have something I need to do to be free from my father once and for all.”

He let out a breath that tickled the hair around her face. Warm and inviting. She wanted to kiss him again, but she knew that had to wait. At least until they had discussed this matter. She reached out and gripped his paw, drawing him back into her. He was such a comforting weight, and she needed that right now.

Taking a deep breath, she spoke, “My father killed my mother. He pushed her down the stairs. I have been trying to fool myself that I was mistaken, but after his actions these past days...”

“Isa,” he said again. The weight of his sympathy and compassion was so heavy. “What do you want to do about this?”

She pursed her lips. “I want him to confess.”

Tyclon drew back again, but this time he moved her across the seat so that he could sit beside her. The carriage dipped with his movement, but she was so focused on the way his thigh rested against hers that she barely noticed.

They were alone, finally, and all she could talk about was her damned father...

“How will we get him to confess?” he asked. His gaze was thoughtful. “We will need witnesses, of course. And by a stroke of good fortune, Countess Stalbridge has already arranged to meet me at your home two nights from today. She wants to ensure your father understands that my offer of marriage still stands.”

Isabella chewed on the inside of her cheek in an entirely unladylike fashion; but she had a feeling that Tyclon would either not notice or care if she was a little less ladylike than others. “I have the inklings of a plan, but I will need time to prepare.”

Tyclon’s smile was slow and satisfied. “Tell me,” he said, leaning in. “Before we get back to our lodgings, because I fear that the moment I get you into my rooms, I will no longer have the focus to hear you.”

Those words rolled through her body and she could feel herself responding, wanting, needing whatever he was offering. It mattered not to her whether they were wed yet, because they would be soon enough. As soon as it could be arranged.

“I want to sneak into the house and haunt him. I want to scare him so much that he thinks I am the ghost of his murdered wife. Come back to avenge my death.” As she spoke the words, she shivered in anticipation. It felt powerful, delicious, to think of him cowering before her, admitting to what he had done. “And if you can ensure there is a constable with the countess, when he admits his crime, they can take him away and my mother will have justice. Finally.”

Tyclon laughed, full of good humor and delight. There was nothing derisive in the sound. “You are far more cunning than I thought. I can see that I will need to be careful when we are wed.” He raised an eyebrow, and she smiled back at him.

“As long as you treat me with love and respect, then there will be no need for me to play such tricks on you, Ty.” She tested out the shortened version of his name, liked how it felt as it rolled off her tongue.

He purred in response, one hand reaching around her to draw her closer.

“I like it when you call me that,” he said. He pressed his mouth to hers, soft, tentative, as if he wasn’t sure how this worked, but they found their way, his soft fur smooth against her skin, his lips still human enough, and his sharp teeth grazing her tongue in a delicious way that made her shiver.

They could not get to their lodgings quickly enough for her liking.



A maid led Isabella to Tyclon's rooms while he finished his settling his affairs. A letter would return to Broadstone Hall along with the carriage, and all going well, their plan would unfold in just the way she wanted it to.

Now that she was here, alone, the bed such a large presence in the room, Isabella felt uncertain.

While they had been in the confines of the carriage, it had seemed safe and natural to kiss each other. And if he had been willing, she would have let him take her right there. Yet he knew that this was her first time and he wanted to ensure that it was done right. Whatever that might mean.

Yet here she stood in her plain brown robes, her hair no doubt a mess and the funk of travel on her body. It had not seemed to deter him when they were caught up in the moment, but there had been time for their passions to cool now. For awkwardness to creep in. For her nerves to overwhelm her.

Yet, something had changed in Tyclon. That fact could not be denied.

Before, he had been withdrawn, almost cool. She had hoped there was passion there, that he might want to take her in a carnal manner in their relationship. And in the stable he had made it clear he wanted her, but he had not trusted himself.

That had all changed with the revelation that Penelope was fine - more than fine, happy and thriving at the convent.

Now he was free to thrive as well. At least, that was what she hoped.

The door creaked open and there he stood, filling the frame completely. He was so large, and yet so gentle with her. She trusted him in a way that should have been impossible, but he had done nothing to harm her. And she knew that he never would.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, voice low, husky with desire.

Tension had been building between them in the carriage, and Isabella had known that once they were alone, they would finally explore each other’s bodies in private. Vivid memories of the way it had felt to touch him in the stables washed through her head and her body heated in response.

She wanted so much more than that, and to finally see what he had under his breeches. Women had gossiped back at the Hall about different anatomy, and she did not know what to expect. She had never even seen a human man’s penis, let alone...

Tyclon locked the door, then pulled his jacket off and tossed it over a chair before stepping toward her.

Isabella inhaled sharply, raising a hand up to stop him from coming closer. It felt like she could not breathe and while she wanted him, she was also terrified of that want.

“I am a virgin, Ty,” she whispered. “I’ve never done this before.”

His eyes darkened, but not in rage. He stood in place, his pink tongue flicking out to lick his lips. Where else might he lick with that tongue? She had ideas, but would he want to try them? Would she like it when they were actually done to her?

It wasn’t like she hadn’t imagined this act, simply that there had felt like such a vast difference between imagining and doing.

“We can take this as slowly as you like, Isa,” he said, and she loved the way her name rumbled from his mouth, the catch of passion behind it. “You can tell me what you like, and I will do the same. Does that sound good?”

She nodded and bit her lip, then watched as his fingers went to the buttons on his shirt. He slowly undid them from the top, but as he neared the middle, she scooted off the bed and went to stand before him.

“May I?” she asked. If she was in control here, then this would be easier, safer somehow, though was she really safe with a monster like him? He was so strong. Could take her against her will if he wanted to - but if he did, then he’d had opportunities before now. He was a gentleman. She was safe.

Tyclon nodded, his body tensing as she reached for the buttons. His arms were at his sides and he looked so like he had in the stables, bound up and yet full of tension, fighting every urge he had to move, to push, to take her before she was ready. She ran her fingers up his chest and grabbed the collar

of his shirt, pushing backwards, stripping it down his shoulders, his arms, until the fabric fell to the floor. He was only in his undershirt now and, with his help, she tugged it free from his breeches and over his head.

Stripped bare, she could see the way the stripes crossed his body, a pattern she would one day memorise, and how the fur was shorter on his torso than on limbs.

She touched his chest, and he shuddered, a low rumbling groan coming from him, making her smile. She bit down on that, though, wanting to stay with the seriousness of the moment. Surely now was not the time for laughter, and she did not want him to think that she was chuckling at his expense.

Isabella glanced down, noting the large bulge in his breeches, but then she saw his hands were balled into fists at his sides, claws gleaming in the light.

She ran her hands down his arms until she reached his fists, lifting them higher so that she could see. The claws looked wickedly sharp, but as she moved a finger closer to one, Tyclon drew it back into his body. They made little noises as they disappeared. Wondrous! He was remarkable, and she felt sure that he had no idea.

Prying his fists open, she brought his hands to her chest, pressing them there, her hands on the backs of his. His face softened, his mouth falling open as he gently squeezed the round orbs of her breasts. Isabella gasped at the sensation, reveling in the way he stroked a finger across her nipple. She wanted to be rid of her clothing right now, but first...

Her hands went to his belt, and she undid the clasp before she fumbled with the buttons, her fingers trembling with nerves. Tyclon dropped his hands to hers, helping her undo them before reaching behind him for the buttons there.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice ragged.

“Yes,” she said. “I must see you. All of you.”

He nodded once, and then dragged his breeches down over his hips, revealing more striped fur, down further, catching on the bulge of his erection. With a little more force, he shoved the fabric further down and let it drop to where it caught on his boots.

But it was not his boots that she was looking at, but his member. It was far larger than she had imagined, a pink color with what looked like spines coming from it. There was a definite curve to it as well. Quite terrifying at first glance. It made her breath quicken, as well as her pulse. Tyclon seemed to sense her fear, for he wrapped one hand around the organ, sliding it up and then down, showing her that the spines were in fact firm but supple.

“I assure you, my lady, that these will do you no damage. Do you...” He swallowed hard. “Do you want to touch it?”

“I... Can I?” She looked up at him then, knowing that her face was flushed, uncertain what expression he might read in her eyes, but she was curious how it felt, wanted to know this before it pierced her body.

“God yes,” he purred. “Like this.” He stroked himself again, his hand wrapping firmly around the member, up and down, exposing what looked like a sensitive tip.

Isabella licked lips which were suddenly dry and then reached out and wrapped her hand around it as well, just above where Tyclon held it. He groaned with pleasure, eyes closing at her touch. Empowered, she gripped firmer, sliding her hand up and feeling the strange sensation of movement within his member as he did. The spines were indeed quite subtle, but she could tell that they would cause extra friction inside her and she felt herself grow damp with the thought.

Her fingers worked well, but this...

“Please,” she said. “Touch me.”

He didn't say a word, simply undid the robe and pulled it free from her body. She had only the simplest of underthings on and they were gone quickly too. His eagerness to undress her made her feel strangely powerful. Soon she was naked too, and watching as he fumbled with his boots and socks, kicking everything away until he was bare.

Well, not bare, for he was covered head to tail in fur. He was a miracle, really, like nothing she had ever seen before. Brazenly, she moved toward him as he stood up, stepping closer so that she could be pressed against him, feel the way his fur tickled her body, warmed her too. She ran her hands across his chest, around his back, and down to where his tail emerged from his body. Tyclon did the same, his soft fingers

across her body, stroking her shoulders, her back, sweeping her hair to the side so that he could kiss her neck.

She gasped at the sensation, her core twitching, wanting. She had never felt like this before and the yearning to have him inside her, to feel all the pleasure he offered, overwhelmed any trace of nerves that remained.

“I need—” she said with a moan as he nipped at her neck, his hand squeezed on her buttocks, and his cock pressing against her belly.

“I know what you need,” he murmured into her skin, lifting her easily and carrying her to the bed. He laid her down, his gaze raking over her with a hunger she had not seen in him before. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

There was a sliver of vulnerability in those words, in his tone, and she nodded her head, uttered a word that she hoped sounded like yes, and then watched as he knelt on the ground by the bed and dragged her toward him. Isabella held her breath, not understanding what to expect. But his eyes were locked on hers, those golden globes full of heat and affection as he licked along her inner thigh, up toward the junction of her thighs.

He paused there for a moment, then dragged her legs apart, exposing her sex to the open air, to his gaze. Isabella wanted to cringe and curl up, but he held her firm and stroked up her crease with his thumb, rubbing it firmly on her most sensitive nub. She moaned in pleasure, writhing against his thumb, wanting more pressure. He did as she demanded and then

slipped one furry finger inside her. The sensation was like nothing she had ever experienced before, but she was slick with need and the fur was soon damn creating an intense friction in her. She moaned again, not caring who might hear her.

Tyclon adjusted his position, used his fingers to open her wider and then leaned in, hot breath against her pussy, and then his thick, pink tongue lapped at her. Over and over again, hot and wet and pressing her, his hungry purr sending her wild. She cried out, louder then, and when he rubbed her clitoris, combined with the sensation of his tongue inside her, she could not stem the convulsions inside her and she screamed out as climax washed through her body and she shuddered against his face.

He licked her clean, his purr of satisfaction vibrating against her skin, her pussy. It twitched with pleasure while her mind tried to comprehend what had just happened.

And orgasm, of course, but like none she had ever given herself. And his tongue between her legs... Why, she had never heard of such a thing.

“How do you feel?” Tyclon asked as he laid kisses on her thigh, her hip, her stomach. He was crawling onto the bed now, his member thick and erect, larger even than before.

“That was...” She sucked in a breath, trying to calm her system. “Amazing.”

“More?”

“There is more?” she squeaked, unsure if she could endure.

“I promise there is so much more.” He moved her up the bed, gentle hands against her body, and then dipped his head to suck a nipple into his mouth. His sharp teeth scraped at the breast ever so slightly, sending a new tremor of pleasure through her body.

“Show me,” she said, “but I cannot promise to contain myself.”

“I don’t want you to,” he said, and then he kissed her again and she could taste something new on his tongue. Her own pleasure, a tang completely foreign to her. The taste heated her core again, and she hoped that one day, he would let her taste his pleasure as well.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he murmured, nuzzling his damp nose against her neck.

“What if I like it?” she asked, unsure where such boldness was coming from.

“Then tell me that too, moan it in my ear, scream it for the ton to hear.” Typhon’s voice was so rough now, and she could sense that he was on the verge of losing control over his actions. He wanted her, she knew it, so badly that he might be unable to stop himself should she ask. The thought that her body, the wanting of her, could drive him to such ungentlemanly behavior made her want him more. Because she knew she was safe with him, safe here, no matter how unsafe he made her feel.

The tip of his member nudged against her entrance and he reached down between them, spreading her lips wide. He pushed inside. The slickness of her pussy aiding him, though it wasn't long before she stretched. She gasped, squeezing his arm to get him to slow. Taking her guidance, he slid back and forth, back and forth, pushing in deeper each time, easing her open until she felt what could only be the spines along his shaft.

Isabella moaned at the sensation, resisting the urge to tense up, to stop his motion and instead drawing him down closer so that she could kiss him, lose herself to the feelings rushing through her body. He kissed her back, thrusting inside deeper than before. She threw her head back, a scream of pleasure erupting from her lungs, that feeling only deepening as he withdrew and then slammed into her again, fully seated inside her.

“More?” he growled, nipping at her neck as he rocked inside her, sending washes of gentle pleasure through her core.

“More,” she moaned, unable to keep her eyes open now. It was all too much.

In response, he moved again, thrust again, powerful strokes that sent her closer to orgasm every single time. Soon she could no longer determine one limb from another. Her whole body seemed on fire with pleasure. Tyclon increased his pace, his own moans of pleasure joining hers until he was moving faster than she could imagine and exploded inside her, spilling

his seed and sending her over the edge and into what could only be Heaven, for it felt so good.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tyclon



Isabella had sent Tyclon out with a list of things to purchase, and while he knew where to get most of the items, he was unsure whether her plan was the best of ideas. The thought of leaving her alone in the house unnerved him; the fact she would go there willingly after her father had been so cruel to Maris put his teeth on edge.

But he could see no other way. Isabella was intent on getting justice for her mother, and Lord Carmichael was unlikely to admit his guilt to anyone without a little ‘supernatural’ nudge.

Tyclon just hoped that everything came together in time.

It was beyond strange to be walking around the ton, shopping like a regular human. He hadn’t particularly enjoyed this, even before the plague had struck him low; but he had barely left the manor since. At first, he felt awkward and tried to shrink in on himself, like everyone was looking at him, but the further he went the more he realized that actually, most people were just going about their business. Other monsters

strolled the streets looking comfortable in society, and in their skin as well.

Perhaps it was time for him to do the same. His mother had put such stock in him being a terror, unworthy of love, having ruined Penelope.

He was still trying to process what it meant. That he had hurt no one, least of all the woman he had been engaged to. That his mother had lied about that made him clench his fists and curl his lip, but the surprised look from a passing woman made him relax again. It certainly was not her fault that he was in a mood.

It was time to let that all go, though. Time to move forward with his life, and with Isabella.

Isa.

He clutched the small bag of pearls in his pocket. He hadn't known what to do with them before, but now he had an idea. While Master Bow had salvaged the pearls necklace that had been broken when her father invaded the ball and tried to take her home, the locket had gone missing. It had been Isabella's mother's necklace originally, and now that he knew how important the woman was to his future bride, he wanted to honor her memory as well as create something new and beautiful for the woman who was to be his wife.

The woman that he might actually allow himself to fall in love with.

She had certainly captured him, and he had the feeling that there were many layers of Isabella left to unwrap as she cast off the trauma of her past and finally embraced the woman she wanted to be. For he could see that in her. The latent potential, the wildness waiting to escape. She was like a tiger who had been caged and beaten. Some of the light had dimmed from her eyes, but that creature was still lurking inside.

And he would help her free it.

He saw the jeweler up ahead and hurried to the door, pushing his way inside. It was still reasonably early and there were only a few other customers present. Tyclon waited his turn and then approached the counter, opening the bag and tipping the pearls into his broad hand. They shimmered in the sunlight that came through the window.

“I need you to string these into a new design. There used to be a locket as the focal point, but I will need something new. Something...green,” he said, thinking of Isabella’s eyes. “Have you anything that might suit?”

The jeweler assessed the pearls, and then gestured for Tyclon to tip them back into the bag, and motioned him towards the end of the counter where he withdrew a wooden box containing an assortment of cabochons. The stones glimmered and were a range of colors. Tyclon glanced over at them, though he was instantly drawn to the large emerald oval.

“That one. Can you have it ready in two days’ time? I will pay handsomely.”

The jeweller assessed Tyclon, who did not look as fine as he might in other circumstances, but when he withdrew a heavy pouch of coin, the jeweler straightened and nodded.

“Certainly, my lord. You can trust me with this.”

“I appreciate that very much,” Tyclon said, slinging the pouch onto the counter before dipping his head and making his way from the store. It felt good, very good, to know that by the time this was over, he could present Isabella with something new and beautiful. Just as she was becoming someone new and beautiful.

Tyclon quickly went about gathering the other supplies that Isabella had asked him for, including a plain cream-colored dress. If she were to walk around the ton in her brown nun robe, it would be too conspicuous, so she had to look like everyone else, just not as fine as she might ordinarily. His tasks complete, he lingered, feeling like there was something more that he needed. Some token to give to Isabella right now, but what?

His eyes landed on a pawnshop, and he ducked inside. It held an eclectic range of items, and he wasn't sure what he was looking for until his gaze landed on a delicate dagger. Its blade shone, and its hilt was simple, but inlaid with precious stones.

“Does that come with a sheath?” Tyclon asked, not even glancing around to see whether the broker was in earshot.

“I'm sure I can find something to suit,” a gentleman replied. He ducked behind a set of shelves and reappeared with a

simple black sheath.

“That will do splendidly,” Tyclon replied, rummaging for the proper payment. “Could I please have it boxed up?”

“Certainly, sir.” The man dipped his head, and set to work, and shortly they made the exchange.

Free from shopping, Tyclon rushed back to the lodge, eager to give Isabella the lovely weapon. It was only as he got closer that he wondered whether it was an appropriate gift.

The thought of her in that house, unprotected by him, was too much, though. She needed a blade. And she needed to know how to use it. A novel idea tickled his brain as he opened the door to their rooms and dumped the packages on the bed.

“It appears you have purchased an entire store,” Isabella declared with delight. She was still in that dull brown robe. He could not wait to get her out of it, but first...

He presented her with the box.

“For you,” Tyclon said softly, locking his gaze on her face so that he could see every part of her response. “Like you, it looks dainty, but it is strong and lethal when wielded the right way. You have my heart, Isa, and the power to utterly destroy me.”

Her eyes went wide, warm, moisture flooding them. Isabella blinked back tears as she took the box and set it in her lap. She removed the lid, and even though he wasn't sure it was

possible, her eyes got even bigger as she took in the blade, her mouth forming an oh.

Her fingers trembled as she reached down and wrapped them around the hilt, dragging the sheath off with the other. She tested the edge with one finger, drawing a delicate line of blood.

Tyclon surged forward and took the digit in his mouth, sucking the iron tanged blood from her skin. She gasped and he could swear that her heart beat faster, could smell her arousal. It was instant and powerful, and he wanted every part of her now, but as he moved to take her mouth with his, she got a sparkle of ferocity in her eyes that he hadn't seen before. The blade was against his neck, and though he knew she would do him no harm, there was a frisson of excitement.

Carefully, he used one hand and wrapped his fingers around hers, moving the blade a few inches so that it rested against his artery.

“Here,” he said, his voice rough. “This is where you want to cut. It is an artery and will kill quickly. You are not the strongest person, but you can be fast. You can be deadly. Safe.”

Her bosom heaved at his words, as though she was intensely aware of the way he was putting her life in his hands. That he would do nothing should she choose to sever the artery right now.

“And where else?” she whispered. He could still smell her arousal, and could not deny his own, and he could sense that

this was a new game between the two of them. He was literally exposing his belly to her, giving her all the power over him, and he wanted that. Wanted the security in knowing that no matter what happened, she could defend herself.

He moved one hand to the base of her neck. “Here,” he said. “Cut the spinal cord and it will incapacitate them.” He leaned forward, and she moved the blade with him as he dipped his head to brush a soft kiss against her eyelid. “Through here to get to the brain.”

Her breath was coming shallower now, and he ran a hand down her body, cupping her breast and then moving lower to find the bottom of her ribs. “Under here, and up. Of if you want to take your chances, between the ribs.”

Tyclon reached for his buttons and stripped off his shirt. He could feel the bulge in his pants had grown uncomfortably large, but he was in no rush. He guided her fingers to his chest, pressed them in until she could feel the bones beneath his fur and flesh. She moved the knife then, finally taking it from his throat to move it to one of those gaps. It was too low, though, and he moved her higher, pressed her other hand against his chest so that she could feel the pounding of his heart. The tip dug in, just a little, and he felt his own breath coming faster.

He trusted her though, trusted her and knew that this was arousing them both. That soon enough he would have her on her back and be able to bury himself inside her, and right now, she could do that with a dagger to his throat if she wanted to, he did not care.

“More,” she whispered. Her cheeks were flushed, and she looked dishevelled, as though they had done much more than simply locate a few sites of potential injury.

He dropped his gaze and he could sense hers followed. The bulge in his pants was unmistakable, and he ran a hand down his belly, over that bulge, stroking it firmly as he trailed a hand to the location of the artery in his thigh.

“Here,” he said. “On either leg.”

She bit her lip, and he knew she was hungry for him. Wanted him to take them both over the edge and into oblivion like he had the day before. He wanted that too, but first he wanted to be sure that she knew where to cut.

“Show me again, but on me,” she said.

He frowned. “But...”

“Show me,” she said more firmly this time, and moved the blade up, up, to where her robe crossed over her breasts. “Take this off me.” There was a dare in her voice, a dare and a command, and he was helpless to deny. He gripped the ugly brown fabric with his other hand so that it was away from her body and then cut into it, slicing down, down, letting the robe fall to each side and reveal her creamy skin.

She was so fucking beautiful. He growled, his desire almost too much to bear.

“Here,” she said, moving his hand to her thigh. “Mark me.”

“Isa...”

She was breathing so hard now that her chest was rising and falling in a hypnotic rhythm. “I want you to show me, slice me in the right place so that I will know, and if I forget before we see each other again, I’ll be able to touch the cut and feel it. Feel you.”

He was heady with need, and he leaned down and kissed her fiercely, pushing his love and want against her lips, slipping it into her mouth on his tongue, wanting her to swallow it down, to hold it always. Finally, he drew back, ran the flat of the blade down her leg. She shivered at its touch, shuddered in anticipation as he held her thigh still with one hand. She gripped his hand, turning the blade so that the edge was against her skin. He saw something in her eyes then, something he had sensed lying there, hidden beneath the layers of control and abuse from her father. It was wild, feral, and it had been dormant for far too long. She was waking up now, to her true self.

He pressed his thumb into her thigh. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she hissed. “Cut me. I need to see the blood.”

He slid the blade across her soft skin, and she gasped, her fist clenched at her side, teeth biting into her lower lip.

She was so gorgeous, vulnerable, and trusting. Determined to know how to kill a man.

A thin line of red swelled to the surface, and he leaned down to lap it up, running his tongue over her thigh, taking the iron tinged substance into his mouth. Another of her tastes that

he would savor. She shuddered beneath him, her body arching into his.

“More,” she demanded.

He was so hard now, so hungry to be inside her, but he would deny her nothing. He moved to the other thigh and made a cut to mirror the first. She moaned this time, pleasure and pain making her squirm under him as he lapped at her wound, kissed her thigh, her hip. He moved up, sliced across her belly.

“Here to spill organs,” he whispered, kissing her skin, licking up the red. A sharp prick at the place beneath her ribs. “Up through here.” He was above her now, straddling her thighs. She looked up at him, mouth partially open, lips pink with desire, cheeks flushed crimson. She nodded at him, begging him for more with her gaze.

He went to her upper arm then, one side, the other, more arteries, under the armpits. “Straight in here,” he whispered, moving to her neck, kissing her hard there. Her legs were wrapped around him now, her body arching against his. She ground herself against his bulge and it took everything in him not to cut his own clothing free and pound into her.

Finally, he replaced his mouth with the blade. Looked her in the eyes, so close that their heated breath mingled in the space between them. He kissed her then, as hungry as she was, the blade still at her neck, though he refused to cut her there. He could not. Would not.

Despite her smaller size, she forced him to roll over so that she was astride him, and now she held the blade to his throat. There was a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“Here?” she asked. With her other hand, she reached between them, pressing her fingers to his bulge. “Undo the flap, my lord.” It was an order, not a request, and he rushed to comply. She didn’t remove the blade for even a moment, so he fumbled with the buttons, practically tearing the fabric in his haste to free his member from the clothing.

Isabella flicked his hands away, gripped his member and stroked it once before drawing him up so that she could slide down on him. He let out a moan, all of his pent-up desire flooding through his system. She felt so damn good. He would happily die like this. Die for her. She closed her eyes, moaning in ecstasy as she filled herself with him.

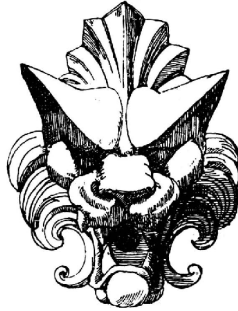
The knife was still firm against him as she rode his cock. He gripped her hips and matched her rhythm, thrusting up into her with increasing speed. She was losing focus, on the brink of losing control, when he felt the nick of steel as it cut through his fur, his skin, the sliver of pain rocketing him over the edge. He came inside her with such force that he thought he might black out with the pleasure of it. All the while she rode him, taking everything he had, pleasuring herself until she came apart, dropping the blade and falling against his chest, utterly spent.

They lay there like that, both of them sucking in ragged breaths. His heart hammered against his chest as he draped one

arm around her and pulled her to the side so that he could curl around her body. She made a contented noise, the smile on her lips radiant in the midday light bleeding through the window. He could not stop himself from purring if he'd wanted to.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Isabella



Isabella's body ached in the most delicious ways. She was sure that she looked different now, less vulnerable, certainly less innocent; Tyclon had ravaged all of that from her, and she could not be more grateful.

She wore the thin scabs of Tyclon's cuts like they were jewels. A map of ruby showing her the way if she ever needed it. She'd seen the doubt in his eyes when she'd asked him, but he had done it all the same. Because it was her.

The thrill of that power danced through her veins and she wished she had a decent mirror so that she could peer at herself and assess exactly what was different. Not that it mattered whether anyone else could see it; she could feel it. She knew it. She was returning to the home of her father a changed woman, and she would exact revenge on him. He would pay.

Tyclon had purchased her a nondescript cloak with a deep hood, and now they walked arm in arm down the back streets on their way to that very home where she would lay her trap.

So many things had rushed through her mind about how to trick her father into a confession, but she had a feeling that most of it would come down to the opium that her fiancé had bought.

Fiancé. That word felt wonderful. For so long now, she had thought it would never happen. Her drunkard father impeding every potential match. Funny that it had taken the Monsters Ball before she had met a man who would stand up for her against her father.

But Tyclon was more than a man. He was a monster too, and yet so protective of her, so gentle, unless she wanted him to be otherwise.

As they neared the townhouse, she felt her steps become shorter, wanting to take her time getting to her destination. Well, it wasn't that so much as that she was not nearly ready to leave the side of her lover. He gave her such strength, and she needed that now; but for their plan to work, they must separate. Just for now.

Until tomorrow.

She squeezed Tyclon's arm, and he turned to her, looking down so that their eyes met. She could see the slight curve of his feline lips, could practically feel the smile in his muscles.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"I am nervous," she admitted. "I know this is my plan, and I believe it will work. And yet..."

“And yet, he is still your father. Our family has a hold on us, no matter how challenging they have been.”

She felt such relief that he understood; but, of course, he did. His relationship with his mother was fraught with its own difficulties. “I know that justice needs to be delivered,” she said, making sure each word was firm, both inside her mind and out in the world as well. “I need it. My mother deserves it. And so does he. No matter the outcome.”

“No matter the outcome,” he echoed, though she could tell that inside his mind he was adding the thought that no matter what, as long as she remained safe.

Freedom whispered to her though, and she knew that she would have it and it would taste so wonderful.

She could see the house in the distance now, and knew that they would have to part. Isabella tugged him down the alley that led to the servants’ entrance. She turned part way down to face him, going up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss against his cheek. His fur was so familiar to her now, soft and thick. She could spend hours stroking it, but she knew without a doubt that would lead to the bedchamber, rather than achieving their goal.

“I will miss you,” Isabella said.

“Not as much as I will miss you,” he murmured. “I hate thinking of you here, alone. Of him...” He ground his teeth together so loudly that she could hear them.

“I will not be alone, not really. The staff are here and they will keep our secret. It will be okay. I shall see you soon enough.” She squeezed his hands. “And then we can wed and leave this place forever.”

“We can go wherever you wish.” A purr emanated from his chest and she placed a hand there, feeling the rumble of it through her like a comfort she’d never known she needed.

“As long as it is with you, I care not.” She kissed him again, let him deepen it for a moment before withdrawing. Soon. Soon, this would be over and they could be together.

“You have your dagger?”

He knew full well that she did, as he had helped to secure it beneath her dress. The memory made her blush, and she believed that every time she so much as thought of the dagger, her cheeks would heat and she would yearn for his touch. What they had done... It was so far from what she had assumed would happen between men and women. So unlike the civilized veneer that she had seen played out between couples; and much more than she had ever hoped for herself.

“I won’t part with it, never fear.” She kissed his cheek again, felt the firm grip of his hand on her waist. Neither of them wanted to part, but this was the way. “Please try not to wear a path on the floor of our rooms while you wait for the countess to arrive. It will be no time at all before we are together again.”

With that, she stepped back. Or tried, for he held her tight, looking into her eyes with his molten gold gaze.

“Be safe,” he said. Then nodded once and let go, though she could tell how hard that simple action was for him. It was harder still for her to turn away and hurry down the alley. Away from him, and back into the belly of the beast.

It took a few minutes for someone to answer the servants’ door, but she wanted to be sure that it was safe to enter, so she waited patiently. Rosie opened the door, her mouth open as if to say something, when she seemed to realize who was standing there.

“Miss Carmichael!” she exclaimed, ushering Isabella inside. “What are you doing at this entrance? I thought your father had sent you to—”

“Shush, please, Rosie.” Isabella pressed a finger to her lips and glanced around the older woman. “Is Father home?”

“No, my lady, he’s out for a few more hours. Meeting down at the offices or some such, I gather. Not that he feels the need to inform us.”

Isabella could tell that Rosie was readying to start her complaints, so she gripped the woman by the shoulders and waited until she made eye contact. “It is of the utmost importance that you do not let him know I am here. Do you understand?”

Rosie frowned, the lines around her eyes deepening as she tried to comprehend what Isabella was trying to tell her.

“I am going to get him to confess to killing mother. You know it is the truth,” she rushed to add when Rosie stepped

backward. "I will let no one else get hurt, not like Maris."

Rosie paled. She might deny that he was a murderer, but there was no way to avoid the bitter truth that he had beaten Maris badly. That any of them could be next; had no doubt been on the receiving end of one of his attacks over the years.

"What will you do?"

"You leave that up to me, Rosie. The less you know, the better. Just behave as though I never returned. Go about your business. I am but a ghost." Isabella winked at Rosie, whose eyes now sparkled with mischief. "Make sure you tell the others."

"That I will, lass. You're a good girl." Rosie cupped Isabella's face, sorrow playing out across her features. "You did not deserve this life."

"None of us did," Isabella assured her. "But I am going to make it right. I promise." She stepped away from the cook and scanned the kitchen, her eyes landing on a freshly baked loaf of bread. It smelled so good. Like home. "May I?" she asked.

Rosie rushed to wrap it in a cloth, along with a small ball of sweet cream. "I'll leave a plate out tonight as well, if you feel a little peckish." Rosie put the bundle into Isabella's hand, and then turned away, acting as if she were not there at all.

Her message had been received.

She was now a ghost.



News of her arrival passed through the household at record speed. She did not know how Rosie had done it. Isabella glimpsed Smith, who turned his head away, and when she passed the butler, he did the same, sweeping past her as he went about his business.

It was strange, in a way. She felt secure and safe, as if she truly were invisible. Isabella made her way up the stairs, and then up again to the servants' quarters and the storage room. She could sleep in Maris' quarters tonight, but for now she needed to assess her supplies and lay her plans. If what Rosie said was anything to go by, she had a few hours until her father returned, and by then her fake haunting would be well underway.

She found her mother's favorite perfume and sprayed it on the pillows in her father's room, as well as on the runner near the top of the stairs, near the bottom, and then in the living room on the very chair her mother would sit and do her embroidery of a morning. She cracked open all the windows she could get to, knowing that a chill would seep into the house that way. She went through the clothing again, finding the dress her mother had been wearing when she'd died.

She knew that she would have to don it tomorrow night, but she wasn't ready yet to slip into it. With no Maris to help her, she would have to ready herself early to ensure she had

enough time to twist her hair up in a decent approximation of her mother's. It had only been a few years since her passing, but those years felt very long.

Isabella tried to think of other things to do. She glanced around the living room and got a sudden idea. She rushed back to Maris' room and grabbed the pot of white powder she would use on her skin and gently dusted it onto the painting of her mother. It felt like blasphemy, but she knew it would wipe off, and the effect made it look like there was a ghostly aura around her mother. She moved a few items as well, not so much that her father would likely notice, but just to make the room feel off. Nudging an armchair a few inches in one direction, that kind of thing. The result was pleasing as much as it was disconcerting, and pleased with her efforts, she headed upstairs to do the same in his bedroom.

All she needed to do was unsettle him enough, make him think things were amiss.

Finally, she took the vial of opium and tipped some into the carafe of brandy that he kept on the sideboard, and that he would start on the moment that he got home.

How the man could continue on with his life as though he were innocent of any wrongdoing surprised her, but he was not the average man. Not by any means.

How had her mother chosen him as her match? Or perhaps there had been no choice. Isabella remembered a time when they had seemed reasonably happy; but she did not know what had changed. Or when. Too wrapped up in girlish things and

concerns that seemed important. More important than her parents.

Isabella swirled the amber liquid in the carafe, making sure that the opium was undetectable. She had to hope that she there was enough in there to cause his world to shift a little. She only wished that she could be present to watch the outcome.

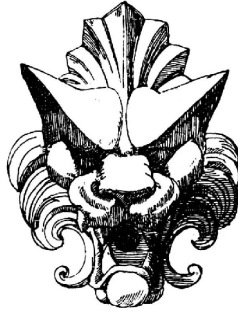
Not tonight. Tomorrow. It would come soon enough.

Isabella took herself back upstairs and sunk into Maris's bed, drawing the blankets up and snuggling beneath them. They were rougher than her own, but they smelled like her friend, and that comfort dragged her into a settled sleep.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tyclon



Tyclon paced outside on the street. Not directly in front of the townhouse, but a little further down. He'd changed positions approximately five times already, but none of them felt right.

The only thing that would feel right was to have Isabella in his arms again.

The light was just dimming when a familiar carriage clattered along the street and drew to a stop outside the townhouse. Tyclon straightened his clothing and tried to walk sedately toward it, though it took every ounce of restraint not to burst into a run.

The countess was finally here.

He hovered as the coachman leapt from the front of the carriage to pull the door open. Tyclon stepped forward, offering his own hand to the woman to assist her out. She stepped down gracefully and dipped her head in thanks.

“I see you have managed not to wear a trench outside her house,” she said, her lips quirking into a smile.

“It took a great deal of effort, but I have been as discreet as possible.”

A thin, tall man stepped down from the carriage as well.

“This is Davies, the runner. He will bear witness to whatever comes from this and, hopefully, escort Lord Carmichael off the premises.”

Tyclon greeted the man, keeping his hands clasped behind him. There was so much tension in his body that he thought he might crush Davie’s hand if he had to shake it. “Can we?” He gestured toward the house.

“If you’ll just stay here,” Countess Stalbridge said to the coachman. “I don’t imagine this will take too long.” She had the look of a cat who knew that soon she would be delivered cream in an elegant bowl. Maybe with a side of fresh liver.

She reached out and gripped Tyclon’s arm, letting him escort her up the stairs and rap on the door.

But they both knew who was really in charge here.

A servant opened the door, and Tyclon had the vague recollection that his name was Smith; better that he not use it.

“My lord, my lady. How can I help you?” he asked. His eyes skipped the countess and landed on Tyclon, assessing his monstrous form. His eyes widened slightly in surprise, but he kept his calm attitude in place.

“We are here to see Lord Carmichael on the matter of his daughter’s engagement.” Countess Stalbridge was so regal that even if he had wanted to, there was no way Smith would have turned them away.

“My lord is home. Please, step inside and I will let him know you are here.” He bowed gracefully and then stepped back inside.

They followed, and Tyclon noted that the room was strangely chill. Colder than it had a right to be. Was that something that Isabella had done? He glanced around, also noting that it was duller than it needed to be. Several of the flames in sconces had gone out, and the chandelier was missing several candles. It gave the whole place a gloomy feeling that was compounded by the chill.

As the sound of steps approached them, Tyclon straightened to his full height and turned to face his future father-in-law. He had to stifle a growl at the sight of the man, who looked more stooped than he had two nights prior. His pallor was worse for wear as well, redness on his cheeks, and darkness beneath his eyes. It looked as though he had barely slept, and that gave Tyclon much joy.

“Countess Stalbridge. This is a pleasant surprise,” Gustav said, pressing his hands together as though he were praising God. “What brings you to my home?”

“We have come with the papers regarding the engagement of your daughter to this fine young gentleman, Marquis Tyclon

K'var.” The countess gestured toward him. “I believe you briefly met that first night of the ball.”

“Him!” Gustav threw his hands up. “No such thing will happen. My daughter will wed no monster.”

Tyclon could not bring himself to be mad at this, because he knew that no matter what Gustav said or wanted, Isabella was his. Would remain his. Nothing this man did would change that. He only wished that he was base enough to tell the man exactly how intimately he knew his daughter; but his honour, and his respect for Isabella, would never allow that.

But he knew. He knew all the way through his thick, striped fur to his very bones.

“Your daughter’s engagement has been approved by the queen herself, so there is very little that you can do about it. Unless...” The countess paused, pressed a finger to her lips. “Unless you intend to oppose her?” She raised a delicate eyebrow and stared Gustav down.

“I... I...” he spluttered. “Isabella is not here at present. She has gone to attend to a sick aunt in the country. When she returns, we can discuss this matter.”

Just then there was a noise, like a rapping on the walls that caused them all to glance around the room, though it was impossible to know what might be causing it. And then there was what sounded like a step, a stumble, and a single shoe rolled down the stairs to come to a halt right beside Gustav.

His face paled and his mouth gaped open, flapping like a fish out of water. He bent down to pick the shoe up, cradling it in his hands with an expression that flitted between wistful and terrified.

“Camilla?” he whispered. Then he seemed to remember himself and hid the shoe behind his back, snapping his gaze at his guests. “You must go. Now.” He swept his free hand at them, shooing them away. The countess looked torn between surprise and distaste.

There was a noise then, almost a whisper, though it was loud enough for them all to hear.

“Gustav...”

The shoe clattered to the ground as the man spun around to gaze up the stairs.

Tyclon looked too, and he could see her shape there in the gloom. A long, pale dress on her slim, pale figure. If he had not known that it was Isabella, he too might have thought that she had returned from the dead. The figure took the first step, her hands raised, her face full of sorrow. “Gustav...”

There was blood on her dress, and it looked tacky, as though Isabella had added fresh blood to old. He sniffed the air. Could tell that she had done exactly that. The effect was instant because Gustav took a step backward, almost moving into the countess, who stepped out of the way. They all stood there, transfixed by the sight of this ghostly woman coming down the stairs.

She took a few more steps and he could see that the blood was not only on her clothing, but at her neck, wet against her head. His heart clenched at the thought that she might have seriously hurt herself to make this look true, but now was not the time to ask. Nor could he rush to her side, cradle her body, and check that she was okay.

“Gustav...” that mournful call came again, but then her expression changed from sorrow to rage. She moved faster, seeming to glide down the stairs at speed now.

Gustav let out a shrill cry and stumbled backward, turning to claw at Tyclon’s chest. “Help me, please. Get me out of here. It was me. I did it. I pushed her. It was my fault!” He screeched this last sentence, eyes closed, face scrunched tight.

“It would seem that we have our confession,” the countess said, unable to keep the smirk from her voice. It was incredibly unladylike, but Tyclon could not fault her for it. “Davies. Please escort Lord Carmichael to the cells.”

“What?” Gustav cried out, turning back to face them for just a moment before he switched back to looking at the ghostly figure.

Isabella glided to a stop near him, she looked so ethereal like this, and he knew it was a trick of the light and powder, and this strange tension she had brought to the room, even so, he could imagine how this looked to Gustav.

“It is over, Father. Mother will finally get the justice she deserves, and you will never hurt another soul.”

Gustav shrank away from her, and then leaned closer, peering at her face. Isabella did not move a muscle. There was no fear in her face now, but a serene peace. Tyclon wanted to go to her, to bow down at her feet for concocting this plan and carrying it off so effortlessly. She was a goddess in his mind.

Gustav suddenly moved, trying to run from the foyer. Tyclon grabbed him by the arm, though, letting his claws extend just a little to give the threat of physical damage. Enough that Gustav stopped in his tracks.

“Davies?” Tyclon said. “Make sure he sees the inside of a cell as quickly as possible.”

“Of course, my lord.” Davies dipped his head in acknowledgement, and tied Gustav’s hands behind him so that he could cause no more trouble. Then he led the man from the foyer, out into the increasingly dark night.

Isabella let out a long sigh and Tyclon rushed to her side, threading an arm around her waist to support her as all the tension seemed to leave her body.

“I’m alright, Ty. But thank you. I just...”

“You!” the countess declared. “That was sensational. Why, if I hadn’t known better, I too would have believed that your poor departed mother had returned to take her vengeance.” Countess Stalbridge rushed forward and planted her hands on each of Isabella’s cheeks. “You were brilliant. I always knew there was more to you than your fear. I think a certain someone helped to draw that out of you.” Her eyes flicked

toward Tyclon with such warm approval that he wasn't sure what to do with it.

For so long, he had considered himself a savage beast who no one could love or care for, let alone approve of, and yet his time at the ball had proven that so wrong. His mother had a lot to answer for, and yet, he had no desire to approach her, or have anything more to do with her. He had people in his life who mattered, and truly, so long as Isabella loved him, he knew he would be content. A purr rumbled through his chest, making Isabella glance up at him with a smile.

“Well,” the countess said, clapping her hands together to regain their attention. “Seeing as they have taken your father into custody, and the queen has approved this marriage. I propose I expedite the ceremony. Is tomorrow too soon?”

“Tomorrow?” Isabella asked, her voice squeaking.

“Well, it would hardly be seemly to leave a young woman without a chaperone for too long.” The countess winked at them, and then turned on her heel, heading toward the door. “We can have it here. Keep it very simple. Noon. I have two witnesses who I am sure would love to attend. If that suits.”

But she was out the door before either of them had time to respond.

Tyclon could feel the heavy thud of his heart as he turned to face his fiancée. “Is this what you would like?” he asked. “I know it is quick, but—”

She went up on her toes and kissed him hard on the mouth. He delighted in the taste of her, letting her assure him with her actions that she was eager to be wed.

When they finally pulled apart, she smiled at him. “I want nothing more than this. For so long, I have wished to be free of my father, and now I find I am. But that is not why I want to be your wife, Ty. Even if I had the finest father in all the world, I would still wish to wed you.”

Her words warmed his whole body, and he pulled her closer, tucking her head beneath his chin to embrace her fully. She seemed to melt against him, her fingers reaching for his neck so that she could stroke his fur.

“Tomorrow it is then,” he murmured into her hair, feeling content for the first time since they’d parted. He didn’t want to spend a moment worrying about the details, he just wanted to enjoy this.

Isabella pulled away, cupping his cheek with her hand. “I don’t want to stay here. Not tonight. Never again. Could we...”

His lips twitched into a grin. “You want to go back to our lodgings? But this is such a fine home...”

“It is not my home anymore.” She slid her hand down and into his, gripping it firmly before tugging him toward the door. Like a dog on a leash, he followed. “Smith.” She paused by the door. “Can you please see that this space is fit for a small wedding tomorrow? My fiancé and I will return before noon to ready ourselves.”

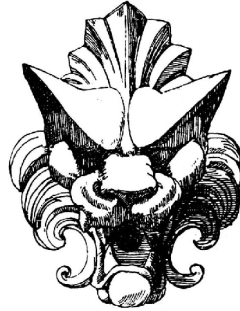
“Yes, of course, my lady,” Smith said with a deep bow. His lips twitched, as though he wanted to say more, but could not quite get the words out.

“Do not fear. I will make sure you are all taken care of.” She glanced up at Tyclon. “I believe my lord has a manor in need of some new staff, but we can negotiate all of that after the wedding.”

Smith dipped his head, but his relief was palpable. Tyclon could see that no matter what the man had thought of her father, he trusted Isabella in a way that warmed Tyclon’s heart as well. She was good. Truly good. And he was the luckiest monster alive.

Chapter Thirty

Isabella



Isabella stared up at the townhouse. It looked different today, though she knew that had nothing to do with its design and everything to do with the fact that she could step inside with no fear.

She hoped that today was the last day she would lay eyes on this place; she had already sent to the family lawyer to make instructions on the sale of the property, and extended letters of employment for the staff to take up at their will. Tyclon had assured her there was room, and the thought of bringing familiar faces to an unfamiliar manor was a comfort.

“Shall we?” Tyclon asked. He held an arm out to her and she took it, letting him lead her up the steps and into the foyer.

In just a few short hours, it had been transformed. There were colorful bouquets of flowers decorating the space and ribbons had been woven through the rails of the staircase, dangling below like white vines that fluttered in a slight breeze, and sunlight streamed in from the long windows near the door. It was magical.

“Do you like it?” a voice called from the stairs.

“Maris!” Isabella’s landed on her friend and she released Tyclon, running forward as though she were a young child and not a lady of standing. She shot up the stairs and clasped her friend’s hands, drawing her into a gentle embrace. “You’re here. I had hoped, but...”

“As though I would miss your wedding.” Maris pulled away, and Isabella could see that her friend was still bruised. Not long enough had passed for the damage to have faded, but despite that, she looked radiant. “It is so good to see you.”

“And you,” Isabella said, relief washing over her. No more would Father hurt this girl or any other.

“Come. We must get you ready for your special moment.” Maris reached for Isabella’s hand and drew her up the stairs, and with a small wave, Isabella left Tyclon, knowing that before long, they would be together always.

“Can you believe that he’s gone?” Isabella asked as they neared the top of the stairs. So strange to think that only yesterday she stood here in her dead mother’s gown to scare her father into a confession.

“I cannot. I expect him to come raging out of doorways at any moment,” Maris confessed. She reached up to touch her face. Isabella did not think there would be permanent damage, but it was hard to look at her friend like this.

“I am so sorry that I was not here to protect you, Maris,” she said. “Can you forgive me?”

“For being dragged to the ball by royal decree?” Maris raised an eyebrow. “You can hardly be at fault for that, or for your father’s actions. Besides...” Maris’ gaze flicked downstairs, and Isabella followed the line of her vision to find the orc guard, Caleb, standing below. “It turned out well for both of us.”

“Maris!” Isabella squealed, tugging her friend toward the bedroom. “You must tell me everything, but while we ready ourselves.”

“You are right,” Maris said. “I have laid out a few gowns for you to choose from.”

“Just how long have you been here?” Isabella demanded in a faux bossy voice. “I ordered you to be removed so you could recover, and here you are, already back at work.” She laughed though, and Maris joined her, the two of them sharing an amused glance.

“I only want you to have the best wedding that you can, under the circumstances.”

“I shall be the talk of the town, perhaps! A rapid wedding at home. What will people say?”

“Do you care?” Maris asked, raising an eyebrow.

Isabella shook her head. “Not anymore. Typhon has shown me I need not live in fear.” She closed the door behind them and turned to the bed, where there were indeed several dresses laid out. A lovely white gown in a simple style that would be

utterly fitting for a wedding, her mother's wedding gown, which was in a slightly older style but still excellent.

And the emerald gown she had adapted for the ball but never had a chance to wear.

"This one," Isabella said, stepping forward to touch the fabric. "I'm to be the lady of a forest manor, after all. It's only fitting." She glanced at Maris over her shoulder and grinned. "And to hell with the expectations of society."

"Perfect," Maris said, stepping forward.

She helped Isabella into her clothes, and even as she put on the layers, Isabella thought that there must be a better way to dress than this, and once she was away from this place, she would explore those options. When that was done, Isabella sat to let Maris at her hair.

"So, now it is your turn. Tell me what happened between you and the orc."

"Caleb."

"I know his name, Maris! Just tell me what happened. I thought he was sweet on you the day that they came to get me for the ball."

Maris was quiet for a moment, and Isabella could see in the mirror's surface that the other woman was pursing her lips, a flush coloring her cheeks.

"Well, I took quite the shine to him as well," Maris finally said. "And then he took me out of this place. He was so gentle, Isabella. He cradled me the entire way to the Hall and carried

me to a room. He barely left me side.” She let out a little laugh. “The countess took notice. She is a woman of incredible intelligence and observation. If you’ll have us, she has released him to become staff for Marquis K’var.”

“Maris!” Isabella cried out and spun in her chair, wrapping an arm around her friend. “Yes. Oh course! I know he will say yes. He only wants for me to be happy and this—this—delights me.”

Maris stroked Isabella’s hair, and then gently pried her off. “If you are to secure this arrangement, then I suggest we finish getting you ready.”

Isabella laughed. “Yes, you are quite right.” With a happy sigh, she turned back to the mirror and allowed Maris to work her magic.



Finally, it was happening.

Maris had assured her that everyone was ready and waiting, and the only thing left to do was walk down those stairs and take her place beside Tyclon. Become his wife. Her hands trembled, and she wished she had something to hold; maybe that would steady them. Instead, she clasped them together in front of her and set her shoulders back as she walked to the top of the stairs.

The stairs where so much had happened. Her mother's death, her father's arrest, and now, her marriage.

Inhaling deeply, she took that first step, keeping her eyes lowered to the stairs, almost afraid to look below in case Tyclon had changed his mind. It was all too good to be true. She had her future waiting for her, and it was brighter than she had ever hoped for.

Someone picked out a light tune on the piano in the other room, and Isabella looked up, frowning. Who was that? They were very good and could teach her a few things. Not that it mattered right now. No. The only thing that mattered was him.

Her gaze yearned for him, and he was easy to find, towering over the few others present, his long tail swishing back and forth as he watched her walk down the stairs. She could see the hunger in his eyes, could feel the responding burn of it in her core. Oh, but he was a decadent, lovely monster. She quickened her pace, practically skipping down the last few steps so that she could get to his side sooner. He held out a hand, and she reached for it, letting him draw her closer.

"You look beautiful," he said, his voice a warm rumbling purr that banished any remaining nerves she might have had.

"And you look very dapper," she replied, smiling up at him.

The music stopped, and Isabella glanced over her shoulder to see Countess Stalbridge exit the drawing room. She looked as regal as ever in the rich red that seemed to be her signature color, and though she could not swear to it, Isabella thought

the older woman winked as she crossed to stand beside Maris and Caleb.

The church clerk had already begun the ceremony, but Isabella found she could barely concentrate on the words coming from his mouth. The warm buzz of her affection and joy clouded out everything else. Shortly though, Tyclon squeezed her hand, bringing her back down to earth.

“My darling Isabella,” he said, moving so that they were facing each other. “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” He pulled a silver band from his pocket and slid it onto her finger. It fit just right, and she did not know how he had managed that.

She smiled at him, pressing her lips tight so that she did not sob. Isabella thought it would be her turn next, but Tyclon gestured to Caleb, who moved closer, lifting a box for Tyclon. Her feline monster lifted the lid and withdrew a beautiful necklace strung with pearls and an emerald pendant. Isabella gasped, a hand fluttering to her lips as he presented it to her.

“This is from the night we first met. Your father broke this necklace, but this is a promise that I will never break your heart.”

The tears came then, running down her face so quickly that she had to use both hands to wipe them away.

“Ty,” she uttered. “It’s beautiful.”

“Just like you,” he purred, and then he moved behind her to place the necklace around her neck and do up the clasp. It sat perfectly above her cleavage, and she knew she would cherish it for the rest of her life. She pressed one hand to it and then turned in his arms, going up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

The countess and Maris giggled and in delight, while the clerk gave a harrumph.

“If you could, please wait until we have completed the ceremony,” he said, distaste clear in his voice.

Isabella blushed as she turned, straightening herself out. And then her face fell when she realized she had no ring to give him.

But he was there to save her, pulling another ring from his pocket and placing it into her hand. She bit her lip, so touched that he had taken such care of this moment, and relieved that she had something to give him in return. Isabella took a deep breath to recenter herself and then she said, “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” She slid the ring onto Typhon’s finger, locking him to her always.

The clergyman spoke from the bible, but Isabella did not care. As far as she was concerned, they were wed and the paperwork could wait. She leapt into his arms and he swept her up, crushing his mouth to hers. She kissed back, not caring how indecorous they were being. All thoughts of anyone else

disappeared in his embrace and she knew everything would be well in her world from here.

Chapter Thirty-One

Six Months Later



Isabella sat in the drawing room of Lowvalley Manor, the midday light streaming through the large windows and pooling on the floor. She was darning yet another of Ty's socks - he was forever getting holes in them because of his claws, and yet he refused to give up wearing the garments.

Maris sat nearby, sewing a wee blanket, the roundness of her belly making it a little difficult. There was blissful peace between the two of them, both content in their new lives, she as the lady of the manor, and Maris as wife of the guard. Once she had healed, she had wed Caleb and Tyclon had ensured they had a place in good standing within his household.

He truly would do anything for Isabella, and she was so grateful, not only for that security, but because her friend was no longer also expected to wait on her. She had other maids for that now.

Wedded life was bliss, and so was the distance between the manor and London, or anywhere else. While Tyclon's mother may have believed she was banishing him as punishment, it

had turned out to be more of a blessing as far as Isabella was concerned. Even if it meant that Tyclon had to overnight elsewhere occasionally.

She sat up straighter at the sound of boots in the corridor. She knew the heavy thud of that tread so well.

He was home.

Tyclon appeared at the doorway, his golden eyes gleaming.

“My darling,” he purred, and it made her light up inside how just a few words could still make her tingle. “Would you like to hunt?” He raised a brow, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Yes!” She practically threw her darning to one side and leapt from the chair, kicking off her slippers as she walked toward the door.

“Oh,” she said, turning to Maris. “Remind me, when are our guests due to arrive?” Now that they had returned the manor to its former glory, they were hosting a weekend for some of the other couples who had wed after the Monsters Ball. After a completely failed appearance at a gathering of purely normal human couples, she and Tyclon had both decided to only socialize with those who fell into the same situation as them. Humans and monsters in matrimony, or even only monster couples.

This had proven much more enjoyable for all involved.

“Not until tomorrow, Isa, but if anyone should arrive early, I will tell them not to enter the woods.” Maris had a knowing smile on her face, though she was doing her best to keep it

tamped down. In the past, Isabella might have blushed at this, but she was free from such restrictions now.

Free in so many senses of the word.

“Thank you,” Isabella said, and with that she stripped off her overdress so that she was only in the breeches that she now wore daily, and her chemise. They did not stand by normal societal standards here, and for that she was so pleased.

Tyclon held out a hand and Isabella moved forward as if to reach for it, but then she took off running down the hallway with a glee that she’d only ever experienced in childhood.

He was much faster than she, though, and within moments he had snatched her from the ground and thrown her over his shoulder, giving her buttocks a firm slap as he did. Isabella squealed in delight.

“Put me down you beast,” she cried through tears of laughter.

“Not until I’ve decided whether to take you to hunt, or to bed,” he growled.

“Why not both?” she asked coyly. She could feel his body tense a little at the suggestion.

“Oh, my wife is so much wiser than I,” he said, slipping her from his shoulder until she was standing again. The rough graze of their bodies was enough to make her consider just taking him to bed, but she had other plans in mind.

“It is good that you can admit that,” Isabella said, drawing him down for a kiss. Long and sweet and hot and full of

promise.

They would hunt: she, small game with a bow, and he something much bigger that would feed them for days. And then they would make love in the leaves beneath the towering trees and maybe, just maybe, she would tell him about her own swelling belly and the new life contained within.