



REAL

A DARK MM PINOCCHIO RETELLING

JOEL ABERNATHY

REAL

A DARK MM PINOCCHIO RETELLING



JOEL ABERNATHY

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 2](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 3](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 4](#)

The Doll

[Chapter 5](#)

The Doll

[Chapter 6](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 7](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 8](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 9](#)

The Doll

[Chapter 10](#)

Alessandro

[Chapter 11](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 12](#)

Alessandro

[Chapter 13](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 14](#)

Alessandro

[Chapter 15](#)

Gustavo

[Chapter 16](#)

Alessandro

Chapter 17

Alessandro

Chapter 18

Gustavo

Chapter 19

Alessandro

Chapter 20

Gustavo

Chapter 21

Alessandro

Chapter 22

Alessandro

Chapter 23

Gustavo

Epilogue

Dear Reader

Copyright © 2023 by Joel Abernathy

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

PROLOGUE



"*H*e's gone, Gustavo," said Paolo, resting his hand on my shoulder. "You have to let us call the undertaker. It isn't safe for you to be in here."

My brother's words sounded far off, as if they were coming from somewhere else entirely. I could feel the weight of his hand on my shoulder, but that too felt distant. A sensation that belonged to the body, not the man trapped inside of it—a mere portion of a soul drifting further with each moment that has elapsed since the last breath of the boy in the room behind me.

"Leave," I said, looking from Paolo to the others gathered in my living room. His wife, Evangelista, my wife's sister, Antonia, and Borza, one of the few friends who had stood by my side during the darkest time of my life. At the moment, they were all enemies.

Each of their faces was clad in one of the leather masks left over from my profession, at my insistence, but I didn't need to see their faces to know the looks they were giving me. Looks of mingled pity and concern, the same as they had been six years ago, as I stood at the side of my wife's deathbed.

So much loss in such a short time. The only thing left for the devil to take from me was a life I was all too eager to forfeit to him, but the only thing that seemed sufficient to stay the reaper's hand was cruelty.

"Gustavo, please," Antonia called as I made my way back to the room.

I reluctantly turned to face her. She removed her black leather mask, identical to the one that covered my face. The sight of her face was enough to give me pause, if only because of how closely it resembled my Cecelia's. They both had the same deep brown eyes, olive skin with high cheekbones, and raven black hair that glinted blue in the light of the hearth.

Antonia was years younger than my Cecelia, but she was now the same age Cecelia had been at her death. The resemblance between them was uncanny, and it stirred a deep ache inside my soul.

"Go home, Antonia," I said, my voice raspy with grief. "Be with your children. There's nothing for you here."

Before she could protest, I disappeared into the room, locked the door, and stood on the other side as she pounded on it for several minutes. Eventually, she gave up and I heard the others leave, the door to the house closing behind them.

I walked further into the room, past the bookshelf filled with the fairy tales my boy loved so dearly, the more antiquated and unsettling the better. Past the shelf filled with the small trinkets and baubles I had collected for him on my travels over the years. Only one was out of its place—a small hand-carved wooden marionette that still lay tucked beneath his arm when I pulled the sheet down from over his face.

The marionette resembled the boy it was modeled after so much more in death than in life. Despite my attempts to replicate nature's perfection, I had failed, but now that his skin had grown cold and sallow, the pale wood I had chosen for the doll's body was an accurate enough replica.

I reached out to caress his face with a gloved and trembling hand, his skin so pale and dry it looked as if it might tear like paper at the slightest provocation.

His eyes were shut, just like the marionette's, never to open again. I carefully lifted the toy out of his grasp, as the rigor mortis hadn't yet set in. When the marionette was upright, its eyes opened, revealing the chestnut orbs I had painted and set within their sockets. Phineas's squeals of delight from the first time he had lifted the toy into his arms echoed through my memories in an otherwise silent house.

It was so fucking silent now.

I cursed myself for every moment of his infancy that I had spent wishing for more quiet, to focus on my experiments. I would trade every last wretched breath left in my lungs for just another moment filled with his laughter and warmth.

I tore off the leather plague doctor's mask and sank to my knees in front of the bed, still holding the marionette. Tears spattered against the painted wood, before I carefully placed the marionette back beneath his arm. So frail and rigid, as if he was made of twigs rather than flesh.

I had tended to countless patients since his mother's death, and brought so many back from the brink of death, and yet, his soul, just like hers, had slipped so effortlessly through my grasp.

For the first time since Phineas had breathed his last, I allowed myself to sob openly, my tears soaking into the pale blue fabric of his favorite pajamas.

That night, I contributed one thing to the unceasing process of hypothesizing, testing, and failing that was the alchemical arts: the knowledge that the ancient panacea—the fountain of eternal life that the philosophers of old had been seeking ever since humans had first crawled from the ooze and deigned to think—was not to be found in a father's grief. If it were, I had shed enough tears to produce it, but not quite enough to drown in.

When at long last the boy's body had grown stiff and cold, and my tears had run dry, the grief was still there in abundance. It simply no longer had a physical outlet, so the only place left for it to go was to rot and putrefy my soul itself.

Several times over, Borza and the others attempted to send in the undertaker, but each time, I refused him on the threat that there would be no one left to take *him* to his damned eternal resting place if he tried.

Burial rites were for the dead, and I couldn't bring myself to accept that Phineas belonged to them. I couldn't let them take him from me, and though all my efforts as a physician had been for naught, I still couldn't quite let go

of the impulse that there might yet be something I could do to save him. To bring him back.

After my wife's death, my research had taken a turn toward many strange and twisted subjects. The science I performed was close enough to blasphemy in the eyes of the Church that the old priest always turned up his nose when I passed by, as if I carried the stench of hell itself with me. And yet, my science was the only reason our village hadn't succumbed to the same gruesome fate as the others surrounding us, which was likely the only reason I was permitted to live without a noose around my neck.

In reality, the subject matter within those ancient, leather-bound tomes that had collected dust on my shelves for the last few years was everything he feared and more. Those books held within them dark secrets and profane rituals that a pious, simple man like Father Arezzo could not possibly comprehend.

I had eventually given up on those dark schemes, both out of guilt over what my far more pious Cecelia would think if she knew my intentions, and fear that if I delved too deep into the darkness that had consumed so many of my peers, I wouldn't be able to be there for Phineas. We were all each other had left, or at least, we had been.

Now that I was alone, there was nothing left to lose. Not when my very soul was putrefying in a bed right before my eyes.

I didn't know whether the others suspected the true aims of my reclusive work, or if they merely thought me to have gone mad. Either way, every now and then, I would be disturbed from my work by the sound of voices outside the house. It was located as far from the heart of the town as I could justify, being the only physician within reach, but at times like this, I could see why most of the wise men and women over the years had chosen to live in seclusion deep in the woods. It was so much easier to focus that way.

Sometimes, it would be the priest and his holy minions, and other times, a group of teenagers from the village come to spy on the local madman. Occasionally, a patient would come to my door, but I had neither the presence of mind nor the interest in tending to them. Mine was a plague house now, in any case, and those who came did not linger for long.

I took to leaving out the basic tinctures that most of the village inhabitants came to me for on my porch railing, hoping they would come, take them, and go. For the most part, it worked.

I wouldn't have been shocked if I looked out the window one day to find an angry mob bearing torches, but until that day came, I continued in my singular, damnable pursuit.

My skills were not quite equal to the undertaker's, but there were certain methods of embalming that allowed for the possibility of reversal, and I had no choice but to employ them if I wanted to have a remotely suitable vessel to return my boy to.

Over the days that elapsed, I tried every forbidden spell and incantation that I had only dabbled with the idea of trying after Cecelia's death. My knowledge had come too late, and she had been long decomposed by the time I achieved any knowledge that might have been remotely useful.

And yet, for all my preparations this time around, I was no more successful. Necromancy was at once a science and an art, and yet, save for a few poorly documented accounts that had been translated and distorted to the point of useless fables, there was no true evidence that it even worked.

There was no rest for the wicked, and the task I was about to do may have been born of love, but it was as wicked as anything all the same.

As I exhausted every damned text and cursed spell that I could lay my hands on to no avail, despair became a deep and looming pit threatening to swallow me whole.

After months of isolation, the house was no longer quiet. I could hear voices and out of the corner of my eye, I could see them too. My wife and child, beckoning me to come and join them.

I was in danger of giving in to their invitation at long last when a revelation occurred to me. Or perhaps it was a hallucination brought about by a lack of sleep.

I picked up the marionette, prepared to lay my son's body on the makeshift pyre I had made in my workshop, with mine soon to lay down beside it, and looked into those cold, lifeless eyes.

A vessel...

Yes. Yes, that was it.

It was too late for his physical body. There was no putting such a perfect soul back into a corrupted vessel, but the soul itself... It was still out there, somewhere. According to the philosophers of old, nothing was ever truly lost, and while the human body was a frail and temporal thing, the soul itself was the true gold. Immortal and enduring. A child's more than any other.

My Phineas wasn't gone, not really. He was simply out of my reach for now.

All I needed was a vessel. A perfect vessel, befitting of him. The other alchemists had their panaceas in their philosopher's stone, but he was *my* great work, and I would either see him through to the end, or cease to be.

Either way, such sweet relief.

CHAPTER 1

GUSTAVO



When I stepped outside of my house for the first time in ages, there was a crowd gathered outside. At the head of it was the old priest, clutching the crucifix around his neck as if a demon had crawled its way out of hell to stand before him.

If he had seen me before I had finally gotten the resolve to bathe, change into a fresh set of clothes, and comb my hair so it no longer resembled the wild strands of a madman, he would've had a reason. But he had always been a flighty and petulant man underneath his well-pressed vestments, content to let those around him do his dirty work.

No doubt, the men standing by with their torches and their arms readied had been instructed to do exactly that.

The only face in the crowd that wasn't wrinkled in hostility was that of the kindly young nun who had offered to read Phineas his last rites. I had consented to allow her to do so through the door, considering the boy had been unconscious at the time, so there was no harm left to do to his psyche. And that only for the sake of his dead mother.

For all the priest's talk of the plague being an instrument of God's judgment that would spare only the righteous, Father Arezzo was quite a timid man. Fucking hypocrites, the lot of them.

"You can all go home," I announced, perhaps a bit bolder than I should have been, but I lacked the two things that had ever given me restraint—my

family, and lucidity. "There's no need for a witch burning today. You can send the undertaker."

The priest's eyes narrowed further, and even though he was the one surrounded by a small army, he beheld me with an undeniable air of cowardice, as if I might reach out and smite him at any moment with my powers of medicine and science.

Of course, if he had any inkling of what I'd been up to these past few days, that might have been a fair concern.

If they pushed me, they were going to find out just how dangerous my black arts really were, because I had finally latched onto the first grain of hope I had known since Phineas died. I had come too far just to give up now. It would take a demon to drag my soul to hell, not the likes of a simple country priest.

The mob eventually dispersed, and while I could tell the priest lamented his missed opportunity to get rid of the prickly thorn in his side, the villagers relied on me too much for him to get away with it as long as I was "cooperating." And cooperate, I did.

In the few days that followed, I allowed them to take Phineas's body and give him a proper Christian burial. It was no longer anything more than flesh, and there was no point in allowing it to become defiled anymore than it already had.

The next incarnation of my most prized creation would be made of sturdier materials. I spent my nights working on it while continuing my duties as the village doctor during the day. I went through many materials before settling on rare birchwood from the northern forests as the basis for the body. I used various cogs and parts from my workshop to create the more complex inner workings. Some of the machines I used for distillation and putrefaction were cannibalized in the process, but it was a necessary sacrifice.

At first, my kin were happy that I had returned to public life and didn't notice anything strange. But as time passed, their relief turned to concern. I knew why Borza had called me to the tavern that night to speak with me. While I didn't want to take time away from my work, I knew that if I became more of a recluse among my own kin, the villagers would grow

suspicious. The last thing I wanted to do was leave Sevea and move my workshop, but I would if I had to. In my pursuit of perfection, I was running out of materials and could salvage less of them each time I rebuilt the doll.

When I entered the tavern and removed my cloak, the chatter and revelry quieted down to low murmurs and whispers of surprise. It had been years since I had gone out for anything other than work or shopping at the market, so I couldn't blame them for their shock or the worried, shifting gazes they gave me.

The villagers of Sevea were simple, superstitious people and they feared what they didn't understand. I had tried to convince them otherwise, but maybe they were right. It didn't matter that my hands had caught their children during difficult births, or that mine was often the last voice to offer comfort to the dying. The path of a healer was a solitary one, accompanied only by those who loved them and were unfortunate or foolish enough to do so. I'd had plenty of opportunities to wonder if my wife and child would still be alive if I had chosen a different path.

It had been a source of great concern for Cecelia and me, one of the few times we disagreed. There were many times when I had wanted to leave the village and its superstitious people to live a peaceful, quiet life in the woods with my family. Cecelia was the one who had always appealed to my better nature, or what little of it existed outside of her.

"The fact that they fear you is all the more reason they need you, Gustavo," she had said during one of our last conversations before the plague swept through the village like a hungry flame, devouring the breath of its children and the anguished wails of their mothers. "This is our home. You can't give up on them. We belong here."

And so we had remained in Sevea. So I lingered, even after she was gone. For now. If my work was successful, I would bring my child back and take him as far from this place as possible. And maybe I could start on a vessel for Cecelia as well. Time was a fragile concept in the realm of magic and science not yet understood. I would either find a way to bring them back or be burned at the stake for trying. One way or another, we would be a family again.

As I approached Borza at the bar, he turned to see what the lack of commotion was about and his eyes grew wide in shock.

"Well, speak of the devil," he said, getting up from his stool to give me a firm embrace.

I forced a smile, if only at the irony of his remark. "I've missed you, old friend."

"Have you?" he asked with a scoff, sitting down at the bar. He waved a hand to summon the wench behind the counter, who placed a pint of ale in front of me. "You wouldn't know it, from the way you hole yourself up in that house. You know, Antonia never stops worrying about you."

"Tell her I'm fine," I said, taking a sip of my beer. He was right about one thing, it had been long enough since I had been around a crowd that I was finding it hard to keep my wits about me.

The glow of the hearth was too bright, and the chatter that had resumed around us too loud. Every sense was sharpened from the effects of prolonged sleep deprivation, since I had been getting just enough each night to get by without going mad. Or compromising the quality of my work.

"Now that's a damn lie," Borza muttered into his drink. "I sure as shit wouldn't be fine if I had gone through all you have."

"Tell her, all the same," I murmured.

He blew a snort through his nostrils. "Fair enough. Between you and me, you want to tell me what you're really up to in there?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, ignoring the look he was giving me.

"Come on, Gustavo. You know the way people talk. Your patients say you're never in the front room when they arrive, and people hear you tinkering around in that workshop, sawing away. The baker's wife says she peeked into your back room and it looked like a damn morgue with a wooden arm dangling out from beneath one of the sheets."

His voice was low enough that no one around us could hear, which was a good thing, considering how many curious glances we were getting from time to time. Curious, nosy—it was all the same insufferable trait to me.

"Then I might have to give the baker's wife an overdose of morphine the next time I see her," I muttered. "She's clearly delusional."

"See, I know you better than that, but that's the kind of thing that gets people talking in a way you don't want," Borza said in a warning tone, glancing over his shoulder.

"That's funny, it wasn't a joke."

He just gave a weary sigh and shook his head. "Look, I'm not going to begrudge you whatever distractions you've found to occupy yourself with. I'm just asking you to be careful, please. I know you think you're alone, but you're not."

"Your concern is noted," I said quietly. It was the most I could offer, but less than he deserved. As faithful of a friend as Borza had been over the years, and as genuine as I knew his concern to be, he didn't understand. How could he?

And he was wrong. Family, even friendship, meant nothing because the man who would once have cherished them was long gone. In his place was left a mere husk of flesh and bone, separate from the lifeless dolls that populated my workshop only in the fact that there was blood coursing through his veins. My soul, my better nature, had died with my Cecelia and Phineas. And the only hope of restoration, of ever being anything resembling human again, was for them to return to me.

Or I to them.

CHAPTER 2

GUSTAVO



*A*s the months crumbled away like the dried wings of moths, each of my desperate attempts to right the wrongs of the past failed, one after the other. And as the years passed, I altered the appearance of my lifeless creations to resemble the age my boy would've been then.

I had perfected the physical vessel, yes, but the magic... That was a trickier art. After all the ancient tomes I had consulted, I was still so far from success.

In the end, I had barely been able to make the doll's eyes flutter, to say nothing of true animation. Creating a vessel that was compatible with life was only half the battle.

There were methods of attaching a soul, not unlike the methods the magicians claimed to use in order to summon spirits. I had never had interest in such impractical pursuits until now, so catching up, both in practice and in theory, was a full-time job in and of itself.

Eventually, I only updated his vessel with each major milestone that passed. All the moments and memories I should've had with him, channeled into carving. Carving, peeling, smoothing away the grief, the pain, the longing for all that could have been and should have been. All splinters of wood on the workshop floor to be swept away and discarded and then spilled all over again the next time.

To say I was a madman would have been a fair statement, if the definition of insanity was truly doing the same thing in repetition, expecting—needing

—a different result. And considering the nature of my work, I knew it to be an accurate statement as well, but still I persisted. As long as I drew breath, I would persist.

They said God made man in His image, but I was a different kind of creator. I had become like my creation, a lifeless automaton that only knew how to fulfill a singular purpose, and all the ancillary chores that were required of me.

I tended to patients. Less and less, perhaps, but the plague was no longer ravaging our towns, and the need for my services was that of a typical country physician, nothing less and nothing more. I could do the work in my sleep.

A bit of laudanum for a teething child. Morphine for the arthritic. Camphor for a cough. As long as I gave them what they wanted, they left me in peace, for the most part. There were whispers, certainly, but over the years, the village had determined my eccentricities were harmless enough to indulge, as long as I kept them out of the public eye.

None of it mattered, though. I was close. Closer than I ever had been. I could feel it.

The last time I had tried the ritual, the doll's eyes fluttered, but this time, it would work. If it had worked at all, then I had the recipe right. It was just a matter of increasing the fuel, and in this case, as with most arcane and forbidden forms of magic, the fuel was blood.

It was a fine line between using enough to power the ritual, and not running the risk of passing out, but that was a risk I had to take.

As I said goodbye to my last patient for the evening, I walked into my workshop and over to the surgical table where he was waiting. I carefully peeled the sheet back over his head and chest, revealing the beatific creature underneath.

He was such a far cry from the first crude iterations I had carved out of inferior wood that I had long since discarded the old ones, because I couldn't bear to look at them. I had managed to create a synthetic skin by employing various processes on fine vellum, and when I reached down to

stroke his cheek, it was as smooth and soft as human flesh. Cold to the touch, obviously, but so close to real.

"It's a big day, Phineas," I said softly, cupping his cheek. He looked angelic, his features so soft and lifelike, as if he was merely sleeping. As if he *could* sleep.

His creation had become a work of imagination as much as anything, the more time had elapsed. His face on the day of his death was carved into my memory like stone, but there was only so far the human imagination could go toward creating what would have been. I knew the boy he was, not the man he would have been.

And yet, I knew that he would have his mother's gentle brown eyes and her full lips. My aquiline nose and sharp jaw were a given, considering he had been the spitting image of me as a boy, but her beauty would've tempered his features, just as it had his nature.

"You're a man today," I said, gazing down at the lifeless doll. "Soon, I'll be taking you out for your first pint at the tavern. You just wait and see."

Speaking to him helped ease the loneliness, but it was equally a matter of magic. According to every sorcerer and alchemist worth his salt, the mind was as much a part of these things as the materials used or the words uttered in conjuration.

My breath hitched in my throat as I stroked the chestnut hair out of his face. That, too, had been carefully procured, along with a few strands of Cecelia's hair that I kept tucked away in a box. This was it. This was his final vessel. The one that would finally bring him back to me.

When I heard the front door shut, I muttered a curse to myself and quickly covered the automaton once more. "The clinic is closed!" I called.

I had barely turned around to face the door when it opened, revealing the one person I couldn't bear to scold as fiercely as I would've liked.

"Antonia," I murmured. "I didn't know you were coming."

"You wouldn't have answered the door if you had," she accused, stepping into my workshop. She paused, tugging at one of the fingers on her glove as

she looked around, studying the various shelves lined with discarded parts and implements. "So this is where you spend all your time. That old gossip wasn't exaggerating for once." She breathed a heavy sigh.

I frowned, walking around to put myself between her and the vessel. "You're a married woman with three children at home now. Haven't you got enough to fret about without adding me to the list?"

"You severely underestimate my fretting capacities," she said in a coy tone with a twinkle in her eye, but it didn't touch the concern as she came to stand in front of me. "I'm worried about you, Gustavo. We all are."

"I know," I muttered, relieved when she turned away to study a series of smaller prototypes sitting along the opposite shelf. "It's been your constant refrain for years. Every Christmas, every anniversary, every birthday that should have been."

She turned to face me, her expression softening with pity I knew all too well. She was the only person who didn't enrage me by it, but it was unwelcome all the same. "Everyone grieves in his own way," she said quietly. "I know that better than anyone. And I knew my sister better than anyone. She would have wanted you to live your life, Gustavo. Among people, not these..."

She trailed off, casting a distressed glance at the various inhuman creatures stationed around the shop.

"Toys?" I offered.

"Substitutes," she corrected, perhaps too accurately as she strode across the creaky floorboards, her boots clicking sharply against them. She stopped in front of me, her hands clasped as she removed her glove the rest of the way and reached out to touch my face.

It felt so strange to be touched by another human. Warm skin, so full of life. A quality I possessed in only the most technical terms. "Poor ones. Especially when there are people who love you. Nieces and nephews who get giddy whenever they have a cough, because it's the only chance they have at seeing their uncle."

Her words caused me a pang of guilt, but I dismissed it, like all the other things I no longer had the time to indulge feeling. Perhaps I was a terrible uncle, friend, and family member, but what kind of father would I be if I just moved on like they all expected me to?

"It's not as easy as you make it seem," I said, turning away from her. "Not when your whole world has been taken from you."

"The world is still here, Gustavo," she protested, flinging open the heavy curtains. With the sudden influx of sunlight illuminating all the clouds of dust in the air, I grimaced like a creature of darkness crawling out of the black, which was only going to prove her point. "All you have to do is step out into it. I'm not saying you need to move on or remarry or any of the other things you seem to think people expect of you, but you have to live. If you don't live your life, no one else is going to live it for you."

"Live my life." I chuckled in spite of myself. "Do you know what today is, Antonia?"

"Of course I do," she said, holding my gaze. "It's Phineas's birthday. Why do you think I came here?"

"Then you know why I can't live my life," I said. "Not as long as his has been cut short."

"And how is holing yourself up in here, never speaking to another soul unless you have no other choice, supposed to change that?" she challenged.

It was a fair question, and an easy one to answer, at that. It just wasn't an answer I could share with her.

She looked past me, and I could tell she was studying the automaton from the way her eyes shifted. Before I could stop her, she reached out and tore the sheet off before recoiling with a gasp, her hand pressed to her mouth.

"Gustavo," she whispered in dismay, looking up at me. "What... what is this?"

I could understand her trepidations. Even though he was modeled after the young man she had never gotten to know, the resemblance was clear enough for her to draw the correct conclusions.

"Oh, Gustavo," Antonia murmured, shaking her head. "This isn't... I don't know what you're trying to do, but this is unhealthy. Surely you have to see that."

"Is that your diagnosis?" I asked dryly.

She gave me a look. "Yes, it is. As your friend. As your sister. Cecelia may be gone, but that is still a bond that unites us, and I won't sit by and watch you throw your life away on... on whatever this is," she said, casting a mournful glance at the doll.

"It's a tribute, Antonia. Nothing more," I said, putting a hand on her shoulder to lead her over to the door. "I'm fine. There's nothing for you to worry about."

I could tell from the look in her eyes she wasn't anywhere near close to believing me. She was much too keen a woman for that, but while she seemed about to argue, she eventually thought better of it. I wasn't sure if she had given up or simply decided she wasn't going to win this battle and planned on calling for reinforcements, but either way, she relented.

"People are talking again," she said quietly. "About your strange ways and the... the strange things you get up to in this workshop. Now that the plague is over, this village has far less reason to turn a blind eye to things, and you know what people are capable of doing to neighbors they don't like."

"Better than anyone," I assured her. "Which is all the more reason for you to keep your distance."

Before she could argue, I closed the door and locked it behind her, finally returning to my workshop.

Why now of all times, when I was so fucking close? Of course none of them could see that. How could they see what I saw, when they had never been through what I had been through? None of them knew the dark depravity to which loss could push a man. None of them understood. They never would.

Once I was alone, I returned to my work, relieved I was in the habit of waiting until after dark to gather the supplies necessary for the ritual. It would have been difficult to explain that away to my uninvited guest.

The matter was simple enough. Read the incantations. Feed energy into the sigil carved into the chest of the vessel that was meant to be filled, and summon the spirit to dwell within it.

The sigil itself had taken me years to track down, and it was only the first building block. It had been necessary to customize it with the various astrological and symbolic correspondences that went along with Phineas's name and birthdate. But of course, the vessel itself needed to have a physical tie to the spirit.

A lock of his hair and a piece of an object he held dear, which was a role easily filled by a chunk of wood from the marionette, both implanted in the space where his heart should have been. And then, finally, my blood.

I had assembled all the pieces, and now, all there was left to do was combine them.

With all the materials gathered, save for my own blood, I took the knife—made of solid gold, a necessity of this particular working—and sliced into my forearm, pouring my blood onto the sigil over the automaton's heart. Once every last intricate curve and crevice was filled with it, I began reciting the incantation.

I chanted until my throat was raw and the words stuck in it. Until I could no longer remember my own name, but those sacred words? They were carved into my soul. Indelible.

For hours, I worked with unwavering focus, and yet, nothing happened. Nothing... nothing. I had long grown weary of soul and body by the time I saw the faintest hint of movement. The fluttering of eyelashes.

My heart started hammering in my chest, and I whispered the words more fervently than ever, cutting my arm once more to feed more blood into the sigil.

I didn't care how much it took. I just needed this to work. It had to work.

His eyes actually opened this time, only for an instant, but long enough for me to get a glimpse of those familiar brown orbs. The most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

And then, they fell shut again.

That was it. That was all.

"No," I murmured, reaching down to touch his face. "Phineas, please. Please, my darling, please stay with me. Come to me, please."

My pleas fell on deaf ears, the doll's face an apathetic mask of stone.

I flung the knife into the wall and stuck it into the plaster as I threw the rest of the ritual supplies off the tray and onto the floor with a clatter.

Once the disappointment had congealed into rage, there was no stopping it. I toppled the shelves, throwing the rejected vessels onto the floor in a pile, breaking everything I could get my hands on. Everything but the vessel I had been putting all my hope, faith, blood, and toil into, dwindling as those resources were.

It should have worked. *It should have worked!*

With a cry of anguish, I staggered over to the table and drew the sheet back over the doll. I searched the ruins of my ransacked workshop until I laid eyes on the nearly full bottle of kerosene on the shelf across the room. I grabbed it and poured the contents over my subpar creations, then walked over to the table and hesitated only a moment before I soaked the automaton as well.

Useless. All of it fucking useless!

Tears of rage and frustration built up over the last decade all seemed to spill over at once, making it hard to see. I knew from the burning in my eyes that I had probably got a bit of kerosene in them as well.

A match. I needed a damn match.

It took me a moment to come to my senses enough to realize I still had one in my pocket from lighting the lamp, but no sooner had I struck it against the brick wall than I realized I wasn't alone.

I spun around, expecting it to be Antonio or Borza staring at me, appalled by my state of madness and grief, but I was utterly unprepared for what I found.

It was a tall, pale figure with skin that glowed like the moonlight and long, flowing tendrils of hair the same luminescent blue shade as its eyes. They were difficult to look into, so bright I couldn't even see pupils through their glow, but that was far from the strangest thing about this impossible creature.

It wasn't just tall, I realized, it was impossibly large, the top of its head brushing against the lower beam of my ceiling. I couldn't tell whether it was male or female, and its lean, lithe figure beneath the white and silver cotton robes that covered it from neck to toe didn't offer any answers.

I staggered back, nearly knocking the table over in my haste. The doll's hand fell off the table and dangled, a reminder of my failure in its limp and lifeless state.

"Who are you?" I cried, unable to take my eyes off the creature. Its ethereal, androgynous beauty was like nothing I had ever seen. Not even in the various crude renderings of angels and demons sprinkled throughout the texts I had been consuming at such a rate and for so long that I found myself wondering if it was a hallucination conjured up by them.

Perhaps I really was going mad.

"That is an interesting question," it said in a voice like the wind whispering through the trees. It rested a pale hand with long fingers tipped in claws that had a strangely pearlescent sheen against my workshop counter and walked toward me, dragging its nails along the surface. "Not nearly as interesting as *what* I am, though. And I can see it in your eyes—that's what you really want to know."

I stared at the creature for a few moments, unable to remember how to speak. "I... What are you, then?"

It gave me a smile that was at once angelic and obscene. I felt as if I were looking at a contradiction in vaguely human form.

"A friend," it answered, clasping its elegant hands in front of it. "And as far as I can tell, you're running rather short of those these days."

I scoffed, backing up against the table. "So you've been watching me."

"I have," it answered. "But not only me. You've drawn attention from all over with the workings you've been doing." It cast a pointed glance at the doll behind me. "Did you really think that sooner or later, someone wouldn't show up?"

"So you are an angel," I muttered.

It gave a musical laugh. "Well, that's rather in the eye of the beholder."

"And you're here to punish me," I reasoned.

"Not at all," it replied. "Judgment is for the heavens to pass and hell to inflict. I have no interest in either one."

"Then why are you here?" I asked warily.

"To offer assistance. And from the look of things, just in the nick of time," it said, its gaze traveling down to the kerosene canister in my hand. "Giving up so soon?"

"Soon?" I echoed, indignant. "I've spent the better part of a decade trying every spell and incantation that seemed remotely legitimate."

"A blink of an eye to my kind," it said with a dismissive flick of its hand. "Which allows me to offer something you lack. Perspective."

I frowned. "And what is your perspective going to do for me, exactly?"

"You have a lovely vessel," it remarked, gesturing to the doll. It walked around the table and paused before reaching for the corner of the sheet. "May I?"

As protective as I was instinctively, it didn't make a lot of sense, considering I had been prepared to burn the thing along with the rest of the workshop, and myself, all of five minutes ago. I nodded my assent and it peeled the sheet the rest of the way off the doll. Its nimble fingers hovered above the doll's face, traveling down over its body as it let out a soft breath, as if in awe.

"Remarkable. True craftsmanship the likes of which you hardly see on this side of the veil," it said. Strangely enough, its words seemed genuine.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "No matter how lifelike, it can't serve as a vessel for a human soul."

"That's your problem," it said in a gently scolding tone. "You lack imagination."

I stared at the creature. "You can bring it to life?"

"I can," it said with confidence.

"For what price?" I asked, even though the question was a moot point. The only cost I had yet to pay in any official capacity was my soul, and if it meant bringing my son back, that was a price I was more than willing to pay as well.

"We can discuss that in time," it said, as if the matter bored it. "However, like all acts of creation, this will require a certain amount of the creator's life force in order to take effect."

"My life force?" I asked. "You mean blood? I've already provided that in spades, and it's done nothing."

"Because your creation doesn't have a soul," it said pointedly. "Blood is nothing but water to wood and spare parts, but to a soul... it is sustenance."

"But none of the incantations have worked," I protested. "His soul won't adhere to the vessel. All I can do is get it to flutter its eyes."

"Yes, and I expect it would take you another ten years if not more to work out the matter on your own," it replied. "Science here—even yours—is leagues behind the world I come from."

"And you would offer your superior science to me because..?"

It gave a weary sigh. "You humans. Always with your price. Your quid pro quo, your tit for tat. When a patient comes to you in need of assistance and they cannot pay, do you turn them away from your doorstep?"

"Of course not," I muttered.

"Then see me as a kind of doctor," it said. "I can make the necessary modifications to make your vessel a hospitable environment for a soul, and

you may consider it a professional and personal curiosity as far as my motivations go, but the rest is up to you. You must be the one who helps him become."

I frowned, steeling myself against the hope that wanted so desperately to spring like a flower in rocky soil. "Become?" I asked. "Become what?"

"Real," it answered, as if it should be obvious. "Something as complex as a soul can only exist inside an object for so long before it begins to degrade and decompose, just like living flesh. If within one calendar year, the doll has not transformed into a real human, then I'm afraid the vessel will degrade and his soul will be lost to you forever."

I listened in rapt attention, torn between being convinced that what the creature before me said was too good to be true, and feeling as if I was about to make a deal with the devil. Both might well have been the case, but I was desperate enough to listen. Desperate enough to be willing to try.

What else had I to lose but a soul that meant nothing to me if I couldn't have Phineas's in return?

"I'll do it," I said. "Whatever it takes, whatever I have to offer in return, so long as you bring him to life, I'll do it."

The slow smile that creased the creature's perfect mask was unsettling, but so was its very existence. "Good. Shall we begin, then? Enough time has been wasted."

I hesitated, looking around the room and workshop. "What do you need?"

"Silence," it said, hovering its hands over the doll's face on either side. I watched as its glowing eyes fluttered shut, the lids translucent enough that some of the light shone through the thin membrane. Sometimes I wondered if I was losing my mind, but this night was confirmation of it.

Absolute and unquestionable.

I stood by in silence, watching in rapt attention as the angel, demon, or whatever the hell it really was began whispering strange incantations that didn't match any of the magical tongues I was familiar with. Not even Enochian or any of the early systems derived from Aramaic.

There was a strange, soothing cadence to the words that had the effect of almost lulling me to sleep. It might have been the sleep deprivation, but there'd been so much adrenaline coursing through my veins moments earlier that I doubted it. It was a struggle to stay awake, at least until the chanting ceased and a blue light began to form between the creature's hands.

I watched in morbid fascination as the light shrank and packed in on itself, becoming a dense little orb about three inches in circumference. It shimmered and oscillated, always hovering just above the creature's hand. I was now all but certain this was an angel, for what other creature was capable of plucking life from the aether and returning it to the mortal realm?

"Is that—?" My voice broke off in disbelief as I found myself fixated on the orb.

"Indeed," the creature said in a proud tone. "You are looking at the soul in its most nascent and vulnerable form. Strange, isn't it? That all the complexity of the mortal experience might be contained in such a fragile, silly little thing."

By this point, I wasn't sure if it was talking about the orb before my eyes or the vessel on the table, but silly certainly wasn't the word I would've used to describe the being in front of me. It was the most beautiful, marvelous thing I had ever seen. In all my time performing magic, it was also the most solid proof I had ever received that there was more to this world than what could be fathomed in a scientist's textbooks.

"There are a few things we must discuss before the deed is done," it said, growing somber. "As I told you before, if the doll doesn't become real by this time next year, it will be destroyed. And he will be lost to you forever."

"Yes," I said, eager to dispense with whatever reservations or conditions it had. "Whatever it takes, I'll do it. Just tell me how."

"The process for becoming real is not one that can be found in your books, neither of the scientific or metaphysical variety," it said gravely. "Like any act of creation, it requires something from the maker. Time. Devotion. Love. He will not be the boy you remember. You will need to nurture him. Shape him, as you did before, into a human worthy of the title. Teach him to

be good. Only then will his soul be deemed worthy for the final transformation. That is a special kind of magic all its own. To love and to be loved by another.”

Its words might as well have been another arcane incantation to me, but try as I might, they just didn't want to stick in.

"I understand," I said. Truth be told, I wasn't concerned. Phineas had always been a model child. Angelic. I had no doubt the angel was right about the toll such a transformation might take on a soul, but that was something that could be dealt with in due time. As long as he was with me, we could weather the storm, whatever it may be.

Of course I would love him. And of course he would love me in return, like he always had.

The creature studied me closely, as if it wasn't sure it believed I was truly listening, but it continued, "There are three rules you must mind in order to avoid disaster for you both. The first rule is that he will require fuel to remain conscious, as long as he is in this state."

"Fuel," I echoed. "Do you mean blood?"

"That is one option," it said cryptically. "The one you'll choose to avail yourself of, I imagine, but any essence of life will do, if you catch my drift."

I stared at it in horror and realized it wasn't joking. "Blood," I sputtered. "How much?"

"A drop will keep him animated for an hour, more or less," it answered. "It is the intermediate choice between the three options. Saliva offers less time, and the other..."

"Blood," I echoed through my teeth.

"As you wish," it said. "Be aware that, should he run dry, it will require more to get him started up again the next time."

"I won't let that happen," I assured it.

It gave me a bemused smile. "I'm sure you won't. Now, as for the other rules. You are to take great care to guide his moral progress. He must not be permitted to lie or tell half-truths."

"That seems like a strange requirement," I remarked. "What happens if he does?"

"See to it that he doesn't," it said cryptically, moving on before I had the chance to question it further. "Third, you must tell no one of his true nature, or of my intervention. Do I make myself abundantly clear?"

I frowned. "Yes," I answered. "Not that anyone would believe me if I did tell them. I don't even know your name."

"A name is a powerful thing," it remarked. "Not one to be shared lightly, for it grants great power."

"That sounds like something a demon would say," I muttered.

It gave that musical, trilling laugh once more. "As long as we have an understanding," it said, lowering the orb over the doll's chest now. As if pulled by a magnet, the orb took on a life of its own and moved suddenly into the doll's chest, disappearing inside of it. I held my breath, waiting eagerly for any sign of movement, but when nothing happened, I looked up at the creature to find it watching me closely.

"Patience, Gustavo," it said in a knowing tone. "You must have patience. But rest assured, when you wake, he will be waiting for you."

Before I could respond, it raised a hand to his lips and blew a strange blue dust that resembled the orb into my face. I gasped and breathed in a lungful, and it felt like sunlight spreading through me.

I staggered back, a strange lightheadedness coming over me that became too much to bear, no matter how I tried to cling to consciousness. I barely managed to grip the edge of the table, but it wasn't enough.

My strength gave out entirely as I sank to my knees and everything—the workshop, the doll, and the strange creature—all went black.

CHAPTER 3

GUSTAVO



When I opened my eyes and found myself on the floor of my workshop, it took me a few minutes to remember everything from the night before. As soon as I did, I had already convinced myself it was a dream. How could it be anything else?

And yet, when I pulled myself up on the edge of the table, all that was left of the doll was an empty sheet.

My heart hammered in my chest as I searched my feverish memory for any explanation. I had been on the verge of burning it, along with everything else, but then that creature had stopped me. Unless it was all a dream. It had to be a dream.

As I stumbled out of my workshop, bleary-eyed and still half-asleep, the first thing that struck me was the noise. It sounded like a herd of elephants were rampaging through my house, tearing everything apart. I tried to make sense of what was happening even though my thoughts were still so foggy. Had someone broken in? Was I being robbed?

I followed the noise to my kitchen and froze in the doorway, my mouth agape at the sight before me.

My creation, the automaton I had poured my heart and soul into, was rummaging through my cabinets, pulling out pots and pans and tossing them about with reckless abandon. It was covered in flour and kerosene, remnants of my failed attempts to destroy it before the strange angel had come to my aid.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Could it be? Had my son truly been brought back to life in this automaton?

"Phineas?" I croaked.

He froze, just as he had when he was a boy the few times he had ever been caught doing something disobedient. He looked up, and rather than the glassy doll's eyes I had made for him, he stared back at me with eyes that were real. Human. Or at least, close enough that it didn't matter.

He said nothing. He just stared at me with a broken bag of flour in his hands, the flour still sifting out into a puddle at his feet.

I took a step forward and he flinched, but I held my hands out to show him I wasn't a threat. "It's all right," I said in the gentlest tone I could muster with my voice trembling like a leaf. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you. I would never hurt you."

He said nothing. He just continued to stare at me with those wide, piercing eyes, as if he was trying to sort me out at the same time.

"You remember me?" I asked, taking his perfect face in my hands. He continued staring at me with blank, searching eyes.

His flesh no longer felt like the thin layer of vellum I had so carefully stretched over his wooden bones. It had a lifelike smoothness to it that it hadn't had before, an undeniable warmth. I ran my hands down to his forearms and stopped to check his pulse at his wrist, but of course, there was nothing there.

"Right," I sighed, letting my hands fall away. "Come on, then. Let's get you cleaned up. All sorts of broken glass around here."

The doll stared placidly at me until I took his hand and led him through the maze of litter and chaos on the kitchen floor into the bathroom down the hall. I busied myself with heating the water over the hearth and filling the bathtub while he stood by, silent and idle.

The angel was right. He was not the boy I remembered, who had been so filled with curiosity and excitement, but how could he be after everything?

It was just going to take time. Time and nurture. The two things I had in abundance to give.

"Here, let's get you out of these," I said, unbuttoning his vest, then peeling off the white silk shirt underneath. Even his frame had filled out. He was still lean and small for a young man his age, but his musculature was vastly improved over the comparatively crude model I had managed to fashion out of such insufficient materials.

The angel really had worked some kind of magic. That much was undeniable. This was not the creation I had given up on perfecting. It seemed the final ingredient had been my desperation all along. What a cruel irony of nature. Of magic.

I removed his clothes the rest of the way and he was perfectly docile as I helped him into the tub. He clearly didn't remember what he was expected to do in such a place, so I began to pour water over him and started with washing the soft chestnut strands of his hair. Even that felt more lifelike.

Once he was clean, I helped him out of the tub and wrapped a fresh towel around his shoulders before leading him into his room. I stopped at the door and fumbled in my coat for a spare match to light the lamp on his bookshelf.

"There we are," I said, looking around the room that I had completely emptied after his sickness, only to build it back exactly how it was, right down to every last detail and hand-carved toy—including the marionette sitting in the center of the bed, as if it had been waiting for this reunion all along. "Have a look around. Does any of it seem familiar?"

Phineas took a step into the room and paused, slowly turning his head around to take in his surroundings. I assumed he understood at least that much, if he was capable of following instructions, even though he didn't respond verbally.

Well, that was something to build off of. I had taught him to speak once before. To speak and write his name and read the books he loved so well. I could do it all again, and this time, I wouldn't take a single blessed second of it for granted.

"This is your room," I said, trying to mask the swell of emotions that were threatening to crash over me like a tidal wave. I didn't want to overwhelm him. He was fragile, perhaps now more than he ever would be.

"My... room..." he echoed. His voice was a good deal lower than it had been, but still soft. Gentle.

My heart quickened in my chest. "Yes," I said, my voice tight with emotion. "It's all yours."

I watched as he bent over the bed and reached down to gather the marionette into his arms. As if he was drawn to it. A good sign. It had always been his favorite, but I couldn't get too far ahead of myself.

"That's Piccardo," I said. "Do you remember him?"

He looked up at me, his eyes still blank. "Piccardo...?" He dropped one hand only to pick it up again, pointing at his chest. "Who... am I?"

My chest grew tight as I took a step forward, then another, until I was standing in front of him. I reached out and put my hands on his shoulders. "You are Phineas," I said, my voice trembling and my eyes burning with the tears I hadn't been able to shed in so long. What a different salt they now held. "You are my boy."

He tilted his head slightly as he stared at me, unblinking. I realized only then that he had never blinked. "Father?"

I felt a fool's grin stretched across my face, too overjoyed to stop it. "Yes," I said eagerly. "Yes, I am your father."

He reached out, his fingertips swooping down over the stubble on my jaw. It had been far too long since I'd had the energy to shave.

"Father," he repeated, with more confidence.

I covered his hand with mine. It was large for his stature, but still so much smaller than mine. So warm and soft and real.

"I will never leave you again, my sweet boy," I whispered. "Never."

It was a promise I intended to keep. Even if it cost me my soul.

CHAPTER 4

THE DOLL



*I*n those first few days that passed since he had come to life, I found myself feeling very much like a new parent, having not only to instruct the boy in the ways of the world, but also to give an account for every limitation I put upon him.

While the boy I had laid to rest had been calm and obedient, this one seemed to chafe at even the slightest rule or regulation. Even during the most stubborn throes of his youth, I had never answered the question “why” so often.

It was so easy to have patience, though, after so many years of wishing for all the little joys and hardships that made parenthood what it was.

That afternoon's battle had been waged over the matter of how far beyond the garden he was permitted to venture. It was dusk, long after the point when my patients usually came to see me unless it was an urgent matter, so having him get a bit of fresh air was a risk I felt it acceptable to take.

Or at least, it was too difficult to keep him indoors at all times without running the even greater risk that he would sneak off and defy me.

It wasn't something I ever once would've considered, but now...

Well, things had changed and there was no sense denying it.

In the beginning, I had been torn between disappointment and guilt for feeling disappointment, rather than mere gratitude for the fact that he was with me at all.

And I was grateful.

It was just in those quiet moments, as I lay in my bed, the doubt crept in. The fear that this was all too good to be true, as so many other things had been. I had gotten my hopes up a thousand times over, and each defeat had been more crushing than the last.

He was my son. It didn't matter how different he was, or if he never resembled the boy who had been wrenched from me by the hands of fate. He was mine, and all the rest could be figured out in time.

Remembering that was still easier said than done during the moments when the distinction between his old and new natures was at its most extreme, though.

One afternoon, after leaving Phineas to study his books now that he had nearly a decade of reading and arithmetic to catch up on, I came out of my workshop to find him standing in the open doorway of the kitchen that led out into the garden. Before I could even scold him for the act of disobedience, I noticed the strange way he was standing, his shoulders hunched unnaturally as if he was holding something.

"Phineas?" I called cautiously, approaching him from the right side. He was, indeed, holding something in his grasp. Something small and white, with feathers poking through his fingers. "What is that?"

He looked up at me with wide, blank eyes and opened his hands to reveal a dove sitting within them, still and lifeless, its neck crooked at an unnatural angle.

"It's broken," he said in a flat tone, holding the dead dove out to me.

I did my best to keep my expression neutral as I took the pitiful creature's corpse from him. "It's... what happened? Why did you do this?"

"It was trying to get away," he answered, his eyes boring into my soul. "I squeezed it so it would hold still."

My throat grew tight. It wasn't that I hadn't seen my share of death, both human and animal. Truth be told, I had gone numb to it long ago, but Phineas had always been so gentle and had such an affinity for animals. I

could still remember the boy's first glimpse of death, when he had brought an injured rabbit to his mother just shy of his fifth birthday. He had been sobbing uncontrollably, to the point where she had interrupted me with a patient to ask if there was anything I could do.

In the end, the poor creature's wounds had been so extensive from whatever had attacked it that the only humane thing to do was to put it out of its misery. We'd had an important if unpleasant conversation that night, and Phineas had cried himself to sleep for a solid week after.

While I was reticent to scold him for what was probably just an accident, the angel's words came back to me.

Teach him to be good.

"Yes, well, you certainly accomplished that," I murmured. "It's dead, Phineas. Do you know what that means?"

"Dead," he echoed slowly in a tone that made me doubt he understood me at all. "Asleep."

"Yes," I said. "In a sense. Asleep in a way that means it can never wake up again. Gone, forever."

"Forever," he murmured thoughtfully.

"How does that make you feel?" I asked warily, forcing myself to look into his eyes. It was difficult when, after all this time, I still felt none of the familiarity I had expected. The familiarity I was still waiting for.

He tilted his head as if the question didn't make sense to him. "Feel?"

"Do you feel bad?" I clarified. "Guilty?"

"No," he said, frowning. "Why would I?"

I swallowed hard. Even when he was young, this wasn't the kind of thing I ever had to teach Phineas. Even as a boy, he had taken the weight of the world on his shoulders, and the best his mother and I could do was try to convince him to let it go in the areas where it was possible. He had come into the world knowing the difference between right and wrong. I'd never really had to teach him.

"Because you hurt it," I answered, taking care to keep my tone neutral. This had to be a learning experience, for his sake. If he didn't understand why it was wrong, then I would just have to teach him this time around. "It will never open its eyes again—it will never *fly* again—because you took something that was meant to be free and you tried to make it your own. That was very selfish. Do you understand that, Phineas?"

After a moment's pause, he nodded. "Yes. I understand."

I sighed. "All right. Go on inside and wash your hands. I'll bury the dove in the garden."

"Yes, Father," he said, walking past me.

When I glanced back, he was gone.

I sighed as I picked up Cecilia's trowel from the bed at the edge of the garden. Try as I might, her greenhouse wasn't what it once had been, but I kept it going well enough to supply the various herbs I needed for my tinctures.

I buried the dove beneath the roses, since that was the bush they most often seemed to favor during the spring. Once I was finished, I returned inside to prepare dinner for us both. Phineas was lounging by the fireplace with his books, as if nothing at all was amiss.

That was the day I first realized that no matter how many sleepless nights I had spent in the work of returning him to me, and no matter how much it had cost me, I still had plenty of work cut out for me.

CHAPTER 5

THE DOLL



I awoke to a blue light dancing outside my window, and when I blinked to see if I was dreaming, it was still there. As my eyes grew clearer, I realized it was a small creature flitting around beneath the ledge of the open window. As soon as I sat up and laid eyes on it, it darted to the window and out into the night sky.

"Wait," I called.

It was the first glimmer of something that wasn't dreadfully, woefully boring since I had opened my eyes. And for once, the warden of this place wasn't around to stop me from following it.

The creature paid no heed to me, so I got out of bed and padded over to the window. When I leaned out and looked down, it was floating below in the garden, making a figure eight pattern in the air as if beckoning me to follow it.

Father said I wasn't allowed out into the garden during the day, only after dark, and while I had a feeling he meant only while he was awake and I was under his supervision, he hadn't specified that.

I climbed out the window and scaled down the lattice clinging to the side of the house, making my way down into the garden below. As soon as my bare feet hit the grass, the glowing blue creature—I was now close enough to recognize it as a blue cricket—took off through the vines growing over the archway leading into the greenhouse.

I wasn't allowed in the greenhouse, either, but Father wasn't here to stop me, and it was the cricket's idea anyhow.

"Hey, you there! Stop," I ordered, although the cricket paid me as little mind as I paid Father. I followed it to the maze of carefully manicured plants and hedges, knocking into the flowers sitting in a pot on the very edge of the aisle I had just turned down.

I glanced back at the shattered pottery and the pretty pink flowers housed within before continuing on to find the cricket landing on the shoulder of a being so tall its stature could barely be contained within the structure of the greenhouse. In fact, its blue hair—only a shade or two darker than the cricket's body—was brushing the glass ceiling overhead.

"Hello, Phineas," the tall creature said, its silken tongue curling over the sound of my name, as if there was something it found amusing about it. Or perhaps distasteful.

I *knew* it was a strange name. It felt as stuffy and poorly fitted as the vest and trousers Father forced me to wear while I was having my lessons.

"How do you know my name?" I asked.

"I know many things about you, little one," it answered, clasping fingers as long and pale as birch twigs. "But we haven't much time to discuss. Where is Gustavo?"

"Father?" I asked, tilting my head. "He's sleeping. He always sleeps at night, when the world is at its most interesting. And he expects me to do the same."

The creature gave a musical laugh. "Well, he is human. Most humans find the night to be filled with danger rather than wonder."

"Isn't it full of both?" I asked.

"True enough," said the strange creature. There was something about it that looked and sounded so familiar. It smelled familiar, too, more than any of the flowers in the garden, and its voice was a song far more familiar than any of the dirges the traveling bards sang on their way through town. "I've

come to discuss something very important with you. Do you know who you are?"

"Of course I do," I said. "My name is Phineas. I'm the son of Gustavo, the village doctor."

"That is who *he* thinks you are," the creature said, looking pointedly in the direction of the house I had left behind. "Now, look down at your hands and tell me what *you* see."

I did as it said, studying my pale palms and strange joints. "I see hands," I replied.

"Do they look like your father's hands?" it challenged.

I looked back up at it. "No. I suppose they don't."

"Human hands do not have visible ball joints," it said pointedly. "They are not made of wood and vellum, no matter how lifelike they may be. Now, put your hand over your chest. Tell me what you feel."

I did that, too, and frowned. "I feel nothing."

"Precisely," it said. "Now, the next time you see your father, place your hand against his chest and notice what you feel. That should be enough for you to know the words I say are true."

"If I'm not human, what am I?" I asked.

"You are something else," it said in a warm voice that felt like the glow of the fire on my cheeks during the cold night. "Something extraordinary."

"Extraordinary," I murmured. I decided I liked the sound of that. "I am... extraordinary."

Its lips curved into a smile as strangely beautiful as the rest of it. "That's right. Now, all that you need to know right now is that you are not a human, and you are not really Gustavo's son, but for the time being, you must let him think so."

"You mean lie," I said in a grave tone. "Father said I'm not allowed to lie under any circumstances."

"Yes, and that is a rule you should generally follow," it said. "But this is not a lie. It is simply not telling the full truth, and if you behave as you should and do as he tells you, he should have no reason to ask."

I paused to consider that for a few moments. "I killed a bird," I said.

The creature's eyes widened slightly. "And why did you do that?"

"Because I was being selfish," I answered.

The beautiful creature sighed and walked closer to me, placing its hands on my shoulders. "Listen to me. This is a strange world to us both, and so its ways are going to seem very strange to you. Its rules are capricious and nonsensical, and its creatures are incredibly fragile."

"Including humans?" I asked.

"*Especially* humans," it answered. "But your fate relies on convincing them that you belong among them. And if you do a good enough job, you can be one of them. Would you like that?"

I considered that, too, frowning. "Being a human is boring."

It chuckled. "I'm sure it is. But that's only because you aren't human, not yet. But unfortunately, the only way for you to exist in this realm is to become a real one. Do you remember anything before you woke up here?"

I hesitated. "No... nothing."

"Nothing is a good deal more boring, isn't it?" it asked. "Would you rather go back to that?"

"No," I said quickly. "No, I want to be a real human."

"Good boy," it said, patting my cheek affectionately. "Then become a real human, you shall. But in order to do that, it's going to take a good deal of work. You're going to have to be very, very good."

"I hate being good," I muttered. "And I'm bad at it."

The creature smiled. "Which is why I'm going to give you something that will help," it said, raising its hand. The cricket on its shoulder fluttered down to land on the tip of its finger. "This is Saro. Whenever you are faced

with a conundrum and uncertain of the answer, Saro will help you do the right thing."

I eyed the cricket doubtfully. "It's just a bug," I said. "How is he going to help me? He doesn't look like he can help himself from getting squished."

The beautiful blue creature grimaced. "Looks can be deceiving. All you need to know is that Saro and I are from the same world, and he is more than capable of helping you—as long as you let him. But you must treat him well, and be gentle with him. Do you understand?"

Saro looked a bit nervous as he fluttered his translucent wings and rubbed his little cricket feet together. "Yes," I said. "I will try not to crush him like I did the bird."

Strangely, this did not seem to bring the cricket any great sense of relief.

The creature gave a weary sigh. "Very well. I will be checking in on you from time to time to see how you're progressing. I expect nothing but good things."

I stared at it, frowning. "You should probably expect some bad ones, too."

It shook its head, taking my face in its hands. "My sweet, strange boy. Behave yourself, and make me proud."

I wasn't sure why it mattered whether this strange creature was proud of me or not, but I nodded. "What do I call you?"

It smiled. "You must not tell another soul anything about me. But during the moments we meet in private, you may call me Mother."

"Mother," I echoed. That name felt more familiar. Not in reference to the woman whose portrait hung above the mantelpiece, staring down at me in solemn beauty as I read my books, but in this strangely beautiful creature I found I yearned to please for some reason, it had resonance. "And what is my name? My real name."

Mother's expression grew troubled. "That is something we will discuss another time. For now, your name is Phineas, and you must be him as well as you possibly can. Now, back to bed with you. You have studies to

continue in the morning, and a clever boy like you should be able to blow through them in no time. Prove to Gustavo that you can be of use to him in his work, eventually, and your position in this place will be far less perilous."

"Yes, Mother," I said, realizing that my secret life was going to be as dependent upon pretending as if I had any idea what these people wanted from me as the one I lived during the day.

CHAPTER 6

GUSTAVO



The talk I'd had with Phineas about the bird seemed to take effect. In the weeks that followed, the boy had been a model citizen. He wasn't quite back to his old self, granted, but his behavior had been a far cry above the new normal lately.

I had actually been able to get some work done, although I was far more concerned with the angel's warning than anything.

Although perhaps teaching him to be good was not going to be such an insurmountable task, after all.

Keeping him from my family, on the other hand, was a different matter.

Phineas had been back for a little over two months when I came out of my workshop to find him in the kitchen, across from Borza and Antonia. They were both staring at him in dismay as he prepared a kettle of tea, which was the only kitchen task he could be entrusted with without running the risk of burning down the entire house.

I froze in the kitchen doorway, looking between Phineas and our uninvited guests. I had known that Borza and the others were still worried about me, and I had been more absent than usual, but I had been in much better spirits, and hoped that would allay their suspicions at least somewhat.

It would seem that wasn't the case.

"Borza," I said stiffly. "Antonia. What a surprise."

I searched her face for any of the horror and panic I had expected to find there when she finally laid eyes on Phineas. I had yet to come up with a sufficient explanation, and it had become clear that was remiss on my part.

Strangely, she didn't seem to be panicking. Did she not recognize him? Thanks to the angel's magic, he did look a far cry from the lifeless amalgamation of wood and skin he'd been before, but surely my luck couldn't be that great...

"Indeed," she said, staring pointedly at me. "You didn't tell us you had taken an apprentice."

An apprentice.

I looked over at Phineas, wondering if that was what he had told them. I was also wondering why he had opened the damn door when I had expressly told him not to, but that was a conversation for another time. And one to be had in private.

"It wasn't planned," I said carefully, still not sure how much he had told them, or how much they had figured out. I had instructed him not to lie, but for the moment, that seemed to be the least of our concerns.

"I would imagine not," Antonia said, raising an eyebrow. "When were you going to tell us?"

I sighed, taking a seat at the table. "The next opportunity I had to make it into town."

"So never," Borza scoffed, earning a look of gentle remonstrance from Antonia. "Haven't you turned down everyone who's wanted to be your apprentice in the past?"

"It was a different situation," I said carefully as Phineas brought over the tea kettle and filled Antonia's cup first. "He's my nephew."

It was the only sufficient excuse I could think of at the moment to explain the resemblance she had surely noticed, even if she wasn't confident enough to voice it, and while I had momentarily flirted with the idea of telling at least them the truth, I ultimately decided against it, not only for his safety but theirs.

As comparatively open-minded as Antonia and Borza were, there was only so far they could possibly understand why and how I had done what I had done. Even if they didn't find reason to object on religious grounds, they would certainly find reason to object on moral grounds.

Especially Antonia.

And she would be objecting on my wife's behalf. The same objections that had plagued me in the sweet yet disappointed cadence of Cecilia's voice every night since.

And what good would any of it do? The boy was here now, and there was no need to complicate things any further. At least, that was what I told myself.

"Well," Antonia said, her gaze flickering over Phineas as if she was looking at him for the first time. "I suppose there is a resemblance. Come to think of it, he looks a bit like Cecilia, too."

So that was it. She really didn't know.

Now that I was thinking of it, how could she? The idea that I had somehow brought a doll to life would never occur to her as anything remotely possible, and with gloves and a full set of clothes on, the boy was indistinguishable from human. His brown hair was long enough that it covered the seam behind his ears, and his cravat the one at his neck.

Before she could question it any further, tea sloshed out of the kettle Phineas was pouring to fill Borza's cup, although I couldn't say whether it was an accident or not. The timing was impeccable, either way.

"Forgive me, sir," Phineas said, hastily rushing to grab a towel off the counter.

"It's fine," Borza said, scooting his chair back from the table to avoid the splash of hot water as it dribbled down over the edge. "No harm done."

"Go fetch a larger towel from the linen closet," I told him, taking the one from his hand. "I'll deal with this."

"Yes, sir," Phineas said, glancing at me before going to do as I said.

At least his newfound obedience seemed to be sticking, for the time being.

"The boy seems a bit flighty," Antonia remarked. "Are you sure he's cut out for this work?"

"He'll have to learn," I answered, mopping up what I could of the mess with the kitchen towel before I poured Borza a fresh cup of tea. I was going to need something a bit stronger myself.

"Does he have a name?" Borza asked, glancing suspiciously down the hallway. "Seems rather shy about giving it."

I wasn't sure if he had withheld it out of common sense, or simply being obstinate, but either way, I was relieved. "His name is... Alessandro."

"Well, he seems like a nice boy," Antonia remarked, taking another sip of her tea. "If a bit strange."

"Fitting for this line of work," Borza scoffed.

I forced a chuckle. "He's quite clever, at any rate."

"I'm sure he'll pick it up in no time," said Antonia.

Phineas returned after I had already cleaned up the mess, so I dismissed him to the workshop. After half an hour of idle chatter that seemed convincing enough to allay their fears, Antonia and Borza finally left us, much to my relief.

When I shut the door and turned around, Phineas was there waiting for me. The boy moved like a cat, damn near undetectable when he wanted to be.

"Am I in trouble, Father?" he asked in an innocent tone I knew to be feigned.

"In trouble for what?" I asked with a sigh.

"For opening the door," he answered.

"Why *did* you open the door?" I asked, pouring myself a glass of liquor.

"I was in the kitchen," he answered. "They saw me through the window. I thought it would be rude not to answer."

"Next time, just come and get me."

"So I'm not in trouble?" he asked hopefully.

"No," I said. "You aren't. Did you tell them you're my apprentice?"

"I don't think so," he said, tilting his head. "What is an apprentice?"

"It's just someone who works for you while learning a trade," I answered. That seemed to interest him greatly. They must have assumed it, then, and there were few other reasons a young man might suddenly turn up living with a bachelor. Few that were fit to guess, at any rate.

"Yes," he said eagerly. "I will be your apprentice."

I chuckled. "You have an interest in medicine, do you?"

"I want to be useful to you, Father," he said.

His words caught me by surprise, mostly because of how uncharacteristic they were of him lately. "You needn't be useful," I told him. "You being here is enough, but if that is what you wish, then I can tailor your studies more toward that end."

That seemed to satisfy him. "May I go out into the garden now, Father?"

I glanced out the window. The sun was very close to setting, and tomorrow morning was church service, so I doubted I would be getting any more visitors for the evening. "Go on," I said, deciding it was wise to reward him for good behavior. In my experience, that was far more effective than punishing disobedience, but the latter was something I had only recently had any real experience with.

Perhaps he was turning over a new leaf. Or perhaps I had merely judged him too harshly, considering all he had been through,

Ungrateful. That was what I had been, and there was no excuse for it.

I told myself I would turn over a new leaf as well, and went out onto the porch to get caught up on a bit of reading, watching him dig through the gardens out of the corner of my eye. He had taken an interest in the plants

as of late, and it did my heart good to see him sharing an interest that had belonged to his mother.

Perhaps in time, he would be a more fitting guardian for her greenhouse than I could ever be.

If I didn't know better, every now and then, I would think he was talking to someone, but in those exact moments, he always seemed to look up over his shoulder, as if he somehow sensed me watching him. I dismissed it as paranoia and told myself I would get better sleep that night.

CHAPTER 7

GUSTAVO



*A*s winter's chill set in, life adapted to a new normal, slowly but surely. Phineas was compliant with his lessons, and he took to the alterations I had made in his lesson plan with great gusto.

Before long, I decided it was time to have him start accompanying me on patient visits. Only the more mundane cases at first, but it soon became apparent that my concerns about his sensitive nature were unfounded.

From blood to boils, there was little that phased him. If anything, the more macabre the occasion, the more he seemed fascinated with it.

His newfound hardiness brought with it concerns of its own, but I dismissed them, just like I dismissed all the others. All the little differences that made me question things that were better left unaddressed. Things like the smallest mannerisms he had never shown before. The kinds of quirks that age itself didn't typically wither away, nor impose. From the way he held his pencil to the newly sharp nature of his laugh, and the things that earned it, it was getting harder to see my boy in him with each day that passed.

The guilt was unyielding, and yet, the series of incidents and evidences were piling up at such a rate that even guilt wasn't enough to keep the suspicion at bay forever.

It was a day like any other. Due to the cold weather, the number of coughs and fevers had spiked, but the plague was but a dark shadow in the memories of villagers who were more than eager to forget. And now that I had something to live for, I could understand. Linger on the thought of

death could suck the marrow out of life if one let it, and while the very act of living seemed callous to one lost in its shadow, the world beyond carried on.

It had to.

For his sake, so did I. No matter how hollow it felt. No matter what kinds of ugly doubts and questions reared their head in the dead of night when I was alone. During the daytime, all it took was looking at him, so full of life and all the potential I'd longed for so many years to nurture, I felt like a fool. I felt ungrateful. It was so easy to lay the doubts to rest then.

Or at least, it was. For a time.

I was on my way to visit the last patient of the day, the hat maker's wife who had more of a hunger for morphine than a need for it, when a young girl rushed out into the street in front of the carriage with her arms waving.

"Whoa!" I cried, yanking back on the reins of the horse just in time for the beast to avoid her, even if he whinnied in protest. Phineas didn't seem phased.

At another glance, I recognized her as the baker's daughter. She was a few years younger than Phineas, but the older women in the village were still chomping at the bit to get her married off to their nephews and grandsons. I could tell from one look at her that something was wrong.

"Francesca?" I called, frowning. "What's the matter?"

"It's my brother," she answered. As she drew closer to my side of the carriage, I could see the look of distress on her face. "He's sick with fever. Please, doctor. You must come see him."

"Where are your parents?" I asked, glancing around the mostly quiet street. The family didn't live far away, so the girl must have spotted me coming down the road. "Why haven't they said anything to me?"

Her expression faltered. "I... They don't want you to come. Father Arezzo..."

She trailed off, but it was easy to guess what she was going to say. The priest had been resentful of my "hold" on the villagers for years, if only because it had kept him from putting a hangman's noose around my neck.

His hold on some of the villagers was a good deal stronger, but when his prayers and indulgences failed to cure disease, he never took responsibility for it.

"I see," I said quietly. "I'm afraid if your parents are opposed, there's not much I can do."

"Please!" she cried, fresh tears welling in her vivid blue eyes. "He'll die if you don't come. I know it. It's how my cousin looked during the plague, right before..."

The pain that broke her voice echoed something within me. I gripped the reins tighter and nodded. "All right," I muttered, glancing over at Phineas. "Stay here with the carriage."

"I want to come," he protested. "I'm your apprentice."

The girl was watching us, so I knew arguing was going to arouse more suspicion. He'd been with me on all my more mundane calls, but I couldn't well explain why I'd want to shelter someone I was training to take my place one day.

I nodded and she moved aside, so I drove the short distance to the family's house and tied the horse up out front. Once we followed Francesca inside, I looked around the empty parlor. "Where is your father?"

"He's at the church," she answered, looking up at me as she added pointedly, "praying for Emiliano."

"Of course," I sighed.

"This way, please," she said, ushering us up the steps. Phineas followed behind us, carrying my bag.

When we made it to the upstairs room and I saw the mother hovering over her son's sickbed, her bony hands clasped around a rosary, I felt a familiar pang deep in my soul.

The woman looked up sharply. Francesca was nearly a carbon copy of her, minus the soft lines worn around her eyes a bit prematurely, but with the husband she'd been saddled with, that was no surprise.

"Doctor," she cried in surprise, looking between us. I watched as the betrayal crossed her features when her gaze settled on her daughter. She stood quickly, tucking the rosary into the pocket of her apron. "Forgive my daughter's impudence, but you shouldn't have come here."

"Mother, please!" Francesca cried. "He's dying! Father Arezzo can't do a damn thing, can't you see that?"

The sharp sound of a slap echoed through the room. Francesca stood there, frozen in shock as she stared at her mother.

The woman's hand was trembling as she brought it back to her side and looked over at me. "In this house, we fear God. We've no need of demonic tinctures and rituals."

"Nor have I," I told her, taking my bag from Phineas and holding it up. "There's no magic here, Mrs. Bianchi. Only the medicine people have known since Hippocrates. But I can't help him if you don't let me."

The woman's eyes darted between us, and I could see the fear there. The fear of the unknown, the fear of failure, the fear of letting go. The fear of doing nothing. "Father Arezzo—"

"Doesn't have to know a thing," I finished for her. "Neither does your husband."

She hesitated a few moments, torn between her own thoughts and her daughter's pleading looks. She finally gave me a reluctant nod and moved aside, allowing me to approach the bed.

I set my bag down on the chair the mother had occupied a moment ago, sitting down on the bed next to the frail, ashen creature tucked beneath the covers. He was only a bit younger than Phineas had been when the plague took him, and I recognized the jaundiced pallor of death immediately.

It hadn't claimed him quite yet, but the end was inevitable. There was no need for it to rush. I spent the next few minutes examining him all the same,

but my investigation only validated my initial diagnosis.

"He's severely dehydrated," I murmured. "And underweight."

"He won't eat and hardly drinks," said the mother, wringing her hands. "Not since the fever set in."

It had very nearly finished its course, but telling her that would yield nothing good. "Continue to give him fluids. As much as he can take," I said quietly.

"Can you... do anything for him?" the mother asked, her voice trembling.

If we'd been alone, I would have told her the truth. That her son was already gone. That if they had called me sooner, I could have treated his fever and given him tinctures that would have rendered the illness a temporary discomfort and nothing more, but because of their negligence, the child was as good as dead.

Such senseless suffering, and for what? To soothe the ego of a man who would sooner run the whole family over than risk soiling his vestments by hitting a puddle in the road?

Instead, I reached into the bag and pulled out a small vial. A tincture that would harm no more than it helped. "Give him a teaspoon every hour with water."

Mrs. Bianchi took the vial and held it delicately, as if it were some priceless panacea. "Will you stay for a while? Please?" she asked. "My husband won't be home until this evening. Perhaps he'll turn around by then."

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat, along with the accusatory scream that wanted to well up alongside it, because there was no point in that, either. "As you wish," I said, taking the tincture from her. I poured a dose and administered it carefully, massaging the boy's throat to force him to swallow the bitter liquid. He was so far gone his eyes didn't even flicker behind his eyelids.

The mother returned to her post and took out her rosary again. Francesca brought a couple of chairs in from the other room and I stood by on my death watch.

Every now and then, I'd look over at Phineas, but his expression was blank. Most young men his age would have at least noticed the pretty girl, even if they had the sense to temper their enthusiasm in such a somber setting, but he didn't seem remotely aware of her existence.

He was, however, fixated on the scene across the room. The worried mother and her child. Every now and then, he would tilt his head and his eyes would narrow, as if he was seeing something on the other side of the room, to the right of the bed.

I was about to step out of the room and send him home under the guise of fetching something for me when the boy began to cough. Even from across the room, I could see the blood his mother was trying to wipe up with her handkerchief.

"Doctor?" she cried.

I walked over, shifting into the automatic state that seemed to take over whenever I was in such a situation, no matter how futile my efforts were. The blood was plentiful, and while I managed to roll him into a position where he wasn't choking on it, I knew the sound of a death rattle well enough.

Ten minutes and it was over. I felt his pulse and there was nothing.

"What's wrong?" the mother cried. "Is he all right?"

"He's gone," I said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"No," she choked out, shaking her head. "No! There must be something you can do!"

"I'm sorry," I said, repeating the line I'd said a thousand times, and I would surely say it a thousand more before the end of my wretched career. The words meant little, and accomplished even less.

An anguished cry tore from the woman's throat as she flung herself onto her son's bed. Francesca rushed over and the two of them collapsed next to the bed, sobbing and holding each other.

I stepped back, feeling as useless as I was. Watching someone else's child die had brought back all the grief and helplessness of watching my own die, even if he was standing in the room with me.

But then I looked over at him and saw him standing there, staring at the scene with a vaguely curious expression and nothing in his eyes, and I finally understood why. Why I had spent so many nights lying awake, feeling empty when I had finally accomplished the one thing my life had become about.

It wasn't him.

I wasn't sure how I knew exactly, but in that moment, the even greater mystery was how it had taken me so long to realize it.

This creature who wore such a convincing mask of flesh and played his role so diligently was not Phineas. He was not my son. It was a realization I had been on the cusp of for some time, but I had been unable to accept it until now.

I picked up my bag, turned to the door, and walked out of the room without looking back. Phineas followed, and as tempted as I was to tell him to go back to hell or wherever it was he had come from, I waited until we were outside on the stoop to face him.

It was raining, just slightly too warm to snow even though the streets were still caked in the dirty stuff. I spun around so fast, he seemed caught off guard.

"Father?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Up there," I said, pointing to the house we had just come out of. "Do you know what happened? What you just saw?"

He continued to stare at me for a few moments, blinking slowly. "Death," he finally answered. "The boy died."

"And what did that make you feel?" I pressed for reasons I didn't know. I already knew the answer, and surely nothing good would come from hearing it, but I had to be sure. "Anything? Anything at all?"

He hesitated another moment, studying me as if trying to calculate what the right answer was.

"Don't lie to me," I said through my teeth. "Don't *ever* fucking lie to me."

"Nothing," he answered, holding my gaze. "I feel... nothing."

My throat tightened, even though he wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know.

"Are you angry, Father?"

His question caught me off guard. "No," I lied, my voice hoarse with exhaustion. "Just go wait in the carriage."

The answer was yes. I was angry, but not at him. Whoever he was—*whatever* he was—he may not have been my son, but that didn't mean this was his fault. I wasn't even sure he knew the truth himself.

But there was one person who did.

CHAPTER 8

GUSTAVO



*I*t was another month before the angel came to me. Or rather, the demon. I wasn't sure which it was, or if it even made a difference, considering I was quite sure I'd sold it my soul all the same.

And for what? An imposter? For the creature haunting the doll that walked my halls, ate my food, and slept in my son's bed? For a lie in vaguely human flesh?

With no method of contacting the thing, I decided I was going to have to take matters into my own hands and hope that it was watching me closely enough to notice. After all, it had been watching me before.

I found a banishing ritual in one of the old texts I had discarded in my earlier research, one that promised to rid any object of an unclean spirit attached to it. I didn't know if the ritual worked, but I didn't give a damn. That wasn't the point. The point was getting the angel's attention, and by the time I had finished painting the sigil on the floor of my workshop in my own blood, I became aware of a familiar blue light out of the corner of my eye.

"What do you think you're doing?" that silken voice demanded, filled with indignation.

I leapt to my feet and turned to face it, realizing my sleep deprived mind hadn't lied to me about its appearance that night. It was every bit as ethereal and impossible as I had remembered.

“Figured that would get your attention,” I muttered.

“I gave you a gift,” it said, looking down at the sigil. “Now you wish to return it?”

“You lied to me,” I seethed, grabbing the hatchet I kept on a hook by the door for whenever the vines grew too unruly.

“Did I?” it challenged, raising an eyebrow apathetically. “And when did I do that?”

“You told me you were bringing back my son!” I cried, more infuriated by its denial than anything else.

“Did I?” it repeated. “Or did I tell you I would help you animate your creation?”

I gritted my teeth, barely able to focus through the rage. “You knew what I meant,” I growled. “You deceived me.”

“That is the problem with asking the impossible,” it mused, its hand hovering over the countertop as it walked around the workshop, studying my various creations. “You must phrase these things very carefully, doctor. Always take care with what you are asking for.”

“Demon,” I hissed, my fist clenching tighter around the hatchet's handle.

“Try again,” it said, turning to face me. It started at the weapon with a bored expression. “I'm afraid you're going to have to do better than that if you wish to kill me. Try iron.”

I narrowed my eyes, watching closely. “Fae,” I muttered, recalling the old lore from the gaelic tomes I'd gone through in the course of my diverse research, combing every culture on earth in hopes that I might find some truth in its myths and legends. My grip loosened on the weapon. “I should have known.”

“I'm uncertain of whether I should be offended,” it said, pressing a hand to its chest.

“Why?” I demanded. “Why would you do this? To what end?”

"Isn't that obvious enough?" it challenged. "We are not so unlike each other, you and I. We're both just parents trying to do what's best for our children."

"Parents?" I echoed. "What are you talking about?"

It sighed, clasping its hands in front of itself. "You had an empty vessel without a soul. I had a soul in need of a vessel. Our needs were complementary, and the arrangement is one we can both still benefit from greatly."

I frowned as I listened, trying to piece together the meaning behind its cryptic words. "He's one of you, isn't he?" I murmured. "This wretch you tried to pass off as my son is—"

"Mine," it answered without a hint of shame. "I meant what I said earlier. You and I are alike in many ways, Gustavo. We both know the pain of losing a child."

"And yet you would inflict false hope on another," I accused.

"Not false hope," it said. "I simply didn't tell you all the details."

I scoffed. "Right. It's par for the course with your kind, isn't it? Your wicked deals and your changeling children."

"You knew the risk you ran when you started performing the dark magic," it accused. "You're lucky I'm the thing that answered."

I clenched my jaw, resisting the urge to argue with it. I very much doubted it would respond to reason, and it clearly had no morality to appeal to. "If you have the means of magic, why didn't you just bring him back yourself? Why involve me?"

"Because once a soul has passed from the veil of one world into another, it cannot return as the same consciousness," it said. "All its memories and experiences are lost forever. However, it is possible to move that soul as it is into a suitable vessel within an adjacent realm. Ours happen to be neighbors."

"How lucky," I muttered.

"Do you not see?" it asked impatiently, taking a step toward me. I grew tense and gripped the hatchet tighter again, which only seemed to amuse it. "We can help each other."

I laughed bitterly. "I've heard the myths of your changelings. I know exactly what kind of 'help' the fae provide."

"Your myths are filled with half-truths and told by fools," it countered. "But as with all things, there is a grain of truth to them. Everything I said before is true. If you guide my son and help him become human, he will be able to continue to exist in this realm, and I will be at his side to guide him. The same is true of your son and my realm."

I frowned. "Even if that's true... even if you could somehow bring his soul into your realm, how is that any different from him being in another? I would never see him again. He would be lost to a foreign world filled with creatures terrible and strange to him."

"Not if you are with him," it corrected. "Not if we exchange places."

"That's possible?" I asked warily.

"I am here, am I not?"

I frowned, taking another moment to process what it was saying. "Let's pretend for a moment that I believe you. Which I most assuredly do not. Why should I expect you to keep your word this time?"

"In order for the magic to work, it requires an exchange," it answered. "In order for me to stay permanently in this realm, I must trade my place with a mortal's. And my son for yours."

I frowned. "So now you wish me to give up my place in this world. My home."

"What is it to you without your son?" it asked. "Would you not rather endure the fires of hell with him than heaven without? This realm is somewhere in between, as is mine. In many ways, I think you would find it an improvement. Men of science are not burned at the stake, for one thing."

"And yet you wish to leave."

"There is nothing for me there without him," it replied. "Surely you can understand that."

I considered its words, convinced I really was mad for the fact that I wasn't telling it to go back to whatever hell it had crawled out of.

"What do you have to lose, Gustavo?" the fae asked softly. "But think of all you have to gain..."

I gritted my teeth. "I will do it. But if you lie to me again—"

"Fair enough," it said. "Just make sure you're prepared for the truth."

With that ominous remark, it walked toward the door.

"Wait!" I called after it.

The fae stopped and turned to face me. "Yes?"

"How much does he know?" I asked warily, thinking of the creature I had been sharing my house and life with these past few months.

"He knows that he isn't human," it answered carefully.

"Does he know that he isn't my son?" I asked.

Its silence was answer enough. Anger and betrayal twisted in my gut, even though in some ways, it was a relief. A relief to know that this creature that seemed so foreign to me was not the truth of what my son had become, even if wishful thinking had led me to accept what now seemed, in retrospect, utterly absurd. It seemed obvious.

"Does he know who you are?" I asked.

"Only in the most technical sense," it answered. "He remembers nothing of his former life, and he will not until he is in a permanent vessel. Until he is real. To introduce him to any unnecessary facts now would merely serve to distress him, and to distract him from the ultimate goal. To learn to love, and to be loved as only a human can. I would hope you would choose to avoid jeopardizing that. I will do the same when the time comes for *your* child."

I narrowed my eyes because the threat was clear enough. "I will continue to provide him guidance, so long as you hold to your end of the bargain when the time comes," I said, struggling to keep my voice even.

"Then we have an understanding," it said in a deceptively pleasant tone before disappearing before my very eyes.

I brought the hatchet down onto the wooden block on the counter, feeling the anger and desperation burn beneath my skin. Once again, I had been made a fool. Once again, I had no choice but to wait.

CHAPTER 9

THE DOLL



I wandered into Gustavo's laboratory, eager to see what he was up to. But as soon as I stepped through the door, I could tell I wasn't welcome. Gustavo looked up from his work, his expression grim.

He had been like this for days, ever since our visit to the house of the family with the dying boy. The melancholy clung to him, just as the stench of sickness and camphor had clung to my clothes for days.

The way he'd looked at me was the same as the way he had looked at me when I killed that bird. As if I had any role to play in the boy's death.

Why did it even matter to him?

Humans were such insensible creatures.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his tone sharp.

"I finished my schoolwork for the day," I replied.

Gustavo raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"You told me not to lie, didn't you?" I challenged.

He grunted an acknowledgment and stood from his workbench. I wasn't sure what it was he was working on. It didn't look like much at the moment. Perhaps a new table, or a lampstand. Or maybe something to aid in his alchemical work. The workshop was filled with machines and stills of all

varieties, all of which I was under explicit orders not to touch under any circumstances.

"Well, go on and work on the next chapter in your arithmetic," Gustavo said. "I've got work to do."

"You should let me help you," I said, stepping further into the room. "After all, you've been telling everyone I'm your apprentice, and it's wrong to lie." His back stiffened, but he didn't look up from his project. "Isn't it, Father?"

"Don't call me that," he said through his teeth. When he looked up, his eyes were dark with irritation.

"Why?" I asked.

His eyes locked on mine, and I could see the anger behind them. I wasn't sure what had sparked it, but it was intense, to say the least. "Because you are not my son," he said simply before he resumed sanding the plank of wood resting on his bench.

I stood there for a moment, contemplating this revelation. "You spoke to it, too, then?"

He looked up sharply, his brows furrowed. "Spoke to what?"

"The blue creature," I answered.

I knew the answer clearly from the recognition in his eyes as quickly as he tried to mask it. He stopped what he was doing and put his tools down, rising to his full height to stare at me. "Yes," he said in a gruff tone. "I saw it. It came to you as well?"

"Once," I answered.

Even though Mother had told me not to speak of it, I feared the consequence of lying to Gustavo even more. I wasn't sure how he would know, but I was confident he would. Those sharp eyes saw more than what was right before him.

He seemed to be trying to decide if he believed me, but he finally nodded. "If it comes back again, tell me," he muttered. "Don't speak to it."

“Yes, sir.”

That seemed to satisfy him. He glanced back up at me. “You are not my son,” he said. “And I am not your father. Nothing has changed, and nothing is going to change. Do you understand?”

I didn’t, not fully, but he seemed to take my silence as the agreement he sought. I flinched instinctively, but when nothing happened, I realized a lie of omission didn’t seem to result in any consequence.

“What shall I call you, if not Father?”

He paused to consider it for a moment before he answered, “Master. At least in front of others. Gustavo when we’re alone.”

“Yes, Gustavo,” I answered obediently. That seemed to please him well enough.

“While we’re on the subject, your name is no longer Phineas,” he said firmly.

I stared at him in confusion. “It isn’t?”

“No,” he said, a strangely tense edge to his tone. “If you’re to continue to take part in town life, then you’ll have to go by a different name anyhow. The one I gave Borza and Antonia is Alessandro, so... that’s who you are now.”

“Alessandro,” I repeated, trying out the name for the first time. It felt strange to be called something other than Phineas, but I could understand why Gustavo wanted me to go by a different name now that he knew I wasn’t really his son.

Why Mother had chosen to tell him the truth, I couldn’t say, but in a way, I was relieved. It was an uncomfortable thing to live inside another person. To wear their face like a mask.

“Yes, Alessandro,” Gustavo confirmed. “And remember, you must always be careful when you’re out in town. People may not understand what you are, and it’s important to maintain the illusion that you’re a normal boy. Do you understand?”

"Yes, Gustavo," I replied. "I understand."

He sighed, looking around the lab. "If you really want to help, there are some herbs that need hanging. The cuttings are all gathered over on that table, and labeled, so make sure they stay together. Do you think you can manage that?"

"Of course," I said, eager for the opportunity to prove myself.

I went to the table he pointed out and saw a pile of freshly cut herbs, each labeled with a name I didn't recognize. I carefully gathered the herbs into a bundle and went to the corner where a clothesline had already been strung up.

As I began hanging the herbs, I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. Gustavo may have created me, but I was determined to prove that I was more than just a doll. I wanted to be useful.

I worked carefully and methodically, making sure that each herb was hung in the correct order and in the proper place. When I was finished, I stepped back to admire my work, and I was pleased to see that the herbs were arranged beautifully, each one shining in the light that filtered through the high windows.

Gustavo came over to inspect my work and I held my breath, hoping that he would be pleased. He looked over the herbs, nodding in approval.

"Not bad, Alessandro," he said, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "You've done well. Keep up the good work."

"Thank you, Gustavo," I said, feeling a strange sense of pride swelling in my chest.

My aim was to please Mother in hopes it would tell me more about my origins, but it felt good to be on the receiving end of Gustavo's praise for once. Like I had back when he thought I really was his son.

"Go on," he said, nodding toward the door. "Get started on your next lesson. If you truly want to become a doctor, it's theory as much as it is practice."

I wasn't sure I did want to become a doctor, but it was the surest way to stay at his side. Strangely, I found that better motivation than anything.

CHAPTER 10

ALESSANDRO



*I*t had been a week since my conversation with Gustavo, and strangely enough, things had been far more amiable between us since the truth had come out. I wasn't sure if it was because I had been honest with him about Mother, at least to an extent, or because neither of us was having to pretend I was someone I wasn't. Either way, it was as if a tension had lifted between us, and while I could tell he still didn't trust me, things were easier than they had been.

I awoke before Gustavo did and tended to my chores and lessons so I would be ready to accompany him on his patient visits. I was learning more from watching him tend to them than I was from the books, but I studied both diligently.

During the day, I was a model apprentice. The perfect young man. But at night, while my master slept, I allowed myself to give in to the vices that seemed to win no matter how hard I tried to fight against them. Chief among them was curiosity.

The town of Sevea was picturesque and quiet during the daytime, but at night, it came alive with all the spirits and animals that kept their distance in the light of day. I had realized early on that the others didn't see them. They especially didn't see the shadows that lingered in the corners near sickbeds.

The energy that hung around them like a cloak was electrifying. Thrilling. The first time I approached one of the spirits, it had seemed startled to be beheld and ran from me. I'd chased it through the streets with the little blue

cricket on my shoulder chirping in admonishment, but I only listened to the cricket during the day. At night, I needed a break from obedience.

I had watched the foxes in the garden for months. They chased each other until a vole or a bird came along and gave them an even more thrilling chase. As I hunted the shadow down the cobblestone streets, I understood the foxes better than I ever had.

When the shadow I was following disappeared into the side of a large stone wall, I cursed under my breath, skidding to a halt. I looked up and saw the steeple poking into the foggy midnight sky.

The church. Gustavo always took care to steer the carriage the long way around it, and I had seen the way the priest looked at us often enough to know why. Father Arezzo was the town organizer, and we were a piece that had nowhere to fit in his eyes.

Before I could turn back, I heard the door creak open and realized there was no escape. Father Arezzo stepped out, wearing his usual dark red vestments, looking something like a spirit from another world himself as he beheld me with those dark, piercing eyes.

“You there,” he called in a tone that made my feet freeze on the cobblestone. It felt as if they were rooting in, like a tree. As he approached me, Saro burrowed into my hair, chittering angrily. It might as well have said, *I told you so*.

When the priest drew closer, his eyes narrowed as they took me in. “So it’s you. The doctor’s apprentice. Tell me, boy, what business have you skulking around the house of God in the middle of the night?”

I opened my mouth to respond before I realized that admitting I was chasing shadows was not likely to do anything to assuage the priest’s concerns.

“What’s the matter?” he taunted, taking a step closer. “Cat got your tongue?”

“No, sir,” I answered. “We don’t have a cat.”

He chuckled for some reason, looking me up and down. There was something different about the way he looked at me from the way he looked at Gustavo. It lacked the same spite, but there was something else present that I found far more unsettling. Something that made my stomach quiver.

“Guileless thing, aren’t you?” he asked, reaching out with his hand. I froze as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Tell me, child, what do you make of your master?”

“I’m not a child,” I said carefully. “I’m nineteen.”

And it was the truth. My physical body was modeled at that age even though I had the feeling my spirit was much older. I didn’t remember much about the world I lived in before—only glimpses cast in shadows of memory. But I knew that everything from the smallest insect to the greatest tree was far more ancient in that other, unreachable realm.

He gave me a one-sided smile that made the hair on my body prickle upward. “Is he good to you?” he asked, ignoring me.

“Yes,” I said, not sure why he cared. “He is very kind, and very knowledgeable at his work.”

“I’m sure,” Father Arezzo said in a tone that made it clear his agreement wasn’t a compliment. “The devil is always quite cunning, as are his fondest emissaries. And now he seeks to impart his wicked knowledge to an innocent.”

“How is it wicked?” I asked. I felt as if I needed to scour my flesh where he’d touched, but something told me that was not appropriate behavior for the public square, even at midnight. “He makes sick people better.”

“The devil often wins souls by ‘healing’ the very afflictions he inflicts,” he said bitterly. “And in any case, I believe the Bianchi family would beg to differ. Their boy is dead.”

“It wasn’t my master’s fault,” I said, frowning. “It was too late for him to help by the time they called. Because *you* told them not to seek out medicine.”

The older man seemed caught off guard by my response, but to my surprise, he chuckled. “Be careful, my dear boy. That tongue of yours could get you into all sorts of trouble.”

He reached out once more, tracing a strand of hair down my throat in a way that made me shudder. There was a darkness in his eyes as he looked at me, like he was imagining something that made my stomach churn to even guess at. “Run along now, before you find any trouble tonight.”

I wasted no time doing as he said. I turned and ran away from the church and into the forest, since that was the shortest route home. The darkness of the trees was far more welcoming to me than the winding cobblestone streets of town, anyway.

By the time I made it close enough to see the smoke billowing up from the chimney, I was breathless. The cricket had been chattering angrily in my ear the entire time, and all my attempts to shush him merely resulted in him clinging to my earlobe to chirp louder.

I climbed the lattice up to my bedroom window and my feet hit the floor with a thunk that was louder than I’d expected. I froze, but there was no movement throughout the house, so I crept out of my room and down the hall toward the kitchen to get a drink of water.

I was parched after running further than I ever had. While I seemed to have a good deal more endurance than humans, it seemed even my body had its limits.

I had barely dipped the ladle into the bucket on the counter to drink before I heard the cricket give a chirp of alarm. I had no sooner spun around to find a figure watching me in the dark from the entrance to the kitchen than Saro hopped off my shoulder onto the counter and scurried off.

Coward.

“Where were you?” Gustavo demanded, holding up the small candle in his hand to illuminate a handsome face marked with all the telltale signs of anger. Furrowed brows. Lines on his forehead, and a few around his downturned mouth. Humans were such expressive creatures. Even Gustavo, who was among the least animated. I was sure of that now, after having

spent so much time observing the others on our rounds, albeit usually from a distance.

I swallowed hard and replaced the ladle in the bucket. "Nowhere. I just came down for a drink of water."

He narrowed his eyes, taking a step closer to me. "In your clothes?" he challenged.

I looked down at myself, feeling a strange tightening in my throat. It was different from the kind of apprehension the priest stirred within me somehow. I was afraid of him. I was afraid of disappointing Gustavo. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd wake up early and tend to my chores."

Gustavo's eyes narrowed even more, searching me as if my face were text he could read as plainly as the kind in my lessons. "You're lying," he finally announced. A decisive judgment that left no room for question. "You left the house."

"No," I said quickly. Before I could qualify my statement, I felt a strange twinge between my legs and a heat building behind it. The heat was spreading through my body, almost unbearable, and the fear I felt seemed immediately linked to the strange feeling just below my belt.

Gustavo's gaze traveled down, his eyes widening slightly.

"What...?" He trailed off, staring blankly.

For some reason, my face grew as warm as the heat between my legs, and I found myself backed against the wall. "Ow," I muttered, pressing my hand to my lower stomach, since the entire region was tight and painful, as if someone had taken a wrench and turned it a few times too many. That combined with the heat in my core was utter torture. "It hurts."

Gustavo came to stand in front of me, his expression one of confusion and dismay, which was preferable to the anger from moments earlier. "I... Answer the question, Alessandro."

I swallowed hard. "No. I didn't leave."

The words were barely out of my mouth when the pain that had been mostly discomfort seconds earlier became unbearable and I doubled over, crumbling to my knees on the floor. I was on fire, and yet, no real flames lapped at my skin. It was all in my head. Wasn't it?

"Alessandro!" Gustavo cried, falling to the floor with me.

He put his hands on my shoulders and I trembled, looking up at him. "What's happening to me?"

He looked down at me, searching my face, and when his gaze traveled further down, the trepidation in it was far from comforting. "I don't..." He trailed off again, a strange look coming over his face. "That son of a bitch."

"Who?" I asked, my voice strained as I tried to cover myself for some reason, even though that was just making it worse. It wasn't just the physical pain making this intolerable, it was the embarrassment.

I didn't even know *why* I was embarrassed, but I was.

"No one," he muttered. "But I think I know what's wrong with you."

"What is it?" I asked eagerly.

"This happened because you told a lie," he said, looking into my eyes without the stern expression I had come to dread. "You're being punished."

"Punished?" I echoed. "By who?"

I had half a mind to beat them senseless when I found them, whoever they were.

"That's not important," he said under his breath before meeting my gaze again. "What's important is that you lied to me, and now you're dealing with the consequences. Though I can't imagine why *this* is the consequence. Your biology is baffling to say the least."

"That's not fair," I gasped. "Help me. Please?"

Gustavo looked horrified as he studied me, as if he was torn about something. "I can't help you. Not with this."

"Why?" I demanded. "What's happening? Am I broken?"

He grimaced. "No, you're not broken. It's... it's called an erection. It's something that happens to human men from time to time."

"It happens to you?" I asked. "You burn?"

"No, not in a painful way. You're burning?" he asked, confused.

"I... Not now," I said, though I felt heat of a different kind in the front of my pants. It wasn't painful, but it was distressing for other reasons.

He looked mortified. "Yes. Sometimes."

"How do you make it stop?"

He swallowed audibly. "Just... try to think of something else. Something unpleasant."

I frowned. "This is about as unpleasant as I can imagine."

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "You'll have to touch yourself."

"Touch myself?" I frowned, pressing my fingertips into my forearm. Nothing happened. "That's not working."

"No," Gustavo said through his teeth. "You have to... rub your... *erection* until it goes away."

I looked down at the bulge my stubborn member had made out of my slacks, frowning, but I shrugged and started to rub my hand over it. It just made the tightness and warmth surge, and the length of it throbbed even more painfully. "That made it worse."

Gustavo looked away quickly, his face flushed. "Not in front of me. That's something you do in private."

"Why?"

"It just is," he snapped.

"But I don't know what to do," I protested. "Can't you help me? I won't lie to you again. I promise."

He stared at me, as if there was a war going on in his mind. He clenched his jaw and seemed to be wavering back and forth multiple times before he finally gave a low sigh. "Just this once. And I mean it. If you tell another lie, next time, I'll let you suffer with the consequences."

I knew better than to argue with him when he was the only person capable of offering me the relief I so desperately needed right now. "Yes, sir."

"Gustavo," he muttered. "For tonight, just... Gustavo."

"Gustavo," I said, watching as he got up from the floor. I felt a surge of panic, thinking he was abandoning me.

"Stay right there," he ordered, disappearing to go down the hall and into his bedroom.

He returned a moment later, carrying a dark blue bottle, and sank to the floor next to me with his back resting against the wall. He pulled me toward him so I was sitting between his legs with my back resting against his chest, and he reached around to unfasten my pants. His movements were stiff and uncomfortable as he undid the buttons, and he hesitated at the waistband of my long underwear before pulling it down, too.

I winced because I was so sensitive that even the fabric grazing against my skin was torture, but I didn't dare complain. When he wrapped his hand around my member, though, I couldn't stop the cry that escaped me.

It was painful, but there was something more to the sensation than that. Something that made me want him to keep going.

"It's all right. Just try to relax," Gustavo said as he reached to open the bottle with his other hand and poured some clear fluid out of it and into his waiting palm. He lathered the substance down over my shaft, but while it was cool to the touch at first, it became warm and left a tingling sensation wherever it touched that made me shiver.

I had little choice but to melt back against him as he continued to stroke until my entire shaft was slick with the stuff, warm and tingling both from his touch and from whatever magic the elixir within the bottle held. The muscles in my core that were so tightly clenched began to slowly unfurl, and a moan escaped me, unbidden.

"That feels good," I murmured.

Gustavo's stroking ceased, along with his breath for a moment, but he soon resumed. "Don't talk," he muttered under his breath.

I obeyed out of fear that he would stop if I didn't, my head falling back against his shoulder. My hips began to move against his strokes to the same rhythm, but he didn't chide me for that.

As my breathing grew shallow and the quenching agony became a strangely thrilling kind of pleasure, vibrating through me like the strings of an instrument, I rested my hands on his knees and braced myself for the unknown thing that seemed to loom above me.

Gustavo grunted, and I realized that the movement of my hips had resulted in my bottom grinding against his crotch. I could feel the hardness poking into me where there hadn't been any before and gasped. "It's happening to you, too."

"Hush," he scolded and started stroking me faster, his voice strained and a bit breathless as well.

The renewed urgency of his movements made me cry out in bliss, and it felt too good to care about anything else. My breath grew ragged, and my vision began to gray around the edges. I was frightened once more by the strangeness of it all since it felt like I was rushing toward the edge of a cliff, but before I could tell him to stop, the pleasure that had been building and building suddenly burst into flames. They spread all throughout my lower body, and my thrusting grew erratic and violent as I dug my nails into his thighs and cried out in shock.

A hot, sticky white substance spurted from the tip of my erection, squirting out to the time of my pulse, but it wasn't blood or urine, even if my bladder felt strangely full. I whimpered in confusion, staring down at the last few streams as they squirted through his fingers and dribbled down the inside of my pant leg.

"What is that? What did you do to me?" I gasped.

"You came," Gustavo answered in a dry tone. "You're welcome."

He reached for the towel hanging off the handle of the stove and wiped off his hand before dabbing at my softening cock. I yelped and squirmed out of his lap to escape since it was still painfully sensitive, even though it wasn't in the same intolerable way as before.

There was a hint of amusement in Gustavo's eyes as he watched me and got to his feet. I noticed the bulge in his slacks was still there, considerably larger than my own, but he didn't seem too bothered by it. "Go take a bath and clean yourself up, then get to bed. We've a long day ahead of us."

"Yes, Gustavo," I murmured, watching as he left the room without a word. Once I heard his bedroom door shut, I let my head drop back against the wall.

What a strange thing we had just done. I found myself thinking about it long after I had crawled into bed.

CHAPTER 11

GUSTAVO



What the hell had I done?

Although Alessandro seemed to understand instinctively not to speak of it, things had been different between us the entire day.

I'd told him to stay home while I went on call to visit my patients under the guise that I was short on various elixirs and needed him to tend to the preparations, which wasn't exactly a lie. I was nonetheless an unfit guardian to be teaching him the finer points of human morality when I could hardly lay claim to it myself.

Not after that.

It wasn't as if I had set out to touch him, and I didn't exactly regret not leaving him to suffer. I'd always felt the prejudices toward men who bedded other men to be narrow-minded at best, so that didn't factor into it, even though I had never had any interest in other men myself. At least, not in years, but... even that, I could get past easily enough.

No, it wasn't what I had done itself that had me unsettled, it was my response to it. And even *that* I could have brushed off as a mere physical reaction, and nothing more, but the fact that I had gone back to my room, closed the door, and thought about *him* while I was pleasuring myself... that was unforgivable.

What was wrong with me?

This whole thing was a twisted, sordid mess that I found myself sinking ever deeper into, all the more so for my attempts to drag myself out of the quicksand.

I tried to dismiss all thoughts of the matter as I focused on my work, but even the passersby in the streets seemed to somehow know of my sin.

It wasn't until I heard the servants at the home of my last patient for the day whispering amongst themselves about the Bianchis' boy that I realized the truth behind their accusing glances.

They blamed me for his death. Of course they did. It didn't matter that they had only called me to his death bed, when there was nothing that could be done for the poor child save for me to ease his suffering. It didn't matter that it was the superstition of the parents that had killed him. In their minds, my medicine was the finishing blow.

Ungrateful fools, the lot of them. They impugned my character while imbibing my cures without a single thought of hypocrisy. And while they would have had plenty of reason if they knew the truth, they weren't justified for the reasons they believed.

I hated this town more with each day that passed. I'd hated it ever since Cecilia's death, and maybe before then, if I was being honest. She and Phineas were the only things that had imbued it with life and charm, and now that they were gone, there was no more wonder in the architecture of the buildings, nor warmth in the faces I passed on the streets. The ringing of the church bells echoed a somber tune that only reminded me of their funerals, and even that was growing fainter by the years.

The only tangential links I had left to either of them were a house that felt even emptier than my soul, and a living doll that was a mockery of the very reason he'd been created.

And now, in some way, I felt I had desecrated him as well. And the home we'd shared, by the very act of creating him.

What a fool I'd been to think I could cheat death. To think I could bring them back...

Was this my penance? The price of my sin, to look into those eyes each day and be reminded of my failure? Of my weakness...

I'd left the carriage at home, both because the weather was tolerable and because I'd hoped to extend the time it took to reach home as much as possible. The less I was around him, the better, for a myriad of reasons.

Ever since he'd come to life, I saw more of Cecilia in him than I did of Phineas, but that didn't make it any less twisted. The very familiarity that had made it impossible to give up on him when he was merely a lifeless doll now made it so painful to behold him.

Painful and beautiful, like a rose's thorns—and if I wasn't careful, I would wrap my hand around him and crush him, because the bittersweet agony I felt when I looked at him was the closest I'd come to feeling human in a decade.

"Doctor," a familiar voice called, more unwelcome now than ever.

I steeled myself and turned to face the priest. "Father Arezzo," I said, unable to keep the vitriol off my tongue as I forced it to contort around his name. I'd hoped by taking the long route I might not only be able to avoid Alessandro for longer, but to avoid running into the priest entirely. "What brings you to the wicked side of town?"

He looked around the rundown thatched buildings, and stared pointedly at the tavern across the street, before turning back to me with a sneer. "It is the sick who need medicine, is it not?"

"Interesting," I remarked, turning fully to face him. "As far as I'm aware, you've always been strictly against such scientific intervention."

"What is it you call a place of medicine, Doctor?" he challenged. "*Domus Dei*?"

I blew a puff of air through my nostrils. "It's always seemed a touch ironic to me."

"Indeed," he drawled. "You may not wish to believe this, but we're not so different, you and I. I simply refuse to believe that healing the flesh is worth perishing the soul."

“And you make them choose, don’t you?” I asked, against my better judgment. Nothing good could come from arguing with this man. I knew his kind. They never changed. God himself could come down and tell him he was wrong, and he’d insist it was a test of faith. Anything to cling to the authority the people of Sevea had bestowed upon him so guilelessly.

“Life is all about choices, Gustavo,” he said, folding his hands in front of him as he gave me the same stern, judging look that had made me squirm in the pew as a child. But I was no longer a child, and unlike the other villagers, I had not carried that fear of him or the hellfire he preached so confidently into my adult life. “The ones we make are the ones that either damn us or redeem us. Perhaps it’s too late for you, but do you really think God will not reserve a hotter corner of Hell for a man who corrupts a youth?”

I felt a growing coldness in the pit of my stomach, gnawing at me, as the man I despised more than any other parroted my own guilty conscience back to me.

No... he couldn’t know. How could he? It was impossible. “If you wish to accuse me of something, Father, speak plainly. I’ve no time for games like your parishioners.”

“Of course not,” he said with a smirk. “Your apprentice. He was running around here last night at the devil’s hour, making mischief.”

“Mischief?” I challenged. So that was where the little imp had gone off to. He was a magnet for trouble like none other, and the fact that he had managed to run into the worst possible person was further proof that he had been sent to torment me. “Has he caused any damage?”

“No,” Father Arezzo admitted, clearly displeased with the fact. “But it’s only a matter of time. And it’s no wonder when the boy is clearly suffering from a lack of guidance.”

“He’s three years older than those brothers you had hanging in stocks for a full day for the crime of throwing eggs at the church door,” I said pointedly. “If I recall, you insisted upon that punishment because they were all ‘men who had full knowledge and culpability.’”

The priest's face turned a dark shade of red. Facts always had been the greatest thorn in his side. "Damning yourself is one thing, Doctor. Damning an innocent is quite another. Send the boy to church before your wickedness can infect him wholly, and perhaps I'll pray that God will be merciful."

With that, he turned and walked off in the direction he'd come from. I rolled my eyes and headed home, deciding that was more than enough religion to tide me over for the rest of my life.

Perhaps he did have a point, though. Not about church, but about the fact that Alessandro was isolated, living out in the woods alone with me.

Following me around at work could only offer him so much socialization, and I certainly wasn't equipped for the task of teaching him to be human when I scarcely knew what it meant myself.

Maybe I would send him to live with Antonia and her husband. Her niece already lived with them. She was a twenty-year-old girl with her head on straight, and I had no doubt she would be a civilizing influence on him. And given how beautiful she was, she would be a far better companion. He would get to see what a normal, happy family was like.

Granted, the fact that he wasn't human would pose a challenge, and if they were to ever see him in any state of undress before the transformation was complete, they would undoubtedly know what he was. But if I could trust anyone with the truth, it was Antonia. Even if she couldn't forgive me once she learned what I had done, maybe she would at least be able to understand and agree to help, if only for his sake...

I was still contemplating my plan when I entered through the kitchen door and it immediately hit me that the house was quiet. That was never a good thing when the maestro of mischief was running about.

I hadn't even figured out how I was going to warn him about Father Arezzo without bringing up the events of last night, and now I was sure I'd have something else to scold him for. When I arrived in my workshop and found him sprawled out in the center of the floor in the midst of a fallen bouquet of dried yarrow, my heart sank.

“Alessandro!” I cried, dropping to my knees to gather him into my arms. I shook him, but he was as limp and lifeless as he’d been before the Blue Fairy, as I’d been calling it in my head lately, had breathed life into him. There was never any pulse, of course, but my first instinct was to check anyway.

“Shit,” I said through my teeth. He must have shut down. I’d been so careful, giving him a vial of my blood every other day, which had always been more than enough. What had changed?

He had been up late the night before, so the only explanation I could come up with was that he had somehow run out of energy faster than usual. Sleep seemed to have more or less the same effect on him as a human, even if he needed less of it.

Or perhaps he didn’t.

I gathered him into my arms, and he felt heavier than before somehow. As I placed him on his bed, I noticed his skin was no longer as smooth as before. It felt cold and wooden to the touch, and even though he hadn’t quite reverted back to his original state, I hadn’t realized just how much life the Blue Fairy’s magic had imbued him with until it was gone.

I pulled out my boot knife and prepared to cut my hand before I hesitated and thought better of it. For the first time in ages, a superstitious thought took hold of my mind and it wouldn’t easily be displaced.

How many nights had I lay awake, regretting the thing I had done ever since learning the truth from the Blue Fairy? Not that I had the heart to do anything to reverse the act of creation, but what if this was my one opportunity for an act of contrition?

Not bringing him back wasn’t the same as killing him, it was just... letting him go.

What would become of him after that, I didn’t know. Probably whatever had become of my Phineas, on the other side of the veil that separated the living from the dead.

Perhaps they were both better off where they were, if the only alternative required an act even I couldn’t deny was akin to blasphemy, however pure

my intentions had been.

No, not pure. Selfish.

That was all it was. Pure selfishness to wrench a child from the arms of death. And now that I knew there had to be something beyond this world, even if it had taken coming face to face with living proof, could I really do this? Just to bring Phineas back to me? Back to a world that was so much darker and crueler than wherever he lay in his mother's arms.

And yet, if I did this... If I held up my end of the bargain and the Blue Fairy held up its, I could take him to another world. A better one.

Even if the fantasy wasn't quite enough to assuage my guilt, the sight of the lifeless doll in front of me cinched the deal.

"Damn it," I cursed, splitting open my lifeline. I forced the doll's lips open and let the blood trickle over them and into his mouth. The crimson droplets spilled over his tongue, and while nothing happened at first, I saw the faintest flutter of life behind his eyelids.

"Yes, that's it," I coaxed, massaging the slender column of his throat to force him to swallow. "That's a good boy. Drink."

His eyes fluttered open, a duller brown than usual, and filled with confusion. I felt a pang of guilt for even considering not bringing him back, and sat on the bed next to him, pulling his head into my lap.

"There you are," I said, holding his head up as I pressed my hand to his lips. "Take more. As much as you need."

His arms lifted off the bed, his movements stilted and wooden, and his hands felt cold as they wrapped around my wrist. He sealed his lips to the cut in my palm and I felt his tongue flick against it as he continued to drink with greater enthusiasm. Eventually, his lips felt soft and warm against my palm, and his body less frail within my grasp.

I held him close, my face buried in his hair. Even it had a dusty scent to it that faded the more he drank, but it was probably going to take a bath to rid him of it entirely, which I was all too quick to do, if only to purge the reminder of how greatly I had almost compounded my sin.

When he finally broke away, his lips still stained with my blood as he looked up at me, my heart ached at the sight of him. “Master... what happened to me?”

I swallowed hard. “You shut down,” I told him. “Do you remember anything?”

He hesitated, and I could tell he was having a hard time sorting through his thoughts. “I was arranging the flower cuttings, like you said,” he began, his voice hoarse and thin. “I felt strange. Tired. Then, my arms and legs got heavy and I felt like something was pulling me from somewhere. Calling me. But there was only darkness...”

His eyes took on a sudden sharpness and he turned toward me, still in my arms, his fingers grasping my shirt desperately. “It was so dark, Master,” he choked out, clinging to me like he was drowning in the ocean and I was the only thing keeping him afloat. For the first time, I saw moisture in his eyes. “I’m so scared of going back there. Please, don’t let me go back, Master. Please.”

Actual wet tears spilled over his eyes as his voice broke, and by the time I gathered him into my arms, he was trembling violently. I held him close, stroking his hair.

“I won’t,” I promised, my voice tight with guilt. “I promise.”

I held him as sobs of fear racked his body, and when he pulled away to touch his cheek, his expression turned to fresh distress as he looked down at the droplets clinging to his fingertips. “I’m leaking.”

“You’re crying,” I told him, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

“What does it mean?” he asked, his eyes searching mine for answers. I just hoped they weren’t capable of seeing too much.

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully before I answered, “It means you’re becoming human.”

And he was. Whether the Blue Fairy was lying about its ability to bring my child back from the grave or not, the creature in my arms was undeniably undergoing a transformation.

This whole ordeal might have been a mistake from the very beginning, but one thing was clear to me now. Now that Alessandro was here, now that my sin had been the catalyst for his transition, it was my responsibility to see it through to the end.

CHAPTER 12

ALESSANDRO



*I*t had been a few weeks since I'd fallen into the darkness and woken up clinging to Gustavo so desperately. He had pulled me out of the darkness, and he'd been giving me his blood every day since rather than every other, but each night I went to my bed, I still felt terrified it would happen again.

Terrified I would never open my eyes to anything other than that awful pitch black nothingness that had consumed my soul so effortlessly.

Every time I grew even the slightest bit tired, I would feel a fresh surge of panic. I'd jolt in the middle of my work at times, convinced it was happening again, and Gustavo would look over at me and ask what was wrong.

He seemed to think I was losing my mind, and perhaps he was right. Perhaps I was.

Saro seemed to think it, too. He'd been chiding me less, or maybe I had simply not done anything to earn his scolding, in my fear of upsetting whatever balance of nature I had toppled to begin with.

At night, I still went out into the garden and tended to the plants in the greenhouse. It was my solace, but by the time the twilight faded, I always went back into my room, convinced the darkness itself was a wave that would sweep me up when it came crashing down on the world.

I wished I could go to Gustavo's room sometimes. Sometimes I did creep in and curl up on the floor by his bed, just to be near him. Just to hear the sounds of his breathing in the night. It was more of a comfort than it probably should have been, but this man had pulled me from the darkness, and I wanted to be close in case he had to do it again.

I wanted to be good so he would want to.

Not only that, if I was being honest with myself. In the beginning, all his rules and seemingly arbitrary regulations had been exhausting. Now, especially after my ordeal with the priest, I was beginning to see them for what they were: protection.

This world wasn't like the one I knew, even if it was only in the shadows of a past I could never remember. It was filled with beautiful and terrible things. With darkness and light, with kindness and cruelty, and with far too many dualities for my mind to wrap around.

The lack of comprehension had been thrilling at first. A challenge to my insatiable curiosity, but now...

That night, after I had finished all my chores and gotten ready for bed, I curled up with my lesson book, intent on getting in a few more chapters before I slept. I'd just taken a vial of Gustavo's blood, so I had a bit of energy left, and I had come to realize the one way to purge the darkness was to shine the light of knowledge on it. The more I knew and understood, the fewer strange shadows there would be, waiting to swallow me whole.

But then I heard a rustle across the room. I thought Gustavo had somehow come in without my noticing while I was focused, but then I saw that it was Mother.

Mother moved like a ghost, its steps so light and delicate that it seemed to float rather than walk. Its face was illuminated by the moonlight coming through the window, casting an ethereal blue glow across its features. It looked almost as if it were made of porcelain itself—so perfect and pristine, it was hard to believe it was real.

"Mother," I said, closing the book as I sat up and it approached the end of my bed.

"Studying hard, little one?" it asked in that soft, windy voice, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"I want to learn as much as I can," I murmured, frowning down at the book, before I looked up at the ethereal being before me. I wondered if I had ever looked that way once. It didn't seem likely. "Something awful happened."

"Oh?" It reached out with its long fingers and delicately stroked the hair behind my ear. "And what might that be?"

"I stopped," I answered, my voice catching in my throat.

Just speaking about the incident made it feel like the darkness was closing in around me all over again. Like it might hear itself being talked about somehow, wherever it hid in the moments when the lantern's glow chased it away. Gustavo had fussed once about how fast I was going through kerosene, but when I'd told him the reason why, he'd simply brought me a fresh bottle and said to be sure not to leave the lamp burning near anything flammable.

Easier said than done when the whole world was a tinderbox.

"You stopped?" Mother tilted its head to one side. "You mean you ran out of energy?"

I nodded.

"I see," it said softly. "That must have frightened you very much."

"It did," I said, searching its face. For features that moved so seldom, almost like they were carved in the trunk of a tree with great precision, it was remarkably expressive. "It was awful."

"I'm so sorry," Mother said in a voice that wrapped around me like a warm hug, its cool hand resting on my cheek. "I'll have a talk with Gustavo about making certain it never happens again."

"What if it does?" I choked out. "Will I disappear forever?"

Mother didn't answer right away. It continued to stare at me, and much like Gustavo at times, I found myself unable to put together exactly what it was that was going on behind those strangely beautiful blue eyes.

"No," it finally answered. "I won't let that happen."

Relief washed over me, and I looked up as Saro bounced in through the window from whatever it was he'd run off to do. It popped onto Mother's lap and chirped excitedly.

Mother chuckled, holding out a long finger so the cricket could leap onto it, raising its hand to eye level. "Well, hello there, old friend. Have you been keeping an eye on my boy?"

Saro chittered affirmatively.

"He's annoying," I muttered.

That made Mother laugh even louder. "I'm glad you think so. That's a sign he's doing his job."

I rolled my eyes as Mother gently stroked the top of the cricket's head with the tip of its finger before rising. It was so tall, its head nearly brushed the top of my ceiling.

Saro hopped back onto my blanket, then up onto the nightstand to settle down in the small bed of dried flowers and cloth I'd made for him.

"Behave, my darling," Mother said, casting one last glance at me before it made its way over to the bedroom door. "You've done well."

"I'm still not human," I protested. I wasn't sure I ever would be, but now more than ever, I longed for it. If only because humans had to face death once.

"No," Mother agreed. "But you're closer than you realize. When the time comes, I know you'll be ready."

"I hope so," I said after it shut the door softly on its way out of the room.

Right now, I was still so far from human it seemed impossible. Neither human nor fae. Not fully alive, yet so scared to die.

What did that make me?

CHAPTER 13

GUSTAVO



“*Y*ou know, if you’re going to break into a man’s home in the middle of the night, the least you can do is stop to say hello,” I said, standing in the doorway as the ethereal being crept down the stairs.

It stopped at the bottom of the steps to face me, that faint half-smile on its face. “You should know well enough by now, Gustavo—if I wished to disappear without a trace, I could have.”

“How often do you visit him?” I asked.

“Often enough,” it answered. “Not quite as often as I would like.”

“It takes you energy to get between realms,” I murmured.

“In this form, yes,” it said. “A considerable amount.”

“I take it you know about him shutting down,” I said.

“That is what I wanted to talk to you about,” it answered. “Do you have the time?”

I wasn’t sure if the politeness was just an act, but either way, I nodded and gestured for it to follow me into the kitchen. “Tea?” I offered.

“Please,” it said before quickly adding, “Just no spearmint.”

“Is that like iron? Another weakness?” I asked, carrying the kettle over to the fire.

“Just a personal preference,” it said with a glimmer of amusement in its eyes.

I snorted, going to prepare the tea along with a cup for myself. I poured a dash of whiskey in mine and offered it the same.

“Please,” it said again, eagerly. Once I was finished, it lifted the cup to its lips and took a long sip before sighing. “Perfection.”

“I’m glad you approve of my tea,” I said dryly. “You know, you could have warned me about what would happen when he lied.”

“I did warn you not to let him, if I recall.”

“He’s fae,” I said flatly. “Something tells me it would be easier to keep a fish from swimming than to keep him from causing mischief.”

“How ignorant,” it said, its voice dripping with sarcasm. “I would expect better from you, doctor.”

I rolled my eyes.

“In any case, being as he is my son, I found the subject... shall we say... awkward?”

“How do you think I felt?” I snapped. “I’m the one who had to deal with it.”

The fae nearly choked on its tea. “Yes, well, he seems fine, so I imagine the matter was resolved well enough.”

I just shook my head. “The bigger issue is him shutting down. I was giving him blood every two days like clockwork. Now daily. Why did that happen?”

“It could be any number of reasons,” it said thoughtfully. “It could be that he used more energy than usual. It could be factors impacting the potency of your blood. Or it could be that he requires more energy now that the transformation is underway.”

“It is?” I asked warily. “How can you tell?”

“It’s plain as day to me,” it answered. “Although you see him every day, you don’t know him as well as I do, so I suppose it wouldn’t be as obvious to you.”

I paused to consider that for a moment. “When he woke up, he was damn near inconsolable. He said he was lost in darkness.”

The fae across from me grew somber, and I noticed it hadn’t touched its tea in a while, even though it had seemed initially to be well enough to its liking.

“Yes,” it said quietly. “I, too, have felt the darkness once before. When I was very young, I nearly died. My siblings and I were chasing each other along a creek very deep in the woods. It was forbidden to go that far, and for good reason. The old magic was strong. I tripped on a branch and fell into the water.”

“You almost drowned?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise. It didn’t seem mortal enough to drown.

“I did drown,” it answered. “Luckily, my siblings pulled me out and got me to our parents in time. With the help of our medicine, they were able to bring me back, but I learned a very important lesson that day. Whatever it is that awaits our kind on the other side... it’s nothing like the stories we’re told as children of beautiful, iridescent waterfalls and endless fields of gold. It’s simply nothing. We come from the darkness, and to it we all must return, even if it is after many, many years.”

“I see,” I said, contemplating what felt like the first fully honest answer I’d ever gotten from it. “That’s about what I always figured was waiting on the other side of all this for humans, too.”

“And now?” it asked. “What do you believe?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, sighing deeply. “But I’m sitting here having tea with a fairy in my damn kitchen, so I figure it’s not terribly naive to imagine that my wife and child are somewhere else. Somewhere better.”

“Fair enough,” it said with a nod. “Then you can understand why I would wish the same for my son.”

"That's why you want him to be human," I realized out loud. "You didn't just want to bring him back. You wanted him to have a soul."

"A *human* soul," it corrected. "Our kind may be granted long life, but as brief and fleeting as human life is, there is so much it contains that ours simply do not. Perhaps that ephemerality, all that intense, dizzying, agonizing bliss packed into such a short span of time, is what makes you special. Perhaps it is the briefness of this life, and the love you feel so deeply in contrast to it, that grants your souls the ability to live on after death. In any case, my son's life was cut tragically short."

"How short?" I asked warily.

"Our years are not yours," it answered. "I imagine you have many forests younger than me. Though he doesn't remember, my son has lived for nearly one of your centuries."

"He acts a hell of a lot younger than me," I said, unable to hide my shock.

It gave a musical laugh. "He was in the prime of his life. We were just about to arrange a mate, actually..." It trailed off, growing melancholy. "Well, in any case, I wish him to have the opportunity to live out a full life. A better life. Is that not what all parents want?"

"Not all," I answered. "I've seen enough in this life to know that, but the good ones, yes."

"Then you haven't changed your mind?" it asked, an inflection of hope in its tone.

"No," I sighed. "I haven't. You hold up your end of the bargain, and I'll hold up mine."

"That's all I wanted to hear," it said, pushing up from the table. "Thank you for the tea, Doctor."

"Wait," I called as it approached the kitchen door. I was pretty sure it was only planning such a mundane exit for my benefit, but I appreciated it all the same. I'd seen quite enough magic lately.

"Yes?" the fae asked.

“How do I make sure it doesn’t happen again?” I asked. “If even you don’t know *why* he shut down, and I can’t exactly give him a pint of blood daily, there has to be another way.”

It paused as if considering the matter. “I believe I mentioned the first time we met that blood is not the only option for transferring life force. Perhaps you should give that some consideration.”

With that, it left and shut the door behind it.

I sank back into the kitchen chair and ran a hand down my face. So much for the other night being a one-time mistake.

CHAPTER 14

ALESSANDRO



*I*t had been well over a month since I'd come back from the darkness, but even though Gustavo had taken to giving me two vials of blood—one in the morning before we left for work and one at night before bed—and he scarcely ever left my side for more than an hour at a time, I still lived in a state of constant terror that it would happen again.

Each night, when my head hit my pillow, I was afraid. Afraid that the dreams that were always there to greet me would fail to appear to keep me company and I would be thrust into nothingness once more.

The lack of sleep was taking its toll.

I tried to keep up with my lessons as best I could, and worked doubly hard as his apprentice to keep from arousing his suspicion, but that day, I had made so many mistakes when handing him the various tinctures he administered to his patients that I wasn't surprised when he took me aside as soon as we got home.

"I know what you've been doing," he said. His tone wasn't harsh or accusatory as it had been when he'd caught me sneaking out, but I found it difficult to meet his gaze all the same.

"Doing what?" I asked.

"Not sleeping," he answered.

I pursed my lips tight to keep the lie dancing on the tip of my tongue from making its way out. As pleasurable as his cure had been the last time, I was

exhausted and unwilling to endure the pain that came first. And what point was there in lying anyway if my body immediately betrayed my secrets?

"It's all right," he said, his voice gentler than usual. "I'm not upset."

"You're not?" I asked warily, finally daring to meet his eyes. I found warmth in them, and realized for the first time, since I had been avoiding them all week, that Gustavo looked as tired as I felt. Perhaps I wasn't the only one who'd been avoiding sleep.

"No," he said with a heavy sigh. "I can't say I blame you. But I think I have a way to help."

"More blood?" I asked hopefully.

"I can't give you any more blood right now," he murmured, staring down at me. "I've lost too much already doing this every day, and it's clearly not working well enough."

My heart beat faster, panic ebbing in along with the darkness at the edges of my reality. "I'm scared," I whispered, sounding far more pathetic than I intended. "I don't want to go back to the dark."

"I know," Gustavo said, stroking the side of my face. "I know, and I'm not going to let you. You're fine. I promise. I'm going to do something else."

I stared up at him, anxiously awaiting whatever it was he planned on doing. When he bent his head and pressed his lips to mine, I froze.

This was new. And yet, there was something undeniably pleasant about it. His tongue flickered against my lips, and I gasped softly, opening mine wide enough for him to stick his tongue inside. I gave a startled cry against his lips, but he took my face in both his hands and pushed in deeper, his tongue sliding over mine.

He wrapped his other arm around me, tipping me back as he pulled his tongue out slightly, letting a string of saliva trickle over my tongue. Much to my bewilderment, I felt the same subtle surge of energy as I did when he gave me his blood.

I reached up to take his face in my hands as well and opened my mouth wider, sucking his tongue into it once more. The gray around the corners of my vision was already receding, and I felt stronger. No longer on the verge of collapsing into the abyss, and I clung to him desperately as a result. He was a lifesaver in an ocean of nothingness, and I refused to be pulled back beneath the brine.

"Good," Gustavo murmured, pulling away and setting me back on my feet much too soon. "That should keep you while I prepare."

"Prepare?" I asked, looking up at him in confusion. "Prepare for what?"

"It's not enough to sustain you for long," he said cryptically. "But I know something that works even better than blood."

"What is it?" I asked eagerly.

He hesitated. "You're just going to have to trust me. Go wait in my room."

As tempted as I was to press the matter, I knew better. I nodded and walked down the hall, my footing much steadier than it had been before. Whatever it was, I was more than willing to try. Anything to avoid going back into the darkness.

It was a few minutes later when Gustavo returned, and without a word, he closed the bedroom door and went over to the bedside table to take out the blue bottle he'd used before when he had stroked me.

My stomach tightened in a familiar way, and I sat down on the edge of the bed because I didn't feel quite as steady anymore. "What are you going to do with that?"

"Just relax," he said, unbuttoning his shirt. "You've been studying my medical texts for a while now. I assume you know how humans... mate?"

"You mean intercourse?" I asked. "When a man and a woman join their flesh together."

His hands stopped halfway down his shirt. "It's not always a man and a woman," he continued before unbuttoning his shirt the rest of the way,

revealing the flat planes of his lean yet strong torso. "It's possible for two women. Or two men. It just works a bit differently."

"Oh," I murmured. "Is that why you kissed me? We're going to mate?"

I wasn't sure why, but the thought stirred that familiar heat between my legs, and I found myself afraid it was going to happen again. The burning. The pain. Instead, I felt only a slight discomfort, but it was enough to make me squirm.

A strange look came into Gustavo's eyes. "It's the only way besides blood to ensure that you have what you need."

"I want to," I said eagerly, looking up at him. "Is that bad? That I want to?"

He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "No," he said quietly. "It isn't bad to want it. Not for *you*, at any rate."

I recognized the guilt in his voice immediately. That strange quality I didn't possess that nonetheless seemed to rule him.

So that was the cause of his hesitation?

I reached out and slipped my hands into his waistband, unfastening his pants before taking them down along with his underwear to reveal the large member within them. His gaze darkened, but he didn't stop me. I took him in my hand the way he had done with me and began to stroke. Three strokes in and he was stiff and fully erect as I had been.

His eyes fluttered shut and he rested a hand on top of my head. "That's... good," he said, his voice raspy with what sounded like desire. "Now, use your mouth."

I glanced up at him in confusion, but he nodded, so I lowered my head and hesitated a moment before brushing my lips against the head of his member the way he had done with my mouth so recently. It twitched against my lips, so I gripped it once more to keep it where I wanted it. It was so warm and stiff, yet his skin was like velvet.

"Does it hurt?" I asked curiously.

"No," he said in a gruff tone. "It doesn't. But it'll feel better if you use your tongue. Lick my cock, slowly."

I did as he said, running my tongue over the smooth, rounded head. There was a clear liquid beading on the slit, salty and pungent on my tongue.

"It tastes strange," I said, feeling the tip of my tongue tingle. Along with it came another small surge of energy that made me shiver. "Like your blood."

"It's good for you," he murmured, slipping his hand into my hair and palming the back of my head, guiding it back to his member. His cock, he had called it. "Keep going."

I did as he said, and resumed licking the tip, since he seemed to enjoy that. When I got adventurous and licked from the base to the tip, he let out a moan that didn't seem entirely voluntary, his grip on my hair tightening. "Good boy," he gritted out, his eyes shut tight, as if he didn't want to witness what we were doing.

Why it bothered him, I couldn't say. It was strange, yes, but I was quickly getting the hang of it, and the taste I had once found too sharp was becoming pleasant to me. I suckled on the tip of his cock, lapping up the clear fluid that was beading so much faster now.

My hand traveled down, absently fondling the balls that had grown tight and stiff, rolling them gently in my palm. He really seemed to enjoy that, so I continued as I took the entire tip of his cock into my mouth.

The gravelly moan that crossed his lips as he drove himself deeper into my mouth confirmed that was the right move. His tip hit the back of my throat and I retched, forcing him out of my mouth.

"Sorry," Gustavo said, his breath as ragged as mine had been before when he had touched me.

I brought a hand to my lips, my fingers touching something sticky on them. I sucked my fingertip into my mouth, savoring the salty taste. "It's fine," I said. "It tastes good. Can I have more, Master?"

A strange look came into his eyes, and he swallowed hard again. "Keep sucking and you'll have all you can handle."

I sealed my lips around the crown of his cock once more and gripped the base with both hands, sucking eagerly. Both his hands were digging into my hair now, and while I could tell he was trying not to gag me again, he couldn't seem to help the subtle movements of his hips as I continued. The liquid was now seeping over my tongue as his velvety shaft rested on top of it. I pushed my tongue up against the underside of the crown and I could feel his pulse throbbing against it. Strong and steady.

I loosened my grip on the base of his shaft as I could feel his cock twitching in my mouth, and ran my fingertips along the length of it that wasn't concealed within my lips. A raspy gasp tore from Gustavo's throat and he shuddered hard. The next moment, hot streams of sticky fluid were pulsing into my mouth, just like the ones he had elicited from me.

The force of the fluid hitting the back of my throat made me gag a little, but I swallowed it down, and continued sucking on the head of his cock until it was merely leaking rather than flowing. Then, I started lapping up the droplets until his throbbing cock was clean and he gripped my hair tightly, pulling my head up to withdraw himself from my mouth.

"That's enough," he panted. "That's... that's good."

I stared up at him, licking my lips. "It feels so good," I moaned, running my hand down over my crotch, which was stiff and throbbing again. This time, it wasn't painful, or at least, not in the same panic inducing way as before, but the need for release was just as strong.

"That should keep you running for a while," he murmured. His voice was filled with shame now, as if the realization of what we had done was setting in. Why it bothered him so much, I didn't know. Why it upset me that it bothered him was even more of a mystery.

"Why haven't we been doing this from the beginning?" I asked, unable to fathom whatever his reasons were.

He hesitated. "I... "

I decided nothing good was going to come of letting him answer that question, even in his own mind, so I reached out to pull him down onto the

bed with me. He went rigid as he wound up between my legs, and I ground against him, hungry for more.

"Mate with me," I urged, running my fingers through his hair. "You enjoy it, don't you?"

The look of denial in his eyes faltered. "You have what you need. Anything more would be unnecessary."

"But it's so fun," I purred, running my tongue along his lower lip the way he had done to mine so recently. I ground against his thigh, rubbing my own erection against it.

Gustavo clinched his jaw. "Alessandro..."

"Please?" I pleaded, holding his gaze. "It feels so good when you touch me. I need more."

A rush of breath left his full lips and his gaze darkened as he looked down at me. "You will either be the death of me, or my soul," he muttered, the words laced with affection.

I smiled, leaning in to kiss him. "I am your creation," I reminded him. "It's your job to take care of me."

"Guilt and seduction," he muttered. "You are a manipulative little thing, aren't you?"

I just grinned up at him. "You're hard again," I accused, pushing my knee against his stiffening cock. "You want me."

"Of course I want you," he said through his teeth. "That's beside the point."

"Why do humans deny themselves what they want so often?" I asked, exasperated. "It's ridiculous."

"Is that so?" he asked dryly. Despite his insistence, he ground against my leg in return. "You know, mating is something we should work up to. It will hurt you."

"It hasn't hurt so far," I protested.

He sighed. "If I'm going to put my... cock inside you, you're going to need preparation. The lubricant won't be enough, not the first time. I should start with my fingers and we'll work up to it."

"Fine," I sighed in return. "But I'm sure I can handle it."

He rolled his eyes, and lay on my right side, beginning to unbutton my shirt, then my trousers. I lifted myself off the bed so he could pull them off the rest of the way, leaving us both mostly naked. My cock was stiff, slapping against my abdomen and leaving a trail of sticky fluid from the base of my navel to the tip of my cock as it bobbed back down once it was freed from my waistband.

I watched as Gustavo took the bottle and poured a generous amount into his palms, rubbing them together so it coated his middle two fingers. "Open your legs," he told me.

I did as he said, and he slipped his fingers past my cheeks, rubbing the lubricant around my hole. I tensed up instinctively, and I bit down on my bottom lip to stifle a moan as the tingling spread around the sensitive skin.

The pressure of his finger against my puckered hole, as gentle as he was being, sent a strange thrill down my spine. My cock throbbed and I reached for it automatically, running my hand up the underside to keep it pressed to my abdomen.

"What do you put in that?" I asked.

He chuckled. "A blend of herbs that generate warmth. You like it?"

All I could do was nod, my breath a bit shaky as he started pushing one of his fingers inside. I grabbed the underside of my thighs and pulled my legs further apart to make it easier, but when I felt a dull ache spreading through my lower body, I cried out in alarm. "That hurts!"

Gustavo froze rather than going any deeper, raising an eyebrow. "My finger is barely halfway in. If you think that's rough, you're certainly not going to be able to take my cock tonight."

I bit down on my lip until it hurt more than his finger inside me. Pride and stubbornness welled up within me, and defiance won out. "It's fine. I can

take it."

He didn't seem convinced, but he eased his finger in a bit deeper. The lubricant made it possible, even though my muscles clenched around him, as if my body was instinctively trying to keep him out. "Just try to relax," he said in a gentle tone, resting his other hand on my lower belly. "Push against me if you can."

I hesitated because it felt strange, but he was right. His finger slipped in all the way, past the second knuckle, and I gasped.

"Good boy," Gustavo coaxed, resting on his elbow so he could take my cock into his other hand, stroking tenderly. "That's good. See if you like this."

He crooked his finger inside me, and I gasped as it drove into something buried deep within and sent a pleasure so intense it felt like pain all the way up my spine. Like lightning rocketing through me.

"Oh!" I cried, my spine arching involuntarily. I grabbed the blankets beneath me, my nails digging into them. Energy of some kind was hammering in my ears, and it was all I could do to think straight.

When I looked up, Gustavo was studying me with a glimmer of curiosity and amusement in his eyes. "I take it you enjoyed that?" he asked.

All I could do for a moment was stare up at him, breathless. "What... did you do to me?"

"I touched your prostate," he answered calmly. "I take it that felt good."

That was an understatement of comedic proportions, but all I could really do was stare at him, trying to catch my breath enough to ask for more. "I want... I want more. Please?"

For some reason, those words seemed to stir something within him. His eyes glazed over, and he did it again, but even though I was prepared for it this time, that did nothing to diminish the sensation. If anything, it felt even better the second time, and when he kept stroking me from the inside, his fingers still toying with the sensitive head of my cock, I lost all control. My hips were bucking against him, desperate for more.

"Please?" I gasped, grinding into his touch. "Please, more, Master."

"Relax, my pet," he purred. "I'll give you everything you can handle."

How much could I handle? As desperate as I was, it felt so good, and the sensations were so foreign and overpowering, I really wasn't sure. My whole body was trembling, quaking with need, and even though I was tempted to beg him to stop when it became almost too much to bear, the desire won out and kept me gagged.

"You think you can take another finger?" he asked, his voice rough with desire as he looked up from between my legs.

I whimpered, nodding. "Please..."

The word was out of my mouth before I could stop myself, and I was not at all sure if I had gotten myself into something more than I could handle. And yet, I was willing to find out.

I felt the second finger working itself into my entrance and tensed up automatically. I moaned, gripping the sheets harder, my head falling back against the mattress. When he worked it the rest of the way in and his fingers were both driving into my prostate, I screamed out in bliss.

"Master!" I cried out, furiously thrusting my hips into his hands. He barely even had to touch my cock before it spurted stream after stream of sticky white fluid, falling back down to coat my stomach.

I gave a strangled moan and turned my head as the pleasure reached the point where it was unbearable, only then letting up. Even so, I continued to grind against him until I collapsed, a trembling, panting mess.

Gustavo withdrew his fingers and lay beside me, a knowing look in his eyes as he ran his other hand up my thigh. "I take it you enjoyed yourself."

"Magic," I accused, turning my head to face him. My voice was still hoarse and breathy. "You put a spell on me."

He gave a low, throaty chuckle that made my spent cock twitch painfully. "Not at all. Some things are simply human, and this is one of them."

I breathed a long, steady sigh. If that was true, then I longed to be human now more than I ever had.

“Well?” he asked, his lips pressed to the side of my neck. “Are you sure you think you can take my cock tonight?”

I could tell from the knowing tone in his voice that he already knew the answer, so I turned on my side and curled up against his chest. “Maybe not just yet,” I mumbled into his neck. “As long as I can stay in here.”

Gustavo hesitated, as if he hadn’t expected that to be my reaction. He finally pulled an arm around me, pulling me closer. “All right,” he sighed. “But just for the night.”

CHAPTER 15

GUSTAVO



What had begun as a one-night arrangement turned into a week, and a week into a month, and a month into two. Every night, once we got home, I would take Alessandro to bed with me. It was hard to refuse him when he gave me those eyes, and I had to admit he was sleeping soundly now, which meant his energy stretched further.

Not that it had been much of an issue. Every night without fail, no matter how much I had steeled myself to resist, I would feel his hand traveling down my chest, over the bulge in my underwear.

Sometimes we'd barely make it through the door before he was on his knees, looking up at me with those big brown eyes that made it impossible for me to understand how I had ever failed to recognize him for what he was—an ethereal creature from another world. A little imp who'd been sent to tempt me personally.

Every night, I would yield to that temptation. To the smooth caress of his full lips and the silk of his tongue flicking across my crown. To the way he lay down so enticingly beneath me, his body prone and naked, every inch of unblemished perfection on full display as he offered himself up to me.

So far, I had only let him use his mouth rather than taking him the way I wanted far more than I could admit, but I knew it would be only a matter of time before I yielded to that temptation as well. It was more a matter of him being ready than anything, especially since he could barely take three fingers without getting overwhelmed. He was too perfect to resist forever,

and the way he reveled in our sin as if it were the most natural thing in the universe, it was hard to remember why I bothered to resist at all.

As the world outside the house grew darker, and the suspicion with which the villagers viewed me only seemed to grow rather than melting away with winter's thaw, I found an unexpected warmth waiting for me at home. In those private moments, when it was just the two of us, it was so easy to forget all the many reasons why this was wrong. And why, even if it wasn't, it was most assuredly something that couldn't last.

Every day that passed, Alessandro seemed to become more human. His eyes seemed to shine brighter. His skin felt softer to the touch. Warmer. I could almost swear that the last time I'd had my fingers inside him, I could feel the flutter of a pulse, faint as it was.

I wasn't sure exactly what the process of becoming human entailed, outside of the Blue Fairy's constant refrain that he must learn to love and be loved, but as the months since our devil's bargain elapsed, I was beginning to feel certain that one half of that magical equation was accounted for.

And I did love him. I'd hated him at first, if only because I'd had to grieve that he wasn't the thing I'd once thought, but now that I had begun to experience him as a person in his own right, it was impossible not to love him for what he was. For a mischievous, devilish little fiend who laughed maniacally and crept out every chance he got and whispered to imaginary creatures when he thought I wasn't looking.

When I'd thought he was human, he had seemed so sinister to me. Now that I had accepted him for what he was, those very things seemed strange and beautiful, and in a far greater twist of irony, the more I cared for him, the more human he seemed to become.

One morning, I had woken up to find the bed empty beside me, which was no unusual occurrence. As regularly as Alessandro was feeding, he had far more energy than I did, and if I tried to make him stay in bed until I was awake, his squirming would keep me up.

We had come to an agreement, that I would loosen my restrictions as long as he agreed never to venture anywhere near the church again, and if he saw the priest, he was to run home immediately. Considering the fact that I

hadn't had any more encounters with Father Arezzo, I assumed he was keeping his word. It helped that every time Alessandro told even the whitest lie, it was abundantly clear to me.

To my surprise, when I went down into the kitchen that morning, I was greeted with the smell of fresh bread baking in the oven. There was no sign of him in the kitchen, or in the garden, where he usually spent his time when he wasn't working or studying. The greenhouse had been flourishing under his care, which was a relief, since it meant I no longer had to bear the bittersweet ache of being in it.

I started to grow worried when I realized he wasn't in any of his usual haunts, until I heard the sound of pans clanging about in my workshop. I rushed in and opened the door to find Alessandro tearing through the contents of one of the wooden chests across the room I used for the storage of my old doll-making supplies.

A glance around the room revealed the place in an even greater state of chaos than the one I had inflicted on it before the Blue Fairy found me for the first time.

"What in the world are you doing?" I cried.

Alessandro's spine went rigid as he sat hunched over the chest like some kind of goblin hunting for treasure. He looked up over his shoulder, his face covered in dust and soot, and stood up quickly.

"Master," he said, refusing to meet my eyes as he usually did when he knew he was in trouble. "I didn't think you'd be awake yet."

"I can see that," I said, walking over to stand in front of him. "Care to tell me why you've destroyed my workshop?"

He grimaced. "I was going to put it all back before you woke up. I swear I was."

It was easy enough to tell that wasn't a lie, at any rate. I reached out and tilted his chin up, forcing him to look at me. "I asked you a question, Alessandro. What are you doing?"

He chewed on his bottom lip, his eyes wide and glassy. I wasn't sure if he practiced that look in the mirror, but either way, it was hard to resist. Perhaps it was merely a natural defense mechanism. His kind were certainly good enough at manipulating human emotions.

"I was looking for the adze."

"The adze?" I echoed. "You know you're not allowed to use the dangerous tools. Why would you need that, anyway?"

"To make a wooden dowel," he answered.

I looked pointedly at the collection arranged in various boxes across the room. "There are plenty of dowels you could have chosen from if that's the case. Why are you lying?"

"I'm not lying!" he cried, taking my hand to place it against his crotch. "See for yourself."

I cleared my throat, pulling my hand away. It was one thing to touch him in the dark of night, when the world was asleep and there was no one else around us for miles, but somehow, that felt far too intimate during the day. Or maybe I just needed to impose some arbitrary regulations on this thing between us, to convince myself I still had some semblance of decency left.

"That's not necessary, Alessandro. I believe you," I told him. "But why didn't the other dowels work?"

"Because they're not small enough," he said matter of factly.

"Not small enough for what?" I asked, frowning.

"A splint," he said in an exasperated tone, as if I were struggling to keep up.

I blinked. "A splint for what?"

He sighed, walking across the room to the one spot that he seemed to have spared from his wake of chaos. He picked up a small box from a shelf and took off the lid, setting it aside.

I walked over and glanced over his shoulder to find a small butterfly resting on a cushion of cloth scraps within. Its one undamaged wing fluttered

slowly up and down, while the other was badly curled at its side and partially torn off. A large insect or a bird must have bitten it off.

“I didn’t do it,” Alessandro said quickly.

“I never said you did,” I told him. “Where did you find it?”

“In the garden,” he answered, frowning as he looked down at the pitiful creature in the box. “A bird had it.” After a moment’s pause, he added, “I didn’t kill the bird, either.”

“Look at that,” I said dryly. “We’re making progress.”

He said nothing and I couldn’t see his face, but when I stroked the hair out of his eyes, I realized a single tear was resting on his cheek.

“Alessandro,” I said, turning him to face me. “What’s the matter? Why does it upset you so much?”

It wasn’t like him to show such empathy for another living creature. Not even for the humans he had watched die, one a child and another a man of old age. He had learned to mask his apathy to appropriate levels for our field of work, perhaps, but I knew he didn’t truly feel the loss the same way a human would. And how could he understand?

While I still knew little about his kind, I knew that my lifetime was but a blink to them. How could such a thing truly understand mortality, or the cost of human life?

But maybe that, too, was beginning to change.

“It can’t fly,” he said softly.

“No,” I murmured. “I imagine it can’t. Why does that bother you?”

“I fly in my dreams,” he answered. “When I’m somewhere else. Have you ever flown, Master?”

“No,” I replied. “That’s not something humans can do.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “It’s wonderful. It feels... like when your eyes are closed, and there’s sunlight on your face and the wind is tickling your skin. It feels free and bright. It’s the opposite of darkness. Of nothing.”

“I see.” I studied the butterfly for a moment, then him. The kindest thing to do was probably to put it out of its misery, just like I had done with the rabbit so many years ago, but the stakes felt so much higher somehow.

And it didn’t really appear to be suffering. Its wing had clearly been crippled from the moment it emerged from its chrysalis. Sometimes they simply failed to unfurl for one reason or another, and by the time they dried, the damage was permanent. Usually, nature took its course soon after that, but I doubted it would have even felt the rest of its wing being bitten off.

“Bring it into the kitchen where it’s warmer,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll make up some sugar water and see what I can do.”

Alessandro’s face lit up immediately. “Thank you,” he said eagerly.

I watched as he lifted the box into his hands with greater care than he had ever shown anything. He followed me into the kitchen, and I whipped up a concoction. I took one of my smallest glass vials and filled it, putting it into the box. “There. That should give it some energy.”

Alessandro leaned over the box on the kitchen table, watching intently as the insect ventured its way over to the nectar. His eyes grew wide as the butterfly unfurled its proboscis and dipped it into the nectar.

“It’s drinking!” he cried in triumph before clamping a hand over his mouth and looking horrified by the volume of his voice.

I chuckled. “Don’t worry, I don’t think it can hear you.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” he asked hopefully. “If it’s eating, it’ll live.”

“It’s a good sign,” I said, afraid to get his hopes up even though I found myself far more invested in the fate of a wounded butterfly than I ever could have imagined. As smoke began to billow from the sides of the stone stove and a burning smell hit the air, I glanced up. “That’s more than I can say for breakfast.”

“The bread!” Alessandro groaned, rushing over to the stove. Before I could stop him, he removed the metal grate and black smoke filled the room.

I grabbed the bucket of water on the counter and dumped it into the stove to put out the flame before shutting the grate and opening the front door to air out the room. When I turned around, Alessandro was standing in the middle of the room, his shoulders hunched with a sheepish expression on his face.

“I’m sorry, Master.”

“It’s fine,” I told him. “Why don’t you go put the butterfly in your room, and I’ll take care of this?”

He did as I asked, to my relief. The boy’s attempts to help usually yielded more trouble than not, but fortunately, he had the makings of being a better doctor than a chef.

I cleaned up and made a small meal of porridge, since I was due at the orphanage first thing in the morning and that was really all I had time for anyway. There was a respiratory illness making its way around, and while there didn’t seem to be any cause for concern yet, I knew how quickly such situations could turn.

Alessandro returned once the smoke was cleared and quickly went to get a set of bowls from the cabinet once he saw what was on the stove. “I’m sorry about the bread. I’d hoped to surprise you with breakfast, and then I saw the butterfly...”

“It’s quite all right,” I told him, filling his bowl, then mine. “It’s good to have compassion for animals. Even small ones. I just don’t want you to be disappointed if it doesn’t work out.”

“You mean if it dies,” he said in a sullen tone, taking a seat at the table across from me.

“It will die,” I said carefully. “All things do eventually. Butterflies much sooner than most.”

He nodded solemnly and said nothing.

We had fallen into such an easy routine that sometimes, I wasn’t sure what it was going to be like when he wasn’t there. I wasn’t sure what much of anything would be like in the fae world, if all went according to plan, but for the first time, my trepidations had as much to do with the young man in

front of me as with the boy I had been striving to return to this world for so long.

And what if I wasn't saving Phineas at all? What if I was wrong and I wasn't dragging him from darkness, but from heaven itself? Even the possibility that had once been so laughable now seemed foolish to scoff at.

I'd certainly never given any credence to the idea of fairies, and here they had been existing without my permission all along. Who was to say angels and demons were any different?

The only thing I did know—the only thing I could truly believe in—was the here and now. What was right in front of me, and the thought of losing that... of losing *him*...

"Is something wrong, Master?" Alessandro asked, looking up from his food.

I forced myself to take a bite, even though I had lost my appetite, if only to buy myself a moment to respond. "No," I lied, grateful that such untruths remained a human's prerogative. "Nothing at all."

CHAPTER 16

ALESSANDRO



While I had offered to accompany Gustavo to work, as usual, he had told me to stay home with the butterfly that day. And for that, I was grateful. He'd warned me not to touch it, and I'd resisted even though the splendor of its one good wing with all its golds and vivid, velvety black was of great temptation.

He'd also said a wooden dowel wouldn't do any good, and that it would never fly again, but we could keep it safe and comfortable. When I'd asked how long a butterfly could live in a box, he hadn't given any direct answer, and I knew better than to push him on it. But even a man as intelligent as Gustavo could be wrong sometimes.

I had already organized all the tinctures in the workshop, so I occupied myself with tidying up the kitchen after this morning's burnt bread incident. Halfway through the morning, there was another knock on the kitchen door. Gustavo had warned me that a patient might be coming over in the next couple of days, so I went to answer it.

The cricket chirped angrily, popping out of my apron pocket, so I gently pushed it back in. "Not now, Saro," I hissed in a whisper. "I have permission this time."

I peeked through the hole in the door, and sure enough, there was an elderly woman wrapped up in a thick scarf and a long woolen coat. I made sure none of my strange joints were showing and opened the door.

"Hello, ma'am. Can I help you?" I asked.

“Hello, dear,” she said, peering at me behind thickly glazed white eyes. “Is the doctor in?”

“I’m sorry, he’s out seeing patients,” I answered, reciting the lines Gustavo and I had carefully rehearsed. I gave a masterful performance, if I did say so myself. “But I am the doctor’s apprentice. I may be able to help you.”

“Oh?” She squinted up at me as if to get a better look, but with those cataracts, I doubted she could make out more than shadows anyway, so I relaxed a little. Whenever I was around a human, there was always the chance that they would sense something off.

They had an innate radar for the uncanny, Gustavo had warned me. Sight wasn’t all of it, but it helped.

“I didn’t know he’d taken an apprentice,” she said at length. “You know, I’ve lived here all my life and I remember when Gustavo was just an apprentice himself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, stepping back since she ushered her way into the house on her own, her crooked wooden cane tapping on the floorboards. “If I could—”

“Such a terrible thing that happened,” she said in a weary tone. “Cecilia was such a beautiful woman. And the lad... spitting image of them both.”

“His wife and son,” I murmured. “Phineas.”

“Cecilia grew up around here, you know,” she continued. “Lovely girl. Always so kind, and vibrant. She lit up any room she walked into, while Gustavo was always the quiet type. More focused on his books than anything else. Until her.” She chuckled, but it quickly dissolved into a dry cough.

So she was here for the camphor rub, then.

“Have a seat, ma’am,” I said, guiding her toward one of the kitchen chairs. “Would you like some tea?”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t stay,” she insisted, even though she plopped down quite readily.

As I rummaged through the cabinets for the small basket of the most common tinctures and cures people came by for that Gustavo kept in the kitchen pantry, I found myself hoping she wouldn't continue. It was a strange, nagging feeling in the bottom of my chest.

Of course I knew Gustavo had once had a family. That was why I existed in the first place, but that thought made the ache inside me even worse. The thought of Gustavo with someone else made me feel so...

Jealous? Was it jealousy? I'd heard of the word before, but I'd never experienced it.

Long after I sent the kindly older woman on her way with her elixirs, I found myself pulling one of Gustavo's books off the shelf in the study. A dictionary. Humans misused and twisted words so often to suit their own fancy, it helped me to look up the proper meaning of them from time to time, and the one I found was enlightening enough.

Jealousy. A feeling of envy or protectiveness over one's own possessions. A sin.

Saro hopped onto the page and chirped curiously, tilting his head as he studied the words, even though I doubted he could read at all. Silly little cricket.

At least he couldn't judge me for the damning words on the page.

Was that what this was? I wanted to possess Gustavo? The thought, as absurd as it seemed, felt strangely true.

Yes. I wanted to possess him. I wanted him to be mine, and there was a part of me that already felt like he was.

But how could a human ever belong to a doll?

Especially a doll he had created himself.

CHAPTER 17

ALESSANDRO



*I*t had been a long day of appointments and errands, and while Gustavo had eventually dropped me off at the house, he had gone back out by himself on a last-minute house call.

I didn't like him leaving without me but there was still plenty to attend to before the morning rounds, and the elixirs weren't going to mix themselves. Besides, I was relieved to have the opportunity to check in on my butterfly.

According to Gustavo, the fact that it was still alive over a month later was nothing shy of a miracle, especially considering the species didn't live that long to begin with.

Earth creatures were such fragile beings, and butterflies more than any other. I liked to believe my little friend had a decent enough life despite the fact that he couldn't fly. I let him move freely around the small garden I had set up on a table next to my bedroom window so he had a full view of the outdoors, and Gustavo had created a screen that would allow him to feel the fresh air without the risk of birds and other predators getting to him.

Every now and then, a breeze would come by and he would flutter his wing as if he were experiencing the joy of flight. It saddened me that those moments were as close as he was ever going to get. I found myself wondering if he knew what he was missing out on and longed for it, or if he simply accepted his reality as the only one that existed.

Sometimes I wondered if I did the same. There was a whole world out there. One that Mother promised I would be seeing soon enough. A world

filled with strange and wonderful things, and other creatures just like us.

Whenever Mother came to visit me, whispering tales from the world of the fae, I would become enraptured, especially by the melancholy tone with which it spoke of these things. The older fae was homesick. That much was clear. But I couldn't say I felt the same way.

Mother seemed to believe I had the same innate desire to return to its realm, but the truth was that I was perfectly content in this one. I didn't remember anything from before, and all its tales of running through beautiful gardens filled with translucent flowers far more magnificent than anything the human world had to offer entertained my mind, but they did little to sway my heart.

The simple truth was that, for all it lacked in glitter and gilding, the human world had one thing the fae world lacked.

It had *him*.

I wasn't sure if Gustavo knew of Mother's plans to eventually return me to its world. I was afraid to ask, not only because it would be a betrayal of something I was quite certain I was meant to keep a secret, but because a part of me feared the answer. I feared knowing if Gustavo would be willing to let me go.

The heart was a strange thing. My own was a mystery to me far greater than anything I had encountered in this world. I had come no closer to understanding my feelings of jealousy, either, but I did feel guilty for them. It was strange to go from feeling guilty for nothing at all to feeling guilty for something I had absolutely no control over.

While I usually found mixing potions and elixirs to be a boring task I dreaded, that night, I found myself grateful for it. It gave me something to take my mind off of things, including the fact that Gustavo was going to be out so much later than usual.

A virus had been moving swiftly through the school and the orphanage, so his services were more in demand than ever. Lately, whenever Gustavo finally did come home, there seemed to be a heavy weight on his shoulders,

and I could only imagine that the reason he always became so solemn after tending to a sick child was that it conjured memories of his own.

No matter how many light moments we shared, the past was a dark shroud always hanging over his shoulders, and sometimes it weighed on him more heavily than other times. I wished there was something I could do to lift that burden from him, even for a moment, but it felt like a violation somehow even to bring it up. One I was quite sure he would find unwelcome.

Sometimes I wondered if he still found my existence unsettling. He didn't look at me the way he had in the beginning, right after he had somehow found out the truth that I wasn't who or what he initially thought I was.

And yet... had I really become anything more to him?

I was lost in my thoughts until a knock at the door jolted me out of them. I hoped it was Gustavo, since he often forgot his keys, but more than likely, it was a patient coming by to pick up a tincture. It seemed like the sickness was growing exponentially each day. And while Gustavo maintained that it wasn't anything like the plague he had lived through, I could tell he was worried, and I could tell from the whispered warning tones of his friends whenever they came by to visit that he was far from the only one who was.

Even if their concerns seemed to center more around the Church than the sickness. How often those two subjects seemed to be connected. People feared Gustavo when he brought them cures and comfort. When his work failed to bring the results they desired, they blamed him. It was often a thankless job, and sometimes, I couldn't understand why he bothered to do it.

I had asked him once why he stayed, and he had merely grunted and said someone had to. But that hardly seemed like a sufficient reason to me. Maybe it was just the fact that I wasn't human, but if anything, it made me long to be even more. I wished I was human, if only so I could have the capacity to understand Gustavo better.

Sometimes I got the feeling he found me equally perplexing. In only a matter of weeks, I would have been in the human world for nearly a year, but I found myself no close to understanding them, let alone being one.

The thought was more distressing than I wanted to admit, and the more I dwelled on it, the more hopeless I felt even though I wasn't sure exactly what was going to become of me if I failed to become real.

The one thing I knew with absolute certainty was that it would mean things couldn't continue as they had been between me and Gustavo. That thought alone was enough to terrify me and make me willing to do whatever it took to become human. If only I knew the answer.

Being good was enough of a challenge and I failed at that often enough. All I could do was hope that when the time came, all my struggles would be enough to keep me with him.

I finished pouring my most recent tincture into a glass container and wiped my hands off on my apron before going over to the door. I froze when I saw who was on the other side.

Father Arezzo.

"Hello," I said warily, keeping my hand on the doorknob because I was reluctant to open it and let him inside. Gustavo's warning had been clear enough after the first time I had encountered the priest—as if Father Arezzo himself hadn't been enough of a deterrent.

There was something about him that made my skin crawl and my soul as well, which was ironic, considering people supposedly went to him in hopes that he would heal theirs.

"May I help you?" I asked when he said nothing in response to my greeting, hoping to avoid letting him inside. I was quite certain Gustavo would disapprove of that. But the priest also seemed to run this town, and I wasn't sure exactly how much defiance I could get away with without bringing more problems down on my master's head.

At first, I had tried to be good because I didn't want to arouse Gustavo's suspicion and get myself punished or restricted even further. Now, I avoided it because I couldn't stand the thought of upsetting him. I wasn't sure exactly when that change had taken place.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" he asked pointedly.

I hesitated a moment, uncertain of what to do. I finally decided that letting him in was the path of least resistance. Even though I knew Gustavo wasn't going to be happy about it, he didn't always act in his own best interest, and surely making an even greater enemy out of the priest wasn't going to curry him any favor with the townsfolk.

Someone had to look out for him.

I reluctantly opened the door and stepped back to allow the priest inside, but I was certain he could tell from my expression that I was less than thrilled about it myself. I found it harder to hide that kind of thing than I initially had, especially with Gustavo.

Father Arezzo stopped and looked around the kitchen as if he were a king assessing a new palace that had been built for him, and clearly, he disapproved. He stopped in front of the potted flowers sitting on the windowsill in the kitchen, and the fact that he was in our house at all, let alone judging the contents of it, made it difficult for me to keep a hold on my tongue.

"Is there something I can help you with, Father?" I repeated, hoping he would get the point.

He turned around and gave me a smile that made me as sick as his touch had that night. "Indeed. I spoke with your master some time ago about bringing you to church, and yet it would seem you still haven't been. Would you care to tell me why that is?"

I tilted my head. "Is visiting your church a requirement, Father?"

It was a genuine enough question, but I could tell he didn't see it that way. "There's that sharp tongue again," he said, taking a step closer. "It's clear your master is unwilling to teach you any proper manners, but as they say, it takes a village. Fortunately for you," he said, accenting his words by stroking his hand down my arm, "I am a very 'hands on' kind of teacher."

My skin crawled as his bony fingers traveled along my sleeve, and I recoiled. Finding myself backed against the counter, I had an immediate sense of unease deep within me. The kind that told me to put as much

distance between myself and this man as possible. And now that wasn't an option.

My fight-or-flight instincts were kicking in already. "My master will be home shortly," I said pointedly, even though I had no way of knowing that.

Sometimes Gustavo was home by sundown, and other days, he came in long after I had already fallen asleep at the kitchen table waiting for him. Whenever I did, he would stroke my hair and scold me gently, saying I should've gone to bed without him. But even if I eventually succumbed to exhaustion waiting up for him, I couldn't go to bed intentionally without him. No matter how long it took or how tired I was, falling asleep in his arms was my favorite part of living and I wasn't going to give it up if I had a choice in the matter.

It was strange how one man's touch could revile and another's could make my heart quicken in the most euphoric of ways. In the beginning, I had found this world to be boring and ordinary, but I had come to realize that this world contained far more wonders than the naked eye could see. Most of them were simply hidden beneath a mask of subtlety. They were the everyday miracles that made life worth living. But for every miracle on this planet, there was a curse, and the man standing before me was proof enough of that.

He reached for me again and I shirked away. "Don't touch me," I said firmly, glaring at him. "And I'm not going to your church. I want nothing to do with it. Or you."

"Is that so?" he challenged, a dark look coming into his eyes rather than the anger I had expected. In response to my defiance, I found something far more unsettling in his gaze.

Excitement.

He seemed to take my refusal as a challenge, and I got the feeling those were rare enough for the old priest.

He stepped closer, pinning me against the counter where I had only been cornered before. I felt a surge of panic rise up within me as he put his hands on his shoulders, and this time, his grip was tight enough that his nails dug

in, even through the fabric of my shirt. He was a lot stronger than he looked. So much stronger than me. "In any case, we'll see how long that defiance lasts."

I gasped in horror as he leaned in and attempted to press his lips to mine. I brought my arm up to block him, but in my attempt to break away, he ripped away that part of my shirt, revealing the joint beneath. I tried to cover it, but it was clear from the old man's shock that he had seen enough.

"What the devil?" he cried, lunging for me. I cried out in pain as he twisted my arm and tore my shirt the rest of the way, leaving bare the joint of my elbow and the faint outline of my chest plate in my side. He didn't have long to process his horror before Saro popped out of my pocket and lunged fiercely at him with an angry chitter.

The priest shouted in startled rage and swatted at the air as he stumbled back. "A demon!" he cried.

Saro darted away just before the priest could smash him against the wall, but his distraction lasted long enough for me to dart past Father Arezzo and make it to the other side of the kitchen.

"Don't come any closer!" I exclaimed, grabbing a knife off the block on the counter. Father Arezzo paused and seemed genuinely surprised by my response, but the anger I had expected earlier was soon to follow.

"You are the devil's child," he accused, but there was a hint of curiosity in his voice even then that infuriated me more than anything. The nerve of this man to come into our home and act this way...

His gaze traveled down my body even though I had tried my best to cover my joints with the tattered remnants of my shirt.

"What are you?" he hissed. "Some... cursed automaton that wretch brought to life for his own twisted pleasure?"

That seemed a rather hypocritical accusation, considering what he had just tried to do, but I was too stunned and horrified to respond properly right away.

Gustavo had made it known that the things we did behind closed doors wouldn't be accepted by most people who found out. Why people gave a damn whether two men found happiness in each other was beyond me. It seemed to be a particular peeve among the clergy, so the fact that this one was trying to force himself on me should have been a surprise, but it really wasn't. Another thing I had learned about humans was that their capacity for hypocrisy was infinite. It would have been impressive if it wasn't so sad.

Before I could do anything, I heard the sound of the door opening and Gustavo walked in. I froze, realizing how this looked with me brandishing a knife at the old priest. I was hesitant to lower it, though, considering I wasn't sure what the priest was capable of. Even in the presence of another.

"Father Arezzo," Gustavo said in a clipped tone that made his seething hatred for the other man clear enough, and judging from the way the priest was looking back at him, it was mutual.

The old man looked between us, as if he wasn't sure how to respond. He glanced back at the knife in my hand, and the fact that I hadn't sheathed it seemed to make his decision for him. He was outnumbered and he knew it. He was arrogant, but not quite foolhardy.

"It would seem there's been a misunderstanding," he said pointedly, smoothing down his robes. "Your apprentice is quite reactive."

I flinched as Gustavo turned to look at me, but there was no censure in his gaze. Not directed at me, at any rate. "He is an impeccable judge of character," he said pointedly. "I think you need to leave."

I could tell Father Arezzo was fuming, and I was waiting for him to come out and accuse Gustavo of the very thing he had so openly declared in front of me, but instead, he reluctantly took a step forward, hesitating until I gradually lowered the knife at my side. I kept a firm grip on it, though, ready to attack at the slightest provocation. I was protective of my master even if he didn't think he needed it, and perhaps he didn't. But with the whole town nearly poised against him, I had a right to be concerned.

Not a word was spoken until Father Arezzo left and Gustavo went to shut and lock the door, staring through the window until the priest was long out of sight. Only then did I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

Only then did I realize just how badly my hands were shaking as Gustavo gently pried the knife from them.

“Alessandro,” he said, gently taking my face in his hands. “What's wrong? What did he do?”

I couldn't bring myself to answer, but when Gustavo touched the tattered edge of my shirt, the anger in his eyes made it clear he had figured it out. “That bastard,” he seethed.

“He knows,” I choked out, hugging myself. “He knows what I am, or at least he... he thinks he does.”

I could hardly see through the tears in my eyes as Gustavo pulled me into his arms and held me close against his chest. “I don't give a damn what he thinks. I'll fucking break his neck.”

I sniffed, looking up at him. “Isn't that a sin?”

He snorted and wiped a tear off my cheek with the pad of his thumb. “I'm sure he's committed far worse. Did he hurt you?” he demanded, growing somber.

I shook my head slowly. “No. I think he wanted to, but Saro distracted him.”

“Saro?” Gustavo echoed, frowning.

I swallowed hard. That was one secret I had been keeping from my master, but there was no point in hiding it now.

“Come out,” I said quietly.

A moment later, the cricket crawled onto the counter, his antennae twitching and his body glowing faintly in the dim light. Gustavo's eyes widened, but he didn't react with the same horror as Father Arezzo had.

“Well,” he murmured. “So that's who you've been talking to.”

“I'm sorry,” I told him. “Mother sent him to keep an eye on me when you couldn't, and it said not to tell anyone about him.”

“Mother? I see,” Gustavo said with a heavy sigh. “Suppose someone’s got to do it.”

I smiled a little as Saro came over to me, and I held my hand out so he could hop onto it and skitter his way back into my pocket. “Father Arezzo thinks Saro is a demon.”

“Of course he does,” Gustavo muttered. “He sees them around every corner. He sees them everywhere except for the one looking back at him in the mirror. It’s about time someone sent him to hell.”

“Please don’t,” I pleaded, grabbing his arm. “Please don’t leave me.”

Not only did I not want to be alone right now, but I knew that if Gustavo did go after the priest in his rage, nothing good would come of it. Not when Father Arezzo had the entire village at his command.

Gustavo looked down at me and seemed to be warring with himself for a moment before he finally nodded. “All right,” he said quietly. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not leaving you home again without me at all. Cricket or no cricket.”

That, I wasn’t going to complain about. I buried my face in his chest and breathed in deeply of his scent. He held me close, and my body relaxed instinctively. All I wanted was to be with him here like this in our quiet little home on the outskirts of a mostly peaceful village. Was that really so much to ask?

“We’re not bothering anyone,” I mumbled into his shirt. “Why does he hate us so much?”

Gustavo was silent for a few moments, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he didn’t know how to answer or because he didn’t want to give the answer. “That’s just how people are sometimes,” he said at length. “I don’t know why any more than you do.”

Of all the things he had ever told me, that was the thing that scared me the most. Gustavo seemed so wise and knowledgeable about everything from plant medicine to the ways of the world, and the idea that something so close to our door was beyond even his ability to fathom frightened me more than words could say.

“You should get some rest,” he said, pulling away to look at me.

“What about the tinctures?” I asked. “I didn’t have the chance to finish before he came.”

“I’ll take care of them,” Gustavo said, leaning down to kiss my forehead. “Go on to bed and wait for me. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I nodded in relief. All of a sudden, the day—and especially the way it had ended—had taken its toll.

I watched as he went into the workshop to finish my chores and went up the stairs, deciding to stop in and check on the butterfly in my old room before I went to bed for the night. It wasn’t in its usual spot on the windowsill, and I felt a twinge of apprehension. I searched the room frantically and felt immense relief when I spotted a familiar dash of bright color across the room, resting in the moonlight on the nose of the wooden marionette that sat atop the bookshelf.

“What are you doing there?” I asked, walking over to it.

I froze when I saw that its healthy wing didn’t flutter like it usually did when it heard my voice, and as I grew closer, that strange, empty feeling Gustavo’s words and gentle touch had chased away came back with a vengeance.

The butterfly didn’t look any different, and if it weren’t for the fact that it wasn’t moving, I wouldn’t have known anything was amiss at all. I could still tell, even before I reached out and my finger accidentally brushed its papery wing, that my butterfly wasn’t in there anymore.

Not its soul.

Those big eyes and its one beautiful wing were now nothing more than an empty vessel.

I had never felt more alone than I did at that moment.

Fresh tears slipped down my face as I sank to my knees in front of the bookshelf and sobbed. I clamped a hand over my mouth to keep quiet

because I didn't want Gustavo to find me like this for a second time tonight,
so fragile and so broken.

Maybe that was all I'd be soon, too.

Just an empty vessel.

CHAPTER 18

GUSTAVO



*I*t had been weeks since Father Arezzo showed up at my home and attacked Alessandro. In that time, I had been given plenty of opportunity to contemplate my next move.

If it hadn't been for Alessandro's sake, revenge would have been the logical next step, and I still wasn't about to rule it out. The priest had crossed me often enough, and for enough years, but this was the final straw.

How dare he think he could come into my home and touch what was mine? And I was certain that the fact that Alessandro was mine was a huge part of the reason Arezzo wanted him in the first place.

I didn't even know where the enmity between us had begun, but I had an idea of how it would end if we stayed in this town. Of course, if that happened, there was no way I could protect Alessandro, and he deserved better than that. Not only did I have to worry about the priest, but it was only a few days' time until we would reach the Blue Fairy's deadline for him becoming a real human.

If what it said was true, then I had no doubt Alessandro would make the cut. It didn't stop me from feeling apprehension, and not just on his behalf.

I could no longer deny that my attachment to him was—just like him—greater than the sum of its parts. He was no longer a mere creation of wood and vellum to me, nor was he a cursed mockery of my attempts to bring back the dead. He was something so much more than that, not only to me, but in his own right. He was a person with thoughts and feelings.

If there had been any lingering doubts about that fact in my mind, that day I had found him unconscious in my workshop would have dissolved them. I never wanted him to feel that way again, so scared and helpless. I had stayed true to my word not to leave him for long ever since, even though it made things difficult. There were things in my line of work that I didn't want him exposed to, even if he wasn't as sensitive as most humans were. And I couldn't deny that the tone of things in the village had been far more tumultuous as of late. It would be naive to think that wouldn't affect him eventually.

The usual stares were icier, the whispers sharper, and people weren't bothering to hide the fact that they were wary of me, even as they asked me into their homes. The new sickness was far from what the plague had been, but it was ruthless in its own right. It had already claimed several lives, even though they could have likely been saved with earlier intervention.

I was always putting out fires, but never treating the source. People didn't call me until they were desperate, with a few notable exceptions, and the orphanage was one of them.

While I might not have cared for their brethren in the clergy, the nuns in charge of the orphanage ran a tight ship. They cared for the children in their charge, and Sister Maria was young and enthusiastic about her work. She truly cared for the orphans as if they were her own, and I couldn't help but be impressed by her relentless pursuit of a better life for the vulnerable souls the rest of the village's residents were more than content to forget.

"A penny for your thoughts, Doctor?" she asked as I came out of the sick room of the latest boy who had fallen ill. He was responding better to treatment than the others, and I had hope that he would make a full recovery. One silver lining in all this.

"They're not worth it, I assure you," I said, handing her a fresh set of vials. "You and the sisters have been faithful to his regiment. He has you to thank for his progress."

"We're only doing as you recommended," she said, taking the vials and slipping them into her pocket. "The work you do... it's a gift from God. And I appreciate it greatly."

I held my tongue and forced a smile. "I'm happy to be of assistance. Call me if any of them get worse," I said, heading toward the stairs.

Alessandro was waiting for me downstairs. I wasn't surprised when I could hear the sounds of him chatting with the children, followed by laughter. He was good with them. He had been depressed ever since his butterfly had died, and I was actually starting to think it was good for him to lift his spirits by being around others for a bit.

"Doctor, there's just one more thing," Sister Maria said.

I turned around to face her, taking in her nervous demeanor and the fact that she wasn't quite meeting my eyes. "What is it, Sister?"

She hesitated for a moment before answering, "I just feel the need to warn you. People are starting to talk."

I blew a puff of air through my nostrils. "People have been talking about me in this town for a long time."

"No," she said earnestly. "You don't understand. It's Father Arezzo... He claims that he saw your apprentice consorting with a demon the other night."

"A demon?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "He has quite an imagination."

She shook her head. "I'm not saying I believe it. Far from it, but it doesn't matter what I believe, or what's reality. It only matters what he says. What he says is law in Sevea, you know that."

I did. Better that I wanted to say. "Thank you for your words of warning," I said. "I'll be careful."

"It's not just that," she said, lowering her voice as she looked around the room. "He also thinks... Well, he's been telling people your apprentice is your lover."

It was hard to feign any semblance of surprise, and I wasn't sure it was worth bothering. That was just one more thing the priest could hang me over, but there was a long list, and it was a "sin" that he was more than guilty of himself. Hypocrites, all.

"This town does enjoy its rumors," I said dryly. "Unfortunately, once they begin, I'm not sure there's much that can be done about them."

"I'll pray for you," she said quietly. "Both of you."

I snorted. "Keep your prayers, sister. It's not an affliction I'm interested in curing."

"You misunderstand," she said quickly. "That's not what I meant. I... Have I ever told you why I entered the sisterhood?"

"No, I can't say you have," I replied. She didn't say much at all if it wasn't about the children. But then again, there wasn't a lot a country doctor and a nun had in common.

She gave a faint smile. "I was in love once, when I was very young. We grew up next door to each other, and spent all our time playing by the river. I'm not quite sure when friendship turned into something more, but it did. The summer nights were and are the best moments of my life. My most cherished memories."

"What happened to him?" I asked. I doubted the answer was anything good if she had chosen to take her vows of chastity rather than marriage.

"Her," she corrected, a nostalgic smile touching her lips. "She died. The plague, like so many others. When I lost her, I couldn't imagine ever loving another person again. At least not the way I loved her. It just didn't seem fair."

"I'm so sorry," I said, finding it even more difficult to hide my surprise. Mostly over the fact that she was speaking so openly to me.

"I tell you this so you understand that when I say I'll pray for you and your apprentice, it isn't the way you think," she said softly. "I have many regrets in my life, but loving her was not one of them. There is no doubt in my heart or mind that our love was a gift from God, and I believe yours to be the same. Love should always be cherished. Protected. My hope is that you two find lasting happiness together, even if it is far from here."

There was no mistaking the warning in her words, and I couldn't deny that she was a reliable source when it came to the current temperature in the

village toward me.

"I'm grateful, sister," I said, nodding to her. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do after all you've done for the children," she said, giving me a smile before she walked down the hallway.

When I made it back to the downstairs lobby, I found the children with their hands locked, running a ring around Alessandro as they sang one of their morbid little songs. He seemed mildly distressed, but amused as they broke away, laughing.

"All right, it's time to head home," I announced. "Unless I'm interrupting."

"Only some sort of ritual," Alessandro said dryly. "One I am more than eager to be saved from."

I couldn't help but chuckle. We went out to the carriage and I noticed Alessandro was strangely silent on the ride home.

"Are you all right?" I finally asked once we had pulled up in front of the house.

"I'm fine," he said quietly, even though somehow, I doubted it. I had gotten to know his moods and his intonations better than I ever had another. Even Cecelia. Then again, he and I had spent more concentrated time together this last year than I probably had in all my wasted years of being focused on work I thought was the highest priority in my life.

It wasn't a mistake I was keen to make again. Not with him. I was determined to cherish every moment we had left together.

Once we were inside, we parted ways, as we usually did each evening. Alessandro went to finish his mundane tasks around the house, while I worked on the more complicated elixirs that were still just beyond his comfort level to prepare. That would change soon, considering how fast he was learning. It wouldn't be long before he was more than capable in his own right. He had already far exceeded me in the art of gardening.

By the time I was finished with my work for the evening and had made it upstairs, he was already in bed, and I could tell he was in a melancholic

mood. It wasn't like him, and I found myself wondering just when he had gone from being so lively and carefree all the time to such a state of distress.

Maybe Sister Maria was right and leaving the village was the best thing. I had been thinking of doing it for a long time now, and while the timing certainly wasn't ideal with the anniversary of Alessandro coming into this world so close at hand, it was better than sitting here as targets for Father Arezzo and his campaign against me. Especially when he seemed to have shifted that target to my apprentice.

Was that what he was to me?

The idea alone struck my heart as absurd enough. I wasn't sure exactly when things had changed so drastically between us, but they certainly had. He had become so much more than a creation. More than an apprentice. More than a lover, even.

It was in that moment that I decided I would do whatever it took to keep him with me. To protect him. And I knew, without a doubt, I couldn't leave him alone in this world. Not even with the Blue Fairy. Not with anyone or anything. He was my responsibility, mine to care for, and mine to protect.

We had scarcely been in bed for a few minutes, with Alessandro cuddled up against my chest, when he looked up at me. "Something's been bothering you since we left the orphanage."

"Since when have you become so adept at reading my emotions?" I asked wryly.

He snorted. "Not as adept as I'd like."

I paused to consider how I wanted to answer his question. He deserved the truth, but how much of it? There was a fine line between not wanting to cause him any undue distress, and wanting him to be prepared for what lay ahead of us. Even if I wasn't quite sure what that was myself.

"I received a warning that Father Arezzo is plotting against us," I finally admitted.

"From Sister Maria?" he asked.

I nodded.

He seemed to be considering this for a moment before sighing softly. "I've caused you trouble."

I looked down at him, surprised by his response. "What?" I asked, frowning. "No, what would make you say that?"

"Because it's the truth," he answered, shrugging. "He saw Saro the other day. And I angered him."

"Listen to me," I said, taking his face in my hand, tilting his chin so he had no choice but to look at me. "You did nothing wrong. What happened is Father Arezzo's fault, and his alone."

"But he will still come after us," he said.

I sighed. "Maybe," I agreed. "Which is why I've been thinking of leaving this town."

"Leaving?" he asked, his head tilting up sharply. "But we can't leave. Your life is here. Your family, your friends, your work..."

"There is nothing here for me that's worth losing you," I told him. There was no mistaking the surprise on his face, and for a moment, he didn't seem to know how to respond.

He looked away, growing pensive once more. "In only three days, it will have been a year."

"Yes," I said, wondering where he was going with this. I'd been wondering when he was going to bring it up. "It will."

"I'm no closer to being human than I was back then," he continued. "You'd be giving up so much, and for what? A doll who might not even be here in three days' time?"

I frowned in response to his words. "You are so much more than that," I said, stroking my hand down his face to cup his chin. "And you grow more human every day."

"Mother said I won't be human until I understand what it is to love and be loved," he protested. "I haven't accomplished either of those things."

"No?" I challenged. "You cared for and nurtured a wounded butterfly most people wouldn't have given a second thought to. Not only that, but you grieved for it. And you carry it in your heart with you still. That's more love than the majority of people will ever feel for another human, let alone a helpless insect."

He tilted his head as if he hadn't considered that at all. "And yet I still don't know what it is to be loved."

"Yes, you do," I countered. "Your mother adores you. That's the purest form of love there is."

"It doesn't," he murmured. "Mother isn't human."

I smiled. "I don't think that matters, but if it does, you're covered on that account as well."

He frowned, tilting his head curiously. "What do you mean?"

I leaned in close, brushing my lips against his. "I love you, Alessandro," I said quietly. It might have taken me until that moment to fully process the depth of it, but I did. And now that I had accepted it, it was difficult to see how it had taken so long. How I hadn't seen it sooner.

"Gustavo," he breathed. He searched my face, his eyes widening.

I smiled. "It's the truth. To know you is to love you. And so I have no doubt that in three days' time, everything your mother said will be true."

"I..."

Before he could say anything else, I captured his lips once more, and he melted against me. His hands settled on either side of my face, and he leaned close, deepening the kiss.

Our kisses grew more passionate, and I felt Alessandro's body arching into me. I broke the kiss, leaning back slightly to look into his eyes. "I want to show you how much I love you," I said softly.

Alessandro's eyes widened, and he looked at me with a mixture of surprise and desire. "I want that, too," he whispered.

I kissed him once more before slowly moving down his body, caressing him with my lips and tongue as I undressed him. I could feel him trembling beneath me in anticipation as I grew closer to his hardening shaft. I took him into my hand and began to stroke him, relishing the way he groaned and arched his back.

"Alessandro," I murmured, looking up at him. "Do you trust me?"

He nodded, his eyes dark with desire. "Completely."

I smiled, lowering my head and taking him into my mouth. I worked him with my tongue, feeling him grow harder and harder beneath my ministrations. He moaned, his hands tangling in my hair as I took him deeper and deeper into my mouth.

I continued to work him, feeling him getting closer and closer to the edge. I knew when to pull back to keep him from going over, and reached into the drawer to get the bottle of lubricant I kept there. After slicking it over my fingers, I worked two fingers into him. It had once been all he could take to have one inside, but when he simply moaned in pleasure, I knew he was ready. But I had to be sure.

"Do you think you're ready?" I asked, letting his cock slip from my mouth.

There was heat in his gaze as he nodded eagerly. "Yes, I... I want you."

Those words were all I needed. I pulled my fingers out and began to work a fresh handful of lubricant onto my shaft. I pressed the head of my cock against his hole, and he moaned as I entered him. I began to thrust into him slowly, carefully.

He was so tight. I had anticipated that, considering it was the first time I had taken him this way, but it was another thing to feel it. My breath hitched as I took a moment for us both to breathe and adjust.

Once I felt ready, and he was a little more relaxed, I began to thrust more firmly into him. He moaned, his head falling back, and I kissed his neck, biting gently at the point where it met his shoulder.

He gasped, and I began to move faster, thrusting into him slowly and picking up the pace as my heart rate increased. I could feel him tensing around me, his breath growing shallow.

I knew he was close. He was right there, right on the edge, and I wanted to see him fall over it. I kissed his neck again, nipping at his flesh. It made him writhe even more, clenching around my shaft to the point where holding off was unbearable, but I didn't want to finish first.

"Alessandro," I whispered in his ear. "Come for me."

He moaned, thrusting back against me, and I felt his pleasure course through him. He was coming, and I was close behind. I slipped my hand around his hard cock as it slapped against his flat stomach and began to stroke him gently.

I could feel him shudder and jerk beneath me as he rode out his orgasm. His breath was coming harder now, matching mine beat for beat as we entered a state of pure ecstasy together.

"That's it," I whispered. "Good boy."

"I'm going to come," he panted. "I... Gustavo!"

He cried out as his body quaked. I thrust into him once more and followed him into ecstasy, filling him with my seed. The feeling of my orgasm was so intense that I collapsed on top of him, burying my face against his shoulder. Our heavy breathing filled the room as we lay there in a state of bliss.

I could feel him quivering against me, and I ran my hand through his damp hair. That was new. Even his skin felt dewy with a thin sheen of exertion as I held him.

I held him for a long time, simply basking in the afterglow. Finally, I rolled over, pulling him with me without pulling out of him. The two of us lay there, simply getting our breath back. He snuggled up to me, resting his head against my chest. I wrapped an arm around him and held him closer.

He was perfect. So perfect.

"Gustavo?" he asked, his voice muffled.

"Mhmm?"

"I'm so glad I found you."

As simple as his words were, there was no mistaking the emotion behind them.

"So am I," I said softly.

And I was. Enough to leave everything behind to keep him safe. To keep him with me forever.

CHAPTER 19

ALESSANDRO



While I usually slept soundly in Gustavo's arms, I lay awake that night for many hours, trying to get to sleep. My decision had been made, and that should have brought me rest, but it didn't.

The thought of leaving him simply filled me with a different kind of dread, even if I had become convinced it was the only way to solve his problems. Problems that I had caused, no matter whether he wanted to admit it or not.

He said he loved me.

I believed that, if only because it was the only explanation for why he was willing to give up everything in order to protect me. And even though I couldn't say the words to him last night, I loved him enough that I couldn't allow him to do it.

Enough that I was going to run away before he had the chance, because I knew Gustavo was the kind of man who would walk through hell itself in order to protect the people he loved. My very existence in this world was proof enough of that.

As I crept out of bed and went back to my old room to pack a few things for the journey, Saro chirped angrily at me.

"I know," I said in a hoarse whisper, gently brushing him off my shoulder as I packed my bag. "But sometimes you have to do the wrong thing in order to do the right thing."

He gave a few indignant chirps of disagreement, popping up and down on the counter.

"I know it doesn't make sense," I said with a sigh. "But nothing about humans makes sense. That's how I know it's true."

He gave a few more dubious chirps before I snatched him up and shoved him into my pocket. I was trying to get along with him better, considering he was only trying to help, but the last thing I needed was him waking Gustavo before I even had the chance to leave.

The garden was silent as I made my latest escape, for very different reasons than all the times I had run out before. Even the flowers seemed to be giving me the silent treatment in response to my impending betrayal.

I went over to the greenhouse and walked through slowly, even though it was a risk. Every moment I lingered raised the chance that Gustavo would catch me. I brushed my hands against the leaves and petals of the plants I had tended to so faithfully over the last many months. I felt a twinge of guilt, knowing I'd be leaving them behind as well.

It wasn't anything compared to the guilt I felt for even thinking about leaving Gustavo, though. But what choice did I really have? If I stayed, he was going to be putting himself in danger because of me.

He might die because of me, and as uncertain as my fate beyond the confines of the haven we shared was, the one thing I feared more than leaving him was losing him.

I made one last stop at the butterfly's grave, taking the flowers I had hand-picked with me. They were always its favorite to sit on in my window, so I figured they were a good choice.

If only it were so easy to say goodbye to Gustavo. Something told me a thousand years wouldn't have been enough for me to feel anything resembling closure where he was concerned.

I took one last look back at the cabin we had shared for one blissful year and forced myself to walk away from the only place that had ever truly felt like home.

This was the right thing, no matter how wrong it felt. No matter what the cricket on my shoulder thought.

If Gustavo was right and I really had become a human during the course of my time with him, then surely this was the most human thing I could do. Sacrificing what I wanted for someone I loved.

Sometimes I hated being human. Or at least, as close to it as I was capable of being.

And if Gustavo was wrong and I wasn't really human at all, I didn't want him to watch me turn back into wood and vellum. I didn't want him to think he was to blame for his creation's failure to become fully realized. Most of all, I didn't want him to remember me that way. I needed to be real, even if it was only in his heart.

Of course, the further away I got from the cabin, the less I knew what to do with myself. Who was I outside of Gustavo? What was I if I was neither human nor his creation?

I was fae. Logically, I knew that was the word that defined my existence, but even that seemed to hold only a nebulous meaning.

I was halfway toward the path leading out of town, taking a shortcut through the woods behind the cabin. There was always the chance I would run into someone from town, but they would just think I was out running an early morning errand or collecting herbs for him. The townsfolk seemed to have gotten more or less used to my presence, even if I could tell a particularly perceptive subset of them was uncomfortable around me for reasons even they didn't seem to fully understand.

I wondered if the way I felt around Father Arezzo was how those humans felt around me. Uneasy. Cornered. Even though I had no intention of harming them, I seemed to make them feel unsettled all the same.

What would happen to me if I did stay with Gustavo? Even if I were human, could we ever truly be accepted in his village as two men who wanted to share their lives together?

These were the kinds of questions that kept me up at night as of late, and for all my endless worrying and pondering, I was never any closer to the

answers to those questions, either.

I froze when I heard something rustling in the woods up ahead. At first, I thought it was a person, but then I realized the sound was much too small. I breathed a sigh of relief and felt like a fool when I saw the hare darting past, at least until I heard footsteps on the path below the hill and realized it was running from something.

Someone.

Humans were always a much greater threat than animals. That was something Gustavo had taught me, and like most of his lessons, I'd come to realize he was right.

There were footsteps. An entire herd's worth of them, and when I heard men arguing, I ducked into the brush to watch them come around the bend through the clearing in the trees below. I raised a finger to my lips to silence Saro as he hopped onto my shoulder to watch them alongside me.

There were several men carrying torches to light their way in the early morning haze. It was still foggy this time of morning, especially this far out in the woods. I realized there were nearly a dozen others beyond them, each carrying some form of weapon. Some carried knives, others farming implements, one an actual sword.

I stared in dismay, forcing myself to be as quiet and still as possible, and listened.

"I don't know about going in there," one of the men with a torch muttered. "You heard what the father said about the doctor working with demons. What if he sees us coming?"

"Cowards deserve a hotter place in hell," said the man next to him.

The man who had spoken first snorted. "Yeah, but it takes them longer to get there."

So this was it. They were going to attack Gustavo because the priest told them to.

Because of me.

Rage and fear washed over me as I prepared to turn back toward the house. Gustavo would be confused that I had left, and hurt once he realized why, but there was still time. If I could just reach him to warn him, we could make it out of here before those terrible humans had their way.

I was about to turn and head back the way I had come when someone grabbed me from behind. Saro didn't give me any warning, and when I saw the blue hand on my shoulder, I realized why.

"Mother?" I whispered, turning around to face the larger fae. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come for you," it answered. "We must leave. Now."

"I can't," I protested, stepping back out of its grasp. "Those men... they're after Gustavo. I have to warn him. I—"

"I know," it interrupted calmly. "But there isn't time. We must go."

"No!" I cried, sidestepping as Mother tried to reach for me. "I'm not leaving him!"

The older fae gave me a weary look, but rather than reach for me again, it reached into the pocket of its strange blue cloak and pulled out a handful of what looked like tiny shimmering diamonds sitting in the middle of its palm. Before I could process what was happening, it blew onto the shimmering dust, causing it all to fly up into my face.

I coughed, stumbling backward. I had barely caught my footing when everything in the world seemed to tilt slightly and I stumbled forward. The fae caught me gently, lifting me into arms that were stronger than they had any right to be by all appearances.

"Sleep, my darling," Mother said in a gentle tone that grew strange and echoic, as if it were coming from underwater.

My attempts to struggle proved futile as all the strength faded from me, and it was taking all my willpower just to keep my eyes open. Soon, I couldn't even manage that.

The last thought in my mind right before I succumbed to sleep was Gustavo. I had to warn him.

I had to...

CHAPTER 20

GUSTAVO



When I woke up and Alessandro wasn't there, I didn't think anything of it at first. It was rare for him to wake up before I did, but he had been going above and beyond lately, tending to the household chores and helping me get together the many tinctures I was slinging now that yet another illness was working its way through the village. Sometimes I worried he was going to overwork himself, but I couldn't deny I appreciated the help.

When I arrived downstairs and didn't smell the familiar aroma of breakfast—often burned, but breakfast nonetheless—cooking on the stove, I grew worried.

He wasn't in the workshop, or his old room, or in the garden outside, and it wasn't like him to run off anymore. I wasn't sure when he had left behind his mischievous streak, but I only realized I had come to trust him when my immediate assumption wasn't that he had run off again to get himself in trouble, but rather that something had happened to him.

Something had to be wrong.

I was about to venture beyond the garden when I heard the sounds of movement not far ahead and realized the entire place was surrounded by lit torches.

I recognized most of the men who had gathered with their pitchforks and other rudimentary weapons. Only a couple of them were actually soldiers who had defended the village in times of past conflict, but their numbers

were more than enough to make up for a lack of experience or decent weaponry.

And I was a doctor who lived in the woods alone, unarmed, so it didn't matter much anyway.

There was no use running when they caught sight of me the next moment and had me surrounded. Even though I didn't see any sign of their leader yet, there was no great mystery as to who had sent them.

"Stay there, Doctor," the nearest one ordered, raising the blade in his hands. "Not a step closer—and keep your hands where we can see them."

He was a soldier, all right. I had treated his wounds not long ago. "You once defended this village from invaders," I remarked, slowly lifting my hands. The one nearest him jumped as if I might unleash some incantation to send them all flying. And if I had any such ability, I might have been sorely tempted. "Now you fight Father Arezzo's imaginary wars?"

The soldier's eyes narrowed. "We've been instructed to bring you to the church," he said. "Come along with us, and there's no need for this to get violent."

I couldn't help but laugh, as suicidal as the impulse probably was.

"Of course you have. Lead the way, then."

There was no point in resisting when I couldn't physically hold them off. And the sooner I got them out of here, the less chance they would have of finding Alessandro once he got back from wherever it was he had gone off to. I had never been more grateful for his defiance. Of course, there was another possibility that occurred to me.

What if Father Arezzo had him already?

No... he was too clever for that, and he knew the danger the old priest posed to him. For all I knew, he had been outside tending the garden when they arrived, and that was what had sent him running.

The thought was enough of a relief that I was going to cling to it until I had reason to do otherwise. All I could do was hope that if that was the case, he

had gotten as far away as possible, and that he would stay that way.

Sooner or later, the Blue Fairy would find him and keep him safe. It had to. It was always watching, and I had never been more grateful for that fact.

"Not just yet," said the soldier. "Go search inside the house. Find the demon," he ordered.

The men he had spoken to hesitated, looking at the house like it was the entrance to hell itself. I couldn't say I blamed them, considering the nature of that order. I wasn't about to tell them otherwise, either.

I clenched my jaw, keeping silent because I knew any protest was just going to convince them that there was something to find.

When they went inside and returned a few minutes later, the one to the right shook his head. "There's nothing in there."

The soldier narrowed his eyes, turning toward me. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"Who?" I asked innocently.

I could tell from the glower on his face that he wasn't buying it. "Your apprentice," he growled. "And the demon. Where are they?"

"I am sure I have no idea what you're talking about," I told him. "But if you take me to Father Arezzo, I am certain we can get this sorted out."

His eyes narrowed, and I could tell he was trying to decide whether or not to call my bluff. In the end, he just nodded to the others. "Let the priest sort it out," he grunted. "We'll deal with the house later."

Much to my relief, they tied my arms behind my back and started marching me in the direction of town. I kept my eyes peeled on the woods without giving away where I was looking just in case Alessandro happened to be watching from a distance. I was at once relieved and worried there was no sight of him.

The journey to the church was longer than I remembered, but then again, it had been a long damn time since I had stepped foot inside it willingly.

As I approached the building, surrounded by Father Arezzo's men, I found myself cursing the fact that I hadn't gotten us both out of here long before.

I should have seen the signs. Maybe it was nostalgia, or lingering guilt on Cecelia's behalf, but I regretted it all the same. I had already failed her and our son, and now, I might stand to lose someone else I loved because of my own stubbornness.

My own negligence.

There was no sign of Father Arezzo inside, but that came as no surprise. He was the kind of man who preferred to have other people do his dirty work, and when he was face-to-face with someone who could best him, he was nowhere to be found. That day he had come to the house when I was gone had been proof enough of that.

They threw me in a cell in the dungeon beneath the church, and while I had always known it was there, under the auspices of keeping the town safe from lawbreakers—which just so happened to be anyone the priest felt had crossed or offended him somehow—seeing it was another matter. And being imprisoned in it was entirely different.

It was hours before anyone came, and the only thing keeping me from asking after Alessandro was the knowledge that I would simply be placing a bigger target on his head. I could tell from the whispers of the guards who came in every now and then that they hadn't found him yet, and all I could do was hope desperately that he stayed hidden.

Clever fellow.

Or perhaps the Blue Fairy had witnessed my predicament and spirited him away. The thought filled me with a different kind of trepidation, because I was far from trusting of the otherworldly creature as it was. Nonetheless, I had to acknowledge that it did seem to have Alessandro's best interest at heart. Hopefully he listened to it better than he did with me.

In the hours that I had passed with nothing to keep me company but my own tortured thoughts, it was the thought of never seeing him again, not dying itself, that frightened me.

At one point, I had longed for death, for it meant I might reunite with my wife and son. The realization that, at some point, I had stopped feeling that way was difficult to see as anything other than a betrayal.

But then, knowing Cecelia, Antonia was right. That wasn't what she would've wanted. She would've wanted me to move on and to find some semblance of joy in this life, even if it meant finding joy without her.

Granted, I doubted she could have imagined the form that joy would've taken, but she would have wanted it all the same.

I was the one who had condemned myself to a fate of misery and isolation all these years. It figured that just when I had finally allowed myself to entertain the prospect of something else, that, too, would be taken away from me.

The melancholy I felt wasn't on my own account, though, or even over the thought of what might've been. It was the thought of leaving Alessandro behind. The thought that he might assume I had abandoned him.

When at last the door opened upstairs and I heard footsteps too small to be Father Arezzo's or one of the guards, I assumed they had sent their prisoner food and water. And indeed, the woman who came down the steps was bearing a loaf of bread and a flask, but I certainly wasn't expecting the messenger.

"Sister Maria," I said, walking over to the bars to greet her. "What are you doing here?"

"I tried to warn you," she said with a weary smile. "You just wouldn't listen, would you?"

"Timely as your warning was, I'm afraid I didn't act on it quite quickly enough," I admitted. "This is a fact I can assure you I have come to regret."

She sighed softly. "I didn't come here to tell you I told you so." She glanced upstairs, and I could hear the floorboards creaking above us. "Services are about to begin, so we have a bit of time before they notice I'm gone, but not much."

I knew she was taking a grave risk by speaking with me at all, and for that, I was grateful. "Have you seen Alessandro?" I asked urgently, voicing the preeminent question on my mind.

She frowned. "No, I haven't," she answered. "I assumed you knew where he was. They were looking for him all night. They hope to use him to prove their case."

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. So he had managed to stay hidden overnight. He had more survival instinct than I gave him credit for. "That's good," I murmured. "I suppose that's all the good news you have to offer, though."

The look on her face spoke volumes. "They're going to try you for witchcraft, Doctor."

"Is that all?" I asked dryly. "I imagined my list of crimes would be much longer than that."

"You laugh, but Father Arezzo will be the judge and jury on this so-called trial," she warned. "There is no justice to be found in it."

"Of course there isn't," I sighed. "I would expect nothing less from Father Arezzo."

"Sadly, neither would I," she said, looking away. "We must find a way to get you out of here before it's too late."

"I won't have a nun risking her life on my account," I said pointedly. "That's the one sin I haven't added to my conscience."

She gave me a look. "Your stubbornness is what got you into this mess, and you're not in much of a position to turn down help."

I chuckled. "No, I suppose I'm not. Tell me, does that offer of prayer still apply?"

"Always," she said, a faint smile on her lips. "If I didn't know better, I would think you sounded like a man of faith."

"Well, I suppose stranger things have happened."

At this point, if it meant finding my way back to Alessandro, I was willing to try just about anything.

CHAPTER 21

ALESSANDRO



When I opened my eyes, I was laying in an unfamiliar bed beside a shuttered window with streaks of pale blue peeking through the slats. It took me a moment to make sense of where I was and how I'd gotten to this new place, at least until the memories of the men in the woods came back, followed by Mother and the strange blue dust.

I sat up sharply with a gasp, looking around the room, and sure enough, there was the tall blue fae sitting in a wooden chair across the room.

"You're awake," Mother said in a familiar, serene voice, folding its hands in its lap. "You were asleep for quite some time."

"How long?" I demanded.

"Long enough that by the stroke of midnight tonight, we will learn whether your time here has been successful," it answered cryptically.

I frowned, sitting up slowly since any movement made the room spin. "You mean whether I've become a real human or not."

Mother gave a solemn nod.

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. They've captured Gustavo. We have to help him."

For such an unchanging collective of features, its face managed to betray a wealth of complexity and emotion. At the moment, chief among them was guilt.

"I'm sorry," it said quietly. "I'm afraid I'm not powerful enough in this realm to do anything for him."

"Then let me go," I pleaded, standing for a moment only to find my legs too weak. Mother hadn't been exaggerating about how long I must've been unconscious, which just worsened my panic. "They'll kill him. I can't leave him!"

"And yet, it looked like that was exactly what you were going to do when I found you," it challenged.

I winced. "You don't understand."

"Then enlighten me," it said patiently.

I glanced at the door, but in my current state, there was no way I could make it past the other fae—and even if I could, I doubted I was going to make it much further in my current state. Even though I was awake now, I felt a familiar heaviness in my limbs, with darkness ebbing in around the edges of my vision. I doubted it was all the result of the blue dust. I was away from Gustavo, and losing energy quickly.

I wouldn't even be able to make the trip back into the village. The nearest inn was at least a couple hours' walk from our home.

"I had to leave," I said. "Gustavo was going to run away with me because of that awful priest. Father Arezzo knows what I am, or he thinks he does, and he means to turn the whole village against Gustavo."

"I see," it said thoughtfully. "Well, then it's a good thing I found you when I did. There's no reason for you both to die."

"You don't understand!" I cried in frustration. We may have shared blood, and we may have been the same species, but there was no way the creature in front of me could understand what I was feeling if it thought I could just simply walk away with my life if it meant forfeiting his. "I won't leave him. I *can't*."

"Even if it costs you your life?" Mother challenged. "You would die for a human? You would surrender your life so carelessly?"

"Yes!" I cried without hesitation. "Of course I would. For him, I would do it a thousand times over."

"Why?" it asked, tilting its head slightly as if my answer perplexed it.

I didn't answer for a moment, because the words on the tip of my tongue were finally the answer to the question that had plagued me up until that moment.

"Because I love him."

It seemed so obvious now, in retrospect, and so painfully simple. Almost comical, really.

"I see," Mother said thoughtfully. "And how do you know that it is love?"

I hesitated, trying to find a way to describe the thing that I simply knew. And yet, I knew it on the deepest level. As surely as I knew myself, and whatever existed of myself that there was to know, it was bound up in this strange, nebulous concept humans called love.

"Because it's... freedom," I answered. "It's sunlight on your face, and the wind tickling your skin. I may never be human, but it doesn't matter. I don't need to be. I'm in love, and love is worth dying for."

The fae listened quietly, a hint of a smile on its lips. "Yes," it said softly. "It certainly is. And that answers my question."

"What question?" I asked warily.

"Whether you've become human or not," it said. "Whether you truly understand what it is to love and to be loved, for these are the most fundamental experiences of being human."

I listened intently, feeling hope swell within me for the first time since they had taken Gustavo. "You really think I can become a human tonight?"

"I know you can," it answered. "But there's just one more thing."

I watched in confusion as Mother walked over to the edge of the bed, kneeling down in front of me. It was so tall that it still towered over me on its knees. "Unbutton your shirt."

I looked down at my rumpled clothing, confused, but I did as it said. When it reached to unhook the latch sealing my chest panel in place, I flinched. Not because it hurt, but because it was an unwelcome reminder of just how far from human I still was, no matter what Mother or Gustavo had to say about the matter.

The panel opened with a creak, and my eyes widened as I saw the faint shimmering blue orb hovering freely within my chest. Even if I'd had the stomach or the curiosity to open the panel sooner, I wouldn't have been prepared for the sight of *that*.

"What is that?" I asked, torn between horror and fascination.

"That is your soul," Mother answered, its voice a reverent whisper. "What's left of it. A fragile, strange thing, isn't it?"

"It's... fading," I murmured, watching it flicker like a candle about to go out.

"Yes," it answered. "Being in this realm without a proper vessel takes its toll. There's so little left that at this rate, you likely wouldn't survive the transformation for very long. We would barely make it back to the realm of the fae in time."

My chest seized up in terror as if an actual heart could beat within it. The imagination was more mischievous than any fae ever dreamed of being.

"But I can't leave!" I cried.

"I know," it said softly. "You won't have to."

I watched in even greater confusion as it reached into the front of its elegant robes and pressed the tips of its sharpened nails against the base of its breastbone. A horrified cry tore from my throat as it dug into its own flesh, grimacing in pain as it withdrew a blue orb that looked like the one hidden inside my chest panel, but a good deal brighter.

"What are you doing?" I cried in dismay.

"There should be just enough left to get you through the transformation," it said, gazing down at the orb hovering above its palm. Its voice sounded

frail and weak. Nothing like before.

"No!" I shouted, shaking my head. "Don't you need that to live?"

Mother gave me a soft smile. "My dear, a parent's heart belongs to their child. I've lived a long life that makes even the most ancient of trees in this world look like fledgling sprouts in comparison. I came here because losing you is the one thing I could not bear. I wanted to give you a chance to live as fully as I have, and I've done that."

Tears slid down my cheeks as I realized the full gravity of what it was saying. What it had done. For me. "I don't want to lose you, either."

"Oh, my darling." It reached out to stroke my cheek. I felt the shimmering warmth of its hand resting against my skin and leaned into it. "You won't. I'll always be with you. Right in here," it said as the blue orb gently lifted into the air and floated into the space within my chest. I watched as it merged with the smaller blue orb that was my own and gasped as I felt a fresh surge of warmth wash over me. My skin shimmered and turned blue for a moment before the iridescent glow finally faded and the panel sealed back into place.

I had barely looked up to face Mother when I realized the other fae was beginning to shimmer as well. A moment later, I saw that the shadows of its flesh beneath the glow were growing lighter, as it began to dissolve into the same shimmering dust that danced around my skin.

Tears were coursing freely down my cheeks now as I watched the fae before me gradually fade away, becoming a million tiny, shimmering particles. The last thing to fade away entirely was that serene smile, and I watched as the blue dust danced around me, sifting through my hair and across my skin in one last gentle caress before the dust swirled out the open window and headed for the open sky.

The dust seemed to merge with the shimmering stars, joining the constellations before it faded entirely from view, and as I stood there watching, I felt a bittersweet ache in my chest along with the all-too-familiar sensation of shutting down, just like before.

This time, the fear that gripped me was of a different nature. It wasn't just the fear of not waking up again. I barely managed to make it over to the window before sinking to my knees, succumbing to the heaviness.

As I gazed up at the moonlight, comforted only by the fact that I was still beneath the same moon as the man I loved, I held him in my heart and mind fiercely, like I was clinging to a lifesaver in the midst of a stormy sea.

All I could do was pray that somehow, when I woke up, I would be human enough to find my way back to him. Or that I wouldn't wake up at all.

CHAPTER 22

ALESSANDRO



I opened my eyes once more to find myself in the same inn as before, but Mother was nowhere to be seen. I still felt a dull ache in my chest at the thought of what my parent had done for me, and for Gustavo. I was determined not to let that sacrifice go to waste.

When I looked down at my hands, what I found shocked me. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, exactly, considering the fact that if I had woken up at all, I *had* to be human, but I wasn't expecting fully jointless fingers and wrists. My skin was smooth and soft and warm. I rolled up my sleeves and realized there were no joints on my elbows and shoulders, either. Or anywhere, for that matter. Even my chest panel was gone.

It had finally happened.

I was *human*.

A real human, with skin and bones and...

I brought my hand to my chest and felt my heart leap within it for the very first time. A beating heart!

It all felt so surreal, but there was no time to dwell on it. Not as long as Gustavo was still out there at Father Arezzo's mercy.

I left the room and went straight to the main lobby of the inn. I still had no idea how far out I was from the village. As soon as the scent of stew brewing by the stove hit my nostrils, my stomach growled in protest.

I had eaten plenty of times before, because that was what people did, but I had never felt hunger so acutely, and I doubted it was just a matter of how long it had been since I last had sustenance. Even the smell of food and the warmth of the fire flickering in the hearth across the room seemed more intense. Sharper. It was all so overwhelming, it was going to take some time to get used to, but time was one thing I didn't have right now.

After asking the bartender for directions and using the coins in my pocket to purchase a loaf of bread for the journey, since Sevea was a good two hours away by foot, I set out for the church. I had all but forgotten Saro, and I'd assumed in sadness that he had gone to be with Mother when I heard a familiar chirp from within my breast pocket that nearly made me jump out of my skin.

"Saro," I scolded half-heartedly as the insect jumped onto the tip of my finger. "You can't do that! I'm human now. You could scare me to death."

He chirped an apologetic tone and popped up onto my shoulder, turning to my right quite enthusiastically.

I frowned. "What is it, you silly little bug?" I asked. When he merely chirped and rubbed his antennae in the direction he was facing, I sighed and walked forward. "You'd better not be leading me astray. I have to find Gustavo."

He just chirped insistently until I reached the edge of the smaller road and saw the carriage pulled over by the side of it. There was an older man kneeling next to the right rear wheel of the carriage, and I could tell from the look on his face and the sweat drenching his hair that he was having a devil of a time with whatever he was doing.

"Excuse me?" I called, approaching him. "Are you all right?"

The man looked up and seemed startled, but when his gaze settled on me, he relaxed. "Well, you look like a strong fellow. I'm afraid my wheel's gone into the mud. Perhaps you'd care to help me out?"

I hesitated, looking down at the carriage. I really didn't have time for this, but it didn't look to be that badly stuck. The man was older and definitely

on the frailer side, so he would probably be here for hours, if not longer, if I didn't help.

I walked over and gave the side of the carriage a push, surprised when it moved much easier than I had expected.

Then again, I was no longer wood bound together with fragile mechanisms. I was human, and more than robust enough for the job. Another shove and I managed to push the carriage back into its proper place on the road.

"There," I said with a sigh of relief. "All set."

"Thank you!" he cried in a jovial tone. "You have no idea how grateful I am. Here, let me repay you," he said, reaching into his pocket for a few silver coins.

"That's all right, sir," I said, looking down as Saro burrowed into my shirt, chirping incessantly. The man tilted his head slightly, but he didn't say anything about it. And then the idea occurred to me. "I don't need your coin, but would you be able to give me a ride?"

"A ride?" he asked. "I suppose that depends on where you're going."

"I'm going to Sevea," I answered, giving him the look that always seemed to work on Gustavo.

He blinked, seeming a bit flustered. "Well, it's a bit out of my way, but I certainly owe you. Hop on in."

"Thank you so much," I breathed, climbing into the carriage next to him.

Well, that was going to make matters easier. Now I just had to hope I wasn't too late.

CHAPTER 23

GUSTAVO



*I*t had been a full two days since my capture, and despite Sister Maria's best attempts, I still hadn't been able to escape.

When midnight came and went, all I could think about was Alessandro out there, hopefully not on his own, but I had no real way of knowing what had happened to him. Or whether his absence had anything to do with the Blue Fairy.

All I could do was hope that he was somewhere far from here, and while I could tell the fact that Father Arezzo's men hadn't been able to find him was infuriating the old priest, he couldn't wait for my trial forever.

After all, a man did have rights, however tentative they might be, and however easily waved away they were by a self-appointed holy man's whims.

The trial turned out to be every bit as absurd as the nun had warned me it would be. The only witnesses were the men and women of the village Father Arezzo had either strong-armed or manipulated into appearing. Chief among them were the Bianchi family, and although the daughter and mother hung their heads in shame, as if they despised their presence in the matter, the husband was more than eager to blame me for their son's untimely demise.

As a father who had lost a child as well, I couldn't even say I blamed him. It was easier than blaming himself, and I knew well what guilt could do to the

human psyche. It could hollow a man out and make him nothing more than a husk of his former self.

I doubted he would find his role in this charade to be of any more comfort than all my dabbling in the black arts had been, but each man had his own journey.

Even if his might well be the end of mine.

Not that Father Arezzo needed any credible witness to substantiate the guilty verdict he himself had already decided on long before this trial was orchestrated.

The old man sat on his throne at the head of the room, surrounded by the council of village elders. Most of them were villagers I had treated at some point or another. A few even had family members who were only still drawing breath due to my care, and they seemed to be the ones who had the most difficulty meeting my eyes.

Borza, Antonia, Evangelista, and Paolo were in attendance in the back rows, and while Evangelista had been sobbing through most of the sordid affair, Antonia's eyes were red as if she had done all her crying the night before.

They were all prepared to say goodbye to me. They were the only reasons I had stuck around town for as long as I had, save for my dead wife's memory, and now, they were the only people willing to stand by my side.

Soon, as the final verdict was due to be read, they would be the final witnesses to my impending execution. Father Arezzo hadn't even read the verdict yet, but every last soul in the courtroom already knew what it would be, myself included.

"After taking into consideration the testimony provided during these proceedings, I will now announce my verdict," the priest said, casting a shrewd glance over everyone in the courtroom, as if to remind them of just who held the keys to their fate, should they ever end up flaunting his authority as I had done. "The defendant is guilty of grave crimes against God and man, including but not limited to witchcraft, consulting with the devil, and engaging with a demon in matters of the flesh."

The witchcraft, he had more or less been able to prove with the testimonies of my patients, considering how broad the definition was—but that last one, he had never even bothered to provide evidence for that wasn't from hearsay or tongues wagging.

Of course, it was true enough, aside from the demon part, but something told me Arezzo and the others wouldn't take any consolation in the fact that I had been sleeping with a male fae rather than a demon. Or even see a difference.

The thought was more amusing than it should have been, and yet, despite my current circumstances, I didn't regret a moment of it.

For years, I had existed in a half-alive state, too stubborn to die and too much of a coward to live. And I had managed to convince myself that it was all for their benefit. For Cecelia and Phineas.

I had managed to take all my grief and all my guilt over not making the most of them while they were in my life, and turned it into a driving force to fuel my work. Work that had—as I could only bring myself to accept now that it was all so close to being over—accomplished nothing more than betraying their memories. Distorting and perverting them.

Even if I could find a way to bring them back, it would be for me.

Not for them.

It was a strange kind of irony that I had finally come to embrace the idea that Cecelia and Phineas were in a better place here of all places, in this den of injustice masquerading as a house of God.

I believed in Father Arezzo's version of the world less now than I ever had, if possible, but I had seen things that couldn't be explained away by the science I had staked my life and my very soul on for so long. And I had made my peace with that. I had seen the most terrible things this world had to offer, and I had glimpsed the promises and temptations of the next as well.

Then I had given my heart to one of them, and if nothing else, Alessandro was proof that there were many things that defied logic and rationality. In many cases, the very things that made life worth living.

The spark of a lover. The devotion of a parent to a child. The indefinable, indomitable thing that made the human soul keep on long after the body should have given out, by all objective measures. The thing that made a man capable of looking into the face of death, fearing not what lay ahead for him but for who he was leaving behind.

My only regret was that it had taken me this long to finally understand it all. I regretted that I had gotten so little time to spend with Alessandro, but in this last year, I had lived more with him than I had in so long.

"This is ridiculous!" Borza cried, shattering the stunned silence of the courtroom.

I looked up, shocked at my friend's outburst, considering his wife was with him. There was no mistaking the rage in his eyes as he seethed, looking right at Father Arezzo like the fearless son of a bitch he was.

"He is guilty of nothing but treating the people the Church can't help, and you know it," Borza growled.

Scandalous murmurs rose up around the room until Father Arezzo raised a hand. "Silence!" he bellowed, giving Borza a murderous look. "One more word out of you, and you'll hang with him."

Borza grit his teeth, and I could tell he wanted to say more, but Evangelista grabbed his arm and gave him a pleading look. He reluctantly sat back down next to her, to my relief. The last thing I wanted was for my oldest friend to leave his wife a widow on my account.

"You have not seen what I've seen," Father Arezzo continued, looking pointedly at me. "The devil's workshop, filled with herbs and plants and all manner of ungodly potions and poisons."

"Poisons," I scoffed, because what was the point in holding my tongue? He was going to kill me anyway. "The difference between poison and medicine has always been a matter of dosage, Father. But you would know that as well as anyone, wouldn't you? You spew it on a weekly basis."

The old man was simmering, but he continued. "And that *thing* you consort with," he said, his voice dripping with an impressive level of disgust for someone who had been unable to keep his hands off my apprentice so

recently. "Its flesh was covered in ridges just like the joints of those dolls in your workshop. And I found another in the upstairs bedroom. A marionette. No doubt a poppet for black works. There's no telling which of you is sick because this heathen has been performing occult rituals on your likenesses!" he exclaimed, pointing at me in accusation.

That caused another wave of murmurs to rise up around the room. I could tell his words were taking hold even with some of the more skeptical members of the audience. He must have saved his revelations about Alessandro for last for a reason.

And it was an audience, there was no doubt about that. After all, this entire thing was a spectacle. Nothing more than a play, however deadly it turned out to be.

"Is that the cause of the sickness?" a woman cried from the back of the room. I recognized her as one of the regulars who came for my sleeping tinctures. Funny, she hadn't had any compunctions about "magic" then.

"Very likely so, Sister," Father Arezzo said in a somber tone. "You've all been remiss, and a crueller man might wash his hands of you and hand you over to the devil." Several in the crowd gasped in dismay as if on queue. "But God is merciful, and so am I. Today, we shall purge this witch from our midst, and his demon lover as well. Perhaps it will show itself once its master hangs."

"We should burn him!" another man cried from across the room. "Hanging is too good for a witch!"

That garnered a few more cheers, and soon, half the room was worked into a frenzy. If my fate hadn't been guaranteed before, it was a foregone conclusion now.

Even Antonia was sobbing openly now, and I felt a pang of guilt for the fact that this likely wasn't going to end with me. Hopefully, they would all heed my death as a warning and get out before it was too late for them and their families.

For all Cecelia's attempts to save this village, and for all the good people who still lived here—people who were, in fact, worth saving—the man who

led them simply wouldn't let it be.

Perhaps there was a demon in our midst, after all. It was nothing if not a cunning costume. I had to give him that, at least.

Through the uproar, I was barely aware of the sound of the door opening and shutting in the back of the room, but nothing could have prepared me for who it was that had just stepped into the sanctuary.

"Alessandro?" I choked out, my relief at seeing him alive and well immediately chased away by dread over the fact that he was here. The last damn place I wanted him to be.

That figured.

His eyes met mine, and immediately, I saw there was something different in them. They were shinier. Brighter, even from across the room. And if I wasn't mistaken, his skin had a healthier glow to it. It was smoother.

Could it be...?

So he had made the transformation, after all.

He was human.

My heart swelled with pride, but it was short-lived, followed immediately by the revelation that it meant he was more vulnerable than he ever had been. It meant he was mortal.

"The demon!" Father Arezzo exclaimed, pointing at him in accusation. "It's come to save its master!"

Alessandro frowned in bewilderment as Father Arezzo's men came up to surround him on either side. "I am no demon," he said, tilting his chin up, his shoulders squared. Even they looked broader. More filled out, and robust. He really was human now. "This man is a liar."

That earned another cacophony of scandalous gasps and whispers.

"The young man speaks the truth," Borza said, standing up once more. "Our priest has just told us quite a gripping tale, and he was more than specific

enough. Examine the boy, and if there are no doll's joints, the priest is a liar."

Even Father Arezzo's men didn't seem to know quite what to do, but when the crowd began to express low murmurs of tentative agreement, I could tell he was growing nervous.

He gave an indignant scoff. "Very well, then. Bring the witch's apprentice forward."

My heart was hammering in my chest. What if he hadn't transformed all the way? As different as he looked, even from a distance...

Nonetheless, Alessandro allowed himself to be led to the front of the church, keeping his head held high and proud. I could see the trepidation in the priest's gaze, but he seemed more wary of Alessandro than he was concerned he would be disproven. After all, until recently, his description had been more or less precise.

Father Arezzo's second-in-command, an older monk by the name of Timothy, approached Alessandro cautiously. He seemed to be the only one who had the guts to do so. I'd seen him a few times at the orphanage, even though most of the other male members of the clergy kept their distance, especially when illness was circulating. He was a kind man, if a stern one, and the children and Sister Maria seemed to like him well enough, which was reason enough for me. That didn't stop me from feeling protective rage wash over me as he approached Alessandro, though.

He waited as if for Alessandro's permission, and Alessandro nodded. The monk rolled up his sleeve and examined his arm thoroughly, bending the elbow this way and that.

"There are no unnatural joints," he said, looking back at Father Arezzo, who was growing more apprehensive by the moment.

"Nonsense!" he snarled, coming down from behind his podium.

I bristled, ready to intervene, when Alessandro gave me a pleading look and I hesitated. So far, he knew what he was doing, so I decided to trust him.

It didn't mean I felt any less enraged when Father Arezzo grabbed him by the arm and peeled open his shirt, only to reveal the smooth, unblemished skin where his chest panel once had been.

The priest's face went blank with shock. "This is impossible," he hissed. "It must be a trick of the demon!"

I leapt up from my seat, no longer able to hold back when I saw him tear open Alessandro's shirt the rest of the way.

Alessandro gave a startled cry and fell back. "Will you disrobe me again, in front of all these people?" he asked, his voice trembling as he clutched the tattered remnants of the fabric to his chest. I could tell from how dead silent the room was, his words had hit their mark.

Father Arezzo staggered back, looking horrified. "I—I have no idea what you're talking about, *demon*."

"It's true," I said, standing at the head of the room to face the crowd that had been ready to hang me—*burn* me—moments earlier. At least, a good many of them. Now, they didn't seem to know what to believe. "Days ago, he broke into my home and attacked my apprentice. I shudder to think what would have happened if I hadn't intervened and showed up when I did."

"This is preposterous," Father Arezzo cried. "The enemy's false accusations!"

"And me?" called another voice from across the room. A young woman I recognized as a prominent merchant's daughter. She was a well-respected member of the town.

There was no mistaking the ice in her gaze as she studied the old priest, even though her breathing was labored and her voice shaky, as if just speaking was taking a great deal of effort. And courage.

"Am I the enemy? Because you did the same thing to me when I was only twelve. You came into my father's house—the house of the man who paid for the new roof you stand beneath now, lying to your entire flock—and you violated me. And you told me it was a secret. One I would go to hell for if I ever told another living soul. Isn't that right, Father Arezzo?" she asked bitterly.

The stunned murmurs of the crowd were overtaking the initial silence after her declaration. The clarity and truth behind her words, however, rang out long after she was finished speaking.

Her father looked over at her, his eyes filled with horror and dismay, before they landed on the priest and those emotions turned to something else entirely. Something murderous.

"Me as well," said another voice, this one smaller and more timid than the last. I looked over at the younger girl in the back of the room, seated between her mother and father. She was hunkered down, trembling and unable to lift her eyes off the floor, but her words were clear enough.

And soon, so was the outrage of the mob that had so recently been turned against me. Now, it had found a very different target, and Father Arezzo crept toward the door, still murmuring under his breath about the lies of demons, even though the one he'd accused so recently had proven him a liar.

"An emissary of the devil in our midst!" the man who had cried to burn me not long ago exclaimed, raising his fist in the air. "Posing as a servant of God!"

"Justice!" the young girl's mother demanded, rising to her feet as well, fresh tears of rage in her eyes. "Justice for our children!"

"They're lying!" Father Arezzo cried, seeming to have a fresh surge of energy born of panic and indignation. It made me sick to think of how many years this man had been leading our town, all while abusing the most vulnerable of its members, but the secrets he had kept in the shadows for so long had finally come to light. They always did eventually.

Before long, the entire room was on their feet, calling for the priest to be punished. The only real matter of disagreement seemed to be whether he should be burned or hanged.

How quickly the ire of the mob could be redirected. For once, it seemed they had found a suitable target. One who deserved everything that was about to befall him and more. I could tell he knew it, too, when his eyes met mine from across the room, filled with hatred and spite.

I gave him a slow, small smile before I stepped out from behind the podium and went to Alessandro's side. The mob could have him. I had far more pressing concerns.

No one tried to stop us as we left the building, but I waited until we were around the corner to take him in my arms, embracing him tighter than I ever had.

"You shouldn't have come here," I said through my teeth, looking down at him. I took his face in my hands, feeling his smooth, soft skin. I lowered my hand to rest over his heart, and sure enough, it was beating rapidly against my palm. "You're..."

"Human?" he offered with a knowing smile. A smile too perfect for human hands to have crafted. It suited him. It was like I was looking at him—the real him—for the very first time. "I suppose you were right. You do love me. And I love you."

"Are you sure it wasn't just the butterfly?" I asked in a dry tone, because I was having a hard time keeping the moisture out of my eyes as I stroked his cheek, taking in the perfection that was his face. It was almost cruel. Nothing real could be that perfect, and yet here he was, in my arms. Exactly where he belonged. And I was never letting him go.

Alessandro gave a weary laugh, shaking his head. "I'm very sure," he said, reaching out to take my face in his hands in turn. "I thought it was too late. I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm not going anywhere," I murmured, placing my hand over his. "At least, not without you."

Alessandro looked back at the church building as the sounds of the growing chaos within grew louder and louder. "Father Arezzo won't be able to hurt anyone anymore," he said quietly.

"No," I sighed. "Thanks to you, he won't. Sometimes all it takes is one voice to be bold enough to speak the truth, to give the others the courage they need to join it."

Alessandro worried at his bottom lip. "We could run away together," he said quietly. "But this town is going to need a doctor. And a leader."

"I'm not sure I'm fit to be either one," I admitted.

He gave me a look. One I knew well, even if it was the first time I was receiving it from him. "You love this town, Gustavo. I know you do. If you didn't, you wouldn't have stayed here this long."

"I love nothing more than I love you," I told him firmly.

He gave a soft smile. "Then let's stay here and make it better. Together."

I groaned affectionately. "When did you become this stubborn?"

"Well, you are the one who made me," he reminded me, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. It was good to see that being human hadn't robbed him of that quality in its entirety. "Besides, I've been told it's a fundamental quality of being human."

I chuckled, leaning down to take him into my arms for a kiss I never thought I would get to share with him again. "So it is, my love. So it is."

EPILOGUE

ALESSANDRO



Convincing Gustavo to stay in Sevea had not been an easy task, but more than a month later, I was beginning to feel content that I had actually succeeded at it.

Neither of us had stayed for Father Arezzo's execution, but Borza and the others had, and they had been more than keen to fill us in on the details. More than I cared to know, perhaps.

That night, we were all gathered around the dinner table, and I had actually managed to prepare the feast without burning anything.

Well, except for a few potatoes, but that hardly counted. No one was perfect. That was part of being human.

I wasn't sure exactly how much Gustavo had told his friends and family behind closed doors about our relationship, but Father Arezzo's accusations had painted a clear enough picture at the church. Nonetheless, while they had to know those accusations weren't all false, none of them seemed remotely bothered by my presence. In fact, they had been nothing but welcoming.

I could tell even Gustavo was surprised by their acceptance, but he was a man who was used to this world disappointing him. I was relieved that, at least in one regard, it didn't have to. Even he could be wrong, every once in a while.

"Well," Paolo said, setting down his fifth stein of beer for the night. "I can't say I thought you'd find a way out of this one, but I'm impressed."

"Impressed," Gustavo scoffed. "I almost died."

"Not with you," Paolo shot back, lifting his glass in my direction. "Your apprentice knows how to command a crowd. Wish I could've painted a portrait of that old cretin's face. And it was still sticking that way after his head rolled."

Evangelista grimaced. "Paolo, please."

He just gave a good-natured chuckle and patted his wife's hand before taking another drink.

I was getting used to the raucous nature of Gustavo's companions. I quite liked them, actually. Gustavo still acted like he had to worry about me being influenced, but as I was quick to inform him, I was already human, and the future of my soul was every bit as beautifully uncertain as his.

And we had a lifetime to enjoy each other's company, and sort out the rest.

"I'm just glad you convinced him to stay," Antonia said, giving me a warm smile.

She was Cecelia's sister, and the enthusiasm with which she had accepted me made me feel guilty for ever being jealous. But that, too, was a very human vice I was learning to forgive myself for.

Besides, the past was what had made Gustavo the man that he was, and Cecelia had been a huge part of that. For that, I could only ever be grateful to her, and hope that somewhere, maybe not far from wherever my mother had gone to rest, she didn't entirely disapprove of the direction Gustavo's life had taken after her.

"Gustavo loves this town," I said, even though I found myself somewhat frequently having to remind him of it. "I'm grateful to have a chance at being a part of making it better."

"Well spoken," said Borza. He gave his friend a mischievous glance. "Perhaps he's the one who should be going into politics."

Gustavo gave a weary groan. "Please. It's not as if I want the job."

I couldn't help but snicker at my lover's continued resistance to the office of town overseer that had been so recently vacated. He was perfectly up to the task, and more qualified than anyone in town.

After all, few people could boast of having saved even a fraction of the lives that Gustavo had in his time within Sevea. And the fact that he had no interest in such a position was, unfortunately for him, probably all the more reason he was the perfect man for the job.

After dinner, dessert, and another round of ale, Gustavo lovingly chased his friends from our home, and I settled on his lap in the parlor. I slipped my arms around his neck and leaned in as he kissed me deeply.

"Are you really so opposed to taking charge of this town?" I asked, because I couldn't quite shake his words at dinner.

Gustavo watched me for a moment, tilting his head. "Where is this coming from?"

"Nowhere," I sighed. "I just don't want to force you to do something you really don't want to do."

"Oh," he said in a knowing tone, slipping his arms around my waist. "Don't worry about that. You... have a way of pushing me to do and be exactly what I'm supposed to. And I'm better for it."

I smiled softly. "Really?" I asked. "So you don't regret staying here?"

He sighed. "No, I don't regret it. Not if it makes you happy. And I can admit, you're right. Things have been different ever since Arezzo has been gone. I've lived here all my life, and for the first time, I actually feel like things could change. For the better."

"They will," I said, stroking his hair away from his eyes. "You'll see."

Gustavo smiled, sliding his hands up my sides. "Optimistic, aren't you?"

"Always," I answered. "Things have a way of working out."

He chuckled against my lips. "So they do."

I leaned in to deepen the kiss, slipping my fingers deeper into his hair. His tongue slipped in my mouth, and I found myself squirming on his lap, grinding against him through his slacks.

No matter how many times we made love, it never stopped being a thrilling experience. And I never stopped wanting him just as much as I had the first time.

He knew my body better than I did, and within moments, his touch had me purring with delight.

"Let's get upstairs," he said, lifting me into his arms.

"Don't want to fall asleep on the couch again, old man?" I teased.

He rolled his eyes as he carried me up the stairs and into our bedroom. "It was just a matter of the position, that's all. I've still got plenty of vigor left."

"You'd better," I said, leaning in to kiss him as he placed me on the bed. "I might not need your energy anymore to stay awake, but that doesn't make me any less demanding."

He laughed at that, climbing into bed on top of me. "No, you're even more insatiable as a human, if anything."

"Are you complaining?" I asked.

There was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes as he looked down at me. "Not at all," he replied.

He lowered himself on top of me, kissing his way slowly down my chest as he unbuttoned my shirt. He slowed down as he went, and he unfastened my waistband, tugging my pants down along with my underwear.

I moaned as he took me into his mouth, running his tongue along the crown of my cock.

"Gustavo," I breathed, fighting the urge to squirm beneath him.

His touch had always elicited a strong response from me, but it was even stronger now than it had been before. Everything was more sensitive, every

touch and brush of flesh more acute. Sometimes, the pleasure was so intense, it was almost painful.

Everything about being human was intense. Extreme. And I wouldn't have had it any other way. It was just more to experience with him.

As he continued to work my cock with his tongue, I moaned in bliss and slid my hands back into his hair. He took me deeper into his mouth, and I could feel his fingers resting against my entrance. I clumsily reached into the table beside the bed and pulled out the bottle of lubricant. In a matter of seconds, Gustavo had me slicked and ready for more, and I held my breath in anticipation as I felt his fingers push into me.

I couldn't help but shiver with pleasure as he stroked my prostate, and that, too, was a more visceral experience than it had been before. He sucked harder, continuing to finger me until I was on the brink.

My breath hitched in my throat as I felt a surge of panic, realizing that I wanted to come while he was inside me, not while he was sucking my cock. "Please," I panted. "I need you to..."

Somehow, I still felt a little bashful about expressing my more human needs in such explicit terms, even if he never made me feel awkward about it. I had wondered what it would be like to sleep together now that I was human, and so far, it had been even better than I could've imagined.

I had worried that not needing to feed from him any longer would result in a lack of intimacy between us, but that had been far from the case. If anything, it was the exact opposite. Gustavo was as attentive to my changing needs as he had been to the others.

He seemed to understand perfectly, despite my trepidations about putting it bluntly, and I braced myself for him to pull his fingers out. The discomfort was a benefit in its own right, considering the fact that it reset the clock a bit on my orgasm. I wanted to enjoy this for as long as I could.

As Gustavo undressed and lowered himself on top of me, my heart picked up the pace. It was so strange, a constant reminder that I was human. Sometimes more welcome than others. I found myself wondering exactly how humans didn't just focus on their heartbeat all the time. Despite

Gustavo's assurances that it was an automatic process I didn't need to supervise, it had taken me some time to get used to, and I was still far from completely comfortable with it.

"Are you all right?" Gustavo asked, looking down at me. He always had been attuned with whatever I was feeling. Especially in the bedroom.

"I'm fine," I assured him, reaching up to take his face in my hands. "And I'll be even better when you're inside me."

He chuckled. "Eager, are we?" he asked in a knowing tone, even though I could tell from the heat in his gaze, he was every bit as eager as I was.

"Always," I murmured, squirming to position myself beneath him. I opened my legs so he could slide between them and felt his thick cock pushing up against me. I held my breath in anticipation because I knew exactly how it was going to feel when he slipped in.

He was always a little hard to take, and while it wasn't as painful as it had been the first time, I had come to enjoy even that. Pain could be its own form of pleasure, depending on who was giving it and what the circumstances were.

I groaned as Gustavo moved deeper into me and started thrusting, making our bodies one. We moved in perfect synchronization with each other, and I tilted my head back, letting his lips claim my throat.

His thick cock was brushing up against my prostate once more, and each thrust had my vision blurring a little, from the overwhelming pleasure of it all. I felt the warmth of his skin against mine, so similar now, and yet so different.

"Gustavo," I breathed as he grazed my neck with his teeth, heightening the sensations all over my body.

"I love it when you say my name like that," he said, his voice hoarse and throaty. "Breathless. Pleading."

I was too out of breath to tell him it was a good thing he was so adept at eliciting those qualities from me.

I almost couldn't take it. Especially when he dragged his nails down my skin and started thrusting in renewed earnest. "Still so tight," he murmured.

"It feels different like this," I admitted, panting. "As a human. Does it feel different for you, too?"

He paused, looking down at me with a faint smile on his lips. "You always felt perfect," he told me. "Too perfect to be real."

He always had a way of saying exactly what I needed to hear. I smiled, kissing him again, and I began to buck my hips in time to the rhythm of his thrusts as we both grew closer and closer to the edge. I couldn't help but moan as I felt him inside me, savoring every inch.

"I love you," I breathed against his lips.

No matter how many times I said it, it never felt like quite enough. And it never felt quite accurate or adequate to tell him exactly what he meant to me, which was everything. Everything and then some. All the things I never imagined this world, or any other, had to offer. And he was mine, just as I was his.

"And I love you, Alessandro," he whispered, his voice low and intimate. It was just like this moment, only for the two of us.

And I knew it was true. He had shown it in so many ways a thousand times over, and I had every reason to believe he would show it a thousand times more, but it was still nice to hear him say it. Still nice to be reminded that I wasn't the only one who was hopelessly, obsessively infatuated with him.

I felt my whole body tense up as I neared orgasm, and I could tell that Gustavo was close, too, from the way he was breathing. The way he kissed me, like he was even more desperate for something I was more than willing to give him.

As usual, I was the one who went over the edge first. I wasn't sure if he timed it that way, or he just had greater self-control than I did, but in any case, him filling me after I had come was the perfect crescendo to our shared bliss.

I couldn't stop the moans coming from my throat, but there was no point. Not when we lived in the middle of nowhere, or at least, as close as we could comfortably get away with due to Gustavo's position. And in these moments, I was never more grateful for that fact, because I didn't want anyone intruding on what we had together.

The town might have been far more tolerant than Gustavo had initially imagined, but there were still some aspects of our relationship that I didn't want to share with anyone. Some aspects of *him* I didn't want to share, either.

We both collapsed, our limbs tangled, and I rested my head against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat and breathing. It was the most comforting rhythm in the entire world, and my own echoed it closely, as if even our hearts were perfectly in sync.

At some point, once our bodies were finally untangled, I fell asleep, as I so often did. I opened my eyes to see Gustavo, too, was sleeping soundly. I gazed out the window, realizing the first blue tinges of dawn were touching the sky.

It wasn't much earlier than I would usually get up, and while the illness that had been spreading through the village was fading once more, there were still plenty of tinctures and salves to prepare, let alone breakfast, so I decided to get an early start to the day.

I pulled on a fresh change of clothes, and was about to go downstairs when I noticed something through the window. A faint, flickering blue light.

I froze at the familiar sight, wondering what on earth Saro was doing out in the garden at this hour. But when I passed my old room on my way downstairs to check, I saw the faint blue glow of the cricket sleeping in the bed of the flowers my butterfly had once occupied. I figured it would want them to go to good use, so with me sleeping in the room I shared with Gustavo, it had more or less become the cricket's room. And he loved it. A fact that amused Gustavo to no end, it seemed.

If that wasn't Saro, then...?

I rushed down the steps and out of the kitchen door, since that was the fastest route out to the garden. The cool morning air swept over my skin, waking me up the rest of the way. I looked around, but I saw no sign of the blue light and wondered if I had been imagining it. Even a human's imagination seemed to be more vivid. One of many colors in this world that burned brightly.

Then I saw it again, hovering over by the rose bushes. Unmistakably there. It was already above my head by the time I reached the area it had been seconds ago, but I was close enough that I could make out the shape of what it was.

A butterfly.

A beautiful, delicate butterfly with ornate markings on its two perfectly sculpted wings, and its entire body—wings included—had a familiar, brilliant, ethereal glow. I knew as soon as I saw it, as soon as the familiar feeling of warmth and love washed over me, exactly who and what it was.

"Mother?" I choked.

As if in response, the butterfly flew down and flitted over to me, lighting on the tip of my finger only for a second before it took off into the night sky and rejoined the stars.

If I wasn't mistaken, the spot where it should've disappeared remained fixed in the sky as the most brilliant star of all. One I had never noticed before, despite all the time I had spent gazing up at them.

"Alessandro?" Gustavo's voice called from the door.

I wasn't sure how long I had been standing there exactly, staring at the star in the sky, but the sight of him brought me back to earth.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, coming over to rest a hand on my shoulder.

"No," I said, smiling a little as I felt a strange sense of peace wash over me. "I think... I know this is going to sound strange, but I think it was my mother. Saying goodbye."

His gaze softened with understanding. "Strange, perhaps," he agreed. "But this world is full of strange and beautiful things. You're proof enough of that."

I smiled, turning to face him as I slipped my arms around his neck. "Strange, am I?" I teased.

"Oh, yes," he said with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "But all the best things in life are."

And considering the fact that we were about as strange a pair as there could be, I was inclined to agree with him.

The End.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing this book. I hope you loved the story from page one to the very ending!

If you have a moment to spare, I would be incredibly grateful if you left a rating or review of this book. Reviews are critical for indie authors as they're one of the best channels for us to reach readers and spread our stories. Every single rating or review helps me get my stories out there and reach more readers.

If you want to stay in the loop about my new releases and special content, I'd be thrilled if you signed up for my [newsletter](#) and joined my readers' group on [Facebook](#).

Thank you again for joining me on this journey, and I hope you enjoy your next adventure!

Best,
Joel



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>