

MAGGIE MAYHEM

POSSESSIVE
MONSTERS

MANTICORE
MADNESS

A PARANORMAL MONSTER ROMANCE

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Manticore Madness

Possessive Monsters Book 5

By Maggie Mayhem

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CHAPTER 1



EVA

“OKAY, OKAY! JEEZ, HOLD your horses, I’m coming!” I yelled, stomping down the stairs toward the incessant pounding on my door.

I didn’t know what Tony had against doorbells, but this was the second night in a row that my good-for-nothing asshat of a brother was waking me up after midnight by banging on my door. When I’d opened up yesterday, he’d rushed in like he’d stolen the flipping Mona Lisa. He wouldn’t tell me what was going on, and since I had work in the morning, I’d ignored him and gone right back to bed. When I woke up this morning, he’d already left.

And now he was back, pulling the same assholery? Fan-fucking-tastic.

This time, I wasn’t going to let him in until he told me what was going on. The last thing I needed was gangsters knocking on my door because they thought he lived here. The little shit was never up to any good.

The pounding started up again, this time with a sense of urgency. I got to the first landing and flipped on the lights. I winced at the sudden change in brightness, cursing at the unnatural cool tone of the power-saving bulbs. I really needed to get those things changed to something that gave off a warmer light.

If he thought pulling this stunt would get him a set of my keys so he could come and go anytime he wanted, he had another thing coming. Our parents had left the house to me for a reason. Tony would probably trash the place.

My cat Sriracha stood in front of the door, hissing and snarling. That was normal. I had named him Sriracha because he had a touch of spice for a Persian cat but was really quite mild when it came down to it. Kind of like the hot sauce. As a hobbyist cat groomer, I'd encountered my share of super spicy kitties.

Sriri had never liked Tony, and always hissed at him every time they met.

"I know, Sriri, baby. He's annoying, isn't he?" I scooped the not-so-little floof up into my arms before opening the door—

And found myself gawking at the massive stranger standing in front of me who most definitely was *not* my brother.

The man towered over me. He had to be at least six and a half feet tall, maybe more. He had sharp features and a strong jawline, with light brown eyes that almost looked to be gleaming yellow under the porch lights. His hair was slicked back off his face. He was good looking, but beneath his handsome features, there was a darkness lurking, just under the surface, itching to get out. I wasn't sure if it was his intense glare or the hint of danger that surrounded him, but I was instantly on high alert. He had that look that screamed he could be your ruin if you let him.

Fuck. Why the hell didn't I check to make sure it was Tony before I opened the door?

"Oh. I thought you were my brother." I looked at the screen door that separated us to make sure it was locked, though I

honestly had no idea what the flimsy door was going to do if this guy decided he wanted to knock it down. Well, I did know. It would do nothing. “Can I help you?” The words came out tougher and angrier than I felt. Which was a good thing, right?

He crossed his arms over his wide chest and raised his eyebrows at me in a way that sent shivers down my spine, but didn’t otherwise respond. There was a slight shimmer around him that I recognized as glamour, an illusion spell. If this was the way he decided to appear to the world, how much scarier was he without it?

Having lived most of my life in Darlington, I’d grown up knowing about magic and monsters, even before the magical Wall that prevented humans from seeing into the paranormal world had fallen. He must be a monster of some kind, but I didn’t know which.

There was an unmarked black SUV in the driveway. Law enforcement? Gangster? If Tony was involved, it could be either. But the stranger wasn’t in uniform, so I assumed the latter. He looked more like a club bouncer, or maybe security for the mob. Not a cop.

“I think you got the wrong house,” I said as I started to close the door.

There was a loud sound as the useless lock on my screen door gave way and a hand stopped me from closing the front door. Suddenly terrified, I shoved at the door as hard as I could, with Sriracha still hissing up a storm in my arms. But the door was not closing any time soon. The realization hit me that if this guy wanted into my house, he was getting in. Nothing would stop him.

Why, oh *why*, did I assume it was Tony? I was such an idiot! I could see the headline in tomorrow’s paper now: *Really Dumb Fuck Opens Door for Axe Murderer*.

“Calm down, woman. I just want to talk.” The man’s voice was low and rumbly. Given that he was currently forcing his way into my foyer, his words didn’t make me feel any better.

Who the hell pounds on someone's door after midnight because they "want to talk"?

I did the opposite of calm down: I panicked. I ran to the powder room and locked myself and Sriri inside. I dug in my robe pocket for my phone. Fuck! It was still on the bedside table in my room.

"Get out of my house!" I yelled. "I'm calling the police." He didn't need to know my phone was upstairs.

"Relax. I'm here investigating a theft."

He wanted me to believe that he was here with the police investigating something at midnight? Sure, and I was a monkey's uncle.

"Go away."

"*You* opened the door for *me*."

"I thought you were someone else." Oh! Maybe this guy was looking for Tony. "If this is about Tony, I've got nothing to do with it."

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "I'm done playing nice. Come out, woman. You know I can break that door down if I want to. And I can do it long before the cops get here."

Ha! So he *wasn't* a cop. I knew it.

"Let me guess, Tony owes you money, right? Well, he left this morning, and he's probably not coming back. He doesn't live here, and before he showed up yesterday, I hadn't seen him in years."

The door handle to the powder room turned and broke, and the door opened. Ugh! So much for locks. I reached for the first thing I could get my hands on, which happened to be a super intimidating pump bottle of foaming soap. I brandished it in front of me like a weapon.

The stranger took one look at me and burst out laughing.

I tried to use the moment to squeeze past him, but he grabbed me hard by the arm. I hissed, sounding much like my cat, and tried to pull away. I found myself smashed up against a hard,

muscular body. The guy was huge and could squash me like a bug if he wanted to. At five foot six, I was average in height, and with my love of all things yummy, I was...well, slightly above average in everything else, especially my breasts, hips and thighs. But next to him, I felt positively tiny.

I let out the loudest scream I could, hoping to wake the neighbors, but before anything more than a squeak could come out, he slapped a thick palm over my mouth. It felt almost furry, which was weird, and something sharp pressed against my cheek. Claws? What the hell was I up against?

Sriracha swiped a paw at him before leaping to the floor and sprinting under the couch.

With his hand still over my mouth, he turned me to face him. “*You’re* the thief? You’ve got to be kidding me—never mind. Let’s get to work. Tell me where the artifact is, and no one gets hurt, okay?” He narrowed his eyes at me. I could see now that the glow in them was most definitely yellow, almost the same color as Sriri’s eyes. “You’ve probably already guessed I’m not with the police, and I’m not with the EA, either. Which means I don’t need to follow any of their stupid rules. My client doesn’t care what I do, so long as he gets his stolen artifact back.”

Stolen artifact? That was unexpected. That wasn’t Tony’s usual MO. Usually it would be drugs or something.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said the moment he took his hand from my mouth.

“I know it’s here, woman. We have video evidence of the thief entering this abode yesterday around this time.”

That had to be my brother, then. The douche canoe probably stole whatever-it-was to sell for a quick buck and used my place as a safe house, thereby putting me in the line of fire. Ugh! I was going to neuter him the next time I saw him!

Mr. Big and Scary turned me back around, his arms still around me, my back to him, the crook of his elbow right under my chin.

“From now on, you do as I say. And you’re going to start by showing me where you hid the locket. March.”

“I already told you: I have no idea what you’re talking about. My brother dropped by unannounced yesterday, so it’s probably him. But I had to work in the morning, so I went to bed after letting him in. He was gone by the time I woke up. If he left anything in the house, that’s completely on him. I have no idea about it, but you’re welcome to have a look.”

As if I could stop him.

“Lies. He’s still here. I’ve been watching the video feeds all day. He never left.”

I don’t know who this guy got his information from, but they were dead wrong. I was one hundred and ten percent sure Tony had left. I’d searched the whole house for him, even the basement, which had all my parents’ old stuff in it. I hated going down there because seeing their things made me miss them. That was why I’d redecorated with a bunch of cheap crap when I moved in. Cheap crap didn’t have memories attached to it.

“Well, in that case”—I gestured grandly at my tiny home—“go right ahead and find him.”

CHAPTER 2



MATEO

THE PRETTY BLONDE WOMAN was glaring at me with so much righteous anger that it made me wonder for a fraction of a second if I'd gone to the wrong house. The Persian cat she held in her arms looked similarly pissed off.

She'd taken the time to throw on a plush, dark blue robe, but the tie had come loose as we struggled, revealing a silky black nightie underneath. It was cut low at the front, and the swell of her ample breasts peeked out the top. It was everything I could do not to stare.

"Are you happy now?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips. The movement pulled the hem of her robe open, flashing me a glimpse of generous thigh, which was even more enticing to me than her assets up above.

I forced myself to drag my eyes away and look up at her face. She was cute. Not Hollywood starlet beautiful, but the adorable, make-your-heart-melt kind. The kind that made me jealous of the cat in her arms. Even angry, she was fetching.

I searched her entire house but found nothing. The only strange thing was the spare room, which was set up with a pet grooming station, complete with hose and tub. That seemed like a lot for one tiny cat.

There was also magical residue in her living room, but that was pretty standard for most homes here in Darlington, what with all the witches and wizards living here. She must be a witch of some sort. Not a green one, though. I'd seen the bedraggled state of the houseplants languishing on her windowsill.

But I knew now that the thief had been here. I could smell his cologne, the same one I'd scented at the museum where Desmon's priceless treasure had gone missing. It was only faint, even with my exceptional sense of smell. Like he'd stepped into the home only briefly, then left.

That was impossible. I'd hacked into the various home security cameras in the neighborhood and had been monitoring this place since last night. He should still be inside! But now I'd personally searched the tiny home, a shoe box really, inside and out, and sure enough there was no one in it but one very disgruntled woman.

I also hadn't found the locket, or should I say the half locket, that had been stolen from Desmon's collection. It had been on display at the Darlington Museum—also owned by the dragon of Darlington—and was being packed up for return to his private collection when it had gone missing. The prime suspect was one of the museum's student volunteers.

The volunteers were from Darlington University's Magical Archeology department and were supposed to be thoroughly vetted before they came to do any work at the museum. We'd never had problems with them before, but that was the first thing I checked when I got the call last night from a thoroughly agitated Desmon. He'd opened the box of artifacts they'd returned to him and found one of his prized possessions missing.

Sure enough, a quick check of the security footage showed one of the volunteers, a guy called Eric, removing it from the

carton and pocketing it right before he sealed up the box. According to museum records, he'd been helping out there since the start of the school year, and had arrived with the other volunteers. We had a copy of his student ID card on file and everything. The problem was, the university claimed they'd never seen him before. Furthermore, they'd only sent two students this year, not three. The other volunteers had just assumed that Eric skipped a lot of classes which was why they never saw him at school.

Long story short, I tracked the guy the best I could, and it led me to this house and this woman.

"This doesn't make any sense," I grumbled, frustration oozing out of me with every word.

"What's there to make sense of, Einstein? I told you: he left."

Now that she'd had some time to gather her wits, she no longer cowered from me. The delicious, prey-like spike of fear I'd smelled when I first restrained her had faded into one of general wariness. She'd even started getting a little mouthy with me, though I had a feeling it was less a lack of fear and more because this was how she reacted to stress. Which made sense. I'd woken her up in the middle of the night and invaded her home.

To be honest, I kind of liked her sassing me. It made me want to order her to get on her knees and put her mouth to a better use. But that wasn't what I was here for. I was here for the missing locket.

"Feel free to leave any time." She made a shooping gesture at me before pointing a blue-tipped finger at the door.

Cute. Her nails matched her robe.

She put down her cat, but instead of running away from me and under the couch like before, it lunged for me, hissing and clawing at my legs. Hmm. Like his owner, the cat had lost some of his fear of me. I plucked the indignant kitty from my leg and held him aloft, his back to me, and sniffed.

Nope. No shifter here. And he didn't smell anything like the guy I was after, either.

I put him down and looked up to see the woman looking at me with her brows raised. Oops. I'd just sniffed her cat like some weirdo. I was used to working with shifters and other monsters, not cute little humans.

"Yeah, so, if you're done molesting my cat, the door is that way."

She scowled when I didn't move.

"You said your brother's name is Tony?"

"Yeah."

I dug my phone out of my pocket and showed her a copy of Eric's student ID, watching her face carefully to see her reaction. "Is this him?"

She leaned in, giving me a whiff of her fragrance. Vanilla with a hint of cassis. Delicious.

"*University of Darlington. Eric Matheson,*" she read out loud.

"Yes. He's been volunteering as a student at the Darlington Museum for just under six months."

She snorted. "As if Tony would ever get into college. He never even finished high school! But that's his face, all right." She sighed heavily. "Listen, I'm really sorry if he's been causing shit, but I have no control over him. This"—she gestured to the falsified student ID—"is new. I've never known him to do anything consistently for anywhere close to six months before. If I were you, I'd scour the newspapers and online buy-and-sell forums. He's always looking for the next bit of easy cash."

I wasn't ready to give up on my only lead just yet. "Unfortunately, this is the thief's last known location, so you are now the newest suspect in this case."

Her scowl turned into a look of shocked disbelief. "*Me?* What the hell! You looked. There's. Nothing. Here."

"I don't see anything here, no, but I do sense magic. You might be using magic to hide him and the locket from me."

"Right, because that makes so much more sense than my brother leaving this morning. Yeah, magic. That must be it."

Sure.” Her words dripped with sarcasm.

“I know for a fact the culprit never left. Your neighbor’s security camera catches sight of your door. There’s footage of you leaving for work in the morning and then returning home again, but that’s it. We checked the other cameras in the neighborhood, in case he went out the back door, but he never did. That means you”—I poked the tip of her nose, then snatched my finger away hastily as she tried to bite it—“are our newest prime suspect.”

“You went to all my neighbors?” she scowled.

“For the footage?” I shrugged. “No. I hacked into the network to grab the feed.”

The ordinary security systems sold to the average consumer are easy enough to bypass. And that’s fine. Most people don’t have extremely valuable treasures to protect. I, on the other hand, am accustomed to guarding priceless artifacts for a fire-breathing dragon. The fact that the locket had gone missing right out from under my nose had been a stab to my ego and called my professional abilities into question.

Which was why, come hell or high water, I *would* find it. I needed to prove to Desmon, and to myself, that I was still the best of the best. Technically, I hadn’t been on duty at the time the locket went missing, but I still took it as a personal failure.

“I never caught your name,” I said.

“That’s because I never gave it.” She eyed her phone, which was now on top of the counter. I’d discovered in my search that it had been on her bedside table and not on her person, which meant she’d lied about calling the cops when she’d locked herself in the powder room. What else was she lying about? I positioned myself to block her line of sight to the device.

“I’m Mateo.” I held out my hand, but she didn’t take it. She didn’t offer her name either. Well, I’d tried. “I’m sorry, Little Thief, but since you’re my only suspect, I’m afraid you’re coming with me.”

She lunged for the phone, just as I thought she would, but I caught her around the waist. I clapped a hand over her mouth, careful to keep my claws hidden, before she could scream and wake up the neighbors. She struggled against me, rubbing that deliciously round ass all over my front. I groaned.

“I would stop that if I were you. If you keep rubbing that ass against me, I’m going to think you’re asking me to fuck it.”

She froze immediately.

“Don’t forget,” I continued, “I don’t work for the police or the EA. I don’t have to follow rules. In fact, I kind of like breaking them. Especially when it comes to a sexy little witch like you.”

Her sweet spike of fear returned, and I couldn’t help burying my face into her neck to savor it, letting the untamed predator in me revel in it.

“Since scaring you doesn’t get you talking, maybe we can try bribery,” I continued. “If I get you screaming my name and coming all over my face, will you decide to be more cooperative with my investigation? I’m very good with my tongue.”

I smelled the rush of arousal coloring her fear. “Again, you’re welcome to try,” she panted against my hand, which I had relaxed enough to let her speak. “But I don’t know any more than I’ve already told you.”

This woman! As much as I wanted to have a little taste, she was distracting me from my job.

Just then, the gray fluff leaped out from under the couch, hissing and scratching in defense of his owner. Instinctively, I hissed right back. Little Thief’s eyes grew round. Oops. I forgot I was in disguise.

Faced with a bigger predator, the cat retreated, its ears flattened.

I dug out the canned spell I always kept on hand to get out of a jam without being spotted. It was a powerful spell that combined a blanket of silence, a look-away spell, and a sudden

burst of energy that messed up any recording device in the area for a few minutes.

I let her go and pulled back the ring tab, opening the can. Magic spilled out, enveloping us with a burst of sparkling light, fading so quickly most people would think they'd imagined it.

“A literal canned spell?”

I shrugged. “The wizard working for Desmon has an odd sense of humor. When we asked for canned spells, this is what we got.”

While the mini cans were kind of cute, they were unwieldy. I would have much preferred a foil-lined paper envelope, but he claimed those tore too easily, resulting in premature or accidental spell release. But I had to admit that I still preferred these mini tin cans over the glass bottles of old. I only needed to have one of those break in my trouser pocket once to realize I hated them. Not only had I accidentally opened a portal in my pants, I'd also had to deal with broken glass.

“Come on, Little Thief, let's go.”

“Argh, stop calling me that! I'm not a thief!”

“Well, you never gave me your name.”

“It's Eva,” she said with a pout.

“Eva,” I mused. “Well, Eva, you're mine until I find this treasure.”

CHAPTER 3



EVA

SASSING OUT THE SCARY dude with the golden eyes wasn't the smartest thing to do, obviously, but I couldn't seem to control myself. Nope. I was turning sassing into an Olympic sport. I blamed it on the nerves.

I was like this around any kind of authority figure, to be honest. I got nervous and started acting like a smartass despite myself. It was like the world's worst instinct, and it had gotten me in trouble before, mouthing off at my teachers and even a cop once at a traffic stop. But this time was probably the worst, because I now found myself locked up in some mercenary's basement because he thought I'd stolen some ancient artifact from a dragon.

At least it wasn't a drab, grungy cell in a dungeon belonging to an angry dragon. Mateo's basement was far from that. If anything, it reminded me of a secret agent hideout. It was split into two rooms, and I was currently in the office area.

There were several large screens set above his desk, and on them were playing a bunch of video feeds, one of which belonged to my neighbor. It did indeed catch sight of the front door of my home. Another was trained on the traffic light at the end of my street. Several others showed the inside of a museum. There were also shelves full of weird gizmos and gadgets, some receiver thing with like a billion dials, and a cot, on which I was currently sitting.

The other room looked like a super high-tech gym where he could train. There was one-man hot tub in the corner that looked particularly enticing. It must be for when he was sore from wrestling artifact thieves. There was also a futuristic pod that I hadn't yet figured out the use of, and a bunch of advanced diagnostic equipment. It was hard to believe we were underneath a charming Victorian in a quiet neighborhood. I almost expected a magical version of Q to show up and hand him more magic in a can.

Seriously, literal canned spells? I would've thought it was a joke if I hadn't seen it myself.

According to the various wall clocks, which displayed local time as well as the time in several other cities, it was already five to nine, which meant I'd been here for at least eight hours. Mateo had spent the first hour or so grilling me, trying to poke holes in my story, and when he'd gotten tired of doing that, he'd taken a nap upright, sitting in the office chair in front of the screens. Somehow, I had managed to fall asleep on the cot, despite being in a strange place. I had woken up to him tapping away on his laptop.

Crap. Five to nine also meant that in five minutes, I'd be late for work. My overbearing, watch-you-work-over-your-shoulder boss was going to be pissed. I could already picture the steam coming out of her ears, but honestly, Tamara was the least of my problems right now.

No, that award went to the monster currently pacing a trench into the concrete floor as he explained to the dragon on the phone that no, he had not, in fact, retrieved his treasure yet. I couldn't quite hear what was being said since the conversation

was happening in the other room, but from Mateo's half of it, things didn't sound good.

I didn't envy him. I'd much rather face Tamara's judgy disappointment than a dragon's wrath. Getting fired was much better than getting set *on* fire. I almost felt bad for Mateo. Almost. I just hoped he wouldn't take it out on me.

In the end, he hadn't actually tried to convince me to talk by offering sexual favors, and I was secretly a bit disappointed. What a tease.

Seriously, my fear response was completely broken. I'd been kidnapped from my home and locked in a basement, and instead of shaking in fear like a normal person, I kept wondering what my kidnapper hid behind the illusion spell he wore. What was up with that?

Whatever he was, it was definitely some kind of predator; the spell wasn't strong enough to hide that.

Mateo shoved his phone back into his pocket as he entered the room and slumped into the chair in front of his laptop.

"What's your brother's number, Little Thief?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes; he'd been calling me that all morning. "I don't have it memorized, and *somebody* didn't let me bring my phone."

He dug out his phone again, and held it up to take a photo.

"Say cheese," he said, then snapped the pic before I could react.

"What are you doing?"

"He's your brother. He'll come for you if I send him this."

I looked at him for a moment before bursting out laughing. "You're funny," I wheezed between cackles. "As if Tony would ever think about anyone other than himself. I bet he stopped by my house on purpose, just to waste your time." I looked at the clock again. I was now officially late for work. Remembering the time I'd arrived fifteen minutes late because of a flat tire and Tamara had launched into this whole spiel, asking why I even bothered to come in at all if I was going to

be late, I decided I wasn't going to go to work today. "How about I go one better? I'll tell you where he lives."

Mateo had done a search first thing this morning and found no address linked to my brother's name. In fact, he'd found nothing at all on him, except for two previous arrests that had him listed at a shelter address. But I knew where Tony was staying. He was housesitting while his friend was serving a five-year sentence—though I wouldn't really call it housesitting, since the place would've probably been better taken care of if he hadn't been there. He'd trashed it.

"How do I know you're not wasting my time, Little Thief? You could be taking me on a wild goose chase, just like your brother wants."

"Because I have no love for that jerk. Not after what he did."

That piqued Mateo's interest. "What did he do? I mean, besides stealing a dragon's treasure and leading me straight to you."

I looked at my feet. "When I was a teenager, a bunch of scary-ass mobsters showed up at my parent's door, demanding they pay them back for a loan they never took out. You can guess who was involved. It cost them their entire retirement plan *and* my whole college fund. We even had to down-size our home, but we made it work. Then, to top it off, the last time he visited, he stole my car. Then he crashed it."

"Huh. Great guy."

"Yup. I promised myself I was never helping him again. The only reason I let him in the other night was because it was late, and I was too tired to argue, and I figured I'd deal with it in the morning. But then in the morning he was gone. I seriously don't know how he left if he didn't take the front or back door."

Mateo had gone through the footage around my home again, and sure enough, it showed Tony getting into my home, but never leaving. So weird. It was like he'd been beamed up or something.

“There was a substantial amount of magical residue in your living room. I assumed it was merely from your practice.”

I shook my head. “Nope. I know Mom’s side of the family used to have magic, long ago, but none of us have shown any magical ability for generations.”

“Must have been a portal, then.”

“That makes sense. But Tony doesn’t have any magic either. Someone else must have put him up to it. Actually, that’s probably the best explanation. He’s not the type to steal magical artifacts, and he definitely isn’t the type to wait months to do it. He’s more of an instant gratification kind of guy.”

“All right, then.” Mateo stood, picking up the ballistic vest he’d taken off last night from the desk. “Bring me to his place, Little Thief. I’d better not find out you’re lying or giving me the runaround.”

I seethed at the nickname he’d given me. “Would you stop? I’m not a thief. What happened to innocent until proven guilty?”

“Exactly what a thief would say.” He turned away from me.

“You know what? I was going to be nice and help you so you didn’t get roasted by a dragon for failing your mission, but screw that. You can go find Tony yourself.” I crossed my arms over my chest with finality.

I don’t know how I expected him to react, but he was silent as he approached a locker and pressed his index finger to a lock pad. That opened the locker, exposing a huge arsenal of weapons and armor. Yep, this place had total secret agent vibes going on. But if he kept insisting on calling me a thief, it was going to get downgraded from Secret Agent Hideout to Supervillain Lair, pronto.

I blinked when after hanging the vest up, Mateo started peeling off his skin-tight black T-shirt, exposing his broad, muscular shoulders and lats that formed a perfect V down to his trim waist. Would a hero or a villain be more likely to have

such a perfectly sculpted body? Hmm. Maybe he was a bit of both.

I'd satisfied myself that he was, in fact, responsible for the artifacts on display at the museum. Why else would he have the feeds constantly playing on the screen? It wasn't exactly a gripping show. If that wasn't enough, I'd spotted his museum name tag on his desk as well, naming him as Head of Security. So he *was* truly looking for a missing artifact, and hadn't just shown up at my house in the middle of the night to kidnap me. Then again, he *did* kidnap me. And he had stated very clearly that he didn't care much about rules.

I was still trying to figure out if all this made him more of a villain or a hero when he turned around, revealing some perfect pecs. I had to remind myself that he was still wearing an illusion, which meant what I saw wasn't necessarily what I got, but glamour spells usually worked with whatever was already there, so whatever this guy was, he was fit.

"Okay, I'll stop calling you Little Thief. But you're going find this artifact for me. Or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I'm locking you up in Desmon's dungeon and throwing away the key."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I? Technically, you're still my prisoner."

"No...wait... I only agreed to bring you to where Tony's staying. I never said the artifact would be there. He could have sold it already, for all I know."

"I guess we'd better hurry, then. You have three days."

"*Three days?* You just totally made that up."

"What if I did?"

"Okay, whatever. But can we at least please stop by my place so I can grab my phone and change?" I stuck out my foot. "I don't even have shoes."

"Footwear is overrated."

“Says the one with heavy combat boots.”

He looked down at his feet but didn't reply.

“I also need to feed Sriracha. It's way past his breakfast time.”

“Sriracha? Isn't that a type of hot sauce?”

“Yes, but it's also my cat's name. He throws a fit when his food is late.”

“What's the worst he can do? Bite you with his smooch face? Does he even have a jaw?”

“Hey now, I happen to *like* his smooch face. And trust me, he's vicious when he wants to be.”

Mateo rolled his eyes, clearly not convinced. “Fine. We'll go.”

CHAPTER 4



MATEO

SRIRACHA'S SLEEK COAT GLISTENED in the sunlight as he groomed himself, never once taking his eyes off me.

Since I had decreed that Eva was staying with me until the locket was in my possession, and I doubted a simple trip to her brother's place would produce the much-sought-after artifact, I insisted she pack up some clothes and bring them over to my place, together with her cat.

She agreed on the condition that I feed her precious feline as she got her things together. Not knowing what I was getting myself into, I had made the deal. But the little cat didn't like me to begin with. Not only that, his breakfast was several hours late. The end result was that the peeved Persian attacked me on sight. His little smush face meant his jaws and teeth were weak, but he had strong claws for such a small creature. Fortunately, my thick skin and fur meant I survived his numerous attacks.

He'd descended upon the bowl the second I put it on the adorable cartoon fishbone mat that designated his feeding spot. He ate like he'd never been fed before in his life, even though his physique said otherwise.

As he devoured his meal, I went to take a look at Eva's powder room door. I felt bad for breaking it and was hoping it would be an easy fix, but the wood around the handle had cracked under the excessive force I'd used. I'd have to get her a whole new door.

I went back into the kitchen to see that Sriracha had already finished his food. Now that his belly was full, I figured he would be much more approachable. I inched in and reached for his empty bowl. The cat moved fast, claws extended, and I snatched my hand away just in time. Okay, cat. Your dirty bowl could stay.

Eva came down the stairs carrying a gray and black leopard print gym bag. She had on a tight-fitting sweater tunic and printed gray leggings. I usually didn't notice what women wore unless it was super flashy, but the blue sweater hugged her form in such a way that it had the blood draining from my big brain up top down to my other one down below.

Realizing I was staring like an idiot, I pretended I was only looking at the print on her leggings. I squinted, trying to make out the pattern. Oh.

"There are humping cats on your pants," I blurted out.

"So? What's wrong with that?" she asked defensively.

"Nothing."

She caught sight of my arm and frowned. I looked down too, but couldn't see anything wrong with the illusion.

"How did you manage to feed him without getting all scratched up?"

So she'd sent me on a dangerous mission, knowing full well what would happen.

I held my arm out, turning it. I could say I was too fast for her feline friend, but that would be a lie. Sriracha was very quick.

“My skin is tough. His claws can’t puncture it.”

Eva grabbed my arm in disbelief, sending a tiny shock of awareness right through me. She didn’t react to it, though, so I must have been the only one who’d felt it. She massaged the skin of my forearm with her fingers, as if trying to find secret scratches hidden by the illusion. She frowned, and I wondered just how powerful the glamour spell I had was.

Some spells only offered a small amount of protection, hiding our bodies behind a visual illusion. Most hid what you were by way of touch too, but they were far from foolproof, meant only for occasional, accidental contact.

Eva was doing a lot more than that. Did it feel like skin to her? Or fur?

Her furrowed brows told me I didn’t feel normal, that was for sure.

“What the...”

Surely she knew I was in glamour.

Unlike some monsters who had chosen to forgo illusion spells altogether since the fall of The Wall, I opted to wear mine as much as possible. Mainly because people reacted horribly to my scorpion tail, and I hated causing a scene.

Occasionally, when I wanted to use my natural form to intimidate, I went *au naturel*. But that was only for special occasions and at Desmon’s request. Apparently, a human guard was a lot less intimidating than a manticore and having a monster of legend guarding his special displays added to the appeal.

I wasn’t able to shift into a fully human form, but I could choose between a real lion’s body on all fours or the anthropomorphic version that stood on two legs. I considered the latter to be my “natural” form, since it was the one I used most in daily life behind the illusion. It was also a lot more convenient, since almost everything was designed with human bodies in mind.

I was still furry all over, and while my hands were more like paws with claws than human hands, I did have opposable

thumbs. Just don't ask me to use chopsticks or anything like that. My hands were horrible for intricate work; they were designed instead for picking up weapons and smashing whatever needed to be smashed. The best thing ever to happen to society was the switchover to typing rather than using a pen. I could type just fine, but my penmanship rivaled that of doctors when it came to legibility.

Eva's hands had moved down from my forearm to my palm. "It's...velvety." She closed her eyes and continued to touch me.

I clenched my jaw to stop the rumbling that threatened to start in my chest. I was a monster. Even the name mantichore, meaning man-eater, was meant to strike fear. I did not purr like a mere housecat. But my chest, it seemed, hadn't gotten that memo. A loud rumble escaped, and that had Eva's eyes popping back open again.

"If you're done molesting my cat," I said with a smirk, throwing her own words back at her, "the door is that way."

She scowled and snatched her hand away. "You're no kitten."

"No? Then what am I?"

She wrinkled her nose. So cute. "Well, you can't be a shifter because then you wouldn't need an illusion spell. What type of monster is furry all over?"

"Not all over, actually. This is my real face."

My tail was also smooth, though she'd probably freak out if she saw or touched it. That was the part that scared people the most. A lion with a man's face usually had people gasping. The wyvern wings made their jaws drop. And then the scorpion tail had them running.

"You have day-old stubble. That's furry enough."

"There are other parts that are smooth." I gave her my best suggestive smile. "If you need more to work with, I've got other places for you to molest."

It took a moment for her to react. Then she flushed bright red and made a face. "Ugh! Men." She stomped over to the

kitchen counter to pack up some extra bowls and a big Ziploc bag of food for Sriracha. The cat had his own separate mini duffel that matched Eva's.

I laughed and picked up her gym bag, mostly so I wouldn't be asked to pick up the cat. Those claws might not be able to get past the thick skin on my arms, but my face was another matter.

She picked up the spoiled feline and cuddled it to her chest. That was when I realized Sriracha's collar was the same blue as Eva's top. The two matched, blue and gray. Had she chosen her wardrobe to match her cat, or was it the other way around?

She walked in front of me as we headed back to my SUV, with Sriracha glaring at me over her shoulder. Technically, the SUV belonged to the museum, but the driver's seat had been modified to accommodate my tail. As long as no one tried to sit in the seat behind me, it was fine, which was why I always kept a bag of tools there.

Eva directed me to a less-than-stellar part of town and to a row of run-down townhomes with peeling paint and grimy, barred windows. I parked around the corner and stayed in the car with Sriracha as she went to ring the bell.

She was frowning as she made her way back to me and opened the passenger side door. "I don't think he's home. Well, technically, it's not his place. It's his friend's, but his buddy's in lock up."

Not home? Just as I'd expected. "Let's go in and see what we can find." I reached into the back seat for my tools.

"You're going to break in?" Her eyes were round.

"Do you have the keys?"

"No."

"Then yeah, we're going to break in. Come on."

"No way. I never agreed to break into anywhere. Unlike *you*, I don't break the law."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Okay, fine." I turned to Sriracha. "Hey, buddy, wanna come with me and be a cat-burglar?"

Her arms tightened around her cat. “Leave poor innocent Sriri out of this. He’s an upstanding feline citizen!”

“Well, one of you is coming with me.” I didn’t want her to run off while I was distracted, and I wasn’t beyond using her cat as collateral—or would that be cat-lateral?

“Come on. You honestly think I’m going to steal your car? Where the hell do you think I’m going to run to? *You know where I live.*”

The little minx did have a point. I leaned in close to her and inhaled, but didn’t smell any lies. “All right. You can stay here. But you’d better be here what I get back.”

“Yes, boss.”

I grinned at her ridiculous salute and adorable eye roll.

I opened a canned look-away spell and approached the home. The lock was an easy one to pick, so easy I didn’t need to waste any of my magical options. The second the door swung open, I knew that Eva had not let me astray. That same overpowering cologne I’d encountered at the crime scene and to a lesser extent in Eva’s home filled the space, except here it was fighting the stench of stale beer, sweat, and unwashed dishes.

The place was a mess. The walls were grimy and stained, and there was an unidentified mustard-yellow patch on the beige carpet. The smell of mold and mildew wafted out from the disgusting bathroom. Empty fast-food containers and crumpled beer cans littered the coffee table, and a layer of filth blanketed everything in sight. Everything looked...sticky.

Wow, this Tony guy was a slob.

I grabbed a pair of extra-large gloves from my bag and put them on. Thus protected from the film of gross covering everything, I searched the place thoroughly, but didn’t find the locket, nor anything else useful. No laptops, cell phones, or electronics of any kind. No IDs. No papers. It looked like all this guy ever did here was eat and sleep. I doubted he’d come back since stealing the artifact.

And if he'd used a portal to leave Eva's house, it certainly hadn't led here.

I made my way back to the car.

"Nothing?" Eva asked when she saw my grim face.

I shook my head.

"You have his number, call him."

"That would be a lot easier to do if I had my phone. You confiscated it, remember?"

Right, I had. I pulled it out of my bag. There were a dozen or so missed calls and messages on it. I frowned. Could it be her brother trying to contact her?

"What's your password?" I asked.

She stuck up her thumb. Oh. One of those.

I turned the screen around so she could use her thumbprint to unlock it.

"Great. You're going to read my messages? They might be private."

"They also might be crucial to the investigation," I said.

They weren't.

Every single message was from her boss, asking where the hell she was and why the hell hadn't she called in. Shit. That was my fault. Maybe I could convince a friend from the not-so-secret-anymore Enforcement Agency to say Eva was helping with an official investigation. Or I could call in a favor from a police friend. It would depend on whether her boss was human or monster.

"Your boss is pissed off."

She huffed. "What's new?"

"It's my fault."

"Yes," Eva agreed firmly. "Yes, it most certainly is."

I tossed the phone to her. "Don't call him yet. I'm going to track the location."

“You can do that?”

“No, but a friend can.”

As I drove us home, I flipped through the EA’s channels on the radio—something I wasn’t still supposed to have access to, oops—as Eva called her boss to let her know she wouldn’t be in today. From the pissed-off way she shoved her phone into her bag after ending the call, I guessed it didn’t go well.

We went in through the main door this time, rather than the side door which led straight down to the basement. I got Eva settled in the guest room.

“Ooh, so I get to stay above ground this time? Lucky me. I must be your favorite prisoner. And I didn’t even need to do you any special favors.” Her words oozed sarcasm.

I ran a hand through my hair, smoothing back the bits that had come out from the low ponytail I usually kept it in. Now that I’d gotten to know her a little bit, I didn’t want to treat her like a suspect anymore. I also didn’t want her to think of me as the enemy. I liked her sass, and would prefer she sass me in friendlier ways.

“Look, we got off on the wrong foot. Can we start over?” I stuck out my hand. “Hi. I’m Mateo. I’m head of security at the Darlington Museum. I’m looking for a missing artifact. Can you please help me?”

CHAPTER 5



EVA

I EYED MATEO'S OUTSTRETCHED hand warily. It was a little hard to "start over", especially since I doubted he would be so nice to me if I decided not to help him, but at least now he was trying. That had to count for something.

I sighed and took his hand, shaking it. It still felt furry and paw-like, despite looking exactly like a human hand. Now that I'd had a chance to really touch it, it was harder for the illusion spell to do its job. If I concentrated and squinted hard enough, I could almost see the fur on his forearm.

I got Sriracha settled in Mateo's home, setting up some of his favorite toys and his water bowl. I'd even thought to bring his cat bed, which was a basket lined with a cushion and his favorite blanket, but Sriracha ignored it in favor of Mateo's laundry basket full of clean clothes. Yup, he was already claiming the place as his, leaving his hair everywhere...and as a long-haired cat, there was a lot of it.

Mateo didn't seem to mind, though, and upon closer inspection, I noticed there were golden cat hairs all over his couch. I bet he had a feline form. He hadn't mentioned what he was when I remarked that he wasn't a shifter. Did that mean he didn't want me to know? What would have a cat's body but not be able to shift?

There was a sphinx, but I wasn't sure. Weren't they all supposed to be female? Mateo was most definitely male. On the other hand, he did technically guard a museum, and sphinxes were usually depicted guarding temples and other important places. He hadn't asked me a single riddle yet, though. Of course, that could just be a legend, along with the consuming of anyone who gave the wrong answer.

"Ready to go to Desmon's?" he asked, gesturing to a blank wall.

I frowned, confused. Then I took a quick look in my purse.

Phone? Check.

Keys? Check.

Wallet? Check.

Nerves of steel, because I was about to meet a dragon? Check and double check.

"Ready when you are."

He brought out another can of spells and opened it, aiming at the wall. A huge rush of energy filled the room, making the hairs on my arms stand on end. A swirling black portal opened on his wall, big enough for a person to fit through. Wait. Weren't you supposed to be able to see through to the other side? There was nothing there but an empty void.

I looked at it dubiously, then back to Mateo. He wasn't seriously expecting me to step through that, was he?

So much for my nerves of steel. Nuh uh. No. Freaking. Way.

I knew portals existed, of course. I'd seen them used in videos. The wizards from the Wizards' Elder Council often appeared for interviews by walking through a portal. They liked to make a grand entrance, and the portals usually showed a brief

glimpse of the inside of their extravagant homes. But I'd never seen one that was just pitch black.

I didn't know much about magic. I did, however, know enough about science and physics to know that teleporting anything from one place to another was risky business. Hadn't some kid died trying to teleport himself to his exam because he was late? What if I came out the other end all jumbled up like a scrambled Mr. Potato Head?

And really now, did I trust a portal that came from a can?

Mateo reached his hand out to me, clearly expecting me to take it.

I didn't. Instead, I backed away from the gaping black maw of nothingness swirling on his wall. "Couldn't we go by, you know, car?"

"Don't tell me you're afraid of stepping through a portal."

"Actually, I am. I'm not teleporting."

"But this isn't a teleportation device. It's a portal."

"What's the difference?"

"Teleportation is the transfer of matter or energy from one point to another without traversing physical space." It sounded like he was reciting from a textbook. "As in 'beam me up, Scotty'. Science doesn't have that yet, and magic can't do it."

"Okay. Then what's...that?" I waved at the creepy hole.

"I told you. It's a portal."

Well, duh. "And if it doesn't teleport you from one place to another, then what does it do?"

"It, like, folds...space. And you go through. Physically. In physical space."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You really have no fucking clue, do you?"

He let out a low growl. "Just—trust me. It's safe."

"You want me to trust the same guy who forced his way into my home, kidnapped me, and is now making me help him

solve a case? Sure, whatever. I've seen portals online before, and you can always see through to the other side. Why is this one completely black?"

"I don't know. I'm not a wizard. But honestly, the wizard who crafts these spells is strong. This is a quality portal, I swear. Now will you stop wasting time?" He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward it.

I dug my heels into the rug, frantically looking for an escape route. I didn't survive this long to get my brain all scrambled. I struggled, swatting at him uselessly with my free hand. "I'm not going through that thing!" I screeched, panic filling me.

Why was I so scared of stepping through the portal? Was it the swirling darkness, or the fact that I couldn't see beyond it? At any rate, I imagined all sorts of horrible things inside reaching for me, making me disappear into the void forever.

"Hey, hey. It's okay." He pulled me close, wrapping his arms around me. "Shit. You're really scared. You're shaking." He rubbed a palm on my lower back. "What if I solemnly promise you'll come out on the other side perfectly fine? We can step through together. I'll be with you the whole time."

I looked up at him and saw only sincerity shining in his golden eyes.

"I'll be right here," he reiterated. "Just hold onto me, and I'll take us through. You can even close your eyes if it helps." He cupped my head and pressed my face into his chest.

I closed my eyes and focused on what was directly in front of me: him. I inhaled his spicy masculine scent and tried to ignore the soft hum that was emanating from the portal. Well, not quite a hum, more like if silence had a sound. I listened instead to Mateo's heartbeat, the steady thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud strong and comforting as he guided me toward pitch-black nothingness.

I clutched at his skin-tight shirt, just to have something to hold on to. His muscles twitched under my fingers, and I focused on that instead of the slight tingling that washed over my body. It wouldn't be nothingness if he was here, right? As long as he

existed, so did I. And he was definitely here, completely solid and very real.

Strong fingers clasped my chin firmly and tilted my head up. “You can open your eyes now, Eva.”

His beautiful golden eyes met mine. I blinked several times, mesmerized. Were we through already? Why had I been so afraid, again?

I exhaled loudly, not realizing I’d been holding my breath. “I’m still alive. And so are you!” I patted his chest, just to be sure.

Mateo grinned down at me, his eyes focused not on my eyes but my lips. “Very much so.”

When he pulled me closer, my heart raced at the feel of his strong body against mine. The joy of realizing I was still whole combined with the closeness had me leaning into him on tiptoe as my lips sought to close the gap between us.

He groaned when our lips finally met. His hands gripped my waist tightly, pulling me closer as his tongue teased mine. My whole world narrowed to just us in that moment. Nothing else mattered. I could feel every inch of him pressing against me, hard and ready. Our tongues danced together in a sensual rhythm that sent sparks through my veins.

His strong fingers tangled in my hair as he took control of the kiss. His touch was electric, sending shockwaves throughout my entire body. I moaned into his mouth as desire tickled in my belly, radiating lower and making me hyper-aware of every inch of him. His scent enveloped me, a mix of musk and spice, but also something else—something uniquely him that I found myself craving more of.

Then his body tensed. With a groan, he broke the kiss. His eyes darted to the side for a brief moment before meeting mine again. I looked around, feeling more than a little confused. The portal had set me up, and the kiss had knocked me out.

We were inside a library. Not a public library, but a private one in a home. It was like stepping back in time. Old wooden shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, filled with

leather-bound volumes. The air was musty with the smell of old books. A chandelier hung from the high ceiling, casting a warm glow over the room. Along one wall was a large fireplace with two oversized armchairs in front of it.

I was still in a daze when the door creaked open, and a young, pretty woman with rosy cheeks and a wild mop of auburn hair stepped in. She was curvy, the type of figure you'd call Rubenesque. She looked familiar, but it took me a second to place her. Then it clicked. She'd been a bride in a gorgeous glittering gown, dancing in the arms of her very powerful groom. I was staring at none other than the dragon's wife!

The woman grinned at Mateo. "Oh, it's *you*. I was wondering who would be portaling in unannounced. Desmon's out right now, but he should be back tonight." Then her eyes landed on me. "I see you brought a guest."

Guest sounded so much better than *prisoner*, or *suspect*.

Mateo cleared his throat. "This is Eva. She's helping me with the missing artifact case."

She shook my hand. "Nice to meet you, Eva. I'm Carly." Then she frowned and put her hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay? You look a little—"

"This was her first time traveling through a portal," Mateo jumped in.

"Oh, of course!" she said. "Yes, first-time portal travel can be a little unnerving."

Deciding that blaming a portal instead of a kiss for my disorientation was probably for the best, I ran with it. "It is indeed."

"I find having something to drink and sitting down for a bit after helps," Carly said. "Would you like a coffee or tea? Soda? We also have watermelon or lime-flavored sparkling water, if that's more your thing."

"Did you say watermelon?" I loved watermelon-flavored anything, especially if it was the fake candy scent kind.

"I sure did." Carly beamed.

“I’d love some, thank you.”

“Great! I’ll bring you some, and let Desmon know you’re here when he gets back.”

“Can you get Elana to contact Seth as well?” Mateo asked. “I’m actually here for him. I’d call myself, but I figure he’ll come faster if Elana does the asking. Knowing him, he’ll take forever on purpose if he knows it’s me looking for him.”

“Sure thing.” She bounced out the door.

Mateo turned to me when we were alone again. “Elana is Seth’s mom,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“Who’s Seth?”

“The wizard who made the portal spell you just stepped through, and who’s going to help us track down your brother.”

“I see. Did I just meet the dragon’s wife?” It seemed odd she was grabbing me a drink. For some reason, I’d always thought dragons would have servants for things like that.

“Yup. Carly’s great. Super easygoing. The complete opposite of who you’d think would be mated to a dragon. Or maybe it’s more that she’s exactly what a dragon needs. It’s a good thing, really. She keeps Desmon happy. And a happy dragon is a benevolent dragon.”

“But my family has lived in Darlington for generations. I never got the impression that Desmon was particularly mean.”

“No. Because people here know how to keep him appeased.” His face darkened. “Touching any part of his hoard is one sure way to anger him, though. I haven’t seen him this pissed in years.”

I swallowed. “Are you sure bringing me here is a good idea, then? I mean, I didn’t touch this artifact, but my brother did...”

“Desmon won’t hold you accountable for something your brother did. Trust me.”

Carly was back with a tall glass of sparkling water, complete with a tiny sprig of mint floating on top. That artificial candy

scent drifted from it, making my mouth water.

“Thanks!” I took a sip and hummed happily.

“No problem. For what it’s worth, it took me a while to get used to portal travel too—” But her eyes weren’t on my face, they were on my legs. “Oh my god, are those humping cats on your leggings?”

“Sure are!”

“I love them!”

We were going to get along great.

CHAPTER 6



MATEO

I ANGLED MY BODY so I could see Eva's reaction to Seth as he walked into the library. The wizard was a bit of a misfit and looked it. It was hard to believe he was one of Desmon's esteemed wizards and not just some punk troublemaker, especially in the outfit he'd decided to wear today.

He wore black skinny jeans that were ripped at the knees and held up with a studded belt. His heavy combat boots looked more like weapons than footwear with all the hardware on them. His slim-fitting tank top was also black. I had to give it to him, though: he'd kept in good shape, both for a human and a wizard. He didn't even have to cheat and enhance his physique with magic, like so many wizards did.

His hair was short and spikey, the tips an almost white blonde. Several piercings completed the look, including a silver barbell through one eyebrow.

His look was a far cry from the old curmudgeons leading the Wizard's Elder Council. The fuddy-duddies at the WEC still

thought robes and cowl hoods were the height of formal attire and wore tailored suits for even the most casual of functions. They also shunned witchcraft, deeming it inferior because, in their opinion, it was for women.

Seth, however, had no qualms about learning witchcraft to bolster his already strong magic. He also refused to follow any of the other ass-backward ideas the WEC put forth. He'd elevated rebellion to an art form and, in the process, had caught a dragon's attention.

I was used to him by now, but most people who saw him for the first time reacted with surprise. Sure enough, Eva was surreptitiously trying to gather her jaw up from the floor. And Seth wasn't even with his demon partner this time. The pair made an even more shocking impression when they were together.

"This better be important, Matty."

I scowled. I hated that nickname.

Seth noticed Eva perched on the armchair in front of the fireplace. His gaze softened, and he smiled; it tempered his rough, edgy look and instantly made him more approachable. Eva relaxed a bit. I narrowed my eyes at him as he dialed up the charm and extended a hand to her. "I'm Seth. Who might you be?"

Eva pushed to her feet to shake his hand. "I'm Eva. I'm helping *Matty* find a lost artifact."

Shit. Of course she'd picked up on the nickname and my reaction to it.

Instead of shaking it, Seth took her hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed the back of it. Eva swallowed a giggle at the old-fashioned greeting.

A sudden and unfamiliar feeling of possessiveness crashed over me. I wanted to slap his hand away and growl at him for even touching her. I clenched my fists at my sides, pushing away the unusual thought. Eva wasn't my anything, and I had no right to get all possessive over her.

All we'd done was share a kiss. One kiss. One breathtaking kiss that had stirred a primal need inside of me. I'd almost missed the sound of Carly's footsteps outside the library door and had only broken away just in time. Now that would have been awkward.

"A lost artifact? Huh." Seth released Eva's hand, turned to me, and smirked. "Don't tell me you're losing your touch in your old age. Misplacing a piece of a dragon's hoard? I mean, you had one job, Matty."

"Are you going to help me or not?" I demanded, losing my patience. Technically, he had to help. If he said no, I would just ask Desmon, and he'd order Seth to do it anyway. But it was better to sort this out ourselves. Desmon gave us a lot of autonomy and expected us to use it.

"That depends. Are you going to ask a little more nicely?" He turned to Eva again. "Are you sure you want to partner up with this guy? I promise I'm a much better choice." He winked. "I haven't lost a piece of a dragon's hoard."

I growled. "Does Liam know you're hitting on random women?"

He rolled his eyes. "Temper, temper."

Eva cleared her throat. "Can you help us track someone down?" she asked, bringing us back to our task at hand. "I'm pretty sure my brother stole the artifact. But he never went home after. I don't know where he is. If I call him, would you be able to pinpoint his location?"

Seth instantly turned serious. "Sure, as long as you keep him on the phone long enough."

"I suspect he's working for someone who has strong enough magic to cast a stable portal," I put in. I figured if he was going to help us, he might as well know all the details. It could mean the difference between failure and success.

"If he is in an area that is warded against magic, I might have some difficulty," Seth admitted. "But I can break through low-level wards. And us being here at Desmon's place means they won't be able to track us right back. However, I have a feeling

they'll know where it's coming from. Did you want to do this right now?"

Eva shrugged. "Sure, why not? The faster we figure this out, the better."

She picked her purse up from the armchair and pulled out her phone. She made a face when she looked at the screen.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She waved her hand dismissively. "It's just my boss again. I'm going to ignore it. She'll be upset no matter what I say, and I've already told her I can't go in today." Eva covered the side of her mouth and lowered her voice, as if telling us a secret. "She's a bit of a bitch."

"Sit here," Seth said, pointing to the armchair, "so I can focus my magic on one spot."

She sat, and dialed the number. After a moment, she frowned. Then, after a little longer, she covered the mouthpiece. "He's not picking up."

"Do you think he's suspicious?" Seth asked.

"He used my house as a getaway spot, so I'm not sure. Tony's never been really smart or particularly clever."

"He was clever enough to get past security and steal the artifact," Seth said, glancing my way. "That must count for something."

"No," Eva said, ending the call. "I'm pretty sure someone helped him there, and he was just following orders. I mean, he's usually shit at that too, but this isn't how he normally operates. He doesn't think ahead. Never has. And he wouldn't look twice at a historical artifact, magic or not. He's more of a petty thief. I can try again in a bit. I hope I'm not taking up too much of your time."

"Nah, I'm staying to visit with my mother anyway. We can try again after a late lunch."

"Is it lunchtime already?" Eva checked the time on her phone. "Wow, it is! I *am* famished, come to think of it. I haven't eaten all day."

“Skipped breakfast?” Seth asked. “It’s supposed to be the most important meal of the day.”

“Yeah, well, Mr. Slave Driver over there hasn’t let me eat yet.”

Seth laughed. “See? Another reason to come with me instead. I’ll feed you.” He glanced at Eva’s phone. “I should put a spell on your phone to start the trace, in case your brother calls while I’m not there.”

“Ooh, you can do that? Like one of your canned spells?”

“You saw those, huh? Bottled spells are so yesterday. This is a little different. You’ll still need to get to me ASAP once you pick it up so I can guide it, but it should start the process.” He took the phone from her and got to work.

The door to the library opened, and Elana poked her head in. I introduced the older lady to Eva. Unlike her son, Elana was very proper, with her blonde hair, now sprinkled with silver and gray, gathered neatly in a low bun at the nape of her neck. There was a story behind why Seth’s mother lived with Desmon, but I didn’t know the details. They rarely talked about it, and I never pried. It wasn’t my job to know.

Whatever the connection was, the woman earned her keep by making sure the place was well-run and did a good portion of the cooking as well. She had lost her magic years ago but had started relearning and rebuilding it ever since she found—or rather, Seth found—her long-lost daughter, Tansy. I’d met Seth’s sister several times. She was a sweet girl and was practically attached at the hip to her demon, much like Seth was with his Liam. Demon loving must run in the family.

While Desmon’s estate was impressive, it wasn’t too difficult to maintain, since unlike many dragons who liked to be waited on hand and foot, Desmon preferred his privacy. Before Carly moved in, it had only been him, Elana, the groundskeeper Logan, and a handful of guards who lived on-site. I had been one of those guards and had called this place home for a few years.

“Lunch is ready. We’re having lobster rolls today, and I made plenty extra, so please join us,” Elana said.

I licked my lips. I did enjoy seafood, and we had to eat anyway. But what sealed the deal was Eva's hopeful look. I felt bad for not thinking of her needs. I tended to ignore things like food when I was working, especially if it was something as important as this case. But I shouldn't expect her to do the same. I should've fed her before coming here.

"Thank you. We'd love to stay," I said. My chest tightened at Eva's grin.

CHAPTER 7



EVA

“WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN being teleported from one place to another and stepping through a portal?” I asked Seth. I still didn’t quite get it.

I tried to ignore the way Mateo was glaring at me and focus on Seth and my lunch. But no amount of buttery lobster on freshly baked brioche buns could distract me from his intense golden gaze.

What was his problem, anyway? I didn’t ask to get pulled into this mess.

Seth finished a huge bite of lobster-stuffed goodness and wiped his mouth with a napkin before answering. “One is a very real magical phenomenon. The other one is science fiction. Emphasis on the word *fiction*. A portal doesn’t send your cells one at a time and reassemble them on the other side.

“Think of it as if someone took the space between point A and point B, folded it up like an accordion, and opened a door at each end. You’re still fully whole when you step through; you

move through it in one piece, and you step out exactly the way you stepped in. It's like traveling through a tunnel. Unlike teleportation, which is supposedly instantaneous, moving you through the tunnel takes time."

That made sense. I remembered the swirling black nothingness of the portal Mateo and I had stepped through. "When you came through a portal, I saw a glimpse of the room you came from. But when we stepped into the portal to come here, it was pitch black. Why was that?"

"Oh, that's just a privacy setting. Desmon likes his privacy. I don't particularly care if you see the inside of my living room. Hell, it took a long-ass time for me to make it look the way I want; it'd be a shame if no one saw it."

I grinned.

Seth was very easy to get along with, in complete contrast to his aggressive punk look. He was a perfect example of never judging a book by its cover. His mom was sweet too, and a fantastic cook, if this meal was any indication. I was almost tempted to ask for the recipe for the brioche buns, but who was I kidding. I'd never actually have time to bake them.

I already had a billion recipes saved online that I never made. Similarly, my fridge's vegetable drawer was where produce went to die. I always had the best intentions when putting them into my cart. Sometimes, I even had the perfect recipe to use them in. I just never actually got around to making it. Oops.

Carly was eating with us. She was already on her second serving, but Mateo had her beat: he was on his third lobster roll and fourth corn on the cob and didn't look to be slowing down any time soon. Considering that he was at least two hundred and fifty pounds of pure muscle, I guess it made sense that he could put away a lot of food. Whatever type of monster he was, it probably had a high metabolism.

Luckily, Elana had not been kidding when she said she'd made a lot of extra food. She'd made several dozen brioche buns and enough of the lobster filling to feed a football team. There was

a whole pot of butter dip, too. It made me wonder how much a dragon usually ate if this was an average lunch.

I was kind of glad I hadn't met Desmon yet. That could wait until I found Tony and the missing artifact. Meeting the dragon as someone who helped find his lost treasure was a lot better than meeting him as the sister of the bum who stole it.

Feeling a bit gluttonous, but also because I hadn't had breakfast, I helped myself to another serving, piling a generous amount of the creamy lobster filling onto my bun. Halfway through, I realized I was far too full to finish it. I slowed, taking tiny little nibbles because I didn't want such amazing food to go to waste.

"You don't have to finish it all, you know. I won't be upset," Elana said, noticing me picking at the food. "If you're full, you're full."

"I'll take it," Mateo volunteered.

I pushed my plate over to him and turned to Elana. "That was so delicious, thank you. I'd keep eating forever if my stomach would let me."

She beamed at the compliment as Mateo picked up the half bun overflowing with lobster and shoved the whole thing in his mouth at once.

Full and a little sleepy from all the food, I yawned as I checked my phone. Still nothing from Tony. I exchanged a look with Seth and Mateo. "I'm going to try calling again, I think."

"Go ahead," Seth said. "I'm ready."

I did, but again, Tony didn't pick up.

I was really starting to worry now. What if he was already exchanging the piece with the buyer, or whoever set him on this? What if he wasn't picking up because he knew I was trying to find the artifact? What if Mateo thought I was just leading him on? What if I never found Tony, and the dragon blamed me for the theft since I was his next of kin? What if—

“It’s okay,” Mateo said. “It’s probably best if I scour the online collectors forums for any mention of the item. We can try calling again in a bit.”

“I’m staying here to hang out with my favorite mother anyway,” Seth said.

“I’m your only mother,” Elana replied drolly.

“Why don’t you two stay in one of the spare rooms until you get this sorted out?” Carly offered.

Lunch finished, Carly set us up in one of the many spare rooms. She even lent me a charger since my phone was almost out of juice, and I’d left my charger with the rest of my things at Mateo’s place.

Then I was alone with Mateo again. I went straight for the socket at the bedside table to get my phone charging. Now that I had eaten so well, the fact that I hadn’t slept well last night caught up with me.

“Think I’m going to take a nap,” I announced.

He gestured to the queen-sized bed. “All yours. Unless that’s your way of saying you’d like some company.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“No way. Those forums aren’t going to check themselves. Chop, chop.”

I settled in for a well-deserved nap, only a little bit disappointed with myself that I hadn’t accepted his offer. I took off my shoes and socks and left them neatly at the foot of the bed. The sweater came off too; I had a tank top underneath. Then, I snuck my bra off from under my tank. I’d never been able to sleep with a bra on, ever. I tucked it into my folded sweater and climbed under the sheets.

I was exhausted, but when I closed my eyes, they popped back open a few seconds later. Despite desperately needing sleep, I was too wired. I tucked the down comforter a little tighter around myself, hoping it would help, and it did, a little.

Until the clicking started.

Click. Click. Click-click-click. Click.

I knew Mateo had to do his work. And it wasn't like he was being loud on purpose or anything. I was just hyper-sensitive right now. I tried to ignore it.

I couldn't. Every press of the keys and tap of the mouse got louder and louder in my head, until I finally shoved the blankets off myself with a frustrated sigh. Mateo looked up from his work.

“Can't sleep?”

“No, but I'm so tired.” I knew I was sounding whiny, but I didn't care.

“Here, let me help you.” He got up and started kicking his shoes off, setting them next to mine.

Then his pants came off too. I stared slack-jawed at the sizable package now only hidden by the thin layer of his briefs. He'd tossed his jacket over the back of the chair he'd been sitting on, but still had his tank top on as he climbed into the bed. The queen-sized bed suddenly felt like a twin.

Warmth from his body heat suffused me. I kept thinking about our kiss again and the way his fingers had tangled in my hair and his lips had claimed mine. Lust tickled my belly.

“I'm not complaining, because you're nice and warm”—more like hot as Hades—“but how is this going to help me sleep?”

“Trust me.” His warm breath tickled the shell of my ear. “You were right about me being part cat. And you know what cats like to do...”

“What's that?”

“We like to lick.”

He brushed his nose down my cheek and all I had as a warning was a soft, sexy growl before his lips were on mine. I met them with an open mouth. My body started to ignite as he claimed my mouth with his. His hands were all over me, touching and exploring everywhere. I moaned into his mouth and clutched at the firm muscles of his arms.

He moved to cover me, wedging his knees between mine. I took a breath, trying to rein in my uncontrolled desire, but all I

managed to do was breathe in his spicy, masculine scent, which drove my need higher. This was crazy. So out of control. I'd never felt like this before. Not with my college boyfriend, who shall remain nameless. Not with any of the flings I'd had since.

It felt so right, and I didn't want to fight it. Instead, I rolled my hips and pressed myself against the hard package that was now brushing against my front and thighs. Mateo's lips left mine and I whimpered from the loss, but he was already kissing a trail down my neck, starting a series of little fires as he went. He shoved my tank top up and cupped my breasts in his hands.

"So beautiful," he murmured.

He bent his head to my breasts and lavished the tops of them with kisses and licks. His tongue had a strange texture, a little rougher than I'd expected, but not as rough as a real cat's. It was extremely pleasurable. The roughness added something more, ratcheting my need even hotter, especially when his tongue brushed over my nipples.

I gasped at the lightning bolt of lust that shot from my nipples down to my pussy from his touch. He focused on just one nipple, his mouth covering it, and his tongue swirling over the tip. I sucked in a breath, sliding my fingers through his hair, and arched my back, thrusting my breast further into his mouth.

I wanted more. So much more. Closing my eyes, I explored the muscles of his neck, shoulders and upper back, marveling at how strong and powerful they were.

He moved over to the other side, making sure both my ladies were thoroughly loved before moving down my body. As his hands trailed over my curves, I felt something drag down my skin, pointed and sharp but not uncomfortably so. It was an erotic feeling.

So he did have claws. The illusion spell had shown normal human hands. Whatever Mateo was, normal-handed he was not. Interesting.

He caught the waistband of my leggings and underwear and pulled them down my legs. My leggings didn't tear, though, so his claws must be retractable. Good to know.

Then he was between my legs, wedging his broad shoulders between my knees. He slid a hand under my ass and lifted me up, shoving a spare pillow underneath my bum. He squeezed my ass and I felt it again: that erotic pinch of pain from something sharp.

I tangled my hands into his hair again; he did have marvelous hair. Claws? A mane? Was he a lion shifter stuck mid-shift? That would explain why he would choose to wear an illusion spell. I'd have to remember to check later, but right now, my body was on fire and I needed him to put out the flames. I guided his head lower, past my belly button. If he stopped now, I thought I'd die.

Lowering his head, he covered my pussy with his mouth. He let out a moan, like he was devouring his favorite meal, and his chest rumbled to life with a purr. He lapped at me from the opening of my slit all the way to the very top, swirling his tongue around my clit.

“Please, Mateo. Don't stop.”

CHAPTER 8



MATEO

STOP? I HAD NO intention of stopping, not when I could finally bury my face in her cream.

Eva was more beautiful than usual when she was consumed by passion. She wasn't shy, she didn't try to hide her body. I loved that. There was no pretense, no games. What I saw was what I got.

And I wanted it all.

Her hips bucked and twitched against my mouth as I caught her little nub between my lips and sucked. She dug her hands into my hair, urging me on. It was marvelous. I focused on her clit, tracing circles around it with my tongue before rolling it between my lips.

I retracted my claws so only the pads on my fingers were exposed, and replaced my mouth with them. She was soaking, dripping, and it was all for me. I gathered the wetness on the tip of my tongue before thrusting into her warmth, my fingers still rubbing her clit. She keened and a cry escaped her lips,

and her eyes were squeezed tightly shut as her pussy spasmed on my tongue.

The sight of her, together with her taste and smell, had my cock as hard as granite. I yearned to be inside her, to feel her silky heat envelop me. I wanted to thrust into her and fill her completely, making her mine.

But it was too soon. I had to be patient. This was just supposed to be about getting her relaxed enough to sleep. I had to put my needs aside, even though I was a selfish manticore who wanted nothing more than to rut into her until she screamed my name.

Eva's fingers dug into my scalp as her hips bucked again. Her channel pulsed rhythmically around my tongue as pleasure overwhelmed her. She overflowed for me, and I lapped at her greedily, deciding that she was now my favorite meal.

When her legs dropped limp to the bed and she released my hair, I sat up with a satisfied grin. Mission accomplished.

I kissed my way back up her luscious body, making sure every muscle was relaxed. She hummed and there was a lazy smile on her face when I got there. I kissed her softly, gently, before settling down next to her.

“What about you?” she asked, her voice still husky.

“I'm not the one who can't get to sleep.”

Also, Eva still didn't know the monster I was. That was fine if I only wanted a one-night stand and never saw her again, but that wasn't what I was aiming for with Eva. I wasn't sure when the transition from suspect to...whatever this was now... happened. Maybe it was the kiss after we'd stepped out of the portal, or the way she'd clung to me when she was scared, like only I could save her. Either way, I needed to be honest with her.

I snuggled her against my body. She sighed happily and closed her eyes, looking sweeter than any human had any right to be.

“Are you more relaxed now?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Good.”

I massaged her head with the soft pads of my fingers until her breathing slowed.



WE WERE BACK IN Desmon’s library, and Seth was poring over some of the dragon’s magical tomes as we waited for the call. We had decided to wait until dinner before giving up on this particular idea. I’d just caught myself staring at her *again* when her phone dinged and Tony’s name came up on the screen

“Remember to keep him on the phone until we give you the thumbs up,” Seth said. “It shouldn’t take too long, maybe four, five minutes tops.”

Eva nodded. “Gotcha.”

She cleared her throat and answered.

“Tony? About time you called me back. Where the hell are you? You had me so worried. You can’t just disappear from someone’s house like that.”

I strained to listen to the reply that came faintly from her device.

“Eva. I am waiting to become a millionaire, little sis.”

A millionaire? I barely held back a snort. What decade was he in? Being a millionaire meant nothing these days.

“Well, Mr. Future Millionaire, you could have said something before you left. I was nice enough to let you into my house at midnight after you woke me up, and you didn’t even stick around long enough the next day to say good morning.”

“Yeah, well, I had bigger fish to fry.” There was a short pause. “Say, did anything happen after I left?”

“I think you owe me an explanation first, Tony.”

“I can’t...I can’t tell you yet. And even if I did, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“It’s not important.”

“Oh really?” Eva’s face was animated as she spoke, as if Tony was right there and could see her. It was really cute. “Well, *I* think it’s important. You just up and left. With your track record, how would I know you weren’t running from the mob or something?”

“It’s nothing like that. I’m not in trouble this time, sis. I’m doing good. A million-dollar good. Now, did anything happen after I left?”

Eva looked over at me for a brief second before replying. “Yeah. Some huge dude came knocking at the door. Tony, are you hiding stolen property? Because he demanded to search the house.”

“Oh yeah? And then what happened?”

“Nothing. He turned the house upside down, couldn’t find whatever he was looking for...which was probably you...and left. What the hell did you steal?”

Tony laughed on the other end of the line. “Does it matter?” he asked. “I’m about to be really, really rich. So you should start sucking up to me, sis, cuz all that crap Mom and Dad left you is nothing compared to what I’m about to get my hands on.”

Yep, he was definitely our man, and Eva was completely innocent.

“Somehow, I highly doubt that.” Eva added an audible sneer to her words.

How did she manage that? I didn’t know. It must be something only sisters could do. I didn’t have one of those. Or brothers either, that I knew of. I had no one.

Eva gave Seth a look that clearly asked how much longer she had to talk to this idiot. He pinched his forefinger and thumb together to show just a tiny bit longer.

“Okay, fine, Tony, I’ll bite. I’ll admit, you have me very intrigued. What’s this amazing thing you’ve found?”

“I can’t tell you yet. But I’m about to strike it big, like real big.”

“Wait, it’s not more crypto, is it? I thought you gave up on that.”

“Nah! That’s nothing compared to what I have planned. But I can’t tell you over the phone. *He* could be listening.”

I could honestly feel the crazy coming through the phone line. How were these two even related? No offense, but her parents must have fucked up big time with Tony, then had Eva in an attempt to redeem themselves.

“Okay,” Eva said, not even skipping a beat. “Then I’ll come over, and you can explain it to me in person. Are you at home?”

She knew damn well he wasn’t.

“No, I’m...somewhere else.”

“Okay, cool, where? I’ll come over, and you can tell me your amazing plans. I’ll even spring for dinner, how’s that?” She looked over pleadingly to Seth, who still gave her the signal for just a little bit longer. “I’ll bring ribs from that place you like, you know, the one you got banned from.”

“Aww, man. Don’t make this so difficult. I love those ribs, but I can’t. Not until after. I can’t fuck this up. The wizard I’m working with is a big shot.”

Bingo! He was working with a wizard.

Seth gave her the thumbs up to show her he’d gotten the location.

Eva sighed dramatically. “*Fine*, tell me after, but you owe me an explanation at least. I don’t appreciate having some stranger coming to my door and asking me questions. Anyway, I gotta go. I have to look busy before my boss gives me more work. She likes to do that at the end of the day to make me stay late.”

“You still working at that place?”

“Yeah.”

“Man, you should just quit already. I don’t know how you sheep stay in those dead-end jobs.”

Eva rolled her eyes. “It’s called a paycheck, Tony. You know, the thing that keeps the lights on? I need to eat and live. Anyway, my-boss-just-walked-out-of-her-office-I-gotta-go-byeeee.”

She hit the end call button and put down the phone, blowing out a breath.

“Wow, your brother sounds like a real stand-up guy,” I said.

“Oh yeah, a perfect gentleman. Every mother’s dream.”

“Well, at least we know for sure we’ve got the right guy,” I said. “And he’s working with a wizard. Plus he doesn’t have the money yet, which must mean he still has the locket.”

Yes! Now we were cooking with gas!

CHAPTER 9



EVA

“SO, YOU GOT IT?” I asked, turning to Seth.

“I did.” He waved his hand, and a map of Darlington appeared in mid-air. He panned across to the outskirts of town and zoomed in on a run-down motel.

Across from me, Mateo grimaced. “Ugh. That place is disgusting. I had to hole up in one of their rooms once when I was working for the EA. The only people who ever go there are criminals or people who are really down on their luck.”

“You used to work for the EA?” I asked, surprised.

Mateo grunted in a non-committal way. “It was a while ago, and only for a short time. Too many rules.”

“And you hate rules,” I said, remembering our first meeting.

He turned to Seth. “So, we’ve narrowed it down to that motel. Are you able to open a portal there?”

“Better,” Seth said. “I can open one right in his room.”

“You can? Cool.” I said, impressed.

“You are not coming,” Mateo said firmly. “Not there. This place is disgusting; you don’t want to be anywhere near it.”

“It’s my brother, and it’s my responsibility to face him.”

“She’s got a point, you know,” Seth said. “It *is* her brother. What, are you worried that you won’t be able to protect her? I mean, you did manage to lose a priceless artifact.”

I knew Seth was just teasing him, but in this case, it helped my cause, so I let it lie.

Mateo’s look darkened, and he let out a low growl. “I’m able to protect her.”

“Perfect!” I exclaimed. “That solves it. I’m coming along.” I beamed at Seth. “Open her up!”

A few minutes later, a portal opened in Desmon’s library. Unlike the one I’d stepped through before, this one did not open onto blackness. Instead, it revealed a shabby motel room that had seen better days. There were stains on the carpet, and the wallpaper was peeling. There was a good week’s worth of empty beer cans and bottles strewn about. It looked disgusting, and even from this side of the portal, I swear I could smell the stench.

Yuck. Maybe Mateo was right after all. Did I really need to face my asshole brother?

“We’ll be watching. If anything happens, I’ll portal you right back here,” Seth said.

My brother sat on the bed looking at the portal, but he didn’t look particularly scared or nervous. It was like he’d totally expected something like that to happen.

“That’s definitely the ‘volunteer’ from the museum,” Mateo grumbled. “Except he didn’t look like that. He looked like a student, like the other two.”

We stepped through the portal. I felt more confident this time because I’d watched Seth cast the spell, and despite his alternative look, he came across as extremely knowledgeable.

Also, I wasn't stepping into a void. It felt like I was stepping directly into Tony's disaster of a motel room.

As we stepped through, Tony at least bothered to brush the Cheetos crumbs off his shirt.

"You're early! I wasn't expecting—um...uh..." Tony stammered. His eyes widened when he saw me. "*Eva?* What the hell?" He looked between me and Mateo. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I should ask you the same question, Tony," Mateo retorted. "Were you expecting someone else?"

Tony squinted at Mateo, then burst out laughing. "The mall cop from the museum? Are you fucking kidding me? Oh, little sis, you're so dumb. Of course, you'd help them look for the artifact. You're always such a goody two shoes." He rolled his eyes with disdain. "You probably don't even know what it is you're looking for. Has this traffic cop reject shown you a picture of it? Have you even asked?"

I wished I could have looked the condescending ass in the face and told him that I did, in fact, know precisely what I was looking for, but that would have been a lie. Mateo had mentioned it was a locket of some kind, but I didn't know what it looked like.

"It's a locket," I said, trying to sound like I knew more than I did.

Tony just laughed and gazed at me like I was a total idiot. Then he looked at Mateo. "Go ahead. Show her a photo of this locket that supposedly belongs to Desmon."

I turned to Mateo, who looked just as confused as me. Keeping his eyes on Tony in case he tried something stupid, Mateo dug into his pocket and handed me his phone, with the image of the locket on the screen.

A sense of recognition hit me immediately. I knew this locket. I knew the detailed scroll work on it. I knew the secret to working the special mechanism that popped the locket open. Even the chain was familiar.

“That’s Mom’s locket! They told me they accidentally buried it with her.”

I zoomed in on the locket as disbelief messed with my ability to think. Wait. It wasn’t polished like the last time I’d seen it. And something else was wrong. Everything was backward. The clasp was on the wrong side, and so were the little carved leaves I liked so much when I was a little girl.

What about the little notch on the back of Mom’s locket? I scrolled to the next photo, and sure enough, there was also a little notch on the back of this one. But again, it was backward, like they were supposed to slot together.

“Wait. No. Oh, hey! It’s the other half of Mom’s locket!”

“Ding ding ding! Someone give the dummy a prize. So, you see, sis, I’m not stealing anything. I’m just retrieving something that belongs to us. That locket is ours.”

I shook my head. “No. This half belongs to Desmon. Mom’s half belonged to us, but that’s gone, Tony.”

I hadn’t thought Tony even missed Mom and Dad. He sure never acted like he did. But maybe I’d been wrong. Maybe he did have feelings for them after all. But did he miss them enough to steal a locket from a dragon because it looked exactly like the mirror image of the one Mom wore? Somehow, I didn’t think so, but I figured I’d give him the benefit of the doubt.

“I know you miss her, Tony, but you can’t just steal the other half as a replacement. They buried Mom’s locket with her by accident, you know that.” They were supposed to remove it from the casket before they closed it up, but the worker had forgotten.

A mocking look crossed Tony’s face, and he barked out a laugh. “Shows how much you know.” He dug into his pocket.

Mateo instantly stiffened, his hand on his sidearm, but instead of a weapon Tony pulled out Mom’s locket.

“They never buried it with her. They just said they had to hide the fact that they took a bribe from me. I’ve had it all along.”

I blinked as shock ran through me. That asshole! He'd stolen it. I'd wondered why he'd even bothered to show up at the funeral. He hadn't even said hi to me. He'd just stopped by the caskets briefly and was already heading out by the time I'd spotted him.

"That's mine," I finally managed to get out. "She left it to me. It was in the will."

"They gave you everything in that stupid fucking will," Tony hissed. "I got one fucking penny."

"Yeah, that was on purpose! So you couldn't claim they'd forgotten about you."

I was so done with him. Just when I thought maybe, just maybe, he had some humanity in him, he hit me with this? I should've listened to my parents and cut ties with him myself when they disowned him. Suddenly, this wasn't about retrieving a missing artifact anymore. It was about finally teaching my good-for-nothing brother a much-needed lesson.

"Alright, smartass." I stomped over to him. "If you have Mom's locket, then why go after Desmon's? You now have a freaking dragon on your ass. And don't think I'll put in a good word for you or take the fall for you. You're on your own."

Tony scoffed. "Do you think I care? I don't. In about two minutes, I'm going to be filthy fucking rich." He looked up at the clock, and I turned too, to see what time it was. It was exactly two minutes to six.

What happened at 6 PM?

A swirling at the edge of my vision caught my attention, and another portal started to open in the motel room.

"Oh, good," Tony said. "He's early."

Without even thinking, I snatched the locket out of Tony's hand and shoved it down my shirt and inside my bra. By the time the doofus realized it was gone, I was already dashing back toward Mateo, who looked ready to fight. He shoved me behind him, placing himself between me and the swirling vortex.

The portal stabilized, looking much like the first one I'd seen: black, empty. Then a figure stepped out from the nothingness. He looked to be no more than in his late twenties, but something about him made him seem much older. He reminded me of those old-fashioned wizards from the WEC, the creepy ones they'd interviewed on the news.

He wore a pristine suit, which looked out of place in the stained motel room. His dirty blonde hair was styled like he'd stepped out of an old Hollywood movie, with a deep side part and shiny from grease or gel or pomade, or something else that prevented hair from moving naturally.

Behind him floated two transparent creatures that reminded me of the genie from Aladdin, but red. They had heavy cuffs around their wrists. Above the cuffs were massive arms that were attached to equally generous shoulders and chests. They looked capable of pummeling anything into smithereens. Below the hips, they tapered off into twin wisps of smoke. Haloes of smoky red surrounded them.

The wizard's face turned sour as he looked around the room. "This place is a fucking dump." His eyes landed on a stain on the corner of the bed, and he looked ready to step back through the portal he'd come from. I didn't blame him.

Then he noticed me and Mateo. "What the fuck is all this? I said *just you*."

"They teleported here just now. I thought it was you at first," Tony sputtered.

"Whatever. I'll deal with them after. Where's the locket?"

Tony scrambled to pull the other half of the locket from his pocket, and the man snatched it out of his hands. He grinned. "Finally. I have the whole thing."

I caught Mateo's eye as I pressed a hand over my bra, where my mom's locket was warm against my skin. The slimy stranger did *not* have the whole thing because half of it was with me, and I didn't plan on giving it up without a fight. This was my mom's locket that she'd left to me, and that I'd thought lost forever. It felt so good to have a part of her back.

Mateo nodded ever so slightly, his hand moving slowly to a round object on his belt. Then, moving so fast he was nothing more than a blur, he removed the object from his belt and hurled it to the ground.

The room was instantly filled with smoke. Thick, burly arms reached around me, hauling me to a strong, familiar chest. Then we were running out of the motel room and hightailing it through a snowy parking lot. The wind cut through my clothes immediately, chilling me to the bone. We stopped behind a tractor-trailer.

“Any time now, Seth. Get us out of here!” Mateo yelled.

Tony and the stranger were tumbling out of the room now, both coughing up a lung. The two scary-looking genies — were genies even real? Guess so — floated toward us but stopped, as if waiting for orders.

Finally, the wizard guy stopped coughing long enough to yell, “What the hell are you two idiots waiting for? Get them.” He then collapsed into another fit of coughing.

For a moment, I wondered if the two genies had frozen on purpose in order to give us time to escape. Because by now, Seth’s portal was already opening, swirling on the side of the tractor-trailer. There was no waiting this time, no time to be afraid. I took Mateo’s hand, and together we leaped into the darkness.

CHAPTER 10



MATEO

THE PORTAL SPAT US out into Desmon's library. The dragon himself was there too this time, sitting on one of the oversized armchairs with Carly perched in his lap.

Seth, who'd been pacing back and forth, stopped in his tracks and glared at me. "What the hell happened there?"

"A wizard happened," I said. "Weren't you watching? I think he is on the WEC, but I couldn't swear to it. Tony was expecting him, though. He portaled in shortly after we did."

"So that was the source of the interference. I was able to watch your interaction until suddenly I couldn't. Something booted me off. I only got a visual again when you were running toward the truck."

Desmon's expression was neutral, as usual. Despite working for him for so long, it was still difficult for me to guess what he was thinking. It was a dragon thing; they didn't show emotions the way humans or even other monsters did. They

had two modes: neutral or furious. And furious was never good.

“Desmon, this is Eva. Eva, Desmon, the dragon of Darlington.”

Eva bravely stuck out her hand for a shake. Something that not everyone would do, given that he was a fire-breathing dragon.

Desmon sniffed the air. “A witch. How interesting.”

“Oh, I’m not a witch,” Eva said, shaking her head firmly. “My family was, once upon a time, but there hasn’t been anyone born with magic for generations. I’m just a regular old human girl.”

“I see.” Desmon clearly wasn’t convinced.

It made me feel better that I’d thought her a witch when we met, too. She just...*felt* like one. Which was a strange thing to say about someone, I guess. But magical folk can feel each other sometimes, and she felt witchy. In the best way.

The dragon turned to me. “Do you have my treasure?”

Shit. I hated disappointing Desmon. I wasn’t worried he’d fry me to crisp or anything, but I took my job seriously. “No, I do not. I didn’t expect company of that caliber. So we ran for it.”

Seth made a sound, and I expected him to shove my failure in my face, but he just murmured, “None of us did.”

It was only then that I noticed there was a giant bruise developing on the side of his face.

“What the hell happened to you?” I asked.

“When I said I got booted out, I meant I got *booted out*.”

Carly was the one who clarified. “With enough force to send him flying clear across the room.”

“Oh, shit,” Eva said.

“*Oh, shit* is right. We’re dealing with someone seriously powerful here,” Seth agreed. “Too bad I couldn’t get a look at the guy. I might recognize him from my days with the Council.”

Eva's eyes grew round. "You mean the WEC? I thought they were all stuffy old men."

"They are now that I'm gone," Seth muttered.

"I might be able to pick him out of a lineup," I said.

"For sure," Eva said. "We might be able to identify him. There aren't that many creepy-ass wizards around, are there?"

Seth scoffed. "You'll be surprised."

I sat down heavily in one of the chairs. "We've been treating it like a petty theft because a petty thief took it when we should've been prepared for something more. Things could have gone really bad really fast just now."

There was a general air of gloomy defeat in the library. I couldn't help but think that was all on me. I should've done better research. I should've made a backup plan in case things went south. I should've—

Eva took a step forward, her voice a beacon of hope. "Well, they didn't. We're both still alive, and"...she dug into her neckline and under her shirt and brought out the locket..."we have this."

She took a deep breath and approached Desmon, holding it out to him. My respect for her grew. It took serious cajones to face a dragon who'd just found out we'd failed at retrieving his treasure.

It was different for me; I'd known Desmon for most of my adult life. He'd seen my potential to be more than just some street thug, breaking things for the sheer hell of it because I could and working for the wrong people. He'd paid me while I learned to control the giant body I'd been given, not to mention learned not to let my anger control me, and I'd done many jobs for him since.

Eventually, I ended up guarding his home and lived there for a few years. When I left to take the job with the EA, he understood that I needed to make my way in the world. Of course, that stint at the EA hadn't lasted very long. I quit before they could fire me for never following protocol and took the job at the museum instead.

Long story short, Desmon was no stranger to me, but to Eva he was *the Darlington Dragon*.

Desmon took the locket, held it up, and examined it for a long time. “This is not my locket. It is the other half of it, however, and extremely valuable. How did you get your hands on it?” He made as if to hand it back to her, but Eva didn’t take it.

“It was my mother’s. I was always told they accidentally buried it with her. I just found out ten minutes ago that in fact my brother stole it.”

Desmon opened the locket, and a faint smile played at the corner of his lips, so faint that no one would have noticed it unless you knew him well. “This is your family?”

“Yeah,” Eva said, rubbing the back of her neck. “That’s us.”

“Your brother’s image has been...crossed out with a marker.”

Eva blew out a breath and laughed nervously. “It has indeed. Mom did that after they disowned him. He was too much trouble, and they’d had enough.”

Desmon held the locket out to her again. “This half-locket is rightfully yours, Witch. Take it and keep it safe.”

Eva frowned. “My brother stole yours; you should take this one as a replacement. I thought it was gone all these years anyway, so what difference will it make? I’ll just keep pretending it’s with Mom. I don’t mind. Really.”

She was lying. She did mind. I could tell by the way her hands tightened on the chain that she didn’t want to let it go.

“No.” Desmon was firm. “This is yours. And even if it wasn’t, I still wish for my half back.”

Eva finally nodded and proceeded to put the chain around her neck. “I understand. The other half of the locket wouldn’t mean the same to me, either. We’ll keep looking for it. We’re getting close, I can feel it.”

The sunny optimism in her voice changed the mood in the room.

“We’ve narrowed it down to one of the wizards,” I agreed. “I wonder if the WEC is involved or if he’s at least on the Council.”

“He could be working alone,” Seth said. “That’s one thing I’ve learned about wizards on the Council in the time I’ve been there. On the face of it they present a united front, but behind closed doors, everyone’s trying to one-up each other, jostling for position, all that fun stuff.” The way he said it told me he didn’t find it very fun at all.

“So on the surface they are elites with a plan for the world, but underneath they’re a bunch of high schoolers? Got it!” Eva said with a nod. “I’m glad they aren’t as bulletproof as they seem.” Then she looked at Desmon. “If you don’t mind me asking, how exactly did you come to get your half of the locket?”

For a long moment, it looked like the dragon wasn’t going to reply. Then he said, “I won it. From a dragoness. Our kind live a very long time, and we spend a lot of this time gambling and making bets. Meddling. Sometimes with each other, sometimes with the humans and monsters around us. The dragoness lost a bet, and this half-locket was my prize.

“It was one of her most valued possessions, but she never did tell me why. I think in her mind it was bad enough to have lost the bet and the artifact; she refused to tell me the reason it was so precious to her. The only thing I know is that it is very, very old, and there’s magic associated with it.”

“It couldn’t be *that* old,” Carly said, leaning in close to look at the locket around Eva’s neck. “That style of jewelry is only from the eighteenth century.”

Carly might not have looked like it, but she was a total history nerd. It was how she’d met Desmon in the first place. She’d been working at the museum, giving tours when schools came on field trips.

“It could’ve had sentimental value to her?” I suggested.

“Perhaps, but there must be something else,” Seth said. “Especially now that we know a wizard is after it too. They

don't usually collect things unless there's a good reason."

"Did your mother ever say anything about it?" I asked Eva.

"No, just that it had been passed down through the female side of our family for generations. It was very clearly stipulated in the will that it was to go to me in turn. But no one could find it, and when I asked the funeral director, she was so apologetic because she said she was under the impression that it was supposed to be buried with her. Now I know she is a lying sack of turtle doo-doo. I guess Tony knew they weren't going to leave him anything."

"So he took the locket, and put it up for sale to make a quick buck," I said, nodding as the pieces started to fall into place. "And then some wizard saw it, recognized its worth, and asked him to steal the other half."

"Wait, what if this wizard guy comes after me? He probably knows I'm Tony's sister, and he knows I have the locket. I don't think it's safe for me to wear it around, and I don't think it's safe to keep it at home either. I don't have any special anti-theft system. Not even a camera."

Seth reached out his hand. "Give it here a second. I have an idea."

I smacked his hand out of the way. "You're not trying to take the locket from her, are you, *wizard*?"

Seth scoffed. "Please. Whatever secrets it holds, I'm not interested. I mean, sure, I'm curious, but I don't need power, or fame, or any more money than I already have. I like my life just the way it is, thank you. I'm not planning on keeping it. I just want to make a replica so that even if someone does manage to take it from her, they take the wrong one."

That was actually a good idea. A decoy.

"Are you able to put a tracking spell on the fake one? So that if someone does take it, it will lead us straight to our wizard?" I asked.

Seth rolled his eyes. "Duhh. Of course."

CHAPTER 11



EVA

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. I'd talked to the dragon and he'd treated me like someone important!

I'd seen images online of Desmon before, of course, but meeting him in person was something else entirely. He was always in a business suit in his official photos, looking powerful and proper. But now, in his casual clothes, namely a dark silk shirt unbuttoned at the front to mid-chest and fitted pants, he exuded an otherworldly presence.

He looked only to be in his late thirties, but I knew he was much older. Much, much older. Dragons lived a long time, and according to local legend, he had been here when the town was first established around a gold mine. *His* goldmine, to be precise.

For such a prominent figure in Darlington, Desmon wasn't very social. He spent most of his time hidden away on his estate. Even his wedding to Carly hadn't been publicized. The

few photos I'd seen had been snapped by some unscrupulous paparazzi types who'd snuck close to the event.

The only reason why I wasn't shaking in my proverbial boots to be meeting him was that everyone else in the room was treating him like a regular person. A very important regular person, mind you, but there wasn't any groveling or kissing his feet or anything. So I followed along, matching everyone else's behavior.

His wife Carly was a total sweetheart. I liked her more the better I got to know her. We'd had the chance to talk again earlier, after my nap and before my call with my brother. She was super laid back, kind of nerdy, and the complete opposite of the type of person I'd thought would interest someone like Desmon. I'd admit, I'd thought she'd be totally stuck up, living in the lap of luxury, but I was wrong, and it was totally my fault for assuming.

"If this wizard is working with your brother," Desmon said, "he will know where you live, and he will know where you work. Either way, you can expect he will come for you. Mateo can keep your locket hidden at his place, and yes, Seth should make a replica to use as a decoy. To be extra careful, I will send a guard to keep you safe." He turned his head and announced loudly into the middle of the room, "Prax! I have a mission for you."

Seconds later, a demon winked into existence. He was nude from the waist up, showing off perfectly sculpted pecs and six-pack abs, his skin tan and dusky. He wore—I blinked. Were those old-fashioned men's breeches? Whatever they were, they belonged in another century. They were tight and molded to his legs, and the giant bulge at the front was unmissable. I tore my eyes away from his impressive package and looked back up to his devilishly handsome face.

"This is Prax. He was recently released by Seth, his sister Tansy, and her demon Eamon from a long imprisonment by a line of wizards. He was hidden away for centuries, so he's still getting accustomed to living in this day and age." Then he said to Prax, "This is Eva. You will guard her from harm while also

letting my enemies steal a replica of this locket from her. Do what you must to keep her safe.”

Prax’s grin widened, and he gave me a look that was more suited to seducing than to guarding. A double wave of danger and arousal hit me, and I didn’t know whether to be frightened or turned on. He drifted closer to me, not bothering to take steps with his legs.

“Hello, Beautiful. It’s a *pleasure* to make your acquaintance,” he purred, extending a hand to me.

Mateo growled and stepped between us before I could shake it.

“There is no need for the incubus. I can watch over Eva,” Mateo said.

“*You* need to find my half of the locket.” Desmon’s tone was businesslike, but the slightest hint of impatience shone through.

“That’s precisely why I should be the one to guard her,” Mateo insisted. He’d fully wedged himself between me and Prax by now. “I’m still on this mission, and Eva is a part of it. If the wizard does send someone after her, then I should be there to intercept him. It will lead me to the locket.”

Prax looked unfazed. “I’m the better choice to guard her. I can fade into nothing and blend into the crowd.” He demonstrated by puffing out of existence. “*You’ll* look suspicious hanging outside her house,” said his disembodied voice.

Then he slowly rematerialized right behind me. “I’m a lot more fun anyway,” he whispered low into my ear. “*If* you know what I mean.”

I shuddered, simultaneously turned on and repelled. I felt his presence surrounding me; it was as if he could touch me right through my clothes. Something slid up, brushing against the side of my breast, but when I looked down, there was nothing there. What magic was this? It was like he was compelling me to feel lust. Prax *was* handsome enough, in a suave, devilish way. It wouldn’t be an enormous hardship to—

“Get your hands off her!” Mateo grabbed me and hauled me out of the incubus’ grasp.

The moment I lost physical contact with the incubus, the feeling of uncontrollable lust faded. Interesting. I wasn't sure if Prax was conjuring it on purpose or if it was just a part of his nature. Either way, I doubted he was my safest option for a guard. If I had to get naked and make the monster with two backs, I'd rather it was with Mateo. I thought of our teaser this afternoon, and arousal filled me again, this time for the big, powerful monster, longing to feel his burly arms around me once more.

"She won't be at her house," Mateo gritted out, "because she's staying with me until all this is over. She'd already moved her cat in. My place has a state-of-the-art alarm system and is protected by magical wards."

(And a basement that looked like it belonged to a secret agent.)

"While *you*, incubus, are technically still couch-surfing," Mateo continued, his grip tightening on my arm. "Plus, you think I'm going to be the one who looks suspicious? Have you looked in the mirror recently? What century is it?"

Oh wow. Was Mateo jealous? He *had* buttered me up earlier. Maybe he didn't want the incubus showing up and snatching his hard work right out from under his nose. To be honest, I didn't mind Mateo's attention one bit, while Prax gave me slightly creepy vibes. I had a feeling there was some sneaky magic involved, and if I were left alone with him, I'd start thinking very differently until after he left...and by then, it would be too late.

Desmon grumbled, and a little lick of smoke curled out of his nostrils. The dragon was losing patience. "I don't care who does what. As of this moment, you are both assigned to the mission, and Seth is to help you when needed. I want that locket back, and I want the owner of the other half of the locket, Eva, protected. As to who does what, you two figure it out. Carly—shall we?" He stood and offered an elbow to his mate.

"Good luck," Carly said, taking her dragon's arm. "And Eva, you have my number. If you get sick of either of these guys,

just give me a call. It's always safe here."

"Thank you." I grinned and waved as the two sailed out of the library.

I pushed away from Mateo and stepped away from him and the incubus, needing a moment to myself. There was way too much virile masculinity all in one place, and it was making it hard for me to think.

"I can't follow you around while you do your investigations," I said to Mateo. "I have to work, remember?"

"You're going to have to tell your boss you can't go in for a few days, until this whole thing blows over."

"What? No way! I'd lose my job."

"Better than losing your life. Whoever this wizard is, he's not someone you want to cross."

Prax cleared his throat, looking smug. "And that's why I'm the better option. I can protect her at home *and* at her job. Looks like I win."

Seth laughed. "Have fun with your pissing contest, guys. I'll get working on the magical replica. Who knows, maybe you could both *protect* her. Sometimes, two is better than one." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Then he walked out, leaving me with an incubus and a...damn it, I still didn't know what Mateo was...fighting over me like a chew toy. Time to nip this in the bud before it got out of hand.

"How about this?" I said, stepping between the two. "Mateo can keep watch while I'm at his place—"

Mateo grinned.

"And Prax can take over when I leave the house to go to work."

His grin faltered.

"That way, you can do whatever needs to be done with your investigation without having to drag me around, and I stay safe. It's a win-win situation." Both for them and for me.

Knowing that I'd be at work when it was Prax's turn made me feel a little better, too.

Neither of them was particularly enthused about this arrangement, but they agreed to it anyway.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I need to go feed my cat."

CHAPTER 12



MATEO

SRIRACHA HAD BEEN IN a huff when we'd returned because his dinner was later than usual. But now that he had been fed and was satisfied, Eva flopped down on the opposite end of the couch. "So, what is our next step?"

Next step? I knew Eva meant the next step of the investigation, but I feigned ignorance.

"Dinner," I said. "I was thinking we could order in today. Any preferences?" I could just go straight to eating her, but she might be hungry for real food.

She looked amused. "No...I mean, yes, dinner sounds great. I *am* hungry. But I meant with the investigation."

I winked at her, reached under the coffee table, and handed her a stack of menus I kept for the days I didn't want to cook. I did cook, a bit, and I planned on cooking for her another time, but there was just too much to do today, like checking the collectors forums again now that I had better information.

“Well, now that I know Tony has had the other half of the locket for almost two years, I’ll want to go back and see if there were any relevant postings in the collectors forums back then. I’ve only checked back about a year or so.”

As she ran through our meal options, I checked my phone. I was getting alerts about movement outside my house. It was Prax. When we first arrived home, the confounded incubus had attempted to come in, but my place was warded against any intrusions of the supernatural variety, which included pesky demons. Incubi were a type of demon, after all.

I’d happily slammed the door shut in his face. Inside my home, Eva wasn’t just safe from the mystery wizard; she was safe from Prax and his damned incubus sex magic. He’d used it on Eva back at Desmon’s place, and he hadn’t even tried to hide it. Fucker.

It wasn’t that I had anything personal against the incubus. I just didn’t want him anywhere near Eva. Especially not if he got her alone. Who knew what depraved things he would convince her to do? Worse, what if she liked it?

Eva narrowed it down to three options and laid the menus out on the table. “These are my finalists; you pick.”

I didn’t even need to look at the second or third options. A giant mountain of chili con carne piled on top of a bed of rice and smothered with crumbled tortilla chips and enough cheese to feed an army sounded perfect right about now. “We’ll do Tex-Mex.” I grabbed my phone and dialed the number. “What do you want, Little Thief?”

She frowned, then pressed her lips into a thin line before pointing silently to the steak fajitas.

Eva was quiet while I was on the phone, but the moment I hung up, she laid into me. “Why the hell are you still calling me that?”

Shit.

“Umm, habit?” I ran my hand through my hair. “I honestly don’t know. I’ll stop.”

“You owe me, you know. You owe me for calling me a thief and doubting my story.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, “I do owe you. I’m sorry. And I don’t apologize much or lightly. What can I do to make it up to you?”

She wrinkled her nose as she thought about it, then her eyes landed on the pile of menus still on the coffee table. “I think you owe me more dinners.”

I raised my eyebrows. That wasn’t what I was expecting.

“Multiple dinners,” she continued. “And not takeout. Dinner at restaurants.”

She wanted me to take her out? That wouldn’t be a hardship at all.

“Dinners out, then. All right. What about homemade?”

“You cook?” She looked hesitant.

“A little.” I had a few go-to dishes that I loved to make and eat.

“Okay. Those will count too. A dinner, either out or homemade, for every time you called me Little Thief.”

“I wasn’t exactly keeping count,” I said, amused. Was this her way of hinting she wanted to keep seeing me after all this was over? Because if it was, it was a resounding *yes* on my end. I liked her. A lot. She was brave, and quick-thinking, and flipping gorgeous.

“Oh, but I was.” She looked smug.

“Were you, now?”

“Yes indeedy. You called me a thief eight times. So, you owe me eight nice dinners.”

“You pulled that number out of your ass.” Kind of like how I’d made up three days. Was that just yesterday?

She chuckled. “I did, but that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

Eight dinners. That would take some time. It meant eight more dates, and eight more opportunities to impress upon her the benefits of staying around after. I'd originally set out on this mission to catch a thief, but now I was quickly catching feelings for a bold little blonde spitfire I couldn't get enough of.



Eva leaned back on her chair, holding her lime soda. “That was so good. I think I ate too much, though.”

“Impossible. You barely ate a thing.” I'd eaten at least three times the volume she had, and I was perfect. Full, but not overly so.

“Maybe compared to you, but trust me, I'm stuffed.”

We cleaned up quickly and were just leaving the kitchen when my phone chimed, alerting me there was someone on the premises. Moments later, there was a knock on my front door.

“It's Prax,” I said, groaning and turning my phone to vibrate before shoving it back in my pocket.

“Maybe we should let him in,” Eva said, getting up from the kitchen table. “I mean, aren't you two supposed to be working together to find this locket?” She paused in the foyer just outside of the living room.

Like many Victorian homes, the foyer was spacious, with a staircase going up to the second floor. It also connected the kitchen, living room, and the hallway leading to the other parts of the home. Prax's shape was outlined in the frosted window next to the front door. Placing a hand firmly on Eva's shoulder, I guided her into the living room and away from the incubus.

“He doesn't have to be in my house to help me find it. He knows the collectors forums we need to check, and he knows how to use the internet now, so there's no reason for him to be here.” I sat and pulled her down onto the couch next to me.

She sat with a few inches of space between us, but in seconds, gravity had pulled her down into the little ditch my body made, and she was pressed up tightly against me.

“What do you mean he knows how to use the internet *now*?”

I explained how, after being freed from the wizard’s bonds, Prax had enlisted with Desmon, hoping to learn how this new world worked before making a go of it on his own. It must have been shocking for him to find out that magic and monsters were accepted by almost everyone in this world, and that technology beyond his wildest imagination was now a fact of life.

He’d been tricked and imprisoned by Nastafar’s grandfather so long ago that flush toilets hadn’t yet been common. So he’d been spending the last few months catching up, learning simple everyday things like using a computer and driving a car.

“Oh! Those pants make sense now. They must have been in fashion back then, but now? Yeah, if he wants to fit into today’s society, he’s going to have to change the way he dresses. I mean, now that The Wall has fallen we’re used to all sorts of weird stuff, but certain things still draw attention.”

“Which is why I don’t think he’s a good choice to protect you. Can you imagine walking through the streets with him following you around looking like a dead poet?”

Eva giggled. I felt the movement of her laughter in all the places where we touched.

“Well, you draw a lot of attention, too, you know. And you’re already in illusion.”

My phone, which was currently squashed uncomfortably between us in my pants pocket, vibrated. She made a move and wriggled away to give me room to reach it. It was an alert for yet more motion outside my house.

Prax. With her peering curiously at my screen, I clicked on the live feed.

The incubus was waving at us from one of my cameras. Grinning, he held the fingers of one hand in a circle, then moved his index finger in and out suggestively, waggling his eyebrows cartoonishly.

He was implying that we were too busy fucking to answer the door? *I wish!* But I wanted to take my time with Eva, especially after being such a jerk to her earlier.

I opened the line to the speakers at the front door. “Go away, Prax.”

“Oh, does that mean I can keep this, then?” He dangled the replica locket in front of the camera. The real one was already upstairs.

“I’ll come out and get it.” I stood, leaving Eva on the couch.

“Not so fast, Matty.”

I gritted my teeth at the unwanted nickname. He must have gotten that from Seth.

“I need to come in and talk to your little lady friend first. I know you probably want to get started on the naked fun times, but we’re on a mission for Desmon, and I can’t do my job if I don’t have all the information.”

Damn it. Why did he have to be so right?

“What information do you need?”

“Let me in, and I’ll ask her myself.”

“No.”

Eva was already getting up off the couch. “Let him in. He needs information on my workplace, and I need to figure out how we’re getting there in the morning, given that my car is still at home.”

“Fine.” I threw my arms up in frustration, and joined her at the door. I needed to invite him in myself, or else he wouldn’t be able to cross the threshold.

I opened the door and exchanged glares with Prax before I said, “I invite you in, demon. But this is a one-time only invitation. You can’t come and go as you please.”

He grinned victoriously. “Why, thank you.” He floated in through the door. He really did need to learn to use his feet.

He honed in on Eva right away, tossing an arm casually around her and leading her over to the couch. It wasn't me who blocked his way but a particularly protective furball, who dashed out from the kitchen to get between his owner and the demon menace.

The cat was a lot friendlier to me now that he'd gotten used to my scent. I'd also fed him this morning, so that counted for something, I guess. I decided to forgive him for his previous attempts on my life.

"It's okay, Sriri. This is Prax." Eva bent and picked up the little furball, hugging him to her chest. Sriracha proceeded to swat at every part of Prax he could reach until the incubus backed off out of swatting range.

Attaboy, Sriracha! I was going to buy that cutie a huge bag of treats.

Eva made her way to the living room, her furry bodyguard in her arms. "Why don't you let me know what information you need."

She sat down on the couch, and I quickly took the spot next to her, forcing Prax to sit in the easy chair. As he grilled Eva about her workplace, I opened my laptop and got to work searching one of the two collectors forums I knew some of the wizards frequented.

Any collector of ancient artifacts worth their salt was on these forums. They were privately run, and the only reason I had access was because technically I was using Desmon's account. Now that I knew Tony had had the first piece of the locket for two years, I had a lot of searching to do. Finally I found a post regarding a half-locket being sold through a buy-and-sell group on social media. Bingo.

I logged into my rarely used account on the platform and joined the group, glad that it didn't require any form of admin approval. After scrolling for what seemed like forever, I found the listing for Eva's locket. Tony had posted it in a group for mostly unwanted junk.

I'd been looking in the wrong place the whole time! I was lucky someone in the collectors forum had mentioned the posting, wondering if it was valuable or not. According to the people on the forum, the piece Tony was offering must be fake, since the real one was known sometimes to go on display at the Darlington Museum. One person mentioned also that this one looked too new to be anything other than a replica.

I noted the username of the person who'd made the comment. I wondered if it was our wizard, trying to deter any other would-be buyers.

Next to me, Eva had just dug a set of keys out of her purse and was tossing it to Prax.

"What's going on?" I asked. I'd been too lost in my research to notice anything going on next to me.

"Prax is going to drive my car here so that we can take it in the morning."

"And how are you going get over to her house to pick up the car? I know you can't travel with her keys on you."

"You're right, I can't." He held up the keys and then dematerialized completely. The keys dropped to the ground right through his smoky body. Then he solidified again and picked them up. "I can only pop into and out of locations when I'm fully dematerialized, and I can't bring anything along with me. But I *can* do this..."

He stared at the keys in deep concentration, holding up one finger. Slowly, the finger changed, turning into a perfect replica of the key shaft. "That's why I asked Eva if she had keyless entry. This trick only works with old cars. I could imitate the look of a key fob exactly, but it would still be a part of my substance and would be limited to only what I could do. A physical key, on the other hand..."

"Cool!" Eva reached for Prax and I clenched my jaw as she analyzed his key finger.

"Wait. Seth said that teleportation doesn't exist, so what's happening when you pop out of one place and into another?" she asked.

“I’m not teleporting. I’m dematerializing and turning transparent. I can travel extremely fast in that state, moving through barriers in a straight line. The only things I can’t go through are areas that have been magically warded. When I get to my location, I rematerialize again.”

“I understand...I think.”

“My finger can do a lot more than that, you know. Do you want me to show you?” The finger turned phallic in shape.

Eva made a revolted, gagging sound, quickly released his finger, and took back her keys.

“I’ll go grab your car now.”

“Just leave it in the driveway,” I said. “The ward will be going back up the minute you leave.”

Good riddance!

CHAPTER 13



EVA

I LAY IN BED in Mateo's guest room, staring fixedly at the ceiling. I wasn't sure if I'd get a wink of sleep tonight. My brain was going a mile a minute from everything that had happened today, and it was hard to keep it quiet enough to close my eyes for more than three seconds.

After Prax had left to get my car, Mateo had shown me the posts he'd found online. He concluded that our yet unknown wizard had contacted my brother and offered him more money if he could find the other half of the locket and sell them to him as a pair.

Mateo further guessed that since most of the other collectors thought it was a fake and were only offering peanuts, Tony had agreed. Then, when Desmon put the locket back up on display at the museum, it had started the ball rolling. With the wizard's help, Tony had snuck into the museum posing as a student volunteer, doing the same grunt work the others did.

Mateo had then gone back to work, looking up as much information as he could on the wizard now that he had a potential username to work with. He had still been in front of his laptop when I'd said goodnight and headed up to bed.

Alone.

So much for hoping for some more help getting to sleep. I guess I'd already had one ridiculously good orgasm today, so I was being greedy wanting another, but I had to admit, his method of helping was very effective.

Maybe tomorrow. We had plenty of time and many more opportunities, considering I'd managed to ask him out on not one but eight more dates in the world's most roundabout way. I still couldn't believe I'd had the guts to do that, but I thought it was pretty darned clever.

I blinked a few more times before deciding I wanted a midnight snack. I shoved back the covers and quietly made my way out of the guest room. The hallway was dark, and so was the kitchen downstairs. Mateo had thrown in the towel on his research some time ago and was already asleep in his room. I crept down the hall to the stairs, not wanting to wake him. I groaned mentally when the very first step creaked under my weight, much louder than I had expected.

I tested the next step gingerly and found that the stairs made much less noise if I tiptoed down the edge of them. Once in the kitchen, I made a beeline for the fridge to look for the box of leftovers we put in there earlier. It was gone. Mateo must have polished them off while he was working.

Now that I'd committed to a midnight snack, my stomach insisted I find a replacement. I got to work, searching his cupboards using only the moonlight shining in through the open curtains to see. His cupboard was shockingly devoid of anything that was instantly snackable. I found sauce mixes, a ton of spices, a bottle of liquid smoke, and four different styles of breadcrumbs. No snacks, but I guess he wasn't kidding when he said he cooked a little.

I opened the next cupboard and was greeted by a gazillion protein bars and several options for protein shakes. That

wasn't exactly the type of snack I had in mind. I didn't need "Max Muscles" and "Max Nutrition," all rolled into a convenient simulated cinnamon-crunch-flavored cardboard bar.

Suddenly, the feeling of being watched, being hunted, had me freezing in place. The kitchen was plunged into darkness as something blocked all the light. The hairs rose at the back of my neck as I listened carefully for any sound, but heard nothing except my heart thumping in my chest. Silently, I closed the cupboard and turned around, ready to hightail it up the stairs or maybe call Mateo for help.

A massive shape was standing in the kitchen, blocking my exit. It was so dark that all I could see was the outline. It was half-man, half-beast, shaggy and hunched over, reminding me of a werewolf from a low-budget horror movie. It wasn't the wings folded on its back that caught my attention and sent fear racing through my blood. It was the scorpion tail, silhouetted in the moonlight as it slowly swished from side to side.

What. The. *Fuck*.

I didn't have anything against scorpions per se. I mean, they were living things too, but still. They creeped me the fuck out. Usually, Sriracha and I had a special patented double act when it came to dealing with creepy crawlies: I would shriek at them until he came to "take care" of the problem. But I didn't think my feline fighter had a chance with this one.

The stinger attached to a tail like that would surely have enough venom to kill both of us many times over. Fuck, I didn't know what to do. Scream? Right now, the only thing I'd managed to do was freeze. So much for natural self-preservation instincts. Well, at least this time, I wasn't mouthing off to the monster.

My brain's orders for my legs to run and for my lungs to scream reached their respective recipients at about the same time. I managed to lurch forward toward the creature — real smart, Eva — while simultaneously letting out something resembling a squawk. The hulking beast caught me in its massive arms.

Panicked, I struggled, flailing my arms, trying to get out of the monster's grasp.

“Eva?”

Suddenly, the lights in the kitchen turned on. I looked up, right into the face of...Mateo? His warm golden eyes looked back at me, filled with concern and compassion. He cupped my cheek gently.

“Are you okay?”

I traced my eyes down his familiar face, but that was where the familiarity ended. The sand-colored fur started right under his jawline, short at first, but getting longer as it extended down his chest. I was right; he was covered in fur.

“I heard some noises downstairs, so I came to investigate. Then you screamed and ran straight at me. What's wrong? Was something after you?” Still holding me by the shoulders, he glanced around the kitchen, looking for whatever had scared me.

That was when I noticed the dragon-like wings protruding from his back. A little farther back, the nearly black scorpion tail, the same color as his wings, still swished back and forth. Mateo. He was the monster.

Embarrassed that I had made such a mountain out of a molehill, I cleared my throat. “Nothing. Nothing is wrong. I got scared, that's all. I was trying to sneak a midnight snack, but it was dark, and I couldn't see your face, and—”

His tail arched up high overhead, distracting me and cutting off my words. Despite knowing now that it belonged to him, I still couldn't stop the sudden, visceral jab of fear, so strong that I felt it physically, like a jolt of electricity.

His face crumbled with mortified realization. “I scared you. I forgot to turn on the illusion spell. Shit. I'm so sorry.”

“What? No, don't be. It was my fault for not realizing it was you. I mean, it's your house, of course it was you. It's just... um, the tail. It scares me, a bit,” I confessed.

I figured honesty was the best policy, especially considering how we'd met. If I lied about it, I was sure he'd know the instant I saw the tail again, and my body reacted before checking in with my brain.

"It scares a lot of people," he said flatly.

"I'm sorry. I can't control it. I wish I could. I know it doesn't make any sense for me to be scared. I mean, it's you, and you won't hurt me."

Still, I avoided looking behind him and focused instead on his very furry, almost feline chest. I recalled the fur on his couch. No wonder there was so much cat hair everywhere. He was almost completely covered in it. I stroked his chest, enjoying the soft fur between my fingers.

"You like the lion part of me, though," Mateo murmured. He closed his eyes, and a gentle purring sound vibrated my fingers.

Lion? I thought lions didn't purr. Well, this one did. What an odd thing for me to be thinking about right now. I glanced down at his body. I was in the arms of a very naked man-lion. Or was that a lion-man? Well, neither, really, since he also had wings and a tail.

"If you don't mind me asking, what kind of monster are you exactly?"

There weren't any hard and fast etiquette rules surrounding asking a paranormal being what they were, but most people tried to avoid the question. Still, I was looking directly at him right now, and I had no idea. I'd never seen anything like him before, and I'd lived here in Darlington, aware of monsters and magic, my whole life.

"I'm a manticore."

That sounded familiar. I tried to remember what I'd learned in high school. "Is that from Greek mythology?"

"Greece. Persia. Most of Europe, too, actually. Head of a man, body of a lion, wings of a wyvern...and tail of a scorpion." He reached his hand up to touch my face gently, then trailed a line to my lips with his fingers before pulling them away. "I'm

guessing by your reaction to my tail that our dinner dates are now canceled?”

Oh boy. Did he think I wasn't interested anymore just because one part of his body wasn't to my liking?

“What? No way. I'm not canceling anything. I don't mind what you are, as long as you understand that if I react to your tail, it's something beyond my control.”

“I understand that.”

I slid my hand up from his chest to touch his face. “Then you still owe me all eight of those dinners. I'm holding you to it.”

CHAPTER 14



MATEO

HER WORDS MADE ME want to jump for joy. She still wanted me. “I will keep the illusion spell active from now on.”

“No, please don’t. You don’t need to. That can’t be comfortable. And if I’m going to get to know you, I should get to know the real you, scorpion tail and all. But like I say, please don’t be offended by any reaction to it I might have. If I could stop it, I would.”

I couldn’t keep my tail from wagging in excitement, even though I knew it would draw attention to it. Her eyes darted fearfully over my shoulder for a second before quickly focusing very deliberately back on my face.

“Are you wagging your tail because you’re happy? Or is that like a hunting thing?”

I did think of her as a sort of prey, one to catch, claim and keep, but my tail’s only function was as a weapon, and I’d never use it on her. “I’m happy.”

“Manticores purr like kittens and wag their tails like puppies. Cute!”

I frowned at her description. It didn't make me sound very fearsome. “We are also known to be terrifying man-eaters.” I puffed out my chest.

“Yes, yes. Terrifying.” But her eyes were now locked on my face, and her hands were running through the hair on my chest, and I knew she was trying her best not to stare at my rear appendage.

I reached over and flipped off the light switch, depriving her of the light her human eyes needed to see.

“Hey, I need that.” Her hands went to her hips. She was wearing another silky nightie, but this one was blue, to match her eyes. “I'm still looking for a midnight snack.”

“You can have one of my protein bars.”

She made an unimpressed sound. “No, thanks.”

“I don't have anything else.”

“I noticed. There's nothing snackable in here. Not even a cracker.”

“I will pick up some *snackable* food tomorrow. For tonight, I can make you something.”

“No, please don't bother. It's late and I'm not really hungry. I was just having some trouble going to sleep and thought a little snack would help.”

That got me thinking about how I'd helped her nap earlier today, and my cock sprang to attention. I was glad I had turned off the light. I wondered if she realized I was completely naked with so much of her attention on my monstrous form. Had she noticed anything else besides my terrifying tail?

“I'll just get back to bed.” She took a few steps forward and kicked a chair. “Ouch. I'm sorry.” She patted the chair seat.

Did she just apologize to a piece of furniture? I grinned. I stepped forward and swooped her into my arms. A small squeak escaped her lips.

“I’ll take you back upstairs. I can see perfectly in the dark.”

“Thank you.”

I was halfway up the stairs when I noticed her surreptitiously sniffing at my chest. “Are you smelling me?”

She froze. “Maybe?” Then she leaned in again and inhaled, not trying to hide it this time. “Okay, yes, I am. You smell good.”

Earlier I’d gone upstairs and straight to bed without a shower. If anything, I was worried I stank. “Do I really?”

“Yup! And since I’m already caught red-nosed...” She buried her face in my chest and inhaled. She raked her fingers through my furry chest and sniffed again, moaning. She moved across my chest, and by the time I was ready to put her down, she was straight-up trying to burrow her nose into my armpit.

She sputtered and coughed. “Ahh, too much,” she said, in an exaggerated holding-her-breath voice. She went back to the middle of my chest as if to dilute the smell.

I was smiling so hard my face hurt. She was cute and kind of weird, and I was all for it. I set her down on the bed, only to realize I’d taken her to my bed. In my room. Oops.

She squinted and felt around. “Oooh! Satin sheets?!” Then she sprawled out on my bed like she owned it. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

I was about to explain that the satin helped prevent fur breakage in the dry winters, but her nightie had hiked up her body, revealing a pair of matching panties. Fuck. That was hot.

Realizing she wasn’t going to relinquish my bed to me any time soon, I decided she would have to share. Outside the window, the clouds that had been hiding the moon were drifting slowly apart, and the night brightened. I hurriedly mumbled the words to my illusion spell.

I’d used it for so long, since the day The Wall fell, that it came naturally. But this time, when listing what I wanted to be hidden, I only mentioned my tail. I had never done this before,

though I'd gone as a plain old lion-man with no wings or tail for Halloween once, and that had gone over well.

The moon lit up my room, and she didn't react, except to my cock, which was now outlined against my body.

She bit her bottom lip, and her eyes grew wide. Then she was reaching for me, her hands taking away my ability to think.

"Yes indeed, you really have been holding out on me." Her fingers stroked down my length, and she sucked in a breath.

I hadn't expected her touch, but after having been deprived of her earlier, my cock and my brain were not on the same page. I wanted to spend the night worshiping her body. My cock wanted to charge toward to the finish line.

She moved to a kneeling position, licking her lips, and I knew she planned to go down on me. There was no way I would last.

With a snarl, I took her by the wrists and pinned her down.

"I was trying to help," she protested.

"You can help another time." Right now, I needed to take control.

I pressed her hands against the satin pillow. "Keep them there," I ordered.

She did not obey. I hadn't expected her to. The second my hands left her wrists, she was reaching for me again, her hands dancing on my skin and stoking a fire that was already threatening to burn out of control.

I looked around the room, spying my handcuffs. Possible...but they were hard on the wrists, and I didn't want to mar her skin. I gripped the hem of her nightie and pulled it over her head. I tore the pillowcase off one of my pillows for her other wrist.

I moved quickly, and before she could protest, I had one cuff on each wrist, and the chain connecting the two of them passed through one of the bars of my headboard. The pillowcase was wrapped around her right wrist, protecting it from the harsh metal, and her nightgown did the same for the left. I pulled her body down my oversized custom-made bed so that her arms were high over her head. I sat back on my heels

to enjoy the view. She was gorgeous. A perfect addition to my bed.

“Hey, no fair.” She struggled against the cuffs, but the scent of her arousal was all I could focus on. She might be protesting, but this turned her on.

“It doesn’t need to be, Little Thief.”

“Oh. Nine. Nine dinners now.” The words were breathy and filled with need.

I chuckled. I knew she’d be keeping count.

Eva was everything I’d ever wanted, and my need for her kept me at the edge of losing control. I needed her to come for me first. I was big all over, and I wanted her to be slick and ready when I finally plunged into her depths.

I brushed a piece of hair on her face out of the way and kissed her. But even with her wrists bound, she insisted on helping. She wrapped her legs around my hips and bucked and wriggled until she could press her hot pussy against my burgeoning cock. She rolled her hips, making me groan. I thrust, my hips moving with a mind of their own, and my cock slid over the thin, silky fabric covering her sex.

She was moving desperately, but her underwear was in the way. She whined.

“Patience,” I murmured. “I will fuck you soon.”

“You’d better.”

I moved down Eva’s body, silently apologizing to her perfect breasts for the lack of attention. But I needed to be inside her sooner rather than later. I removed the offending scrap of fabric and dove right in, devouring her. When I found her sensitive, swollen nub, she rewarded me with a breathy moan. My hands roamed back up to her generous tits to play with them in a way my mouth couldn’t.

The cuffs’ chain rattled against the headboard as her body tightened and she thrashed, pulling on them. Fresh wetness rushed from her cunt, sweet and slippery. I resisted the temptation to lap it all up. I needed it to fuck her.

She was still tossing her head from side to side and panting hard as I crawled up her body. I kissed her roughly on the mouth so she could taste herself on my tongue. She bucked like she couldn't wait any longer. Neither could I.

Eva lifted her legs and wrapped them around my hips again. My cock was so hard that it hurt. It twitched and bobbed, seeking her warmth. Bracing one arm on the mattress and one hand on my rigid length, I guided us together. The thick head slipped on her juices — she was soaked — and my length glided along her slit, bumping her clit.

She made a frustrated sound. It was a huge turn-on to know that I affected her so much, even after she discovered what I was.

Little Thief needed me. But she didn't need to worry. She would be mine before the night was done. All mine.

“I'm going to go slow,” I said. “So I don't hurt you.”

“You won't.” She bucked her hips again. “Please.”

CHAPTER 15



EVA

WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO me? When had I been replaced by this wanton, needy slut? And I say that as a good thing. I wanted Mateo so badly that he'd had to tie me up so I couldn't rush things, and now I couldn't even wait for him to line us up properly. But it all felt so right that I couldn't find it in me to be embarrassed.

I'd never been one to be ashamed of sex, or my body. I'd come to terms with my sensuality long ago and had no problem making sure I always got my slice of the pie in sexual encounters. I was a demanding lover, and anyone who couldn't handle that just wasn't right for me. But this was next level: if Mateo didn't fuck me right now, I thought I would actually die.

Okay, maybe not. But it felt like it.

He lined us up again, and I tried my best to hold still this time. But that was nearly impossible to do, and I wiggled my hips,

encouraging him. His tongue was amazingly talented, but I needed more. I needed his thick cock filling me now.

It had looked so perfect and delicious in the moonlight. It was girthy, with a wide mushroom head, and a long, slightly upward-curving shaft.

Mateo finally lined us up, and even though I was already sopping wet, I cried out when he thrust into me. Trapped beneath his massive body, my hands tied, there was nowhere for me to go. He pressed in deep, filling me to the brim.

Oh god!

I felt fuller than I'd ever been, stretched so wide it almost hurt. But the pleasure was stronger, and I was a greedy girl.

He moved slowly, letting me get used to him. I took him deeper with every thrust until he was almost completely seated inside me, something that I had thought would be impossible at first.

He started up in a merciless rhythm, as if his control had shattered and he could no longer ignore the need to consume me whole. His cock fit so tightly that he had to fight to move. Needing something, anything, to hold on to, I grabbed the only thing I could reach: the bar on the headboard. The bed creaked despite being made of heavy, solid wood.

Mateo's wings were spread over us like a dark, leathery tent, and they moved as he thrust. Fucking was a full-body activity for him.

He hammered into me, ramming me until there was nothing left in my world but the two of us. I couldn't tell where he ended, and I began.

"Fuck! You feel so good," he said through gritted teeth.

He changed his angle slightly, and hit something inside me that had pleasure spiking through my body. He thrust again and again, rutting into me until I was reduced to a sobbing mess. Wetness dribbled down my thigh and onto his satin sheets as he fucked me.

He brought me to the very edge of the tallest cliff and held me dangling over the precipice. And then all it took was his finger, sliding between our heaving, sweaty bodies to press on my clit, to push me over. I screamed as I fell, my entire body short circuiting with pleasure. My channel clenched around him, pulling him over the edge with me.

Jets of his come bathed my insides. It was hot. Almost too hot. I panicked for a moment, wondering if I was being burnt by magical come. Did manticores have fire of any kind? I couldn't remember. But there was nothing to do now but go with it as he pumped enough into me to fill an ocean. I wasn't being burned, in fact, just warmed thoroughly. The heat spread through my body, infusing me head to toe with his essence as I continued to fall over into the abyss.

I landed in the protective cocoon of his arms, staring up at his handsome face and the glow in his golden eyes. Everything felt right. Felt perfect. Felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. His wings were draped around us like a blanket.

When I shifted to separate us, he stopped me. "Not yet. Let's cuddle."

I wasn't going to question a good thing, but the way he said it, like he was worried about something, had me narrowing my eyes.

"What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing." He held onto me, still not letting me move.

Since my hands were still tied, and he had me trapped under the weight of his hips, I just shrugged. Enforced cuddling was a new one for me, but I didn't mind.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of our breathing. But his reaction still bothered me, and I kept thinking about it. Then I gasped in realization.

"You have spines! Like a cat!" The spines on a cat's penis were supposed to trigger ovulation. But I was not a cat, and I was on the pill.

He hung his head, looking almost embarrassed. “Not quite. They are not as sharp, more like dull protrusions that lift away from my skin when I come. But it will be...uncomfortable...if I pull out too soon. They will flatten in a few minutes.”

“Mandatory cuddling. You’re going to spoil me.” I’d noticed how he’d almost looked ashamed of it, and I wanted him to know I didn’t mind, as long as it didn’t hurt me.

He relaxed visibly. He released me from the cuffs and rubbed his hands gently over my wrists. Even with the pillowcase and my nightie between my wrists and the metal, my skin was a little raw. But that was my fault. I’d been pulling hard on them as I shrieked and screamed like a banshee. I was glad there was plenty of space between him and his neighbors. If we’d been back at my place with my flimsy walls, the entire neighborhood would be awake. Volume control when fucking was something I did not have.

My arms freed, we continued our post-coital cuddle.

When he finally pulled out of me, warmth gushed out, soiling the sheets.

“We made a big mess,” I said, yawning. I’d almost fallen asleep.

“Stay right here. I’ll be back.”

He moved away, and I pouted at the loss. He returned with a damp, warm towel to clean me up.

Then, with me done, he cleaned the bed the best he could before throwing a clean flat sheet over the spot.

“Sleep on this side.” He moved me over to the dry side of the bed. “We will get everything clean in the morning.” Then I was being hauled back into his arms and cuddled against his furry chest.

With Mateo’s arms around me, and his wings above me, and my body happily sated, it wasn’t long before I fell sound asleep.

CHAPTER 16



EVA

NOBODY EVER WARNED ME how difficult it would be to focus on my work with an incubus right outside our workplace window. Prax had insisted on keeping me within view, so he'd parked his perfectly sculpted ass on the bench directly outside in the hall. And to think he'd been the one with the gall to claim Mateo would draw too much attention!

If he had the ability to turn transparent or take on any form he wanted to blend in, then why didn't he? I suspect it was because he was getting a lot of attention from all the women at my workplace, and he thrived on it. It didn't matter whether the attention was negative or positive; as long as he was getting a ton of women riled up, Prax loved it.

He'd taken one look at me this morning and immediately looked away again, as if he realized something had happened between me and Mateo and I was no longer on the market. Was it that obvious? Did I have a "just screwed and happy about it" look to me? Or had Mateo warned him off behind my

back? Whatever it was, Prax was getting his fill of female attention, considering my office consisted mostly of women.

I could see the two younger interns taking turns strutting right by him with their lipstick freshly reapplied and their skirts hiked higher than was appropriate, trying to catch his eye. To their credit, the photocopier was right there. So technically they were still working.

The rest of my coworkers only took furtive glances as they admired the perfect masculine specimen on display. It was winter, and despite the cold, Prax was showing a lot of tanned skin.

At least he wasn't topless, like he'd been this morning when he'd come to meet me at Mateo's place. I'd insisted he conjure some clothes so he could fit in better, warning him that some Karen might overreact and call the cops on him if they thought he was naked, even though he was most definitely covered in all the parts that really counted.

In the end, he'd settled on a pair of leather pants and a silk shirt, open at the front. It wasn't much better at not drawing attention, but at least it was clothes. He also looked completely human.

Oh, and I'd also had a little talk with him about toning down the rapey vibes.

"Do you women not like assertive males anymore?" he'd asked.

"If that's your idea of 'assertiveness', I don't think most women ever liked it," I'd replied honestly.

"No one ever complained before. But I appreciate that this is a different time; I'll dial it back."

I'd worried at the time about what he'd meant by that. But by this point I was more worried about one of my co-workers jumping him than the other way around.

The person who was the unhappiest about Prax's presence was...no surprise...none other than Tamara. She'd grumbled loudly several times already and had already questioned the two interns if they *really* needed to use the photocopier that

much, implying that they were only there for the view. It turned out they really did have that much photocopying to do, go figure.

She stood with her arms crossed over her chest in her office doorway. “Eva, I need to see you in my office. Now.”

Oh boy. She’d seen me arrive with our distraction du jour, but even if she hadn’t, she probably would have figured it out, since Prax kept waving at me. Since she couldn’t very well go out there and ask him to leave—I mean, technically he wasn’t doing anything wrong—she decided to take it out on me. Amazing.

I put on my best business-as-usual face, and we went into her office. The rest of us only had cubicles, and she liked to laud that over us often.

“Close the door behind you,” she ordered.

I did. But I didn’t sit down. I stood, clipboard in hand, looking like I was so busy that I didn’t have time to chitchat.

“This is a place of work, Evangeline. You can’t have your little boyfriend hanging around outside.”

Yuck. Who the hell did she think she was, using my full first name like that?

I tried my best to keep the snark out of my voice, but failed. “That is not my boyfriend. I’m single. Remember?”

That had always been the reason she’d thought it was acceptable to hand me work at 4:55 PM on a Friday that needed to be done ASAP. According to her, the other ladies had families, and I should “be more considerate.”

In this workplace, there was this weird unspoken competition to be the busiest-seeming person on staff. Anyone without children made a big show of staying late at least a few times a week, even though we all had the same workload, and I had no problem finishing mine on time. Since I refused to play this game, Tamara decided it meant I didn’t have enough work and would spring rush projects on me right before it was time to swipe out for the day.

My stock answer had always been that I would *love* to *help her* get that done if she'd approve the overtime. Of course she'd never do such a thing, so she'd tell me then and only then that it could wait until tomorrow.

"I don't care what he is to you. He can't stay here."

"I've already explained. I'm involved in an investigation concerning a missing piece of jewelry, and—"

"What does this have to do with this creep sneaking around my workplace?"

I tried my damndest not to roll my eyes. Did I mention Tamara was a bitch, and I kind of hated her guts? Because she was, and I did.

I took a deep, calming breath. "*As. I. Was. Saying*, I am involved in an investigation and have been placed under protection in case the suspect attempts to target me. I told you all this on the phone yesterday. You told me to come in anyway. Here I am."

Tamara did not even try to hold back her eye roll. "You want me to believe that guy out there is a bodyguard? Do you think I'm stupid? He's dressed like he's on the set of some vampire movie."

Not a vampire, idiot, incubus. Completely different type of monster. I didn't correct her, though.

I shrugged. "I don't exactly get to choose what he wears. You can tell him to wear something more appropriate, but I'm not sure he'll listen. Maybe you can offer him one of our samples. He might look great in a curtain."

Our office did product development and buying for the housewares division of the local department store, and there were always curtain samples lying around somewhere.

If Tamara could have growled, she would. "Look, I don't know which cosplay event you picked him up at, but he can't stay. Your boy toy is distracting everyone with his muscles and his inappropriate attire. Make him go away."

“He’s not my boy toy,” I almost-yelled loud enough for *everyone* outside the thin-walled office to hear. “And I can’t make him go away. Even if you’re distracted by his muscles.”

Honestly, Prax wasn’t doing anything other than just sitting there looking like a delicious piece of man meat. He hadn’t harassed or catcalled anyone. He hadn’t even *spoken* to anyone other than me. Just as he’d promised, he’d dialed it back.

Imagine if the roles had been reversed and it had been a woman out there just sitting on a bench looking pretty, and the boss man inside blamed her for being distracting because his male underlings couldn’t get their heads out of the gutter! And then had the audacity to comment that what she was wearing was inappropriate, even though it covered all the important bits!

That was basically what Tamara was doing to Prax. He might not mind, but I did.

“I’m calling security,” Tamara said primly.

I shrugged. “Okay.” Before she could say anything else, I turned and walked out of her office.

A few minutes later, Kamal, the building’s daytime security guard, was outside my office too, talking to Prax, who looked more than happy to be getting even more attention and poured on the charm. He dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, which I knew was nothing more than his very own soul stuff made physical, and showed Kamal something inside. At this, the security guard visibly relaxed.

Then Prax pointed through the window at me, and I felt every head in the place turn to look. My face heated, and I pretended to be utterly engrossed with whatever was on my screen. A few minutes more, and the two were chatting and laughing like old friends.

I glanced over at Tamara’s office door, wondering what she was thinking. This probably wasn’t going the way she was hoping.

When Kamal returned, he came straight to my desk. I “confirmed” all the details with him, even the part where Prax

claimed he was from the EA. It was a huge lie, but I ran with it.

Too pissed off to wait for Kamal to come to her, Tamara stomped over to him while he was still at my desk. “Why is he not gone yet?” she demanded. “Make the creep leave.”

Kamal’s face turned serious. “Ma’am, I realize you are concerned about a strange male outside your window, but he is not here to creep on you. The EA sent him; I checked his badge. I just spoke to Eva here, and his story checks out.”

Tamara looked like she was going to explode. “Are you saying you can’t do your job and make him leave?”

“With all due respect, ma’am, I don’t think it’s my job to interfere with EA business.” Kamal walked over to her office. Tamara had left her door open, so he walked right in and over to her window into the hall. “Here is the solution.” He closed the blinds. “There. He is no longer bothering you.”

One of the interns snickered as Tamara closed her office door a bit harder than was necessary.

Kamal approached me. “I will keep an extra eye out for your safety, Eva.”

“Thanks, Kamal. I appreciate it.”

I turned back to my screen but had forgotten what I was even doing. I got up and looked over the divider into Betty’s cubicle. Betty was the only coworker I would consider a friend despite having worked here since moving back to Darlington to live in my childhood home. “I’m going to grab coffee from the break room. Wanna come?”

“Sure.” She pressed send on the email she’d been working on and stood.

We made our way to the break room, which was just one room over and had a wall of windows, and started a new pot of coffee.

“The EA must’ve sent their best-looking agent,” Betty said in a low voice as we waited. “He looks like he belongs on the cover of a bodice ripper.”

“Really? He’s not really my type.”

Because my type, apparently, was a manticore.

A sudden cold draft had me rubbing my arms.

“Do you feel that?” Betty asked, pulling her sweater tighter around her. “It’s winter, god damn it. Why would they have the AC on?”

It wasn’t just chilly; I felt a deep sense of foreboding and looked out the window to make sure Prax was still there. He was. Good.

I went over to the fridge to get the milk as Betty stirred in her non-dairy creamer. She wasn’t lactose intolerant or vegan; she just liked it better. Weird. But hey, who was I to judge?

I opened the fridge. And then everything went to shit.

CHAPTER 17



EVA

I STARED INTO THE fridge, not understanding what I was looking at.

Instead of the various take-out bags of half-finished food, bulging plastic containers growing their own civilizations, and furry green sandwiches long forgotten, I found myself staring into a black hole. It wasn't just the fridge. It felt as if the whole break room was one giant silent echo. My ears popped.

“What the fu—” Betty stood behind me, flabbergasted.

By the time I realized why the swirling darkness looked so familiar, it was too late. A pale gray hand reached out through the portal for me. I stumbled back, crashing into Betty, whose eyes had grown as big as saucers.

We scrambled away from the possessed fridge. Whatever magic was swirling within it kept the door open, and something terrifying was crawling out of it.

My shriek was stuck in my throat, but Betty's wasn't. Her blood-curdling scream broke the silence. I expected everyone

to come running, but no one did.

The figure that had crawled out of the fridge shambled toward me. Its skin was pale and gray, with darker mottled patches that looked ready to rot right off. Its gnarled and claw-like hand reached toward me. It stank like rot and decay.

I'd seen these things on the news.

Ghouls.

Run!

I turned, but the door was gone—in fact, the entire break room was gone. Betty and I were in an empty space that was completely devoid of doors or windows. It was lit, though there were no light fixtures. We stood on plain concrete. The only thing left of the office was the fridge.

What the hell?

Betty pounded on the place that had just moments ago been an open door to the hallway as I tried to evade the ghoulish creature. It was after me; that much was clear. It soon had Betty and I cornered, and this time, I did scream. I screamed like my life depended on it. Which it probably did.

Again, no one came running. There was definitely magic hiding what was happening in this room. If Prax had any idea what was going on, he'd be here in a heartbeat, phasing through the window. Wait. Did incubi even have hearts?

There was no time to contemplate that because the ghoul was stumbling into us, grabbing the locket that was hanging around my neck. Betty, who was clinging onto my arm with a near death grip, let out a blood-curdling yell. Suddenly, the ghoul was ripped away from us.

Prax!

He grabbed the ghoul and catapulted it across the room. The break room was back. The thing landed on the table with a crunch and a wet splat, leaving a rotten chunk of itself behind.

Kamal stormed in just in time to see Prax throw the ghoul back into the fridge. But even with his demonic strength, Prax struggled to wrestle the door closed, since one of the ghoul's

arms—the one not holding the replica locket— was sticking out. Kamal helped, adding his body weight to shoulder the door closed. The arm snapped off and fell to the floor, twitching. By the time the two of them had finally wrestled the door closed, several of my coworkers were watching wide-eyed from the hallway.

Prax hurried over to Betty and me as Kamal continued pressing his back against the fridge, which was still rattling as if it was possessed.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.” My voice sounded distant. “It...it has the locket.”

Prax nodded, leaving the rest unsaid. The wizard had taken the bait.

Tamara stepped into the room. “What is going on in here?” Her eyes landed on Prax. “*You!*” She pointed a perfectly French-manicured index finger at him. “I knew you were trouble. How the hell did you get in here?”

Before Prax could answer, a booming voice sounded in the hall. “What’s all this?”

Tamara whipped around, and we all looked behind her. Craptastic. All the ruckus had brought down the big boss, the VP. He covered his nose at the stench the moment he stepped into the room.

As usual, Tamara was the first one to play the blame game, and she pointed straight at me, then at Prax. A look of confusion crossed her face when she saw that Prax was now wearing a very official-looking uniform jacket and looked every inch the part of an EA Enforcer. It must be convenient to be able to shape his own soul stuff into whatever he wanted at the drop of a hat.

It was Kamal who spoke first. “Umm, little help here?” He was still leaning his entire body weight against the fridge door, and something was still trying very hard to get out.

Just then, the fridge door flung open, shoving Kamal forward. The dark portal was exposed again, along with a now one-armed ghoul. Prax and Kamal moved fast, shoving the door

closed. This time, Prax mumbled something in what sounded like a foreign language and made a gesture. Chains appeared around the appliance, tightening until the fridge stopped moving. Then the chains faded away to nothing.

Prax stepped away from the fridge, and so did Kamal, though the security guard still eyed it suspiciously.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“Binding spell.” Prax’s response was curt. Then he turned to the VP and flashed a badge. He quickly explained his reason for being here. “I will need to collect this fridge for evidence.” He gestured to the tossed chairs, ghoulish-covered table, and the rotten dismembered arm on the floor. “Seal this room off. Someone from the EA will come in overnight to clean it. We will replace anything that has been broken, including the fridge.”

“Yes, I think that would be for the best.” The VP kept his hand over his mouth. He looked like he was trying hard not to retch, especially when the arm started crawling toward him like a zombie version of Thing.

Prax picked up a chair and swiftly stabbed it with the metal chair leg, stopping it in its tracks.

The big boss finally noticed Betty and me, still pressed up against the wall. Betty’s arms hadn’t gotten the memo yet that the danger had passed, and she was still clinging to me for dear life and shaking like a leaf.

“You two should take the rest of the day off.”

“B...but...” Tamara started.

“They should take the rest of the day off,” he said firmly, before turning and walking away down the hall.

“Yes, sir, of course.”

CHAPTER 18



MATEO

I BREATHED A HUGE sigh of relief when Eva called to tell me she was safe. I already knew the decoy locket had been taken, since Seth was monitoring it and had notified me the second it happened.

The fact that Eva was leaving work early and I got to see her sooner than I expected was a bonus. I didn't trust the incubus alone with her, despite having already warned him off her earlier this morning. I wouldn't hesitate to call in some favors to get his ass locked up in a jar if he so much as breathed on her inappropriately for even a fraction of a second. The vexing incubus had merely shrugged and said that he was no longer interested, now that Eva "stunk of cat and wyvern".

I scrolled through the numerous pictures Seth had sent me of the wizards on the Council. Some of the photos had been taken quite some time ago, but Seth assured me that the men would still look similar, since they kept themselves looking young—or youngish, rather, since most of them appeared to be in their early to mid-forties.

Of course, with the way they dressed and styled themselves, many of them managed to look young and old simultaneously. I didn't think that was what they meant when they said timeless elegance. More like eternally outdated.

None of the men looked familiar to me. But then again, it wasn't like I'd paid much attention to how he looked when I'd seen him. I'd been too busy trying to figure out an escape route and keeping Eva safe. I did, however, remember what the guy wore. That suit had stuck out like a sore thumb at the seedy motel. Maybe Eva would have a better memory.

My phone rang again, and I picked up immediately. "What's the deal, loser?"

"A whole fucking lot of nothing, that's what." Seth sounded frustrated. "I thought that even if there was a ward around the wizard's place, the locket would at least track it to the edge of it. But it just cuts out about two miles out from Eva's workplace, right over the lake. I did some rudimentary scrying, but all I saw was water. Whatever, we tried. Did any of those photos I sent you look familiar?"

"No. But I wasn't exactly paying attention to the wizard. I was too busy escaping. I'll get Eva to have a look when she gets back."

"Sounds like a plan." He hung up.

I got up from my seat, stretched and cracked my neck, then went to the kitchen.

I'd gone earlier this morning to pick up some "snackable" food: crackers, bread for sandwiches, cold cuts, cheese, and jam, in case Eva had the midnight munchies again, since she clearly wasn't interested in my protein bars. I had considered picking up ingredients to make dinner for us while I was at the grocery store, but decided against it since we might get called away to investigate something midway through it. And besides, Prax might linger, and I didn't want him ruining our time together.

So it was takeout or delivery again. That was probably best; I didn't want to dig into my stockpile of guaranteed dates yet.

Not until all this was over.

Before too long, Eva's car rolled into my driveway, and she stepped into the house. The first thing I smelled was rotten ghoul. I hurried over to make sure she was okay.

"I'm fine. Prax shoved the thing back into the fridge."

"Hi, you going to let me in?" Prax waved from the entryway.

I closed the door on him instead. "Fridge?—never mind." I took her by the arm and led her to the stairs. "You can tell me all about it after a shower. We're going to get you cleaned up."

"You could let Prax in, you know. He saved me."

I pressed my lips in a thin line. It should have been me that saved her, but I kept my mouth shut.

"I'll let him in after you are all clean and smell like me."

She furrowed her brows, but didn't say anything.

I walked into the bathroom to see Prax hovering right outside the window. He waved at us, pointed to the shower, then made that same lewd finger gesture, implying that I planned on fucking Eva in the shower. He wasn't wrong. I wanted to get my scent back on her as strongly as possible, and that was the most effective way. I hated that she didn't smell like me anymore.

I'd never bothered to put curtains up over this window because normally no one could see through it.

"Stay right here. Whatever you do, do not invite him into the house. Unless you want him to watch me put my scent back in and all over you."

An occupant of the house had to invite him in, and technically, Eva was now an occupant.

I returned with a spare sheet and a roll of duct tape. Soon, I had the window covered and my female naked and standing in my extra-large shower. I stripped quickly and joined her under the steady rain of warm water.



EVA WAS ABLE TO narrow the wizards down to the ones with blonde hair and a deep side part.

“I’m not sure how useful that is. I only caught a quick glimpse. I was too busy watching those genie things.”

“*Ifrits*. Djinnns of fire. Yes, I had my eyes on them too. You did better than me with the wizard, and I’m the one who’s supposed to be trained for this.”

“Your attention was on the other guys since they looked the most dangerous. It’s not your fault.”

“Nah, he just sucks at his job.”

I refrained from picking Prax up and tossing him out of my house. But I had to admit that the demon was proving to be quite useful. Seth and I had sent him over to the location where the decoy locket had stopped broadcasting. He couldn’t carry anything like a camera with him, but he did come back with a very thorough description of the area, thus saving us a trip.

It was indeed over the lake. But it wasn’t in the middle of it, it was close to a marina. If the wizard was based there, it would make sense for the tracking to cut off before it could give his location away. We then had him check inside the various marina buildings, but he found nothing definitive. Whoever had been there was long gone.

“Who owns the marina?” Eva asked.

I wasn’t sure, but that was the next place I was going to look.

CHAPTER 19



EVA

WE MADE IT TO the marina by mid-morning. Sure enough, it was open, even busy, despite the lake being mostly frozen. It was definitely not boating weather, but even in the dead of winter, a ritzy venue like this did well with special events like weddings, quinceañeras, and balls. They probably charged an arm and a leg for them.

There'd been an afternoon event there yesterday, despite it being in the middle of the week, and the place had been fully booked with guests from out of town. There had been tons of wizards here at that time yesterday, and that made narrowing down the culprit a lot harder.

The marina operator was not cooperative, citing privacy concerns for the yacht club members, and refused to answer any more questions. She kept repeatedly asking if she was under arrest, despite clearly knowing that Mateo hadn't been sent by the police or the EA.

I tightened my coat around me against the cold as we stepped out of the main building, which housed the marina offices, a fancy banquet hall, several meeting rooms, and two floors of luxury guest suites. A cold gust of wind blew across the lake and buffeted the docks with a flurry of chunky snowflakes.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to get the police or the EA involved?” I asked as we hurried to the back of the parking lot where Mateo had parked.

“Desmon wants to keep this under wraps. That’s why I didn’t give any more information than I did. It doesn’t look good if people know one of his treasures has gone missing.”

Made sense, actually. If someone could steal one piece of his treasure, then why not more? It would prove that there was a weakness in his security. I still couldn’t believe my dumbass brother had been the one to break through it. Granted, he did have magical help.

Mateo continued to the passenger side and opened the door for me, which was sweet. I’d never had anyone do that for me before.

“Thanks.”

My phone started ringing just as he was helping me into the car. At first, I thought it was the local cat rescue. They’d sent me a message earlier this morning, asking if I could do an emergency groom on a few cats rescued from a hoarding situation. I’d said that I’d love to but explained that I’d need a few hours to get my table and equipment set up at a temporary location.

The plan was to head over to my place after visiting the marina to grab my grooming table and supplies. I would have to make do with the kitchen sink for washing the poor kitties, but that was better than nothing.

But it wasn’t Toe Beans Furry Rescue’s number, but my neighbor Charlene’s. Curious, I picked it up.

“Eva! Thank god you’re okay.” There was a huge note of alarm in her voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“You need to get back home right now. Your house is on fire.”

It took a moment for me to actually process her words.

“*What?*”

“Yeah. I was so scared you were inside. I’ve already called the fire department. You need to come home right now.”

Shit. When it rains, it pours. My gut told me this was related to the decoy locket. The wizard was probably pissed when he realized it was a fake and decided to search my home for the real one. A fire was just the thing to hide the fact he’d been there. Or maybe this was a warning? Cooperate, or else?

“Thanks, Charlene. I’ll go right now.”

I hung up and stared out at the snow as it hit me. All my things! And my parents’ things! I hadn’t had the heart to throw most of their stuff away, but seeing their belongings every day had been difficult, so I’d packed everything up and shoved it all into the basement. It was a mess down there.

Even if they were spared the fire, I doubted they would survive the water needed to put out the flames.

And what if I’d been at home, instead of with Mateo?

He was just getting into the driver’s seat. I told him everything, the words tumbling out rapid-fire in half-formed sentences. Then we were both silent as we sped toward my home.

By the time we got there, they’d already put out the flames. Aside from the telltale smell of smoke, which was strong and acrid and burned my lungs, there was something else lingering in the air. I wrinkled my nose. It smelled like rotten eggs.

“Sulfur. There’s magic at work here.” Mateo stepped out of the vehicle. “Bad magic.”

It was a tin of photos at the edge of my yard, lid off, with the contents missing, that had my heart climbing up into my throat. I looked around and found an old photo, waterlogged with its edges singed. I could barely make out the image of my parents, Tony, and I at the beach. I found another, ruined beyond recognition.

All the photos from my childhood were destroyed and littering my front yard. All the birthday parties. All the cross-country road trips to visit Nana. That time the zookeeper let me pet a wombat because it was feeding time. Did you know wombats were solid AF? They were freaking tanks. It had been like petting a fur-covered living rock.

There had been pictures of the old house, the one I'd grown up in, before my parents had to downsize because of Tony's bullshit. And of Archie, our crazy orange cat that had given me my love for furry felines.

I'd been meaning to get all the photos digitized but had never gotten around to it. All those memories...gone. I wasn't naive enough to think that all the little details would stay in my head forever without the photos to trigger them. All those happy memories would disappear forever.

Tears filled my eyes, and Mateo came to put an arm around me.

A cop with a mean scowl saw us. "You can't go in there," he said gesturing to my yard. "This is a crime scene."

Yeah, crime was right. "It's my house."

His eyes immediately narrowed on me. "Oh, is it, now? Looks like we've found our first suspect."

Mateo put his body in front of mine protectively. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Can't you see how upset she is?"

"Yeah, yeah. Right. She's putting on an Oscar-winning performance, but I know arson when I see it. They are still investigating, but if you ask me, Missy here is a prime suspect."

"She was with me the whole time."

"Oh, yeah? Then I guess that makes you a suspect, too."

"Did you even check the security cameras in the neighborhood?" Mateo asked testily.

"We've requested the footage, but I don't see how they would help, since the fire started inside the house in multiple places.

The neighbor said they saw flames in both the kitchen and upstairs. I don't need an investigating team to tell me an accelerant was involved. I can smell it."

"What you smell is sulfur. You know, brimstone? It's a sign of bad magic."

"Nope, smells like carbon disulfide to me. And the home's sole occupant just happened to be safely away at her boyfriend's house when it happened. How incredibly convenient."

"Where's Officer Cooley, and Officer Hayes?" Mateo demanded. "They usually work on crimes involving magic and monsters."

The cop glowered. "What's it to you, pal? Who are you, anyway?" Mateo's mention of the other two officers had finally caught his attention.

"Former EA Enforcer. I have worked with Cooley and Hayes many times."

The officer pressed his lips in a thin line, clearly not liking it. "Well, arson and possible insurance fraud isn't their department. I'm Officer Biffi. You're stuck with me."



BY THE TIME WE got back to Mateo's place, I was beyond exhausted. Officer Biffi asked me so many similar questions phrased in so many different ways in an attempt to catch me in a lie that nothing made sense anymore.

I was glad Charlene had been there with me. She insisted she saw three guys leave the scene. It made it easier to sort out the officer's trickily worded questions.

I typed out a quick message to the cat rescue, explaining that I would no longer be able to help them groom new arrivals, because I'd lost all my gear in the fire except a few brushes. Too bad. Grooming cats was what I did to de-stress. I didn't get paid for it, it was a labor of love.

I was more stressed than I had ever been and now I couldn't even fall back on my hobby. Sriracha meowed, bumping his

head against my leg as if to remind me he was still there. I bent to pick him up.

“I know, Sriri. We still have each other. I’m so glad you weren’t there when it happened.”

If I’d lost my baby in that fire, they really *would* have a crime to investigate, because I’d be murdering whoever was involved.

“What are we going to do, Sriri? We’re homeless. I can’t believe that asshole thinks I did it.”

“Don’t worry: Desmon will vouch for you. If they try to make a case of this, we’ll get it thrown out.” Mateo gave my arm a comforting squeeze before sitting me down on his couch with Sriri in my lap. “Also, I don’t like this Officer Biffi guy. Something about him feels off. He immediately accused you without even waiting for the results from the fire investigation team or going through the available security footage. It’s not normal protocol, and he knows it.”

“Was that why you mentioned you’d worked for the EA?” I ran my fingers through Sriracha’s soft fur, letting the sensation calm me.

“For sure. It was my way of telling him that something smelled fishy to me.” Mateo sat down next to me, and Sriracha butted his head against his arm, asking him for pets too.

“Do you think he’s working with our wizard?”

“Maybe. Or our wizard friend paid him off when he arrived. But, honestly, he could just be a prick.”

I held Sriracha up so we were face to face. “What the hell are we going to do, Sriri?”

He looked back at me, without a care in the world. At that moment, I very much wanted to be a cat and have nothing to worry about except dinner.

“You can stay here with me until you can get back on your feet,” Mateo offered. “You’re here with me now anyway.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“I have a solution. Move your stuff out of the guest room and into my room, and we’ll call it even. Deal?”

“How is that a deal?” His “solution” reminded me of when I’d claimed he owed me dinner, a thinly veiled excuse to spend more time together.

“It’s not like I’m not going to get anything out of it.” He winked at me.

I giggled. “I think the benefits go both ways.”

“Then it’s settled. You’ll stay with me.”

CHAPTER 20



MATEO

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED to you?”

Sriracha stared back at me balefully, the perma-grumpy look on his face even more severe than usual. There was a bow on top of his head. Not just any bow. A shiny baby pink one. His hair spilled out over top of it like a water fountain.

“She gave you a pink bow? I’m so sorry, buddy. That’s just wrong.”

I was about to free the poor thing from the wretched accessory when Eva’s voice rang out behind me. “Don’t even think about it. It stays.”

“It’s pink. Sriracha is a boy.” Well, technically, he was neutered, but still a boy to me.

“Pink used to be a very masculine color, you know. Blues were for girls since blue was supposedly calming and soothing, you know, as in the Virgin Mary. And red was bold and masculine, so pink was for boys. Pink looks great on him. And besides, look how adorable he is!”

“Your poor victim.”

“Victim? Don’t be silly. I groomed him. It helps me de-stress, and he liked it.” She took a step toward me, and it was only then that I noticed she was hiding something behind her back.

I frowned. “What do you have there?”

“Oh...nothing.” She came a little closer.

“What are you holding?” I asked, backing away.

“Nothing.” She matched me step for step, looking menacingly sweet and innocent.

I glanced over at Sriracha, who was in the process of trying to remove the bow from his head. Realization dawned just as Eva pounced. I found myself knocked over onto the couch with her straddling me.

“What the—” Oh. The feeling of the brush running through the fur on my chest chased away every protest I might have had. It felt...really good. And I realized I’d never once in my life been brushed before. My fur needed the occasional shampooing when I was in the shower, of course, but I always just towel-dried and left it as is.

“It’s a clean brush. I promise I washed it.”

It took all of three long strokes to get me purring like a house cat.

“See? It’s nice.” She repositioned herself on my lap. “And I need something to distract me now that I can’t volunteer anymore for the local cat rescue. I just had to turn down three cats and a kitten.”

“Oh, it’s volunteer work? I thought it was a side hustle.” Yesterday, she’d asked if she could bring over her grooming supplies, since she had a few furry clients to care for. I hadn’t realized she was doing it for a rescue for free. That was sweet of her.

Her brush swept over my shoulder, and I found myself tipping my head to give her better access.

“Nope. I don’t get paid for it. But I like thinking of how much better I’ve made these cats feel by the time they leave. Many of them are long-haired cats coming from bad situations. Some of them, their coats are so matted that they can barely move.

“That’s how I got Sriracha. He was a surrender. Someone got him without realizing that long-haired cats like Persians, Rag Dolls, and Himalayans need to be brushed daily to maintain their coats.

“Most abandoned cats do very well on their own, but long-hairs can’t survive once their fur gets so matted and gunked up with debris that they can’t hunt for food or climb to safety. I mean, look at him. Sriracha isn’t meant to be an outdoor cat. Persians got their reputation as princesses for a reason.”

Sriracha had given up on bow removal and was now curled up on the rug, napping in a beam of sunlight. With a smooshed in face like that, he certainly wouldn’t be able to hunt effectively. Nope, he was used to having his food served in a pedestaled dish.

We switched position on the couch so she could brush my back. I closed my eyes and let her work her magic. She was truly a cat whisperer. Eva of the Beast-Calming Brush. The lion part of me had never stood a chance. I’d been under her spell since the moment we met.

Since then, the wyvern in me had fallen for her bravery and fire, and the human for her brains and wit.

When I glanced back at her, she had a smile on her face. “You find this calming for you too?”

“Yeah. And I need all the calm I can get right now. I can’t believe Officer Biffi thinks I’d set my own house on fire. I’m not even sure what’s going to happen with work.”

She hadn’t gone in since the ghoul fiasco. She’d asked for a few more days off until the investigation was over, and her boss had begrudgingly approved the request.

“I promise, whatever happens, I’ll protect you.”

“Thank you.”

As she slowly worked her way down my back, going around the wings, she leaned back against my tail. I wondered if she even realized what was supporting her. Since that night in the kitchen, I'd been careful always to wear partial glamour around her, hiding my scorpion tail while showing the rest of my form.

"Hmm...I'm not sure how to groom the rest of you." She brushed her fingertips over the leathery membranes of my wings. "Ooh, they're soft! But you've got some dry spots." She touched an area that was particularly itchy.

I was suddenly glad Desmon had gifted me that fancy, all-natural flight oil last Christmas. I'd thought moisturizers were too vain, especially one that glittered with flakes of real gold, until the skin on my wings had started to crack in the winter dryness. "I do have moisturizer, but I can't reach parts of my wings," I admitted.

"I'd love to do that for you. Where's the stuff you use?"

I took her upstairs and showed her the fancy bottle.

She held it up and read the label. "Gilded Wings. Flight oil for the most discerning of dragons. Proprietary blend. Since 1790. Sounds expensive. Did they make it look like an expensive bottle of collector whisky on purpose?"

"It was a gift from Desmon. It's supposedly the best you can get. I heard the family who owns the recipe is filthy rich, given how much they charge for it and the fact that one bottle barely covers a single dragon's wing. Have you seen how big Desmon is when he's in dragon form?"

"Can't say I have."

She pulled me into the bedroom and sat me on the edge of the bed. Then she climbed up next to me. She poured a little bit of the oil out into her palm and made a sound of surprise. "It's sparkly! Smells nice, too. Like musk, wood, and a hint of something floral? It's not too overpowering. Honestly, I'm a little surprised something like this came out of such a masculine-looking bottle."

She squinted at the bottle before stoppering it again and putting it onto the bedside table. She rubbed the oil between her palms, sniffing. “Ambergris, sandalwood and jasmine. Those scents have always been expensive. And the gold flakes. They sure made it as fancy as possible for their dragon clientele.” She positioned herself behind me and started rubbing the oil on my wings. “I’m going to have the softest hands in the world after this.”

When she got to the spot where my wings joined my back, a place I couldn’t reach on my own, I moaned. She responded by rubbing a little harder. I tried to convince myself that not every touch had to end in sex, but then I imagined her hands stroking over my cock instead.

Mmm. That would feel good, especially with the oil. As she reached for the bottle again, I moved. She let out a small squeak as her hand missed the bottle, and she fell over onto the bed with me.

“Your turn.” I pinned her down and started licking her face.

“What the—” She giggled at my own attempt at grooming her.

But the giggling stopped when my cock, which was straining the front of my pants, pressed against her thigh.

CHAPTER 21



EVA

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO miss the massive erection that was tenting Mateo's pants. It was even more impossible to look away when he undid his fly and shoved his pants and briefs down his hips before tossing them onto the chair across the room.

He took my hands and placed them on the monstrous beast that jutted out from his short, velvety fur.

"Touch me," he ordered, his voice husky with need.

I didn't have to be told twice.

I reached for his thick cock and rubbed up and down with slow, languid strokes, exploring the smooth surface and spreading whatever was left of the oil over it. There were no signs of the spines that would rise later when he came, but when I ran my fingers along the dip between the head and his girthy shaft, I felt the bumps.

They weren't spines like a cat's, which were sharp and pokey. Rather, I saw now that the head of his cock had sections that

pushed out wide, forming flaring protrusions when he came. Right now, they lay flat, making his head that pronounced mushroom shape. I ran my fingertips along the ridge; it was harder in some spots than others.

I imagined the head of his cock splaying apart like a bulbous grappling hook inside me, holding us together. It wouldn't be impossible to remove, but it would be uncomfortable. Yep. Guaranteed cuddling.

"They won't flare out unless I come inside you," Mateo said softly.

"So, can I taste it?" I asked, moving my hands over him again.

He opened his mouth to reply, but all that came out was a strangled growl. I'd take that as a yes. His jaw tightened, and his golden eyes burned with need. The way the pointed tips of his elongated canines pressed against his lower lip was super sexy. He inhaled deeply, his nostrils widening like he was tasting me in the air.

I bent my head and licked the single drop of precum off the tip. It was musky, woody, and masculine. Mateo's fingers immediately tightened in my hair.

"Open," he ordered.

The single strained word sent a surge of need through me. I opened my mouth and let him guide my mouth to him.

"Oh yeah. Fuck." He moved my head up and down his cock. "Such a good girl."

His words lit me on fire, even as I gagged on his enormous cock. It hit the back of my throat, making tears squeeze out of the corners of my eyes. His musky scent filled me, infused me, until that was all there was in the world.

"This mouth is mine." He looked feral as he gazed down at me, his mane forming a halo around him.

Even with his human face, he looked every bit a lion, at least until I looked behind him. His wings were half open, outlined by the light in the window and reminding me that he was part wyvern too.

His fingers still tight in my hair, he pulled my head away just enough for me to take another gasping breath. Then he was fucking my mouth again, using me like the good little girl I was.

Good little girl? Where had that thought come from? That was completely new. But what would have made me feel degraded and used if it was anyone else made me feel wanted, powerful even, with Mateo. I made him like this, made him wild with need.

He pulled me off him and arranged me on my hands and knees on the bed. Then he was behind me. His palm landed sharply on my ass, making a loud crack that sounded much worse than it felt. It was only a light sting, but the sound had me squirming in anticipation.

His hand landed on my ass again, but this time he squeezed. His half-extended claws dug into me. Not enough to break the skin, but I gasped, not expecting it.

Mateo moved behind me, and I braced myself, thinking he'd just thrust in, but he buried his face in my pussy instead.

“Fuck!” The word tumbled out of my mouth unbidden.

I clutched the sheets in front of me and arched my back, giving him better access. He licked along my slit, the raspy texture of his tongue making the sensation even more intense. After licking me thoroughly, he speared his tongue into my pussy. Finally! I was so empty, and needed to be filled.

I pushed back against him, riding his face until I was sweaty and panting and dripping with honey.

He stood, and I whimpered. I clenched my pussy around nothing, and it felt so empty. I needed something in me, filling me up.

“Please, Mateo.”

My wish was quickly granted when I felt the tip of his cock nudge at my greedy opening. He snarled and pushed in, his strong hands on either side of my hips, holding me in place. I couldn't have moved even if I wanted to.

I squeezed my eyes shut and gritted my teeth as he pressed in, parting my pussy lips and filling me. He was huge, and I knew there would be a moment of discomfort, especially in this vulnerable position. I cried out into the mattress, pain mixing with pleasure as I struggled to accommodate his girth.

He pulled back a little before pressing in again, sliding through my slick juices.

“Mine.”

I almost didn't recognize the word this time. It was little more than a snarl.

He reached around and found my clit, and my hips jerked at the sudden intense spike of pleasure. As he played with my swollen nub, he continued thrusting in and out. His arms trapped me against his body, and I was powerless to do anything but feel the pressure build. I clawed my fingers into the satin sheets, and the bed rattled with our movement.

I felt every last inch of his massive, throbbing cock as it moved inside me.

I crested without warning, tumbling over the edge, sobbing and panting as I pulsed and spasmed around his cock. The world around us coalesced into a single pinpoint of light which then exploded, shattering into a million glittering shards around me.

As Mateo continued rutting into me like a wild beast, I wondered if I'd ever put all the pieces of me back together again. Then he was shattering, too, his loud roar echoing throughout the room.

We collapsed onto the bed with him spooning me. And as I lay there in his arms, I realized. I was already whole.

CHAPTER 22



EVA

I GOT A CALL from Butthole Brother himself the next morning,

Pissed off and all set to rip him a new one, I picked up the phone and immediately laid into him. “You’ve got a lot of nerve calling me after what you put me through, Tony.”

“I know, sis. And I’m sorry. I really am.” Tony’s voice was high pitched, the words tumbling out in a mess. “I messed up. I fucked up super bad this time.”

“Yeah, I’ll say. I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to save your ass from a dragon.”

“Dragon? I’m not worried about no dragon, man. No, I’m talking about this psycho wizard. Listen, Evangeline. You have to give back the locket.”

Was I hearing this correctly? Ugh. I shouldn’t have picked up.

“Go to hell, Tony. And don’t call back.”

“Wait! Eva, *please*. Don’t hang up. You have to help me. You’re my sister. If I don’t give this crazy-ass wizard the locket, I’m going to be in big trouble.” He legit sounded scared, and not in the pretending-to-be-frightened-to-get-what-he-wanted way.

“Big trouble? Maybe you should’ve thought twice before stealing from a dragon. Let me guess, you set my house on fire, too, didn’t you? You snuck into my house to steal the locket, and when you couldn’t find it, you set the place on fire to cover your tracks.”

“I had no choice. Really. They made me break into your house. But I wasn’t alone, and I didn’t set it on fire. Those pyromaniac genies did.”

“You broke into my house.”

“I had to,” he whined.

Somehow, I’d known Tony was involved. I wasn’t even surprised anymore because, come on, he’d already crashed my car once. Even if he didn’t start the fire personally, he was still responsible in my books.

“What the hell were you thinking?” The question came out more as a screech. “No. Forget I asked, because you weren’t thinking. As usual. End of story.”

“I have to get the locket back, or else he’s going to kill me. He’s going to feed me to his crocs, Eva. I saw them. *Actual crocodiles*. You have to help me.”

Eva from a few years ago would have fallen for that line. Eva from a few years ago would have assured Tony that she did care. I was done with that; I had no more fucks to give. But I was curious about the locket, and I wasn’t about to pass up the chance to learn more about it.

“Who is this wizard, anyway? Does he have a name?”

“I don’t know. He never told me. I don’t even have his contact. He calls from a private number whenever he needs something. Sometimes, he just shows up without warning, teleporting right into my room.”

Teleporting didn't exist, but I refrained from correcting him.

"He's been paying my bills since I started volunteering at the museum, so I just went with it."

Tony launched into a rant about how boring it had been at the museum, and I pressed the mute button. I looked up at Mateo who was leaning against the kitchen doorway and listening in.

"Should we pretend to take the bait and try to find our wizard that way?"

"Not after what happened at the motel last time. We'd never catch him twice the same way. Besides, I have another lead."

I unmuted the call and interrupted Tony, who was still complaining.

"What's so special about Mom's locket, anyway? I mean, she had it the whole time we were growing up, and we never noticed anything." If Tony thought telling me more would get me to cooperate, I planned on milking as much information out of him as possible.

"I'm not sure, but the wizard called it a catalytic amulet. Or was it cationic? I don't remember. But it sounded important, and he's willing to pay a fortune for it, but only if I get him both halves."

"But you had both. Did you not try to put them together to see what would happen?" I knew he must have, but I wanted to hear it.

"Of course. They glowed when they first touched, but that was it. I even wore them together for a while, but I didn't feel any different. Anyway, where are you staying? I'm in front of your place right now, but you're not home."

Suddenly, I wondered if this call was being traced. Shit. I hadn't even thought about that.

"At a motel," I lied. "You know, on account that my house is covered in soot and char and everything is soaked and frozen solid, thanks to you."

"Which motel?"

“None of your business.”

“Hey, I know! You can come stay with me. My little sister doesn’t need to stay in some crappy motel.”

Let me guess. He just wanted the locket.

“I don’t have the locket anymore, Tony,” I said patiently. Technically, that wasn’t a lie. I didn’t have it on my person. It was in the safe upstairs.

“*What?!*” he screeched. “Did you sell it? How could you?”

Of course Tony would assume I’d sold it. That was what he would do.

“Mom left it to me. It wasn’t yours to promise to anyone.”

“Didn’t you hear me, Eva? This wizard guy is going to kill me if I don’t give the locket to him. And he’s going to come after you, too. Who did you give it to? Maybe we can buy it back.”

“Sorry, I’m not interested. Why would I want a locket that has brought me nothing but trouble? I’ve had a stranger force his way into my house in the middle of the night. Been accused of stealing a dragon’s treasure. Attacked by ghouls at work. My house was set on fire, and now I’m being investigated for arson—”

“You’re such a dumb bitch.”

Ahh, so we were onto insults now. Nice.

“Whoever you gave it to, sis, just get it back. Bring me the locket, and I’ll forgive you.”

Forgive me? He couldn’t be serious. Why was I even continuing this call anyway? It was a waste of my time. Time to put my foot down.

“You got yourself into this mess, Tony. You can get yourself out. Mom and Dad had the right idea when they disowned you and suggested I sever all contact. I was stupid to have not taken their advice years ago, but hey, better late than never. I’m done with you. Forever. Goodbye.”

I slammed my phone down on the table a little harder than I needed to, got up, and stomped over to the living room to

punch one of the couch cushions. “That stupid little twit! I should’ve gone no-contact when my parents did. Argh!” I gave the cushion another wallop for good measure.

Then I was sobbing, the stupid tears trickling down my face to my chin. Why was I even crying? I didn’t care. Tony didn’t deserve my tears. He’d never thought of me, or anyone else for that matter, as anything more than a means to an end.

Maybe it was because I knew that this really was the last time, that I was well and truly done with his shenanigans. And that if this wizard wanted to feed him to his crocodiles, then so be it.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, smearing the mascara I’d put on this morning. So much for looking cute for Mateo. Worse, he’d come over to wrap his arms around me, and now I’d gotten makeup and tears all over his fur.

“I’m sorry.” I rubbed at the black smudge but only managed to spread it around more.

“That’s okay. You can groom it off me later.” He bent and kissed me on the forehead, then wiped away the tears that still lingered on my cheeks.

“Thanks. Sorry for the meltdown. Tony just got me so riled up I couldn’t think straight. You’d think after all these years of him fucking over everyone he knew, I’d be used to his shit, and it wouldn’t hurt anymore. But no; it still feels like crap to know the only family I have left doesn’t care about me at all.”

I’d never understood why some women stayed with men who were assholes and users, but now that I thought about it, I’d let Tony fuck up my life just because he was blood, and that wasn’t really much different. Well, no more. I deserved better.

“Do me a favor, Mateo?”

“Name it.”

“Never let me talk to that ass again.” I flopped down on the couch, suddenly extremely tired.

“Done.” He sat down next to me and pulled me in close. “With backstabbing family like that, I think for the first time I prefer

being an orphan.”

I looked up at Mateo and blinked in surprise. “You don’t have any family? None at all?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s the only life I’ve ever known. All I know about my mother is that she had me very young and left me in front of a fire hall with a note begging them to help her ‘get rid of the devil spawn’.”

I gawked at Mateo and the casual way he’d said it. “Because you were a manticore? How did she not know that’s what you’d be?”

He shrugged. “My sperm donor never told her, I suppose. I guess she was human, and had me in secret. Even The Wall, as strong as it was back then, couldn’t hide the nature of a baby from its mother. One of the firefighters recognized that I was a monster because he was one, too. He brought me to the right people. I grew up in a group home for monsters and other unwanted magical children.”

I looked around his home. “Well, you certainly did very well for yourself despite your rocky start.”

“Thanks. But I owe all this to Desmon. I came out of the system on a clear course for trouble. The group home got paid for every kid they took in. We were just paychecks for them; they didn’t bother setting us up for success. I survived by being a bully and a menace to everyone. But no one stopped me, because no one really cared.”

I stroked his forearm as I listened to his story, glad for something to distract me from my own troubles, but at the same time sad that he’d had such a tough childhood.

“They cared just as little about their staff as they did about the kids they took in. Everyone was underpaid, and they didn’t have the training on how to give us the care we needed. The turnover rate was so high we’d make bets on how long each new hire would last. I think I made quite a few of them quit.”

“So you were a big, bad bully?”

“Yeah. I was.”

CHAPTER 23



MATEO

I'D NEVER SPOKEN ABOUT my childhood to anyone before. It wasn't something a monster like me did. I was the tough guy. The stoic guard who watched over part of the dragon's hoard. I didn't talk about the past.

But Eva appeared genuinely interested in my life, and if I wanted her to stick around after all this was over, I owed her at least this much.

"I threw my weight around because I thought it was the only way I could get a leg up. The second I turned eighteen, they kicked me out of the group home, and I immediately started getting into trouble. Got into a lot of fights. Did some work for some scary people. It was just a matter of time before I ended up in jail."

"But you managed to turn your life around. How did you end up working for Desmon?" Eva asked. "And the EA, too. How did that happen?" She put her hand softly on my forearm. "I

hope I'm not being too nosy. I just want to know more about you. But you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I don't mind, as long as this stays between us."

"Of course. I've got no one to tell except Sriracha, and he's already listening."

Sure enough, the cat was on the arm of the couch, looking bored.

"Since I relied so much on my size and my muscle mass for what I did, I needed to eat a lot, meat especially, and food costs money. Being the muscle for an unscrupulous loan shark didn't pay much, or consistently. Plus, it wasn't what I imagined doing for the rest of my life. Any Joe Schmo with a weapon can intimidate someone who owed money, you know?"

"But Desmon paid well. It took him a while to trust me, and in the beginning, I just took the occasional job with him, an extra guard during the Darlington Birthday Parade, or at the Magic and Monsters Gala, stuff like that. After he got to know me and trust me, I started guarding his home.

"After a few years, I got curious about what else was out there and took a job as an enforcer with the EA. Desmon wasn't angry; he understood I needed to stretch my wings. But I didn't last long at the Enforcement Agency. I kept being written up for not following protocol and procedure."

"Ah yes, those pesky rules." Eva's lips lifted a little at the corners.

"Yeah. I'm not too good with those. And even worse with paperwork, which doubled after The Wall fell and we had to start working with the police. I quit before they could fire me. Desmon just happened to be looking for a new head of security at the museum, so I took that. He doesn't make me do paperwork."

"I'm glad you did. I'd never have met you otherwise."

I checked her face to see if she was being genuine. She was.

"Even after I invaded your home and kidnapped you in the middle of the night?"

He smiled. "I'd say you made up for that already by offering me a place to stay and protecting me." Then, after a few seconds, she added, "You're still not off the hook for those dinners, though."

"Of course not," I chuckled, nuzzling the top of her head. "Eight proper dates. Or was it nine now?"

"Oh, they're dates now, are they?"

I grinned. "Sure are."

"Well, I guess we did skip all the preliminaries and went straight to cohabitating, at least for a little while."

A little voice in my head told me to keep her forever. But I told it to be quiet for now. All in good time. I didn't want her to feel pressured. Her life was stressful enough without a beast laying claim to her.

"Thank you, Mateo. For everything. And for telling me about yourself. It means a lot. We're quite a pair, you know that? We can be family-less together because, as of today, I have no brother. Now, let's get back to work because, on a more positive note, I think I figured out a little bit more about this locket." She turned to me. "What's a catalytic amulet?"



I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT a catalytic amulet was, but Seth did. Desmon surrounded himself with capable and knowledgeable people.

Seth was sitting in my living room, enjoying a cup of the hot cocoa Eva had picked up as part of our last grocery run. Apparently, eating snacks weren't enough; she liked drinking snacks too.

Prax was also enjoying a cup, even though technically he didn't need to eat. Not requiring nutritional sustenance didn't mean he couldn't enjoy it, though. In fact, most demons I knew loved anything that pleased the senses, including food and sex. They knew how to enjoy themselves.

Seth was once again without his demon companion, and now that I had laid claim to Eva, and was keeping my scent

strongly on her to deter the incubus, Prax's attention had turned to the young wizard, since he swung both ways. What Prax didn't know was that Seth's demon, Liam, had a seriously protective streak. It was rare for his kind; most demons didn't stay with wizards by choice. Many were forced into working for them, but they most definitely did not maintain long-term, romantic relationships with them.

"A catalytic amulet is exactly what it sounds like," Seth said patiently, trying to ignore the incubus preening on the armchair. "It's something worn that accelerates or augments a spell, much like the way a catalyst increases the rate of a chemical reaction."

He went on to explain that such amulets and talismans were extremely rare. Unlike other forms of magical catalysts, such as a single-use potion or the use of a familiar, the amulets were a lot more versatile. Some were not that powerful, only augmenting certain types of magic. Others, however, were strong enough to make the wearer almost invincible.

"There was a concerted effort to destroy all the catalytic amulets still in existence a few centuries ago. It was felt they gave the wearer too much power. And sometimes there's a trade-off for using them," he finished.

"Like what?" I asked. "Giving up a first-born son?"

I'd been kidding, but the look on Seth's face told me I'd accidentally gotten closer than expected to the mark.

"Something like that. It differs from artifact to artifact. To my knowledge, there can't be any of these talismans left, though, because if there were, every single collector of magical artifacts would be after them. Desmon has had the locket in his possession for decades. He would've known if it was that powerful." Seth shook his head. "I had it in my hands and worked with it when I made the replica. It had magic, but not like that. There must be some mistake."

"Maybe my brother heard wrong. Or maybe the wizard was mistaken. Mom had it for years and years, and I don't think it's ever done anything but hold pictures of my family. What if everyone's wrong, and it's just a simple, silver locket?"

“No. The locket has to be important, or it wouldn’t be in Desmon’s collection. I’m just not sure what it is.” Seth looked at me and then Prax. “Any luck finding new leads?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I set up a camera when we visited the marina. I’ve been recording the license plate of every vehicle passing through. I looked up the owners and had Prax pay them a stealthy visit.”

“Wait, when did you put up a camera?” Eva asked. “You never left my side.”

“When we got back to the car. You got that call from your neighbor and weren’t paying attention.” I turned my screen around to show everyone one particular picture. “This man left the marina shortly after we did. That meant he was there when we were, probably hiding out in one of the guest rooms.”

“Hey! That’s him,” Eva said. “Or at least, I think it is. He’s got that same too-perfect-to-be-real look. Like he’s made of plastic or something.”

This guy was a lot younger than the rest of the wizards we’d seen in the photos Seth provided. He looked like an ultra-fake, super eerie version of Marlon Brando that was smack dab in the middle of *Uncanny Valley* territory. If this guy suddenly removed his face like a mask, you wouldn’t be surprised. You’d be terrified as hell, but also, like, “Ha, I knew he was a fake!”

“I know that guy,” Seth said. “Augustine. We went to the Academy together. He’s not actually on the WEC, but he does make yearly donations. Deals with hedge funds, I think, and is totally the type to steal from a dragon if he thought he could get away with it. He’s already a strong wizard; a catalytic amulet would make him very powerful—if the locket really is one, that is.”

“So we’ve got the who,” I said. “Now we just have to figure out how to get the locket back.”

“I believe he’s based out of Miami now,” Seth said.

“That makes sense,” Eva said. “My brother said he’s going to feed him to his crocodiles.”

“Whoa. That’s one way to get rid of evidence. He’s really playing up the evil wizard thing. Are you sure you don’t want us to help your brother out of this mess?” Seth asked.

“Thank you, but it wouldn’t be worth it. He’d probably stab you in the back the moment he had the chance.”

Seth probably thought Eva was being heartless, but I knew better. She’d given Tony enough chances. It was time he took the fall himself.

“I think he’s better off as croc feed than alive,” I said. “He’s a real piece of work.”

“That’s a lot of portaling back and forth to and from Miami,” Seth said. “A huge waste of energy.”

“He’s not portaling,” Prax said. “I followed him to a swanky hotel downtown.”

“So he’s actually staying here in Darlington? The locket really must mean something, then. I wonder if his uncle is involved. *He’s on the WEC.*”

“Not sure. I didn’t see anyone else. Just him and his two ifrits,” Prax said.

“He’s also in town for some Future Wizards meetup,” I said. “It was held at the marina the day of the fridge...ahh... incident.”

“Oh!” Seth snapped his fingers. “You mean the Young Wizards of Tomorrow Assembly?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Wow, I didn’t know they did that at the marina now. I had to sit through that shit when I was growing up, and I hated every moment of it. Think of it as WEC Lite. They basically brainwash young men with magic, tell them that they’re going to control the world in the future. I remember being told that all Earth’s nations and corporations should be governed by wizards, since we are so much better than everyone else.

“Augustine is too old to be attending as a young wizard, though. He was probably giving a talk. One of those inspirational look-what-you-can-be talks. It’s a perfect cover,

considering how many wizards would be there at the same time.”

My alarms went off. I checked my phone to see who had triggered them.

“Uh, that’s my fault, sorry,” Seth said. “It’s Liam. He’s joining the team so we have one more demon at our disposal.”

“Cool. I’ll let him in.” I mumbled the words to let him through the wards.

Moments later, the demon popped into view.

“Hello, lover.” He wedged himself next to Seth on the couch, then eyed Prax, who was now pressed right against him on the other side.

I introduced him to Eva, appreciating that the demon didn’t try to come on to her the way the other demon had.

Liam turned to Prax. “Don’t even think it. Well, maybe if you were a succubus instead.”

Prax shimmered and turned into a gorgeous, nubile woman. “I can be anything you want me to be, baby.”

Liam and Seth did not look impressed.

CHAPTER 24



EVA

I'D SPENT THE LAST few days dealing with the rep from the insurance company, who had just as many questions for me about the fire as the cops did. Then there was stress about my work. Even the big boss himself was starting to question if I really needed this much time off to get my shit together, especially since it was crunch time at the office. I had to return to work tomorrow, or else.

Welp, if they were willing to risk another ghoul attack at the office, so be it.

The only good news was that I'd picked up a cheap grooming table online, and it had arrived last night. Next day delivery was a truly wonderful thing. I was able to take a few volunteer furry clients today in Mateo's living room.

I gave the little kitten one last spritz of the conditioning spray and gave him a final once over with my slicker brush. This kitten was lucky. I hadn't had to shave him, like I had the rest of his siblings.

I couldn't believe the condition they'd found this mother and litter in. Poor Mama Cat had been so malnourished that she was no more than skin and bones. I understood that hoarding was a mental disorder, and people who hoard really didn't have control over it, but hoarding animals was where I drew the line. That shit was unacceptable. If you had to hoard something, hoard something inanimate. Desmon had the right idea.

"There you go," I cooed, clipping the velvet bow tie to his collar. "Such a dapper gentleman." I hoped that my hard work meant these kittens would find their forever home faster. This little guy was the last one. I'd saved him for last as the least matted one, knowing I'd be exhausted from the marathon groom. I gave his carrier a quick wipe down as he explored the room, but he was pooped from his fight with the water and the brush, and by the time his carrier was clean, he was already mid cat nap on the rug.

I wish I had the ability to fall asleep anywhere, anytime!

With everyone clean and ready to go back to the shelter, I headed down to the basement, where Mateo and Prax were figuring out our next move.

Knowing who was behind all this was only the first step in retrieving the locket. We were finding it hard to prove the wizard had anything to do with it, because he was careful not to leave a paper trail. And even if we did know that it was definitely him, we still didn't know where he was keeping the jewelry.

I'd offered to help by calling my brother and belatedly telling him I'd help buy back the locket, a lie of course, but Mateo had refused to put me in the line of danger. He and Prax were adamant that they could figure it out themselves and that they were getting really close, especially now that they knew where to look.

They'd briefly investigated Augustine's uncle but concluded that the WEC wizard had nothing to do with it. That was a good thing, because it greatly reduced the number of places the locket could be.

Nope, Augustine was clearly keeping the good stuff for himself and didn't want to share it with his uncle. Knowing that these wizards didn't all work as one and spent a lot of their time trying to one-up each other was actually encouraging, in a way. It suggested to me that they had failings, and could be beaten.

You know how in detective movies they had those maps on the wall of all the locations and suspects, and there were red lines and circles linking everything together? Mateo and Prax had one of those going on the table.

"Any luck?" I asked.

Mateo looked up at me, then at the clock. "Shit. It's way past noon."

"Hungry, Matty? Do you and your inferior corporeal body require sustenance?" Prax teased.

Now that I'd gotten to know Prax better, I didn't mind him so much.

Mateo knew better than to give the incubus the reaction he wanted. "I *am* hungry, and food would be nice. But let's check the Darlington office of Augustine's hedge fund group first and see what we can find there. The cat shelter is on the way, so I can bring back the little monsters at the same time, if you're done with them."

"I am. Thank you."

"Perfect. We'll bring back some food. I would say you should come along too, Eva, but I'm not sure what we'll find there. I think it's safer for you to stay here."

"I understand. I'll just hang out here."

We'd all gone out for lunch yesterday and the day before, purposely leaving the locket unattended in an attempt to get the wizard to make his move. We'd left it on Mateo's bedside table in full view of the window. We'd even talked about it on the way out the first day, with me proclaiming loudly, "Oh no. I forgot to put it back in the safe." Nothing had happened. I was beginning to wonder if the wizard even knew it was here.

I got the cats ready for transport and loaded them into the back of the SUV. Then the guys left and it was just me and Sriracha, who I'd locked in the spare room so he didn't terrorize the kittens. I usually didn't let him out when I groomed cats from the shelter because I never knew if it would stress them out.

It was my fluffy feline friend who alerted me of the cop car on Mateo's street. I peeked through the curtains, keeping myself well hidden, and saw Officer Biffi creeping around the front porch.

I grabbed my phone and quickly tapped out a message to the boys. Just as I got their reply telling me to stay quiet, the doorbell rang. Technically, this wasn't my house, so I didn't answer the door. The doorbell rang again, and when I still didn't answer, that was when the pounding started.

“Open up! This is the police. We know you're in there.”

Wow. That was so cliché.

I stayed quiet and put my phone on silent. The pounding stopped, but the police cruiser did not leave. After a moment, there was a loud bang followed by a string of curses. Officer Biffi had tried to smash through one of the downstairs windows. Ha! Joke was on him, because the glass was unbreakable. Mateo's home might look like an unassuming, charming little Victorian, but it was a fortress in disguise.

Remembering the heavy-duty door to the basement, I grabbed Sriracha and started down the stairs. As I stepped into the hallway, I caught a glimpse of Biffi outside the kitchen window. Our eyes met for just a second.

He had something in his hand; I couldn't see quite what it was, but I did see him throw it at the window. There was a low rumble under my feet, and the air around me shimmered with energy. The window cracked right down the center and opened up. But it didn't stop there: the wall beneath the window cracked as well, and the whole side of the wall crumbled away.

All this happened in utter silence.

I didn't have time to react as Biffi, who was clearly in cahoots with our wizard, took his first step into Mateo's home. He

encountered some resistance as the magical ward tried to stop him. He dug a bottle out of his pocket and hurled it to the floor in front of him.

It was like one of the canned spells, but because this one was in a glass bottle it left shards of broken glass all over the place. I guess removing the stopper like a civilized person was too much work. A glow surrounded his body, and he stepped into the home, immune to the protection spell surrounding it.

Shit! This was bad. I made for the basement door, but I was too slow. Rough hands grabbed me by the arm and yanked me back. I let Sriracha go, who dashed underneath the couch to safety. I was terrified for his poor little paws with all the glass, but I didn't hear a yowl.

"Where the fuck is it?" Officer Biffi demanded, shaking me hard enough that it felt like my brain was going to get jostled loose.

"Wha—I...I don't understand," I stammered.

"The locket. I've gone through your house with a fine-tooth comb, and it's not there. All I found was garbage. You must have it on you." He grabbed the neckline of my top and pulled it down, exposing my bra. His eyes weren't on my breasts, however. They were looking for the locket.

"Fuck!" He shook me again when he saw I wasn't wearing it before releasing me. Then he looked around wildly. There was still a hazy shimmer of magic around him, permitting him to stay in Mateo's warded home, but it was growing dimmer. "I don't have time for this."

He hauled me up the stairs. I wasn't dumb enough to ask if he had a warrant. He might be in uniform, but he wasn't acting at all like a cop. I was starting to wonder if he was even a cop at all, or if he had everyone fooled, like Tony at the museum.

Biffi raced into the guest room first, checking all the surfaces and rifling through the drawers. Not finding the locket, he stomped into the master bedroom. His eyes instantly landed on the shiny silver piece on the table next to Mateo's bed.

Crap! I should've put it away, but I hadn't thought anyone would be able to get in with all the wards in place.

He grabbed it and held it up triumphantly, then dragged me back down the stairs. "Now, let's get the fuck out of here before the spell wears off."

I'd expected him to let me go now that he had his prize, but instead, he hauled me out the door. "Hey, let me go. You got what you were after."

He hauled me out the door. "Nope, he wants both you and the locket, so that's what he's getting. Now shut the fuck up."

Me? I couldn't imagine what the wizard would need me for, except to make sure he "took care of all the loose ends". Not good.

I dug my heels into the rug, but Officer Biffi was twice my size. I couldn't stop him, but I could slow him down. Every moment counted. Mateo knew he was here, and help was on the way.

Biffi wrenched my arm, and I gasped at the pain as he dragged me down the stairs.

Where the hell was Prax? He could just pop in right now if Mateo let him. Why hadn't he materialized yet? Had something happened to him? Were they both in trouble, too?

I didn't have time to think about it because Biffi shoved me into the back of his police cruiser. I reached for the door, but as I did, he slammed it shut. The last thing I saw was the door hurtling toward my forehead. Then darkness.

CHAPTER 25



MATEO

I HATED THAT I'D lied to Eva. I hated that she was in danger now because of me.

It had *not* been my idea to use her as bait. I'd been strongly against it, but I had been outvoted. Now that it was actually happening, I regretted not standing up to Desmon and refusing to go along with it.

"Why the long face?" Prax tapped on the steering wheel since I'd let him drive. "Aren't you happy the idiot is taking the bait?"

"Eva never agreed to this."

"You know we couldn't have told her. If this wizard really can see lies, it would have given away our plot the second he laid eyes on her. He'd have known she was in on it. That would have been even more dangerous. Crocodiles, remember?"

"I remember. It still feels like I've betrayed her."

“Is it really betrayal if you’re doing this to keep her safe, though?” Prax asked. “If Augustine knew she was trying to trick him, he’d take it out on her. As it stands, she’s completely innocent. Maybe he’ll even treat her well, considering he apparently needs her to use the amulet.”

It had taken a fuckton of research, but we finally figured out what we were dealing with. A few centuries ago, the last of the known catalytic talismans disappeared from historical records. It was called the Magus Scepter and looked very much like it should belong to an evil wizard. One day, it just disappeared without a trace.

Hours of research had led us down a rabbit-hole of urban legends and half-sane ramblings of madmen. The internet was chock full of them, and wizard forums were no different. Simply having magic didn’t automatically make you sane. In fact, I’d argue that there were more madmen in those forums than on the internet at large, and that was saying a lot.

It had taken Prax, Seth, and I forever to weed through the posts, discarding the truly crazy ideas, and finally settling on the theory that made the most sense.

Supposedly, the talisman had ended up in the hands of two witches who were hell-bent on making sure the artifact never made it into the wrong hands. Unable to destroy it, they’d chosen instead to hide it in plain sight by changing its form. It wasn’t the scepter itself that had the magical power, but rather an orb of silver on it. They took the orb and turned it into a locket consisting of two hearts, each one flat on one side and rounded on the other, with the flat sides slotting together to become one. Sound familiar?

As an additional safeguard, the amulet only worked if it was worn by a descendant of one of the two witches who did all this. The descendent, when wearing the locket, themselves became the final piece of the catalytic amulet. The two pieces of the locket alone were useless.

The spell had drained both witches and even their descendants of their magic, a small price to pay to prevent the scepter from ending up in the wrong hands. The two witches had then gone

their separate ways, each with one half of the locket. We still didn't know how the dragoness had ended up with one of the pieces of the puzzle, but Eva's family had gotten the other.

Eva had mentioned that her family used to have magic but no longer did. This fit with the story perfectly. If this locket really was the scepter, then there were only two known descendants left alive—Eva and her brother Tony. Having seen what a flake Tony was, the wizard had probably decided he would rather work with Eva.

And therein lay the final hurdle. The catalytic amulet needed a living person to channel its power. I doubted Augustine would let Eva know she had power over who could use it. But with Eva, it was possible for Augustine to father a child who would rightfully own the locket. A child would be much easier to control.

Just the thought of it made me want to tear something apart.

Since Augustine needed Eva, this explained why the ghoul, despite already having the amulet in its his hand, had come back through the fridge in search of her. It also explained why no one had come for the locket at my house, even though I'd purposefully left all my wards wide open when Eva and I had gone out for food for the last few days.

Officer Biffi had been watching my home for days, that much I knew. And sure enough, the second we left Eva alone with the amulet, he'd taken the bait.

Desmon had assured me that he would throw enough resources and personnel into this plan that we would get Eva back alive and in one piece. That was the only reason I'd agreed to it in the first place. Now I regretted it. What if we couldn't get to her in time? What if we weren't able to track the locket? What if—

I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to her.

“Fuck the locket. I have to get to her. I shouldn't have agreed to this.” I started the SUV and drove toward my home, ignoring the speed limit.

“Hey! Stop! Don’t you fucking mess this up now.” Prax wrestled for control of the wheel and the SUV swerved, almost hitting a signpost.

I roared and lashed out, throwing him against the passenger side door. He winked out of existence, and I continued on my way home. I wasn’t too far. I could get there before the asshole disappeared with Eva.

According to the incessant alerts from my security system going off on my phone, everything had gone haywire. It wasn’t just one breach. Every single alarm was going off at the same time. I checked my cameras, but all I got was screen after screen of nothingness. None of my video cameras was working. What the hell was going on?

I gunned it down the street, frustrated that I couldn’t just pop out like Prax did. The only canned portal I had on me right now went to Desmon’s, and that was the last place I wanted to go.

I kept imagining all the possible outcomes. Eva could’ve gotten down to the basement in time and locked the door behind her. My bunker door was blast proof. It also blended into my wall, so someone who didn’t know it was there could easily look right past it. Maybe—

Prax reappeared next to me. He made a throwing gesture before I could react, and suddenly I couldn’t move.

“Sorry, buddy, but I have to do this.” He turned smokey and settled right on top of my body; it felt weird where we touched. With just his hands and feet completely materialized, he grabbed the steering wheel. “Let’s stop off at Desmon’s and give you some time to cool down.”

Cool down? I’d put Eva in danger, and he wanted me to cool down? I wanted to fight, to roar, to tear up everything I could get my claws on, but I was completely paralyzed right now.

I sat there and fumed as Prax drove us to Desmon’s.

Seth and Liam met us in the fancy garage. The wizard waved a hand, and suddenly I was able to move again.

“Don’t even think about attacking us or I won’t release you next time. What’s the fucking matter, anyway? Everything is going exactly as planned. He has Eva, and we are tracking her and the amulet.”

“We shouldn’t have done this without her knowledge. We should have told her. It was her choice to make.”

“Eva has more power than you think,” Prax reminded me.

“The story said the wearer can control who uses it with practice, but she doesn’t know. We should’ve told her,” I insisted.

“You already know why we couldn’t. Augustine’s been bragging lately about being able to see deceit. It would just make it more dangerous for her. And she’s the one who suggested we use her as bait, remember?”

“That’s different, and I told her no.”

Seth narrowed his eyes at me thoughtfully. “You really like this girl, don’t you?”

Yes, I did. I really did like Eva. Hell, I think I might...love her. And yet I’d betrayed her. I wiped my palms over my face. When I opened my eyes again, Seth, Liam, and Prax were looking at me with their jaws hanging open.

“Oh, shit. You’re a smitten kitten! Matty found his mate,” Liam sing-songed.

I opened my mouth to deny it but couldn’t.

Mate.

Now that the idea was out there, it filled my head, and I knew it was true. Eva was my mate. I’d spent my whole life so sure that someone like me would never find my true mate that I hadn’t even recognized her when she was right in front of my face.

It all made sense now. The crazy, undeniable, unignorable attraction we had to each other was a mate bond, making sure we connected.

I didn't reply. I couldn't. I just gritted my teeth as a feeling of despair washed over me.

A hand landed on my shoulder. It was Prax. For once, he looked dead serious. "We're going to find her."

CHAPTER 26



EVA

“WHAT PART OF I wanted her unharmed did you not understand, you peasant?” The wizard held my bruised face in his hands and glared at Officer Biffi.

I tried not to flinch. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I was scared.

“She was trying to get out of the car and smashed her face into a closing door. There’s nothing I could’ve done about that. She’s alive and in one piece, and the bruise will heal. I did what you wanted. Now give me my money.” Biffi tossed the locket at Augustine.

The wizard let go of my face to catch the locket. He inspected it carefully. Finally, he spoke. “Unlike that useless twit, you have delivered what was promised. But I’m only giving you seventy percent because of the damage to her face.”

“How about you give me the entire payment and I make sure your name doesn’t make it into the news?”

This was the moment I decided that Officer Biffi was an idiot.

“Are you trying to threaten me?”

Behind the wizard, his two ifrit bodyguards rose a little taller on their smoking tails. One of them punched his fist into his palm eagerly, ready to punch Biffi in the face.

Officer Biffi cleared his throat, backing away. “I-I’ll take seventy.”

“Good. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind.” The wizard turned his attention to me. “You, Witch, are going to do everything I want you to do. I have your brother down in my basement, and if you don’t, he is going to become dinner for my pet gators.”

My laughter clearly wasn’t what the wizard had expected. It wasn’t a nervous chuckle but a full-on cackle that hurt my bruised cheek. “Are you fucking serious?” I crowed. “You think I’m going to do what you want to save *his* sorry ass? Go ahead—feed him to the crocs, or the gators, whatever, I don’t give a shit. He’s the last person I care about. I can’t believe you even trusted a dumbass like him with something as important as this.”

I was feeling much the same way I had when Mateo had stormed into my home, accusing me of stealing a piece of a dragon’s hoard: kind of snarky and a whole lot of crazy. I didn’t understand why my brain refused to be smart and STFU in situations like these and instead insisted I go into mouthy bitch mode. Talk about how to get murdered by a supervillain 101.

“He is your only family. How can you care so little?”

“Let me ask you something.” I looked the wizard straight in the eye with more bravado than I actually felt. “You asked him for the locket. Did he deliver?”

The wizard pressed his lips into a thin line.

I held up my hand. “You don’t need to answer that. I know he didn’t. Tony never delivers. He’s a flake, and a liar, and I’ll bet he lived off your dime while he was doing his thing at the museum, didn’t he? Don’t feel bad, it’s not you. He takes advantage of everyone. Did you know that after escaping with

Desmon's locket, he came straight to *my* house, knowing he was being tracked? He threw me under the fucking bus!

"I had a manticore knocking on my door. I faced a dragon—a dragon! I'm sorry if all this"—I waved my hand at his setup with the medieval-looking weapons mounted on the wall and his two ifrits standing behind him, arms crossed, looking menacing—"is supposed to scare me. I mean, I can try to act frightened if it would make you feel better, but I gotta warn you, I'm a shitty actor."

Ah! What the hell was coming out of my mouth? Why did my brain react to stressful, life-threatening situations like this? I would totally have been the one to taunt the tiger back in the caveman day.

Instead of becoming angry, however, Augustine looked intrigued. "My, my, my. You are an interesting one. I would much rather work with you than your brother." He turned to one of his glowing red demon guards. "Feed that useless freeloader to the crocs. I have no more use for him." The ifrit grunted and disappeared into thin air.

I found it disturbingly easy not to react to his words.

"I did not enjoy working with your incompetent fool of a brother." He looked me up and down as I stood my ground, chin lifted despite the swelling that was starting to force my eyes shut. "I see why you have no fear of me if you have already faced down an angry dragon. Maybe I'm going about this the wrong way."

He made a gesture to his remaining guard, who also disappeared. I wasn't sure if they were both gone-gone or only appeared to be, but suddenly we were alone. The room changed, too; I couldn't tell what exactly had changed, but it became a lot more welcoming and less threatening. Warmer.

"Let me introduce myself properly. My name is Augustine Venedictos Volesus, but you may call me Augustine." He stuck out his hand, as if meeting me for the first time and desperate to make a good impression.

I didn't know what type of game he was playing, but decided to play along. I took his hand and shook it. "Evangeline. But you already know that. I'm not sure why I'm here now that you have both pieces of the locket, but I do feel like you owe me an explanation."

"Me?" He put his hand to his chest as if my words had wounded him deeply.

"Yes, you! This whole situation is a mess. My job is at stake. My house has been set on fire. I've been attacked by a ghou, and kidnapped not once but twice. What's so special about my damned locket?" I wasn't sure if he'd just laugh in my face, but it was worth a shot.

"Interesting that neither you nor your brother knows anything about the Magus Scepter. They really did go to great lengths to hide its powers; even the people who are supposed to guard it don't know what it is. It wouldn't be how I would've chosen to do things, but I have to admit, it worked. For a very long time, everyone thought the scepter had been entirely destroyed."

"What are you talking about? Is this something to do with the locket being some sort of catalytic talisman?"

He blinked in surprise. "Why—yes. So, you're not as ignorant as your brother."

I frowned, and the movement reminded me of the bruise on my cheek. I put my hand to it. "I forgot to include this in my list of grievances."

"Allow me to help you with that." He stepped in close and took my face between his hands. There was a cooling sensation, and then the pain was gone. "There. All better." He turned my face to the mirror hanging on the wall.

The bruise was gone. He hadn't just covered it up with magic; he'd healed it. There was no pain or swelling left, either.

He made a gesture in front of me, and suddenly, I was wearing a full face of makeup. My lips were red, my eyes artfully shadowed and ringed with a winged liner. But that wasn't all. My face itself had changed too, becoming perfectly sculpted.

My complexion was as clear as porcelain. Like Augustine himself, I looked beautiful but fake as fuck.

I'd tried makeup spells before, and they had always felt strange on my face. I swear I could feel them there, and I'd always been eager to get them off once the day was over. But this time, I couldn't feel any of the changes. Was this the difference between a cheap mass-produced spell and one cast by a world-class wizard?

It was creepy. I honestly didn't recognize myself anymore.

"Very pretty. You clean up well. Perhaps this is what was always meant to happen, and dealing with Tony was just the means to find you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I didn't like that he was implying we were supposed to meet, like it was fate or something.

The only person I wanted to be fated to meet through kidnapping was Mateo. I wondered if he'd figured out yet where I was. I certainly hadn't a clue, though I had a feeling this was the wizard's actual home in Florida.

"How about we talk about this over dinner? You must be tired after everything you've been through."

"You mean having one of your goons kidnap me, slam a car door in my face, nearly rip out my arm, drive me to an abandoned warehouse, and then drag me through a portal? Yes. I'm exhausted. I'm also pissed off."

"And rightfully so, my dear. Let me make it up to you with dinner."

"I don't want dinner. I want to leave."

"Unfortunately, I can't let you do that. Now, we can do this the hard way, or you can cooperate and get your answers over dinner. Which is it going to be?"

I had to admit, I was curious. I had even more questions now than before. Like, why did he need me? What did he mean about working together? I also doubted I had much choice other than to play his little game. Now that the initial

adrenaline rush had worn off, I'd lost some of my bitchy snark. "I'd love to come to dinner," I lied, keeping my tone pleasant.

"Good. I'm glad you are no fool." He clapped his hands twice, then addressed the air. "Milly?"

Who the hell was he speaking too?

He looked me up and down. "Dinner is in an hour. Clean up and put on something more appropriate."

I looked down at my clothes. "I wasn't exactly expecting to see anyone today. I don't have anything else. I can't just snap my fingers and change into new clothes by magic."

"Milly will take care of it." He looked at the door for a moment expectantly before it finally opened. "Ah, there she is now."

An ancient woman stepped into the room. She was petite, tiny even, and despite her advanced age, she had an elfin quality to her. Upon further inspection, I noticed that her ears were indeed pointed. I didn't know anything about elves. Even after the fall of The Wall they were rare, since they lived in their own realm and had no reason to step into ours. Or at least, that was what I had always been told. She wore a smile, but there was an air of sadness around her.

"I want you to get our guest installed in the room closest to my personal suite. Make sure she has something nice to wear and get her down to the dining room in an hour."

"Yes, Master." Then to me, she said, "Please come with me, Miss. I'll get you settled."

Realizing there was nothing to say, I followed the woman out the door and down the hallway.

CHAPTER 27



EVA

I GOGGLED AT THE formal dress laid out on the bed. Did this guy really expect me to wear that? It was more suitable for a fancy ball than dinner at home. I looked for my clothes, but they were gone.

“I took them down to the laundry,” Milly said. “I thought you’d want them cleaned.”

“Oh. That’s fine. Thank you.”

Milly had been nice to me so far, and she was just doing her job.

“If the color’s not to your liking, Miss, I can change it temporarily. But my magic isn’t quite what it used to be.” There was that sadness in her eyes again, and I wondered if Augustine was doing something to control her magic.

“No, no, it’s fine. I’ll wear this.” I waited for her to leave so I could drop my towel, but she didn’t. She just picked up the dress and held it out to me. Did she expect to dress me?

“I can get dressed by myself.”

She frowned. “Am I doing something wrong, Mistress Evangeline?”

“Oh no, Milly! You’re doing great. I’m just not used to being waited on, that’s all. And you can call me Eva.”

“I can go.” She looked crushed, and I decided with a pang that I could handle a little bit of awkwardness. “It’s okay, Milly. You can help me.”

She perked up right away. “Thank you. I like helping. And you’re nice, not like...” Her words died away, and she looked nervously around her, her eyes finally landing on the mirror as if she expected the wizard to pop out of it any second.

She helped me dress and finished drying my hair, which was still slightly damp. I thought it looked good enough, but she tsked and tutted and insisted she style it for me. She clearly enjoyed having something to do, so I let her.

A quick look in the mirror confirmed that my face still wasn’t my own. Well, it was, but it wasn’t. I worried that if I checked myself in the mirror often enough, I would start believing that it was really what I looked like. Was that what had happened to the wizard? Had he looked like plastic Marlon Brando for so long that he couldn’t remember his real face? That was kind of sad.

I had to admit that my face went with the dress, though it was strange to see myself like this.

“All right, you’re all set. You look beautiful.” Milly stepped up onto the stool and came really close to my ear, pretending to make one last adjustment to my hair. “Be careful during dinner. He’s not to be trusted.”

“Thank you,” I murmured.

We still had a few minutes, so we stayed in my room.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but are you an elf?”

“I am.” She didn’t seem at all bothered by my question.

“I’ve never met an elf before. I thought you all stayed in your own realm and never visited ours.”

“For the most part, we stay in our own. But my father owed the Wizard Volesus, Augustine’s great-grandfather, for a spell. He didn’t have any gold, so he gave me to him as payment instead. I was still a young elfling then.”

I stared at the woman. Had she been enslaved her whole life?

“You look shocked, but in my world, it is not uncommon for parents to give unwanted children away in exchange for what they need. I was unlucky and didn’t get to stay in the Elven realm. After I left, I slowly became more and more human. I can almost pass as one now.”

“Is this why you don’t have your magic anymore?”

“No.” She looked down at her feet and didn’t say anymore.

She walked me down to the dining room, where Augustine was waiting for me. I’d almost expected one long-ass table with him at the head, but instead, the long table had been pushed aside, and there was a romantic, candlelight affair at the center of the giant room.

Crap, I was getting date vibes. I was not ready for this.

“Enjoy your dinner, Miss.” Milly left, closing the door softly behind her.

Augustine’s bodyguards weren’t here either. We were alone.

The wizard stood and came to me, grinning wolfishly. “Ravishing. Yes. Yes. This will work splendidly.” He took my hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed the back of it.

I did everything I could not to pull away in disgust. This was a game, and I had to play my cards right. Fighting him at every turn was not the way to go.

He poured me some white wine as the first course arrived: crispy boats of matchstick potatoes, layered with smoked salmon and topped with dollops of cream and caviar, presented on a gold-rimmed plate. Did this guy really eat this way all the time? Or was he pulling out all the stops for me? And why? Didn’t he have everything he needed already?

“It seems I owe you an explanation.”

I nodded. “Yup, I’d say.”

“How much do you know so far?”

“Only that my mom’s locket is one half of a magical talisman. Something to augment magic. But I can’t do magic. Not even simple beautifying spells.”

He waved his hand. “You are beautiful enough as you are.”

Yeah, and that was why he’d felt compelled to change my face with magic. Sure.

“Thank you.” My words were as fake as my face.

“The Magus Scepter increases the caster’s magic a hundredfold. For someone with zero magic, it is useless. Someone with minimal magic would become a notable witch or wizard. For someone like me...” He grinned, and his eyes sparkled with greed. “It would make me invincible. I’ll be the strongest wizard on Earth. Not even that dragon would dare to come after me.”

“But a scepter is a staff, no? This is a locket. And you already have both halves. So why do you need me?”

“Perceptive.” He looked at my untouched food. “Sometime in the eighteenth century, the Magus Scepter, the last known catalytic amulet, disappeared. Most historians of magic believe it has been lost forever. But there is a theory that two witches used magic to transform the silver orb at the head of the scepter into a locket. The spell took a lot of energy, and they had to borrow magic from future generations to complete it, rendering their offspring magicless.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes. It is only rarely done, but definitely possible.”

“Okay, but why? Why use so much magic to turn a scepter into a locket? Why borrow on their descendants’ magic? That seems a little...excessive.”

“Because they didn’t want it in the wrong hands. They were unable to destroy it, so they hid it.”

“You think that I’m descended from one of these witches.”

“I don’t think it. I know it. I can see it perfectly, now that you are here. Your aura is right, and so different from your brother’s. You are the one I’ve been waiting for.”

Was I supposed to have magic?

“Yes, exactly. You were meant to be a witch.”

Oops, I hadn’t realized I’d said that out loud.

“But you have been doomed to lead the life of a magicless human. I can change all that. I can fill your life with magic, with wonder.” He reached out to take my hand.

“I still don’t understand why you need me.”

“The Magus Scepter always needed a medium, a living person, to channel its power. Turning it into a locket didn’t change its nature. So the witches put in an additional clause, a fail-safe in case the pieces were ever reunited. They added the stipulation that the locket must be worn by one of their descendants.”

Oho! So he couldn’t actually use it on his own. He needed me. Or Tony.

“Why not keep Tony around, then, and have him do it?”

“You are a much better option. You can be hidden in plain sight. No one would question why you were always by my side if you were my wife.”

I was beginning to get it now. “And I guess the other wizards wouldn’t accept you having a husband.” Those stodgy old men who ran the Wizard’s Elder Council certainly had some outdated views.

“Surely not!” Augustine’s look of naked disgust made me believe he wouldn’t approve of Seth and Liam’s relationship.

“So I’m a better choice for...the optics.”

“You are a better choice all around, my dear.” He stroked my hand, reminding me that he still held it. Eww. “We can offer each other much. I need an heir. I am a much better choice than that manticore you’ve been staying with.” He had that

look of disgust on his face again. It was a bad look, even with his plastic perfection.

I held my hand up. “I’m only staying there because I don’t have a home, considering your fire genies and my brother burnt down my house.”

“Of course, of course. You need a place to stay. I’ll remedy that: you’ll stay with me. That manticore may guard the dragon’s treasures, but he’s no more than a watchman. I’m a bit of a collector myself and have my own treasures. I’ll show you my collection after dinner.”

He clapped his hands, and the door opened. The two servers came in to clear our appetizers and serve the next course.

“Here is my offer, Evangeline. Marry me. Be my medium. Give me an heir. In return, I will offer you a life of luxury.”

“I’m going to be brutally honest here: you haven’t given me much reason to trust you. So this is a bit of a shock.”

He only grinned. “That brutal honesty is one of the reasons why I believe we will make a good team. I know when I’m being lied to, and I despise it. I agree, I haven’t given you much reason to trust me, so I will take the first step now to begin earning that trust.”

He snapped his fingers and called for Milly, who stepped into the room moments later.

“Stand, My Sweet.”

It actually took me a moment to realize he was speaking to me. Ugh, I was not His Sweet. I was not His Anything! I stood anyway, playing along. He made a grand gesture as if he was unlooping an invisible thread from around himself then wrapped it around me.

“I hereby relinquish this life to you. This elf is now yours. My first gift to you.” Augustine looked quite proud of himself.

Did he really just gift me an enslaved elf? What. The. Fuck. Was that supposed to be romantic? *Oh god, I think I’m going to be sick.*

Milly maintained her neutral expression, but there was a spark of joy behind her eyes. Okay, this was actually a good thing. I could work with this. She'd be happier with me. I tried to look on the bright side, even though the thought of owning a person...or an elf...made me want to barf all over Augustine's perfectly tailored suit.

"I will wait for you in your room, Mistress." Milly bowed her head and stepped out again.

"Milly has bolstered my family's magic for generations, but she is old and not much magic is left in her. She will make a good maid for you."

So *that* was why Milly no longer had her magic. This asshole and his forefathers had stolen it for themselves! Yeah, I knew exactly who I'd be taking with me when I got out of this joint.

"Thank you," I said, "for the very thoughtful gift."

He looked pleased, so I guess he didn't sense any deceit from me.

"You have until dinnertime tomorrow to consider my offer. Think well," he whispered into my ear, leaning in close, "because if you make the wrong choice, I can and will make your life a living hell. Now, to more pleasant things: are you hungry for dessert?"

I looked down at my main course. I didn't remember eating it, but my plate was mostly empty. "I think I'm going to skip dessert."

"Ah, I see, watching your figure. Of course. That's good."

Ho-lee wow. How did I manage to hate him even more with every sentence that came out of his mouth?

"Let's go do some magic."

He reached into his pocket and produced the locket, entirely whole. There wasn't even a visible seam where they joined. He undid the clasp, reached around my neck, and put it on me.

It thrummed with energy and felt warm against my chest, as if it was alive. All of a sudden, I felt complete. Like this locket had been a part of me the entire time, but I hadn't known it

had been missing. I didn't want to take it off. I couldn't tell which part of it was me, and which part of me was it.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling.

My heels squelched in muddy ground, and I lost my footing. I looked around. Wait. How did I get here?

One moment, I was in the dining room, and suddenly I was standing outside. The sun was setting. Augustine was behind me, his front pressed to my back.

One of his hands was on my shoulder. In his other one was a fireball. He tossed it in front of us, and a fiery dragon appeared. Not a real dragon, but fire in the shape of one. Behind me, the wizard let out a cackle. It sounded like he'd been practicing this evil villain laugh his whole life.

"Go hunt down those pesky drones," he ordered.

What drones? I looked up into the air and sure enough, several small drones zipped by above us.

The dragon took to the air, leaving a trail of flames streaming behind it. It began chasing one of them I couldn't see across the sky.

"Your dragon can have his spies back in pieces."

He meant Desmon. Those were Desmon's drones. Did they know I was here?

A large shape in my peripheral vision had my heart racing. I'd recognize that form anywhere, unless lion-bodied creatures with scorpion tails and wyvern wings were more common than I'd thought.

Mateo!

The fire dragon hadn't spotted him yet. I wanted to call out an alarm but held my tongue, not wanting to give him away. Then two shadowy forms appeared in the middle of the air, grabbed him, and pulled him behind a cloud. Liam and Prax, maybe? I couldn't tell from here.

Had Augustine seen?

The fire dragon was still busy chasing down the last drone, and Augustine hadn't called out new orders, so I assumed he hadn't. With nothing left to attack, the fire dragon landed in front of us. Augustine made a gesture, and it shrank back down into a fireball, landed in his palm, and was absorbed back into his body.

He looked at his hand and laughed again maniacally. "Endless magic. I'm not even tired. I feel invincible. You and I are going to rule the world." The hand that was on my shoulder snaked down to my waist and pulled me against him, making me aware that playing with fire — or maybe it was the thought of world domination? — made him hard.

Disgust had me stumbling forward to put some space between us. I expected him to get angry, but he just laughed.

"Of course, My Sweet, I will wait for our wedding night. Enough play for today. You look ill. This must be draining you."

I only looked ill because of his touch, but I didn't correct him.

He reached for the necklace to take it off, then frowned. "The clasp is gone."

That didn't make any sense, but I was secretly relieved that he wasn't able to remove it. The thought of not wearing it, not being whole anymore, made me sad.

"The clasp is gone. And the chain is...different." He took the chain in his hands and pulled, but only managed to jerk my head and neck forward.

I yelled, but only because I hadn't been ready for the sudden movement. It hadn't hurt, even though it should have, given the force he'd used.

"What the fuck?" He took the chain in both hands and tried to pull it apart.

Nothing happened except he yanked at my neck again, and irritation flared within me. *What a jerk! How dare he try to separate us!* What a strange thought.

There was a sizzling sound, and Augustine jerked his hands away with a cry. The chain had left burn marks on his palms.

I looked down. The chain and locket were now glowing red-hot, but I felt nothing against my skin. I touched it with my hands. It felt normal.

He looked upset, but maintained his composure. “It is useless to me on its own anyway. You can wear it.” He stared intently at his hand for a moment, and the burn marks healed and faded. “Come. We will retire for the night.”

I looked up and scanned the sky as we walked back into the mansion, but it was empty.

CHAPTER 28



MATEO

I SAW RED AT the sight of Eva pressed up against the wizard. She looked almost like an extension of him and had the same fake plastic look, the glamour hiding her natural beauty. They looked like they belonged together. He had a hand on her shoulder possessively, like he owned her already, and that made the beast inside me turn murderous.

She was mine. All mine. How dared he lay his hands on her?

I didn't care who this wizard was, or how powerful. He was a man, and I was a *man-eater*. My kind hadn't eaten humans in a long time, but today seemed like a good day to resurrect old traditions.

With a low growl and a flap of my wings, I turned toward them with only one thing on my mind. I would not rest until the wizard was no more and Eva was mine again. Then I'd lock her away and spend my days convincing her that I was the better choice. She would soon forget all about this wizard.

The fire dragon controlled by the future dead man was busy chasing down one of Desmon's drones. Now would be a good time to swoop in and—

Two sets of large hands suddenly held me back. I swished my tail, ready to strike, but transparent tendrils wrapped around me, holding me in place.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Mateo?” Prax snarled. “This wasn't the plan.”

“I have to go to her.”

“With that thing under the wizard's control, and the scepter bolstering his power? What are you, suicidal? Even Liam and I would get burnt; that's magical fire. You'd be charred to a crisp.”

I hissed at them. If they really were my friends, they'd help me hide the body after I separated this Wizard's head from his shoulders, not stop me from attacking.

I did not fear his magic, not when Eva was right there. Her eyes darted up at us, and I knew she had seen me. But she didn't react. Her face remained an impassive mask, and she was not fighting the wizard. Did she really care for me so little? Had she switched sides? Had this wizard offered her something I could not?

Pain tore through me at the thought that she would choose him over me. And yet, this powerful man came from wealth, whereas I'd had to work for everything I owned. He had a revered family name; I had been discarded at birth. He could give her the perfect life. What could I give her? I had called her a thief when we first met, for fuck's sake. The worst part of all this was how perfect she looked next to him, like she was destined to be more than a mate to a nobody manticore.

Distracted by my thoughts as I was, Prax and Liam were able to pull me back behind a cloud and out of sight of the fire dragon. Then we were traveling through a portal to where Seth was waiting in a nearby hotel.

I roared and shook the two demons off me.

“What’s the matter with you?” Seth hissed. “You can’t just charge in there like that. We were there for reconnaissance only. You know, to get information on the lay of the land so that we wouldn’t die when we made the final attack?”

“He was touching her.”

“Yeah, we saw. And she was wearing the necklace...”

That had been hard to miss too. It had practically glowed on her skin.

“...which meant he had the power of the scepter behind him, multiplying his magic a hundredfold. You’re lucky he didn’t see you, Mateo. You’d have been dead long before you even got close. Is that what you want? To have Eva watch as this guy tears you to shreds?”

“She wasn’t fighting him. She was letting him touch her.”

All three of them looked back at me like I was crazy.

“Yeah, because Eva’s not stupid,” Seth finally said. “You ever heard of a little thing called self-preservation? She knows fighting him would only make things worse for her.”

“And I’ll bet she doesn’t realize that she can control who can access the locket’s power,” Liam added.

True. I doubted the wizard would tell her that.

“But what if he offered her something in exchange for working with him?”

Seth scoffed. “I’m sure he did. He might not plan to honor the deal in the long run, but this is how wizards work. In fact, I’d be surprised if he *didn’t* make her an offer that was too good to be true. And the smart thing right now would be for her to take it, or at least pretend to take it, because she doesn’t really have a choice.”

Seth’s line of thinking made sense, and I was suddenly embarrassed that I’d been so quick to doubt her. Of course Eva had to play along for her safety. But that still didn’t change the fact that I was a nobody who could give her nothing, and she was this powerful...being...entity...that was born to consort with powerful wizards.

Seth mistook the unsure look on my face and continued his argument. “Trust me, I know. My mother stood next to a wizard for decades, bolstering his power until she had nothing left. She hated every moment of it, but she put on a smile because she knew the alternative would be much worse. Eva’s not dumb. She knows what she’s up against.”

He was right. Glumly, I focused on the good news instead. Our sacrificial drones had gotten a good look at his estate before they were taken out. They had also picked up some discussion between two security guards. Not the ifrits, but human ones.

I played the recording.

“We’re supposed to let the priest in tomorrow before dinner. The big boss is marrying that piece of ass he brought in.”

“Wow, that was fast.”

“She’s pretty fucking hot. Have you seen her?”

“Pfft. Probably all fake.”

“Who the fuck cares if she’s ugly behind the magic. My dick sure as shit doesn’t.”

“Yeah, until the kids come out butt ugly!”

I smashed the button to stop the playback so hard I was surprised I didn’t break the machine. I clenched my jaw, and a constant low, angry growl emanated from my chest.

Seth and Liam exchanged a worried look, and the demon moved a little closer to me, looking ready to restrain me if needed. I wished I could say it wasn’t necessary, but I felt an urge to go completely berserker at the guards’ conversation. I wanted to kill.

The growling crescendoed into a full-on roar that rattled the furniture.

“Shit, man. Way to draw attention to us,” Liam grumped. “We don’t want to get complaints.”

“Yeah. Calm your kitty titties,” Seth said.

I lunged at him, but Prax and Liam held me back.

“Relax, this is a good thing. It’s a perfect way for us to sneak into the estate. We just have to intercept the good clergyman and take his place.”

That was a decent plan. As long as we were welcomed in, it didn’t matter if the guards mistook us for someone else; the wards would cease to work until we were defined as hostile again. And by then, it would be too late.

We got to work, setting up our rendezvous with the priest—or, rather, they did. I could do nothing more than pace the hotel room like a feral beast.

We got a call from the front desk that there was a woman here to see us. Which was strange, because no one was supposed to know we were here.

Hyper-aware of the possible danger, we asked them to send her up. We’d rather deal with the unknown on our turf. An elderly woman walked in. Her features had an otherworldly quality, despite being human enough. I’d never actually seen an elf before. Was that what she was?

Elves had their own realm, a place they’d partitioned off from this plane of existence many eons ago to avoid persecution. It was rumored that when they’d lived on Earth, elves had been almost indistinguishable from humans, aside from their magical powers. It was the food and drink from their magical realm that gave them their elfin appearance. The longer they’d stayed on Earth, the more they changed.

This one must’ve been away from her home for a long time.

“Eva sent me to find you. She needs your help, and she needs it soon.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Milly. My mistress is unable to leave the estate. Augustine is watching her every move.”

“Your mistress?” I asked.

“Eva.”

“But you can come and go as you please?” Did that mean the wizard trusted her? In that case, she was not to be trusted.

She held up a bag from the twenty-four-hour drugstore downstairs. “Eva sent me out for some personal hygiene products. She claimed the fancy things at the estate made her sensitive skin itchy. Mast—” She corrected herself. “Augustine went through the list and approved the trip.”

I still wasn’t sure if she could be believed, but I let her talk. She told us more of what had happened.

“Augustine can’t remove the locket. Whenever he touches it, the clasp disappears and the chain becomes impossibly strong and hot, burning him. But Eva tried when she and I were alone, and the clasp was right there. I could remove it just fine, and so could she.”

“So only he is barred from touching it?” Seth was suddenly very interested. “I wonder if Eva is doing that without knowing.”

“Maybe.” The elf looked down at her empty hand. “I don’t have a lot of magic left anymore, but when I touch Eva, it flares up. I think I have enough to take down his magical wards for a few minutes. I’ve been studying his defenses for decades, in case I ever had the chance to escape.”

This had us all sitting up straighter.

“So why not use your magic to portal her here?” Seth asked.

“I don’t think I have enough energy for that. I’d need to disable the wards first, and by then, I would have nothing left. Even with Eva’s help.” The elf bowed her head sadly. “I am not what I used to be.”

“What if I make the portal while you take down the defenses from the inside?” Seth suggested.

“Yes, maybe tomorrow morning?” I proposed. First, because it was sooner than tomorrow evening, and second, I still didn’t trust Milly one hundred percent and didn’t want to give away our other plan.

Milly shook her head. “No, it must be sooner. He says he’ll wait until they are married, but I know him. He won’t. He’ll go to her tonight while she’s asleep and vulnerable. And I

won't be able to do anything to help." She wrung her hands in despair.

"Why should we believe you? What if this is just a trap, and we portal in only to be taken prisoner ourselves?" Prax voiced the question I was thinking.

"Augustine has gifted me to Eva. I am hers now. If she escapes, then so do I."

"What's stopping you from just leaving now?" I asked.

It was Prax who answered me. "She's bound by magic, same as I was. I can see the bonds wrapped around her. I don't know who the bonds lead to..."

"They lead to Eva now." The elf grinned widely.

I looked at Seth, and he gave me a small nod.

"Okay. We'll do it."

"You will? Oh, thank you! When? In an hour?"

"Less than that." If this was indeed a trap, I wanted to give the opponent as little time as possible to prepare. "Twenty minutes?" I looked over to Seth, since he'd be the one making the portal.

"Twenty minutes is good," he said.

She checked the time on her pocket watch, which looked like it was made before the First World War. "I can just make it back in time," Milly said. "Thank you. Thank you so much." Then she was hurrying out of our hotel room.

CHAPTER 29



EVA

I WAS WAITING FOR Milly to return when I suddenly started feeling unnaturally drowsy. My eyes grew heavy, and I couldn't keep them open anymore, even though she'd warned me to stay awake.

I got up from the vanity chair and started pacing the room, hoping the exercise would keep me awake. I thought it was working until I realized I was leaning against the wall, my eyes closed, almost asleep standing up. Shit. I forced myself to walk again, even though my ankles felt like lead.

Why the hell was I suddenly so tired? This had to be magic.

I thought about locking the door, but worried Milly wouldn't be able to get in. And the wizard probably had a key anyway. This was his house, after all.

I blinked and found myself staring up at the ceiling. How the hell did I end up in bed?

God. I was so tired.

But now was not the time to sleep. Help was on the way.

I blinked again and found myself lying on my side, curled up in the fetal position.

I tried valiantly to keep my eyes open, knowing that the next time they closed, I wouldn't be able to open them again. I failed. But I wasn't fully asleep yet, because I could still hear.

I lay there, completely vulnerable, as the door to my room creaked open and I heard footsteps. They did not belong to Milly, who was light on her feet. Those were Augustine's hard-soled shoes.

I frantically tried to open my eyes, but I was stuck in half-sleep. It was like an episode of sleep paralysis, except this time, the demon was real and not just an imagined shadowy blob in my periphery, and he was in my room—a disgusting, despicable man I wanted nothing to do with.

“Where are you, Milly?” I begged silently. “Please, bring help.”

The bed depressed next to me, and I felt cold, invisible hands on my arm as I was rolled onto my back. A heavy weight settled over my body as cold snuck under my clothes.

“Get off her.” Milly's voice pierced the silence.

Suddenly, my eyes popped open, and I was fully awake.

Milly rushed in, bravely placing her slight form between me and Augustine, and trying her best to shove him off me. Remembering the plan she and I had made, I reached out to her, my arms still feeling like lead.

After discovering that I could remove the locket when the wizard couldn't, I started wondering if I had more control over it than I realized. Out of the sight of the mirrors in the room, which Milly had warned me were Augustine's eyes, I'd practiced letting Milly access the amulet's power and then taking away the access again. The wizard must've known I could do this and kept it from me.

Did marrying him prevent me from denying him access to the amulet's power? Was that why he was in such a rush to tie the

knot? Most likely. It had been crafted at a time when women belonged to their fathers first and then their husbands. The world had changed since then, but the magic might not have caught up.

Milly closed her eyes, her lips moving ever so slightly as she recited the spell. I held onto her as Augustine tried to separate us. He only managed to fling both of us off the bed. We landed on the ground, still clutching each other.

“It’s useless, Elf,” Augustine sneered. “You are old. Your powers are just a shadow of what they used to be. Even with the amulet, you are no match for me. I will crush you.”

He stomped toward us, and I moved to protect Milly with my body. The air around us shimmered, and the elf gave me a small smile. His wards were down.

The wizard guffawed. “Oh dear, you’ve removed my protection. Now what? Are you going to portal out of here? With what magic? You don’t have anything left. You’re a shriveled up has-been. I should have known you would put some stupid escape plan into Eva’s head.” He ripped me off Milly and looked me in the face. “Don’t worry, darling, I’ll have this sorted out in no time.”

He flung out a hand in the elf’s direction, and suddenly, she was caught in a net, unable to move. He lifted me up, and I struggled as he dragged me back to the bed.

“Whatever that elf promised you, you can forget it. She’s lying. She has nothing to offer you. I, however, can give you everything you want. Beauty. Power. Wealth. Now, let’s put this child in you so you can’t defy me again.” He shoved me onto the mattress and climbed up to straddle me.

A giant clawed hand with golden fur landed on his shoulder. Surprise registered in his eyes a split second before he was torn from me and launched across the room.

“*Hands off my mate!*” It sounded more like a roar than language, but I’d recognize that voice anywhere.

I scrambled to my feet just in time to see Augustine sweep Mateo aside with a strong burst of magic. Mateo landed on all

fours; this time it truly was a roar that he let out, the sound rattling the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. He was in full manticore form, and his lion body was the biggest I'd ever imagined, all raw power and lean muscle. His wings were folded on his back, but his scorpion tail swung menacingly from side to side.

He lunged at the wizard again but was stopped by a forcefield. The sphere of energy glowed around the wizard.

Augustine laughed. "Why, if it isn't the dragon's little pet. You think this is your mate? Do you really think you deserve a real woman? Ha!" He formed a ball of electricity in his hands and hurled it at Mateo like a lightning bolt.

Mateo dodged just in time, and it hit the wall behind him, leaving a sizzling hole. The wizard launched several more balls at him, and I screamed. He wasn't going to get away in time.

But the lightning hit an invisible screen that had manifested right in front of Mateo. The electricity broke up and traveled across the screen in jagged webs. Seth stood at the door, his hand held out toward the lifesaving barrier.

Augustine turned to him, sneering. "If it isn't Seth, the demon-loving witch who dares to call himself a wizard."

I inched toward Seth, working out the easiest way to get to him. All I had to do to grant him access to the Magus Scepter's power was touch him, but the asshole Augustine was between us.

"Tell me, when the dragon gives you an order, do you bend over to receive it?"

When Seth didn't react to his schoolyard taunts, Augustine snapped his fingers, and his two ifrits appeared at his side.

"Unlike you, Seth, I know how to harness the power of demons without lowering myself to practicing witchcraft and sex magic. Your father must be so disappointed in you."

As the two ifrits rounded on Seth, I made a break for him, dashing across the room. I was too slow, though, and the wizard caught me.

“Where do you think you’re going, missy?”

I got a strange feeling, like I was having the scepter’s power inside me siphoned out. But I knew how to prevent him from using it now. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on forming a mental wall, cutting him off from the source of power like I had practiced with Milly.

But his magic was much stronger than Milly’s, and it was like holding back a starving polar bear. Crap. If I couldn’t stop him from accessing the amulet’s power and get my ass over to Seth right now, all this would be for nothing.

Augustine’s hands went around my throat, and he squeezed.

No! I couldn’t fight him if I passed out.

Even as I thought that, the world around me began to dim.

CHAPTER 30



MATEO

IT WAS THE SICKENING image of the wizard's hands around Eva's neck that gave me the extra burst of energy I needed to break the magical bonds holding me down. It was like I instantly had all the power in the world and was invincible. I charged at him, blind with rage.

I swiped at his fragile human form, my claws digging into his weak flesh, and easily flung him against the wall. He landed in a heap, not having had time to protect himself with a spell. I advanced on him, beyond words now, the monster side of me reducing me to growls, grunts, and snarling.

He tried to form another shield around himself, but I moved quickly, my tail stabbing forward with inhuman speed. The tip stabbed into his thigh, paralyzing him with my venom. But a physically paralyzed wizard was not a magically paralyzed one. His magical shield reappeared, and he was once again impervious to my attacks.

Then he uttered a spell, and I braced myself for his attack. But it never came.

Eva shrieked as she was lifted off her feet and carried toward the wizard. I knew I couldn't let him touch her. Not just because she was mine, but because if he accessed the amulet's power, we were all doomed.

Seth had just finished taking care of the two ifrits, but he was injured. He was slumped against the doorjamb, a pained look on his face. There were burns all over him, and one side of his face was starting to blister. When he saw what was going on he raised his hand, stopping Eva just feet away from the paralyzed wizard. But Seth had expended a lot of his magic and could not free her entirely from Augustine's hold.

I approached my friend and picked him up, careful of his burns. Then, I marched toward Eva.

"No!" Augustine hissed.

He reached his other hand out, and my feet were suddenly glued to the floor.

"You might as well give up now," Eva said to Augustine. "How long can you keep this up? You're going to run out of energy eventually."

"I only need to hold out longer than your wizard, and he isn't going to be conscious much longer. Look at him."

Indeed, Seth did not look good. He was barely holding on. I urged my legs to move. They didn't, they couldn't. Eva reached out to me, her hands stopping just short of my body.

The wizard cackled. "Aww. So close, yet so far."

I gritted my teeth and strained against the magical bonds, but my best effort only got us a fraction of an inch closer, not near enough for us to touch.

"Do you hear that, manticore? That's the sound of my guards coming to my aid. I hope you can swim, because my crocodiles are hungry." Augustine laughed like he'd already won.

Sure enough, I heard footsteps coming down the hall.

“You like this witch, don’t you? Maybe I’ll let you watch while I fuck her. Maybe I’ll even let a part of you live. Yes! How about just your head? I’ll mount it above the fireplace, and you can watch me bend her over the furniture every night.”

I growled and turned my head toward him.

“Mateo!” Eva’s voice had me turning back to her. “Don’t listen to him. Focus on me.” She still had her arm outstretched. “We have to get through this. You still owe me all those dinners, remember? I’m not letting you get out of them.”

The wizard scoffed. “You think she’s going to want you after she’s had me? What can you give her? Nothing. Look around you. Look at the utter splendor she could live in. You could give her—what? A tiny hovel of a home? I know all about you, manticore. You are nothing. She’s just using you, then she’ll discard you. Just like your mother did.”

The beast in me demanded I run over there and tear him to pieces, but the rational man in my head insisted I remain calm. Augustine was only distracting me, trying to stop me from reaching Eva. I was smarter than this. I was more than my beast, more than base reactions, more than instincts. I was more than the sum of my parts.

I ignored him and turned back to Eva. Her lips were now sealed with what looked like magical stitches, keeping her mouth closed. This was why she hadn’t protested his disgusting words. I gathered up all my energy and heaved myself against the magical barrier.

The slight brush of her fingertips against my arm told me we had completed the connection, and the power of the amulet rushed through me and into Seth.

Eva’s eyes held mine, and the electric pain coursing through my body from fighting the barrier abated. For a long moment, I was lost in her eyes. When I finally looked away, the wizard was no longer protected by his shield. Instead, Seth had him pinned to the ground, like a specimen ready for dissection.

I found I was no longer frozen in place. I carefully placed Seth on the ground, and Eva moved to touch his shoulder directly.

“Go for it, Matty,” Seth said. “He’s all yours.” Then he released the wizard.

I didn’t even mind the nickname this time. I let the beast take over and pounced on my prey, claws extended. By the time I was done with Augustine, he was unrecognizable. I did, however, resist the primal urge to eat him, even though the beast inside really, really wanted to. I doubted he would have tasted very good anyway.

I looked up from the bloody carnage to see Eva looking at me.

Fuck. She’d witnessed all of that. Would she be frightened of me now that she knew what I was capable of?

I wasn’t given much time to dwell on the worrisome thought, because she threw herself at me, her arms wrapping around my blood-stained body even before I could get back into my two-legged lion-man form.

I wiped my paws on the closest thing I could find, which happened to be some velvet curtains, before wrapping my arms around her.

Prax and Liam, who had been keeping the human guards busy, arrived on the scene.

“I guess you didn’t need us after all—” Liam began. Then he saw Seth on the ground and a cry of anguish tore from his throat as he ran to his love.

Suddenly there was a low rumble, and chains appeared connecting Augustine’s mangled body to the two ifrits that Seth was holding against the hallway wall. Currently, they were no more than two-dimensional outlines.

Then the chains broke and vanished. So did all the other chains extending from Augustine to the entities he had held prisoner. Usually, ownership passed from father to son, but without an heir, it ended with him.

One of the ifrits, still a flat image on the wall, bellowed a laugh. “We are free!”

Prax, grinned. “Feels good, doesn’t it? Welcome to your new life.”

Seth groaned and tried to sit up. “I will release you, but if you attack us, I will not hesitate to bind you again,” he said, still struggling for breath.

“Release us, even after we attacked you? You are injured because of us.”

“You were only doing the wizard’s bidding.”

The two fire genies did not attack, but when they tried to approach us, Liam stood and blocked their way.

“I am not as forgiving,” he growled. “Leave now while you still have the chance.”

They thanked us before fading away to nothing.

Milly struggled to her feet, the magical net holding her in place having disappeared with the wizard’s last breath. Of all the magical entities the wizard and his forefathers had enslaved, she alone was not freed by Augustine’s death since she now belonged to Eva.

Eva tried to wiggle out of my arms, but I refused to let her go. I couldn’t, not after I had almost lost her.

“I need to go to Milly. Please.”

I compromised by walking over to the elderly elf with Eva in my arms.

“Seth, how do I free her?”

There was no reply.

Seth lay motionless in Liam’s arms. I’d never seen a demon so distraught before. He looked ready to burn down the world.

“I can heal him. Not completely, but a little,” Milly said. She looked at Eva. “I’ll need your help, though.”

“Of course, anything.” Eva reached out to the elf.

It took a few minutes, but eventually, we got Seth stabilized enough to move.

“Let’s get out of here before the cops arrive,” Prax said.

“What’s going to happen when they investigate this?” Eva asked. “People know I was here. And I’m already being investigated for a fire. It’s going to come right back to me.”

“For all intents and purposes, you never left Darlington,” Seth said. He didn’t look much better, but at least he was awake again.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” I said. “Desmon has us covered.”

The sound of someone clearing their throat had us all looking toward the door. The ifrits stood side by side.

“We’re back to, ah, tie up some loose ends.” One of the ifrits handed a glass jar to Liam before the demon could attack. “It’s one of the wizard’s healing spells. Consider it a peace offering. I’m not sure how potent it is, but it would have to help.” He turned to the rest of us. “And now, I’d suggest you mortal folks get out of here. It’s about to get hot in here.” Flames flared out from his body, catching the wallpaper and making it melt and curl up. “Really hot.”

CHAPTER 31



EVA

I STEPPED OUT OF the portal and into a fancy hotel room. Mateo still held me, and I doubted he was going to let go for a while. I didn't mind one bit; I was just happy to be in his arms.

Seth was stable, but his burns still looked horrific, and he must have still been in a lot of pain. "I don't think I have the energy to get us back to Desmon's. I'll need to rest for the night."

"I'll go downstairs to get us checked into the room next door," Liam said. "We can portal out tomorrow, or whenever you feel strong enough."

I suspected the extra room and privacy was as much for them as it was for me and Mateo.

I'd probably miss work again tomorrow, but I'd already decided I didn't care anymore. There were plenty of other jobs out there but there was only one Seth, and my friend needed to rest. Who knows, maybe I'd start a proper cat grooming service. *Sriracha's Salon*. Sriri could be a boss instead.

As Liam went down to the front desk, I turned to Milly.

“How do I free you?”

It was Seth who spoke. “Easy, you just tell her she is free. If you truly mean the words, the magic will realize that and obey.”

“So, no fancy throwing of invisible magical chains? Augustine made a big song and dance about that.”

“It was probably just for show.”

Tell her she was free; well, that was simple enough. “You are free, Milly.”

Had it worked? I didn’t feel any different. Maybe I needed to —

Glowing tendrils of magic appeared connecting the two of us. Was that what was binding her to me? They weren’t like the heavy chains that had bound the ifrits. I watched as the magical bonds that had been wrapped around Milly slowly unraveled, releasing her.

“I am free,” she marveled. She touched her arms and body, as if unable to believe what she was seeing. “I am free!”

She looked at me. “Thank you, Eva. You have broken the bonds holding me to this world. To this life. That is all I’ve ever wanted.” She took a step toward me with her arms open, then stopped, as if she wasn’t sure whether I would want a hug or not.

Mateo released me, and I met her the rest of the way, wrapping my arms around her and pulling the frail elf into my arms.

“No, Milly. Thank *you*.”

“You are my first friend here. My only friend.” Tears filled her eyes. “But I have to go now. I am old, and I just want to rest. I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long. Thank you.”

She closed her eyes and grew older by the second, turning from frail to skeletal. I gasped as the skin and flesh flaked off her bones and disappeared.

“Thank you.” They were her last words as the final breath of air left her lungs, and her lips crumbled away to nothing.

I looked around in a panic. Not even ash was left of her. She'd disappeared entirely. The only thing keeping me from losing it right now were her last words which echoed in my ears, reassuring me that this was what she wanted.

She must have been kept here by magic for years after her time. Trapped in servitude.

"You did a wonderful thing, freeing her," Mateo said softly.

I just nodded, unable to form words just yet.

Then Mateo came to me, and I found myself in his arms again.

Liam reappeared. "All right, the room next door is ours. Let me get you in there, and we can give this healing spell a whirl. I doubt it's as good as yours, but it'll be better than nothing." Then they were gone.

"I'm going to go explore Miami. Never been here before, and it looks like a great town." Then Prax too was gone, and I was alone with my manticore hero.

One look at him told me something was wrong. He looked so unsure, and I wondered if Augustine's cruel words had impacted him more than they should.

"Come on, hero, let's get you cleaned up."

He didn't move. Instead, he just held onto me like he was afraid to let me go.

"Um, Mateo? You're still covered in blood."

"I'm sorry you had to see that part of me."

"What? Your tail?" I reached around him and gave the base of his tail a squeeze. "That tail helped save the day. Today I realized that yes, it's scary, but that scary ass tail would only be used as a weapon for me, not against me. It's a part of you, and I like you head to tail."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." He looked down at his hands. "But I meant the violence. I tore him apart."

So that was what was bothering him. "Hey, I'm just glad you're not cleaning yourself off with your tongue. Sriracha

brought me an eviscerated mouse once, then proceeded to lick the guts off himself.”

My lighthearted attempt to shrug off the violence I witnessed didn't work. Mateo still had a worried look on his face.

“I need to confess something, Eva. I'm really sorry about it, and I'll understand if you are angry with me, but know that no matter what, I will do everything in my power to make it up to you. I'm not letting you go.”

“Okay.” I couldn't imagine anything he would have done that would make me so mad I'd want to leave.

“We knew Officer Biffi was outside. We knew Augustine needed you as well as the locket. We... We used you as bait.” His arms tightened around me even more, like he was sure I was going to leave.

I wasn't that surprised, in fact I'd wondered briefly if that was the case after I found out that I needed to be the final piece of the puzzle.

“I'm pragmatic. It worked, so I can't be angry. We made it! The locket is here, and so am I. So I forgive you, Mateo.”

Mateo made a small noise that sounded suspiciously like a sob. “I love you, Eva. And I will spend the rest of my life making sure you are happy with me.”

“Are you kidding? I'm already happy with you. I don't need a life of luxury. I don't need to be dressed in silk, start my dinners with caviar every night, or be waited on by staff. I just want you, Mateo. You are all I need.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“But you're special. The last of a powerful lineage, destined for greatness.”

I shook my head firmly. “No. I'm not. The amulet is special, not me. The moment I take this locket off, I'm just the same Eva I've always been. I'm not special, and I don't want to be. I don't need power, or fame, or money, or any of that. I just

need a place to belong.” I looked into his golden eyes. “And I need you. I love you too, Mateo.”

I reached up to kiss him, and he met me halfway. I melted into his kiss. Here in his arms, I was home.

“Maybe we should take a shower first,” I said. “You need to make me smell like you again.”

“Of course. I’ll make sure you’re mine inside and out, Little Thief.”

“This again?” I asked, laughing. “That’s ten dinners now. I thought we established I’m not a thief.”

“Oh, but you are.”

“Oh, *am* I now?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah? What did I steal?”

“My heart, Little Thief. You stole my heart.”

EPILOGUE



MATEO

I WATCHED AS MY beautiful wife—my mate—gazed silently into the glass case in Desmon’s library. She did that every time she took the locket off and put it there, like it was difficult for her to leave a piece of herself behind.

I gave Eva her time, knowing that in a few minutes, she’d be over it. Then she’d be hungry, and we’d go find food.

It was hard at first, since it really had felt like losing a part of her. But she knew how dangerous it would be for the Magus Scepter to remain whole, so she’d returned one half of the locket to Desmon on the condition that he promised never to put it back on show at the museum again. She “didn’t want a part of herself on public display”, was how she explained it. It had felt that much like a part of her.

He’d understood and set it up permanently in his library instead. Only people he trusted came here, and we ourselves could visit and see it whenever we wanted. He’d even suggested Eva put it on once in a while and practice

controlling it, just in case we needed it in an emergency someday. It was always hard for her the first few minutes after taking the locket off, but I knew that it was only temporary.

The library door opened behind me, and Carly poked her head in.

“Elana made fried chicken today, if you’re interested. And I just tried my hand at cupcakes for the first time. Head on down to the dining room when you’re done here, if you like.”

Eva turned away from the glass. “Fried chicken and cupcakes sound amazing.” She rested her hand on her growing belly. “I’m ravenous, and so is little Milly.”

She stepped away from the case with Desmon’s half of the locket; her half hung around her neck on a delicate silver chain. She’d replaced the photo inside with one of the two of us that had been taken during our human-style wedding where, instead of officiating, Desmon had given her away. Sriracha had been the ring bearer, though he didn’t do much. It had been a warm day, and he’d found a sunbeam and slept through the whole thing.

We were going to have to replace that photo soon when baby Milly arrived.

She hooked her arm through mine. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure? There’s no hurry.”

“Yeah. I was just thinking: I think I’ve been getting it wrong all this time. It’s not that the amulet is a part of me. It’s more like I’m a part of *it*. And that longing that I feel isn’t really mine.”

“No?” We started down the hall.

“No. I think it’s the scepter’s. I think *it’s* longing to be whole again. It’s been broken into pieces and split up for centuries. It just wants to be together.”

It was odd to think that a magical artifact would have feelings, but then again, magic was strange.

“But now that I’ve reunited the two halves several more times, it’s not as bad. Like, it knows I will be back, and it will be

whole again. It just has to be patient. It's not a *bad* artifact—not evil, I mean. It just wants to be helpful. And belong.”

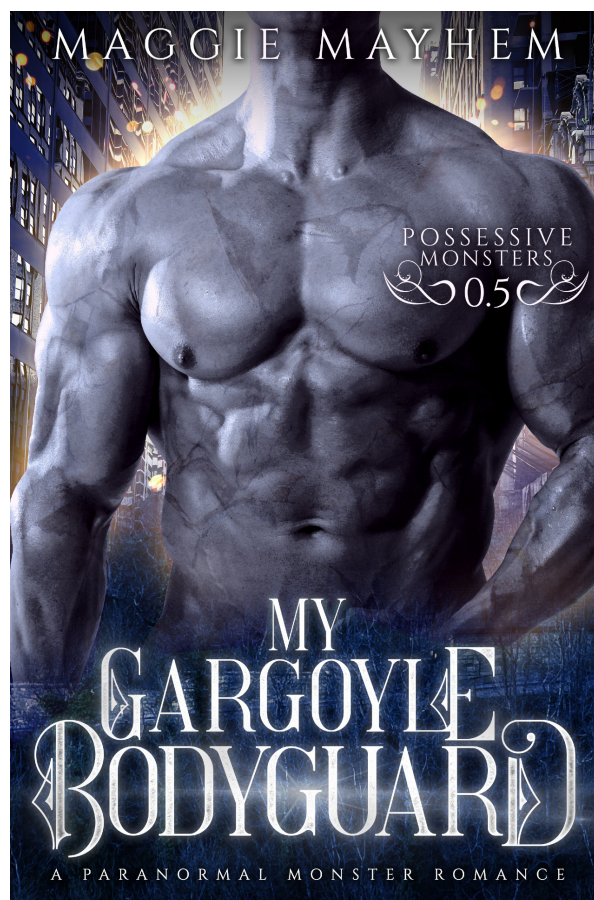
I nodded. “I think I understand.” I stopped in front of the dining room and turned to gaze into her beautiful eyes. “I spent my whole life not quite belonging anywhere until I met a snarky blonde who pressed all my buttons. And now we are starting a family. You’ve made me the happiest manticore in the world.”

Her dazzling smile lit up the hallway. “You’re pretty amazing yourself. And I’m happy too.” A sly look crossed her face. “But, seriously? Snarky?”

“Yup. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

THE END

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MAGGIE MAYHEM IS A steamy paranormal romance author and full-time dog mom. Her love for the fantastical and supernatural has been a lifelong passion, and she finds every opportunity to escape into a good book. When she's not writing, Maggie can be found pulling her canine cloud out of the snow, savoring a glass (or several glasses) of good wine, or exploring the scenic trails of her local parks.

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