



BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

STEAL THE SKY

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STEAL THE SKY

AN MM RAPUNZEL RETELLING

BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

BOOK TWO

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CONTENT NOTICE

Steal the Sky is intended for mature audiences due to adult themes that might be triggering for sensitive readers. These include on-page murder, references to wartime, mention of and visions of parental death, murderous intent, homophobia, bondage and dubious consent.

While the themes of this retelling feel dark, the deep love between our characters is a beautiful light at the end of the tunnel. This book ends with a happily ever after.

Take care of yourself, and email us with any questions.

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PROLOGUE

TOWER

“Cut me, baby.”

I grip my knife and trail the tip of the blade down the woman's neck, raising a thin line of blood. Her head tips farther to the side, and she moans. The thick scent of her arousal hits my lungs, but I ignore it. I'm not interested in what's between her legs.

I want what's in her veins.

Although, it's not really a matter of *want*. If I could stop wanting it, I just might. Blood has always been an inconvenience in my life. Blood. Bloodlines. Blood oaths.

Yeah, blood has been a collar around my neck since I was born. Just once I'd like to breathe without feeling its weight on my skin.

“Lick me,” the woman gasps. “Please, baby, I need it so bad.”

“You and me both,” I mutter. Our needs couldn't be more different, though. She's a *feeder*. Some humans get off on vampires biting them. Downside? They're usually junkies, and their blood tastes like sewage. Upside? They'll do just about anything for a fix.

Desperation is a powerful motivator. It's one of the first things my “family” taught me.

“Please,” she whines, her hand scrabbling for my dick.

With a growl, I slam her harder against the brick wall. She moans, loving it, which makes anger spike in my veins.

That's a decent motivator, too. I seize it, letting my rage burn away the raw edges of my hunger. Every second I spend with her is a risk. Every moment I linger is a chance for my uncle to track me down. I'll take just enough blood to keep me on my feet and then I'll get the fuck out of here.

As she writhes in my grip, I bare my fangs. Quick as a snake, I strike, nailing her right in the jugular.

“Yes!” Her body jerks. Rich, hot blood hits my tongue. I swallow with a groan, ignoring the acidic undercurrents of drugs and alcohol.

We’re in a dark alley in the Free Zone—the only place in the Hallows where the long arm of the syndicates doesn’t reach. Once upon a time, there weren’t syndicates at all. Back then, the Hallows was known as New York City and there were eight billion humans on the planet.

Seriously.

The history books use all kinds of descriptive language to describe what happened next, but the short version is this: One group of humans got pissed at another group; Group One fired a bunch of nukes; Group Two fired back; big boom; most of humanity dead. The blast was so powerful it ripped the Veil that separated the human world from the mythical one.

And then humans discovered all the creatures they thought were make-believe were no such thing. With the Veil gone, magic flooded the world—and the creatures of the Myth took over. Humans became mostly prey, and the most powerful monsters chose the Hallows as their base. Two centuries later, that power structure still holds. The syndicates operate like an unholy trinity of government, entertainment, and organized crime.

But every power structure has gaps—the nooks and crannies where the dirtiest deals happen. That’s where my people dwell. We’re beholden to no one. Loyal to no one but our family. Like the werewolves, vampires have always lived on the human side of the Veil. Not to sound crass, but this is where the food is.

Right on cue, the human tenses and cries out. Her arousal drenches the air.

I disengage my fangs and, grimacing, swipe my tongue over the puncture wounds so she doesn’t bleed out in the alley.

She sags against the wall, her features slack and her pupils wide from her orgasm. “You wanna...?” She makes a jerking motion with her fist.

“No.” I pull a cloth from the inner pocket of my jacket and wipe my mouth.

“Uppity fucker, aren’t you?” She squints. “It’s weird. When you bit me, I swore you looked different. Like you had long hair.”

“Your eyes played tricks on you.” Suddenly, I’ve had enough conversations with humans to last my immortal lifetime. I toss a couple

crumpled bills at her feet. “Drink plenty of water.”

I stalk from the alley without waiting to hear her reply. With her blood in my veins, power hums under my skin. For the moment, I’m strong enough to maintain my glamour—and blend into the shadows when I don’t want to be seen. If I’m going to make it to the harbor, now is the time to do it. I’ve wanted to reach that harbor for as long as I can remember. I just didn’t have the courage to try until now.

Or maybe I just hadn’t realized how pathetic my life has become. That changed a couple weeks ago, when I watched the witch, Ryder Connelly, sacrifice himself for a...well, I don’t exactly know what Wotan is. A fucking nightmare—literally. I was supposed to be casing his nightclub for marks. Instead, I ended up being a reluctant observer of his and Ryder’s sappy love story.

And something about witnessing that flipped a switch in me. It made me do stupid, dangerous things.

Like hope.

Like seize my own destiny.

Glamour up, I step onto the broken sidewalk. The harbor lights twinkle in the distance. If I can make it to those lights, I can leave the Hallows. I can board a ship and sail down the coast. There are places in the south where the syndicate lords don’t bother to wield their power. Where the two families will never find me.

Where there’s not a human in sight and nothing to eat, a little voice in my head chides.

I shove it away. I can live on animal blood if I absolutely have—

Two huge males step out of the shadows and block my path. The one on the right smiles, showing the tips of his fangs. “Nice glamour. Too bad that feeder you just drained works for the family.”

Fuck. *Fuck.*

I spin, prepared to run. Another pair of males are already waiting behind me. One of them is Axel, my uncle’s top lieutenant.

Misery punches me in the gut. Axel’s presence means I can’t lie my way out of this. I can’t claim my assignment lasted longer than I thought, or that I spotted another potential mark on my way back to the family. My uncle probably knows every move I’ve made since I left Wotan’s club.

Maintaining my glamour takes energy, so I drop it. My hair lengthens and turns a platinum hue that glows under the city’s lights.

One of the thugs snickers.

I clench my fists.

"Time to go home, Tower," Axel says. "It's past your bedtime."

"Fuck you, dickface."

His dark eyebrows go up. "Now, that's not very nice. I thought pretty boys like you had better manners."

There's a scuffling sound behind me. Before I can react, a huge hand clamps down on my shoulder. Pain explodes in my side. Nausea roils me. I try to double over, but the hand forces me to stay upright.

"You want us to shut his mouth, Ax?"

Axel shakes his head. "Lucius wants to take care of it personally."

My stomach lurches. The feeder's blood burns my throat as my dinner threatens to spill onto the pavement.

"Search him," Axel says. "The little shit always has a knife or two on him."

Rough hands jostle me, prodding and squeezing. One knife clatters to the ground. Then another.

"That's all I've got," I say. My side is numb now, but it's going to hurt like a bitch tomorrow. Assuming I'm conscious enough to feel pain.

The thugs at my back aren't content to take my word for it, because they shake me down for several more minutes. At last, they finish, leaving me rumpled and swaying on my feet. I guess the feeder's blood wasn't enough, after all.

Axel moves forward. He stops a couple inches away. We're almost the same height, so I can look him in the eye, but he's got about eighty pounds of muscle on me. Still, my stupid mouth can't help but taunt him.

"Does it suck?" I ask.

He frowns. "Does what suck?"

"Being my uncle's dog. He sent you to fetch me. He makes you fetch for him so often I'm surprised he doesn't keep you on a leash. But you're such an obedient dog, I guess he doesn't have to."

My head snaps back before I even register the punch. I stagger, but one of the thugs catches me before I can fall. Then Axel has my shirt in two fists and his face close to mine.

"You're the dog, you entitled little prick," he snarls. His breath smells like old blood and tobacco. "All that blue blood in your veins and you can't

even use it. Fetching is all you're good for. It's all you're *ever* going to be good for."

A half dozen replies spring to my lips, but I can't voice them. My jaw is misaligned, possibly broken. Starved as I am, I can't heal it. And if my uncle flexes his authority tonight, I'm not going to be able to heal it for a while.

And isn't that just an apt fucking metaphor. I'm capable of speaking—and other things—but I'm locked down. Dormant. Muzzled and incapable of freeing myself. Axel is right: The only thing I'm good for is retrieving things for other people. It makes me valuable, which is the only reason my uncle gives a single shit about me.

"Nothing to say?" Axel sneers. He waits a beat, then shoves me into the thugs at my back. "Bring him." As they grip me under my armpits and start walking, his mocking voice follows me. "Back to your cage, Tower. I hope this brief taste of freedom was worth it."

CHAPTER I

TOWER

Three months later

They've been feeding me more regularly. That means Lucius is going to let me out soon.

At least that's what I tell myself as I walk to the window.

My limp is gone, which is nice. The final reminder of my uncle's displeasure. I look out the window, careful to avoid touching the bars, which are infused with magic I collected from a siren a few years ago. The view below is spectacular—a hundred acres of sprawling greenery dotted with manicured shrubbery and meandering pathways. A garden maze nestles close to the mansion. The fountain in the center shoots water toward the sky. Sunlight sparkles in the mist that clouds the air around it. When the family celebrates a new acquisition, the fountain runs with blood.

That hasn't happened for a while, of course. Not since my extended stay in my bedroom.

The door behind me opens without warning. When I turn, Axel is there. I haven't seen him since that night in the Free Zone. I expect a smirk or nasty comment now, but he merely jerks his head toward the hallway.

"He wants to see you."

Nerves prickle down my spine. "All right."

It's a short walk to my uncle's office, but I'm winded by the time we get there. Which is both frustrating and enraging. I do my best to blank my expression as Axel opens the door. I step inside, and he shuts it behind me, leaving me alone with my uncle—and the woman on his lap.

She straddles him, so I can't see her face. But the slow, sinuous way she's moving makes it obvious what's happening here. Her arms are twined around his neck, and her long skirt is bunched at her waist. It's a flowy sort of material, so the ends trail toward the carpet. As Lucius makes eye contact with me over her shoulder, she tips her head back and moans.

"Is this a bad time?" I ask.

Irritation flits through Lucius's eyes. He grabs her hair, yanks her head to the side, and plunges his fangs into her neck. She shudders and gives a choked cry. He bucks his hips once...twice, then grunts. His eyes close briefly. For a split second, his features are soft, his body relaxed.

Then his eyes snap open. He licks her neck and slaps her ass hard enough to make her yelp. "Go clean up. And eat something. I'll want you again later."

She scrambles off his lap like she's afraid he'll dump her on the floor if she doesn't hurry. Her skirt swishes around her ankles. Despite the chill in the air outside, she's wearing a white tank top. Probably so Lucius can access her veins more easily. Her whole outfit seems designed for his convenience, which is wholly unsurprising.

She peeks at me from under her lashes as she passes me. Her gaze moves down my chest, and her plump lips curve in unmistakable invitation.

No thanks. Even if I was into women, I'd rather starve than drink from one of my uncle's stable of feeders.

Thankfully, Lucius has his dick tucked away by the time the door closes behind her. He points to one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Sit."

My temper flares, but I obey. The big windows behind him let in broad shafts of sunlight, turning his blond hair to gold. It's a power move, sitting in a room like this. Only vampires from the oldest bloodlines can tolerate the sun. Just two of the original, ancient families remain: du Sang and Dolabella. Direct descendants of these bloodlines are daywalkers with unique powers. The Dolabellas are *imperators*. Under the right circumstances, they can force just about any being to do their will.

As for the du Sangs, we're siphons, which means we can harvest magical abilities from other beings.

I say "we," but that's not entirely accurate. I can siphon, but that's all I can do. For some reason I've never been able to figure out, I can't release the powers I collect.

But Lucius can. He's the only being in the world who can. Worse, he's the only person alive who can release the magic *I* drain. Without him, I'm nothing but a locked vault. A puzzle box no one—including me—can open.

He regards me now, and it's like staring at my own face in the mirror. We share the same bone structure, with high cheekbones and strong jaws. Our eyes are the same bright shade of blue. The only difference is our hair. His is short and golden blond. Mine is platinum and long enough to brush the center of my back.

But there's nothing I can do about it. It's a quirk of vampirism. Once we reach adulthood, our appearance doesn't change. I could cut my hair every night and I'd wake with the same long, obnoxious waves. *Thanks, genetics.*

Lucius rests his hands on the arms of his chair. "You look fully recovered from your ordeal."

Ordeal. That's an interesting way of putting it. "I would have recovered more quickly if you hadn't starved me. Uncle."

"You were starving on the streets when my men found you." His mouth tightens. "Living among humans in the Free Zone. Going without blood and jeopardizing your ability to hold onto your glamour."

Yeah, well, it was the only way to evade your spies. Not that I'd succeeded. I should have killed that feeder in the alley. I won't make that mistake again.

My uncle growls as he continues his lecture. "You were reckless and foolish. Do you know how many people would love to get their hands on you, boy? What they'd do to you if they caught you?"

I sit back in my chair and prop my ankle on the opposite knee. "You mean like keep me prisoner in a bedroom with bars on the windows?" I look toward the ceiling and frown like I'm trying to remember something. "Or maybe tie me to a chair and savagely beat me?"

"You earned that lesson, son."

In an instant, I'm on my feet and leaning over his desk. "I'm not your fucking son," I snarl. "You don't *ever* get to call me that."

He sits calmly, clearly unmoved by my outburst—and unimpressed by my display of speed. "You're right. No son of mine would ever act as you do. You're as temperamental as my brother was. You have zero respect for the privilege and responsibility you carry in your veins. You're not fit to rule this family."

“Spoken like a second son. The only reason you rule is because you squat on my father’s throne.”

His hand is around my throat before I can blink, and I realize he was just waiting for the right moment to prove he's faster than I am. The edge of the desk bites into my hips as he pulls me toward him. His fangs extend so far past his lips they mangle his speech.

“I rule because *you* can’t, you ungrateful little brat. You’re good at siphoning, I’ll give you that. But no matter how many chances I give you to prove yourself, you just can’t finish the job, can you?”

I glare, which is all I’m capable of. I sure as hell can’t breathe. His fingers squeeze. Just a little bit more pressure, and he’ll crush my throat. I can heal the injury, but it’ll mean another three months in my room.

He won’t kill me, though. I’m confident of that much. Two things stay his hand.

One, I keep him out of harm’s way. With me chasing down magical gifts and siphoning marks, he doesn’t have to put himself at risk. He can sit comfortably in the mansion while I do the hard part. And when I return flush with new power, he pulls it from me, sells it, and keeps the profit. Literally, he bottles the shit. There’s a lot of money to be made in blood magic.

The second thing is what Lucius hates most about me. For all their bluster and willingness to rough me up, the family is loyal to the du Sang bloodline. My father was the boss before he died fighting the Dolabellas. Technically, Lucius is a regent. A placeholder until I come into my full power. If that happens, the family will look to me for leadership.

But it’s a big *if*, and he knows it.

With a hiss, he shoves me backward. I slam into my chair, which tips onto two legs and threatens to topple before I right it. My throat burns, but the pain is nothing compared to the rage that simmers deep in my gut. My chest heaves as I suck in oxygen.

He sits and smooths his hair. The blond waves fall into place just like his army of enforcers. “As it happens,” he says, “I have a new assignment for you. Consider it an opportunity to redeem yourself.”

I wait with my jaw clenched. The thought of fetching power for him makes me want to puke all over the carpet that should be mine. But I’ll do whatever he asks. No matter how much I try to tell myself I won’t, I know

I'll fall in line like I always do. Because he'll lock me up if I don't, and I can't bear it. A pretty cage is still a cage.

"My sources tell me Gothel has a rare book in his possession. It's a powerful artifact from beyond the Veil."

Against my will, interest stirs. I might be a broken siphon but I'm still a du Sang. The urge to *collect* is as natural as breathing. "The lord of the Air Syndicate?" I rasp through my aching throat.

Lucius nods. "You'll have to figure out how to get close to him. He's an aloof son of a bitch. You know how gargoyles are."

I don't, actually. Lord Gothel is the only one I've heard of. He rules old Manhattan—the only part of New York City that's been restored to its pre-war glory. The whole territory is skyscrapers. I'm a daywalker but something about being that much closer to the sun creeps me out. I have no desire to leave the ground.

But my desires rarely factor into the assignments my uncle cooks up for me.

"I can't siphon a book," I say.

"Obviously. This is an old-fashioned theft. I don't care how you get it here. Just do it." He tilts his head. "Your old glamour is compromised since Wotan saw you wearing it. You'll need something new. I'll have Axel bring you a vial."

I'm tempted to ask what's in this for me, but I hold my tongue. I already know the answer.

Nothing. There's nothing in this for me. But I'm trapped. Collared. Suddenly, my dream of reaching the harbor and fleeing south sounds desperately stupid. My uncle has good reasons to keep me under his thumb. He's never going to let me go.

I stand and go to the door. With my hand on the knob, I turn. "What's the name of the book?"

"It doesn't have one."

Exasperation makes my tone sharper than I intend. "Then how am I supposed to find it?"

"You'll know it when you see it."

Okay. Suppressing a snort, I open the door.

"Tower."

I freeze, my shoulders tense.

His voice is like silk, which is how I know his threat is real. “If you ever pull another stunt like you did in the Free Zone, you’ll never leave your room again.”

CHAPTER 2

GOTHEL

I stretch my leathery wings wide, relishing the way the crisp winter air feels against my hard skin. The claws that top each wing joint flex and point in the wind, making my bulky frame more aerodynamic. Swirling through an updraft, I break through a wispy cloud as I breathe deeply.

The thin air above what used to be Manhattan is so cold, it burns my lungs on the way to filling them. What a time to be alive. When I created the Sky syndicate, I ensured that this island, at the very least, would be rebuilt from the rubble of the war that tore the Veil. Other parts of this world are decaying and decrepit, but not here. Not in *my* territory.

Lights glitter from the towering skyscrapers below me. Smirking, I look down at the cluster of three towers that marks my home territory—a strip of high-end casinos topped by my club, the Aerie. Beings from every syndicate flock to my properties for the opulent sensualism found within. There’s nothing like losing your ass at the poker tables to light a fire in your belly.

For those with more deviant tastes, the Aerie is the most exclusive place to see or be seen. It’s a seductive club for those with exceptional needs.

A strobe cuts through the pitch-black night, shimmering as it waves slowly from side to side. To onlookers, it appears only that a light shines in the night. For me, it’s a signal from my grotesques.

I sigh as I flap lazily, staring down at my beautiful properties. Gargoyles are natural collectors of buildings. These three are my prized possessions—not the most prized—but definitely a close second.

Flattening my wings behind me, I speed like a bullet down toward the Aerie. Far below, my personal assistant, Raoul, stands with his stone arms

held tightly behind his back. I speed faster, watching his granite brows arch up and then knit together as he frowns. This is a little power play he and I often engage in.

Swooping low, I aim straight for Raoul's rock-hard chest. He leaps to the side at the last moment, screeching in anger as he throws himself onto the ground to avoid my body slam. I dig my three-clawed hands into the wall, then thrust off the vertical surface and land elegantly on my feet.

I give Raoul a cheeky grin as I straighten the lapels on my vest.

"I fucking hate it when you do that," he grumbles in a ragged, rocky voice. All grotesques sound this way. They're miniature versions of us gargoyles, unable to ever change out of their stone form, although they're far more nimble than one might suspect. One of many reasons grotesques are such excellent companions to their larger gargoyle counterparts.

I watch my hand morph from stone-like claws to something far more human, and then I reach for Raoul. He grips my pale gray fingers, squeezing tighter than absolutely necessary as he hauls himself upright, brushing off his tiny vest. The top of his head barely reaches my navel.

Looking down my nose at him, I fold both bulky arms over my broad chest. "Raoul, if you dug deep for your protector power, you'd be able to stave off that attack easily."

"So you keep saying," he mumbles, black eyes flashing in dismay as he picks at the edge of his tunic. "But I don't feel the power at all, Master Gothel."

"I do," I remind him. "It is clear as day to me, and I will continue to push you until you use it." Glancing up at the dark sky, I smile as I muse aloud. "Perhaps I will toss you off the balcony so you can find that power on your way down to the ground. What say you, Raoul?"

"You wouldn't," he hisses, pointing one claw-tipped finger at me angrily. "Because when I crash into a million pieces there will be no one to manage your properties and then you'll be in a pickle indeed."

I grunt, folding both hands behind my back as I tuck my wings into a cape, nodding for Raoul to head inside.

He licks dark-gray lips as he glances toward the edge of my private balcony on top of the Aerie. "You wouldn't, would you?" His voice is small as he looks toward the edge, true apprehension in his eyes.

"Not today," I laugh. "Now why did you flash the strobe at me?"

Electricity is finicky these days. Magic didn't combine all that well with human power once the Veil ripped. At best it works, and at worst, well, I've seen buildings destroyed by the unfortunate combination of power and electricity.

"I would not have used it, but Megos has agreed to sell the Cavana building next door. He sent over paperwork just moments ago."

My eyes flick over the edge of the balcony to the glittery high-rise next to my casinos. It's a building I've had my eye on since I came through the Veil and became the ruler of the Sky Syndicate. I could take it, certainly, but it's better to create pawns in my game than to simply lord over them with my nearly unlimited power. Plus, I enjoy the give and take. I enjoy the chess game that is ruling a monstrous syndicate.

"Imagine how far you could fly," Raoul says wistfully.

I bristle at his musing, but he's not wrong. My power is that I understand power. It's a unique feature of certain gargoyles. It's why my services were so sought after in the other plane. I could take a nearly powerless being and find their power somewhere. My role was to uncover and develop beings, although my methods are my own.

The downside? Gargoyles are bound to their buildings. I can fly straight up for miles, but I cannot fly over buildings that are not mine. It's a secret most gargoyles will guard with their lives, although I suspect it isn't too difficult to figure out why gargoyles don't stray far from their nests.

I trail Raoul through dark halls lit by pale firelight. Although we have more electricity here in my territory, I prefer not to rely on it. Raoul pulls a lever in a flat wall and the whole wall swings open on a swivel. We pass through, Raoul letting out a contented sigh.

"I adore the library," he murmurs, looking around.

Grotesques are like gargoyles in nearly all ways, a love of collecting being one of those.

Peering around the four-story library that makes up the topmost level of the Aerie, I grin. This library is private to myself and my innermost circle of grotesques. I keep my most prized possession here. No one is allowed in this sanctum without my express permission.

My nest lies off to one side, a pile of blankets atop a raised platform where I can sleep in humanoid form or perch myself and become stone.

"The contract, Raoul?" I extend a hand, and the small male gives me a stack of papers. Flipping through, I look at the terms. They're good—very

good. A win, to be sure. Little by little, my empire grows. And with it, my ability to roam, which is something I'd very much like to do.

"Sign them on my behalf," I say, handing the papers back. "That'll be all for tonight, old friend. I'm going to rest before I head downstairs."

He vanishes in a puff of smoke, and I turn with a satisfied sigh. "Home sweet home," I say, crossing the elegant inlaid parquet floor. I pull a cigar from my desk and sit in my plush, oversize chair. The back is cut out to make room for my folded wings, and they drape over the edge comfortably. I pick up the book I was reading earlier. I prefer to relax before a wild night downstairs in the club.

And tonight is going to be wild indeed.

CHAPTER 3

TOWER

The first thing I do when I get a new mark is find out everything there is to know about them. Their strengths and weaknesses. Who and how they like to fuck. Whether they owe anyone money or a favor. What makes them compromise their principles. Because everyone will. Even the most steadfast saint will turn sinner under the right circumstances.

But I haven't been able to do that with Lord Gothel. Every lead I chased down faded to nothing. The meager scraps of information I dug up revealed nothing new. If the gargoyle ruler of the Air Syndicate has secrets, they're locked up tight.

Fortunately, his casinos are wide open—assuming your pockets are deep enough. I've got no problem there, and after a couple hours at one of the high-stakes poker tables downstairs, I'm riding an elevator up to the Aerie.

"Afraid of heights?" a rough voice asks.

I look down at the security guard parked in the corner. At first glance, I thought he was some kind of troll. But he doesn't have tusks or beady black eyes. No, this creature is something I've never seen before. He's short like a troll, but he's solid as a boulder. In fact, the little guy looks like he was carved from stone. Despite his diminutive size, he's built like a prize fighter. His square jaw juts out, and his thick arms are folded over a broad chest as he regards me with undisguised curiosity. An arrow-tipped tail waves over his shoulder.

He's...kind of adorable, actually.

"No," I say. "I'm not scared of heights."

"Well you look scared."

Okay, maybe not so adorable.

His stare is so penetrating, I glance into the mirrored walls to check my reflection. My glamour is still new, but it sits on me easily, showing a tall male with plain brown eyes and dark-blond hair. Attractive but nothing special. The kind of face that blends into a crowd.

Perfect.

The elevator dings and the little male sweeps an arm toward the darkened club beyond the doors. “Enjoy the Aerie.”

“Thanks.”

As the doors slide shut behind me, his gruff voice drifts out. “It’s a fifteen hundred-foot drop to the ground.”

I whip around, but he’s already out of sight. *Fucker.*

The distinctive shuffle of poker chips reaches me, and I put the creature out of my mind. I’m here to work—to find the stupid book my uncle wants so I can get another shot at freedom.

No one pays me any attention as I move through the club. It’s spacious but intimate, with elegant decor that screams wealth. As it does throughout Old Manhattan, electricity powers the crystal chandeliers and the soft sconces that glow along the walls. A mix of humans and Myth creatures sit at poker tables. Others lounge on leather sofas grouped around tall tables manned by bartenders in tuxedos. But it’s the elevated platform in the center of the room that draws my attention. Bondage equipment is placed around it, along with a small table that holds various whips and floggers.

A woman stands in the center of the glossy black stage. She’s striking with a cascade of bright red hair. Women have never done it for me, but I can appreciate her body, which is perfect—and on prominent display. Her black leather corset cinches her waist to nothing and leaves her firm tits bare. Gold hoops pierce her taut, pink nipples. Her long legs are encased in high-heeled leather boots that rise to shapely thighs. Her pussy is probably as stellar as the rest of her, but it’s obscured by a thick strap-on cock that juts from her hips. The flesh-colored shaft glistens under neon lights that flash to the beat of low, throbbing music.

She looks out over the crowd. “Come here, boy!”

For a second, my blood runs cold. If Lucius set me up—

A male strides from somewhere and mounts the stage.

And, fuck, *he* does it for me. He’s some kind of Myth creature...maybe a demon with his golden skin and arrogant features. Muscles pop

everywhere on his oiled flesh. I see every inch of it, because the only thing he's wearing is a thick leather collar with a ring in the front.

The woman grabs it as soon as he reaches her. "On your knees, Evander. You know what to do."

"Yes, mistress." Fuck, his deep rumble is as hot as the rest of him. He sinks to the floor, and his muscular ass flexes as he sucks her cock into his mouth. His own cock bobs fully erect between his legs as he works up and down her shaft.

I move without thinking, taking a seat on a sofa that gives me a view of them from the side. I'm close enough to hear the buckles of her harness jingle as he sucks her off. His saliva glistens on the shaft, which stretches his sexy mouth. She braces her feet wide apart and thrusts her hips forward, choking him. He takes it like a champion, his powerful ass flexing as he absorbs the cock being shoved down his throat. Drool coats his chin and drips onto his round pecs. His eyes go heavy-lidded, and he groans softly.

"Good slut," the woman croons, sifting her fingers through his dark hair as she fucks his mouth.

Lust blooms inside me, its tendrils snaking through my limbs. I didn't come here for this, but it's been such a long fucking time since I felt anything good. It's too dangerous to get close to anyone. Any hint of joy is like a beacon to Lucius. Any person in my orbit is a target.

But the scene unfolding before me isn't mine. Here, I'm as anonymous as I'll ever be. I'm hiding in plain sight in this dark, decadent place. I can indulge in these beautiful beings taking their pleasure. With a sigh, I relax more deeply in the plush leather.

And that's when I feel it.

A tingling awareness makes me shift my gaze to the left. I lock eyes with a man who sits directly across the stage from me.

My breath hitches. He most definitely wasn't there before. I would have seen him. Anyone would have. He's big—even bigger than the male onstage. And though he's not young, he's just as hot. Salt-and-pepper hair waves back from a high, broad forehead. Dark scruff covers a square jaw. The plain black frames of his glasses complement a dark three-piece suit that's clearly bespoke.

He lounges in his seat with one arm slung along the back and a lit cigar dangling from his fingers. As our gazes hold, he lifts it to his lips and takes

a long drag. The tip flares orange, and the little burst of flame sizzles straight to my dick.

I jerk my gaze back to the couple on stage. The woman pulls her cock from the man's mouth and makes a twirling motion in the air. In one graceful movement, the man rises and walks to a padded sawhorse. He drapes himself over it so his head points toward the floor and his ass is thrust high. He reaches around and palms his ass with both hands, spreading himself wide.

The woman stalks forward, her nipple rings catching the light. The straps of her harness frame her bare, taut buttocks. She draws a blood-red manicured nail down the male's crease, then steps back. "Not good enough, Evander. Show our guests how much your hole wants this cock."

The man flexes his intimate muscles, making his waxed pucker contract in an erotic wink.

"More," the woman demands as she walks to the table and slathers lube on the strap-on. "Seduce us."

With a breathy sigh, the man rolls his hips in a slow, carnal grind. He continues flexing his hole, his big hands holding his ass open.

I risk another look at the male across the stage and find him watching me. *He never stopped*, I realize as the hair on my nape lifts. I'm not sure how I know, but the knowledge presses against my skin as firmly as his gaze, which is now wandering down my chest. He's bold with his appraisal, taking no pains to hide the fact that he's checking me out.

My heart begins to pound. I'm fully clothed and seated the same as he is, but as his eyes make a lazy trip down my body, I feel more like the male on the stage. The stranger takes another pull from his cigar, and the brief flare of light illuminates his eyes. They're the golden color of aged whiskey, with a bright sheen that tells me he's definitely not human.

As soon as the thought enters my head, the fingers holding his cigar... change. Blunt, square fingernails lengthen and curl into elegant black claws. The skin of his hand becomes tinged with gray. It's a stronger hand in this form—three-fingered and roped with plump veins that make me wonder if his cock looks the same when it's hard.

Fuck. My head spins as lust punches me hard in the gut, tightening my balls and making my dick wet my briefs. It's a struggle, but I look away once more.

On stage, the woman presses the tip of her cock against the male's hole and pushes her hips forward. He moans as she enters him. His dick leaks milky white drops of precum that splatter on the black stage. When she's fully seated, he rocks forward, setting the ring in his collar swinging.

The stranger's gaze pulls at me like a magnet, and I look because it's impossible not to. He's still watching me, and now his whiskey eyes dip slowly, deliberately to my neck.

The message is as clear and bright as a lightning strike.

I'll collar you if given the chance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the woman start fucking the man in earnest. His grunts join the thumping, grinding music. But the show on the stage is far less riveting than the wordless exchange happening between me and this stranger who keeps smoking his cigar and looking at me like I'm a menu of all the things he likes to eat. Like he expects me to come to him. Crawl to him. Lick the polished dress shoe he rested on the opposite knee. It won't be any other way. His eyes promise me that. If I go to him, he'll own me.

It's intoxicating. Dangerous. And he's got a lot of fucking nerve. I'm heir to one of the last two ancient vampire bloodlines, its origins so distant humans were still squatting in caves when my people were worshipped as gods. When I'm well-fed, I'm faster than just about any creature of the Myth. Fucked up powers or not, I'm no one's slave.

I let my gaze bore into those whiskey eyes, and I lift my chin. *Try it.*

The man's lips curve. The motherfucker's expression isn't smug. Oh no. It's *confident*—and it goes straight to my dick.

It's infuriating.

And it's *not* why I'm here. I came to the Sky Syndicate to claim my freedom—not surrender it.

I wrench my gaze away and stand. Blood pounds in my ears as I walk away. Every instinct urges me to run, but I force myself to keep a casual pace. I was born a thief, and every thief knows that running makes you look guilty. No one suspects the guy strolling like he doesn't have a care in the world to have pockets full of diamonds—or blood pumping with Myth powers.

The compulsion to *collect* beats at me. My gums throb as my fangs threaten to descend. I can't let that happen. Allowing my true nature to surface can compromise my glamour. I press my lips together and keep my

head down as I make my way to the elevator bank. I'm almost there when I stumble into something hard as a rock. Pain shoots through my knee.

"Hey! Watch it, asshole!" Another stocky, grayish creature glares up at me. Then his eyes go wide. "Your hair..."

My glamour. A wild glance in the mirror confirms my hair is lengthening and turning to pure platinum that glows under the club's soft lights.

The little man draws a breath like he's ready to shout.

Fast as an adder, I grab him and drag him into the shadows. He's heavy as stone, and for a second I'm not sure I can overpower him. As he twists, I strike blindly—and get lucky. My fangs stab into his shoulder. His skin is tough as leather, and I growl and clamp my jaws tight as I struggle to break through. Finally, blood flows into my mouth, and I groan.

He's a strong little fucker, and his heels drum painfully against my shins as I feed.

I tighten my grip around his waist and suck harder. In a rush, my power flares. Light bursts from under my skin and spills onto the floor. I step deeper into the shadows as the little man finally slumps in my arms.

At last, his power flows into me. *Flight.* I've stolen the sky from him. My skin glows more brightly, and I feel the press of tiny wings through his jacket. His tail droops on the ground, the little arrowhead tip limp.

For some reason, tears prick my eyes.

Stress. That's all it is. Somewhere in my chest, another explanation thrashes around, but I ignore it as I lick the wound on his neck and lower him to the ground. His pulse is steady. He'll be fine. I prop him against the wall, straighten my clothes, and turn back to the elevators.

At the same moment, two more of the little creatures round the corner. Their eyes fasten on my hair.

I whirl, bypass the elevators, and hit a door that (thankfully) leads to a service staircase. Flush with blood, I put on a burst of speed that gets me on the ground level within seconds. Outside, I stick to the shadows as I hurry away from the cluster of skyscrapers. I don't look back until I cross the border into the Free Zone. The lights of the Air Syndicate twinkle in the darkness. Winged creatures crisscross the sky, their shadows passing in front of the buildings. But not the creature I siphoned. He'll never fly again.

Well, he's not the only one who knows how it feels to have his wings clipped.

With a clenched jaw, I melt back into the shadows and make my way home.

CHAPTER 4

GOTHEL

My eyes flutter open as pleasure streaks up my spine. The handsome man at my feet, head bobbing up and down in my lap, groans around the thick tip of my cock. My gaze meanders down to him. I've had him before, many times in fact. I helped him once with his powers and joining me in my bedroom is his payment, not that he minds in the slightest.

Usually I don't, either, but tonight my mind is only halfway here.

Teeth drag gently down my length as he serves pain with his pleasure. My lips part, fangs lengthening to stab at my chin as I rock my hips, aching for more, harder, deeper.

The good-looking blond grips my balls and tugs as a string of precum drips from me onto his tongue. He gives excellent head. He's attentive, thorough, and experimental—all things a good student should be. He sucks my cock just like I taught him to.

But watching that blond head dip up and down yanks my thoughts back to the nondescript man from the club earlier. He was so obviously enthralled with the scene, so hot watching my performers put on a show. Was he thinking about getting pegged like that by a sensual mistress with a whip?

I don't think so.

Because the way he looked at me when our eyes met told me everything I needed to know—he was a man practically begging to be broken and tamed. And gods help me, I'd happily be the male to provide that service.

The slurping sounds of my companion's mouth rise in urgency as he pushes me closer to orgasm. Even so, my mind wanders unhelpfully back to

the male in the club.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit I loved how he lifted his chin to me when I made my intentions clear.

Come and get me, he seemed to say.

I should have taken what I wanted. Instead, I allowed him the choice. I figured there was a solid chance he'd take me up on my unspoken invitation. So when he got up to leave, I was surprised.

And disappointed.

A powerful sensuality radiated from him, despite his being nondescript in almost every physical way. A glamour, if I had to guess, concealing who he really was. It isn't uncommon in the Aerie for my patrons to use glamour magic if they're able. It isn't necessary, but they're welcome to be as discreet—or not—as they want.

All that to say, I wanted more and I'm frustrated I didn't get it.

Attraction is such a finicky thing.

Lips tug at the sensitive skin underneath my cock head, pulling a deep groan from my throat. My voice falls low, like two pieces of gravel rubbing together. Pleasure rises at the base of my dick as I begin a partial shift into stone form. The man at my feet grunts in surprise when my dick lengthens and firms. Horns swoop up and away from my forehead as my wings flare out behind me, stiffening with pleasure.

That man earlier? I want him.

But instead of him on his knees at my feet, it's someone else, so I'll take what I can get. Threading both hands through blond hair, I fuck my partner's mouth with steady, even strokes. My hips piston as he struggles around the battering ram of my cock.

What would the male from the Aerie be like, bent over the edge of my bed and receiving what I want to give him?

I snarl, lips curling away from my fangs as my mind conjures up an image of that very thing.

Sparks dance up my spine as my balls swell and fill. I'm ready to explode just thinking of him.

With a growl, I straighten, toss the blond over my shoulder, and stalk across the wooden floor of my office. Each footstep sounds like a boulder cascading down a mountainside. I reach a tufted velvet sofa that faces a bank of windows, and I throw the blond over the back.

When he moans and tries to rise, I shove him back down. I part his asscheeks and spit between them, using my fingers to lubricate the pucker that winks at me. He hisses out a needy breath, reaching behind him to grip my stone thigh with his hand.

I'm lost to my daydream, though, so I hold him spread apart as I guide my rock-hard length into his ass.

We let out mutual groans of ecstasy before I pick up a punishing pace.

My brain returns to fantasizing about nondescript brown eyes widening with pleasure. A smirk tips haughty lips up as he taunts me. I've always loved a brat in the bedroom, and I've no doubt the man from tonight would be one.

If only he hadn't left...what a shame.

I fuck the man before me instead, spilling my seed into him as we come together, screaming release while I gaze out at the sky, wondering where the mystery man from earlier ended up tonight.

Did he go home and fuck someone like I did?

And if he did, did he think about me? I'd wager my right wing that he did.



AN HOUR LATER, MY COMPANION HAS GONE AND I'M ALONE IN MY bedroom. A stack of books next to me will be my reading until it's time to retire for the night. I'll rest once the sun finally begins to streak across the sky.

Looking out at the blackness, I realize I haven't seen Raoul for several hours. It's unusual for him to be out flying for so long, although it happens on occasion.

A letter sits on top of my stack of books, placed there by him, no doubt. Opening it, I read a request to take a new student. This one comes from the Fire Syndicate. It seems a woman there is having trouble controlling her gifts. It must be dire indeed for the Fire Syndicate's leader to seek out my assistance. Of all the Syndicates, they are the most secretive.

I suck at my teeth as I ponder the request. I could have her sent here. I could use my gift to help her master hers. It's been ten years since I took a student in earnest. Maybe it's time...

But for some reason, I'm not feeling it. Teaching requires a certain amount of connection, and nothing about this particular case calls to me.

Reaching for my cigar box, I draw out a favorite and light it. Smoke swirls around me as I try—and fail—to put the male from the Aerie out of my mind.

There's a harsh pound of footsteps and then a quick rap at the door. Without waiting for my consent, two grotesques trundle into the office, their stone features distressed.

"Master, we've been hit by the vampires," the first of the two says, wringing his hands together around a gray handkerchief.

"What?" I bellow, rising to my full height as they shrink away from me. "Where is Raoul?"

The second grotesque steps forward, even as the first shrinks away. His voice is a stony whisper as he looks up at me, dark brows pulled into a harsh vee over his gray eyes. "Raoul has been found drained, Master. He cannot fly. It must have happened hours ago, but he's only just been found now."

"I need to see him immediately," I snap, pushing past both grotesques. I cross the bedroom, fling the double doors wide, and stalk toward Raoul's quarters. Rage turns my vision an inky black as I transform completely into stone form, stomping up the hallway as the grotesques skirt past me at a run.

We reach Raoul's room in moments. His darkened space is lit with a single candle. From the doorway, I can just make out his diminutive form on the bed. He's curled on his side facing the wall.

The grotesques hover in the doorway as I cross the room and lean a hip on the bed.

"Raoul," I say, turning him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. When he rolls, his face breaks my heart. Rocky tears stream from his charcoal-gray eyes. His horns hang low against his nape, as if he doesn't even have the energy to keep them upright.

"He took it, Master." Raoul's voice is so low and mournful, I can barely hear him.

"Tell me everything," I command as I take his much smaller hand in mine, my stone form matching his. It'll comfort him to see me as he is rather than the other forms I'm able to take.

My three fingers dwarf his as I rub absently at the back of his hand.

“Who was it, old friend?” I press, leaning forward as Raoul reaches his other hand out. I take it, folding my larger fingers over his.

“He had glowing platinum hair. I noticed his glamour, and then he took it. He stole the sky from me, Master. He stole it!” Raoul’s distress grows as an uncomfortable certainty settles into my chest.

This was done by the man from tonight. The man I lusted after. The man I fantasized about while fucking another.

He will pay for taking from me and mine.

“I will return your power to you, Raoul,” I promise my favorite grotesque as I pull my hand from his and cross my arms. “Leave this issue with me. Rest and recuperate.”

“You’ll get it back? You promise?” Raoul’s voice is hopeful as he looks up at me, big eyes full of tears.

“I will.” And I know exactly what I’m going to do. The scene from tonight enticed the thief.

No, it was more than that. He was intoxicated by what he saw, right on the edge of giving in. I should have pushed him harder.

I won’t make that mistake next time. I’ll recreate the scene he was drawn to, and if I’m right about his desires, he’ll be back.

When that happens, he will pay for what he did to Raoul.

CHAPTER 5

TOWER

For the second time in twenty-four hours, I trail Axel down the hallway leading to my uncle's office. So far, I've been lucky. Lucius has been too busy to express his displeasure with my failure to fetch the book he wants. But as Axel knocks, I have a feeling my luck is about to run out.

"Come," Lucius barks from the other side of the door.

Axel smirks down at me. "Good luck."

Fuck you. I brush past him and enter. Lucius isn't alone, but there's no feeder on his lap this time. Instead, a tall, redheaded male stands before the big desk. At first, my stomach lurches, because I think it's Ryder Connelly. But when he turns, I breathe easier. Whoever this is, he's not the meddlesome witch. The hair color is the same, though, and I feel a pang of sympathy. It's not easy going through life with a memorable mop. Sometimes I'd kill for bland, basic brown.

Lucius notices me and scowls. "Sit, Tower. We're almost done here."

Gritting my teeth at being commanded like a dog, I stroll forward and plop in a chair. The redhead glances at me with brilliant green eyes before returning his attention to Lucius. He's bare-chested, which would be weird for a human but isn't abnormal for a Myth creature. His pants are made of some kind of iridescent material—a rainbow of colors that shift depending on the way the light hits.

A merman, then, and an important one. Only the most powerful can tolerate being on land for extended periods. His broad shoulders are taut as he focuses on my uncle.

An anxious fish—or a desperate one, maybe. That's not unusual for the family's clientele. He's stupid to let Lucius see it, though. My uncle never

misses an opportunity to extort our customers.

Lucius pulls a vial of blood from his top drawer, then stands and offers it to the merman. "Tell him no more than three drops at a time."

The ginger frowns as he accepts the vial. "You said this would fix the problem with the voice. The burden grows heavier."

My gaze catches on a pendant attached to a gold chain around his neck. It's a clamshell design because of course it is. The Sea Syndicate lacks imagination when it comes to fashion. And decor. And basically everything.

"It's borrowed power," Lucius says, nodding toward the vial. "A large dose could kill him."

Stolen power, I correct in my head. Taken from a siren. I know because I'm the one who siphoned it. And it was *not* a fun experience. The sea is a wild place inhabited by deadly creatures. Backbiting and warmongering are the syndicate pastimes.

The merman's frown deepens. "Is it dangerous? I don't want anything to happen to him."

Gross. Gods help me if I have to hear about another nauseating romance, I will puke on the carpet. Wotan and Ryder were disgusting enough. Even as I swallow bile, curiosity tugs at me. It's odd that the merman needs to buy a siren's voice. Someone as powerful as he clearly is could just enslave one. Or pay one.

Lucius's mouth tightens—a sure sign he's growing impatient. "Then fight your own battles next time, Ari. I helped you in the past—"

The merman cuts him off with a hiss. All at once, menace rolls off him. And his body...changes. His features grow sharper, the muscles in his arms more defined. He swings his gaze from me to Lucius in a fluid movement. "I asked you not to name me, especially in front of your servants."

I bristle like a fucking porcupine. "I'm not a servant, bitch. I'm the heir to House du Sang."

The ginger's lip curls, and I swear his teeth look sharper than they did a second ago. "Really? Then it looks like you're on the wrong side of the desk, *boy*."

I half-rise from my chair.

"Sit, Tower," Lucius says sharply. "We don't tangle with our clients, especially not those from the sea."

The merman smirks. But it's not the expression of a street thug or some punk trying to show off. There's a real threat in that smile. His upper lip

bears a thick scar. More scars mar the otherwise smooth perfection of his chest. I've spent enough time on the streets of the Hallows to know the unlucky bastards who inflicted them are almost certainly dead—and maybe eaten. Some of the merfolk clans are cannibals.

I sit.

Lucius focuses on the merman. "This is the best I can do. Take it or leave it."

The redhead closes his hand around the vial. "I'll take it."

"Excellent. It's been a pleasure doing business with you." Lucius leaves the *now get the fuck out* hanging unspoken in the air.

The merman barely spares me a look as he hurries from the office, no doubt eager to get back to the *him* he spoke of. As soon as the thought springs to life, my mind travels back to the Aerie. No matter how hard I've tried to forget the man in the suit, he's emblazoned on my brain. Even now, his possessive look strokes over my skin. I'm miles away from the Sky Syndicate, but it's like there's a magnet deep in my chest tugging me toward a stubble-covered jaw and whiskey-colored eyes.

Which is ridiculous. He was a hot guy in a nice suit. Nothing more.

But every time I close my eyes, he's there. And the scent of cigars is like a ghost that followed me home.

"Tower."

Lucius's sharp voice jerks me into the present, and I look up to find him staring at me with obvious displeasure.

"Yeah?" I sit up straighter. "I mean, yes." Fuck, he's been talking to me and I've been daydreaming about a male I most definitely do *not* want to see again.

My uncle studies me. "You're distracted. What happened in the Sky Syndicate, besides you failing at your task?"

Resentment sours my gut. "Nothing. There's a lot of security. I didn't get very far."

"You got far enough to siphon someone. I can sense the power under your skin."

My stomach knots. It was only a matter of time before he noticed. Still, I'd hoped to hang onto the power a bit longer. Not for myself. I've never been able to use the magical gifts I steal. But the memory of the stone creature's drooping tail leaves me feeling...something. I can't really say why, but I don't want Lucius selling the little male's gift. Not just yet.

Lucius pushes back from his desk. "I'll draw it from you."

"No."

Slowly, he stands, a look of disbelief on his face. "No?"

"I...would like to wait." I swallow my pride, and it goes down like acid. "Please."

"Well you can't." He pulls an empty vial from his drawer and rounds his desk. His voice is clipped. "You're returning to the Aerie tonight, and I want you to have a clear head this time."

I'm on my feet in seconds because I can't stand having him loom over me. Also, we're the same height and I know it irks him when I look him in the eye. "It's too soon to go back. Security chased me out of there. They know what I look like."

"They know what your *glamour* looked like. You'll wear another one, and you'll return and finish the job. Otherwise, you can sit your spoiled ass in your room." He uncorks the vial, his fangs lengthening. "Everyone in this family works, Tower, even pampered princelings."

I say nothing. I'm not pampered and we both know it. He's never denied me clothes or cash, but he's sure as hell never given me love or affection. He hates me, but he needs me—and he hates that he needs me. Round and round we go, despising each other and bound by blood ties we'd both love to sever.

He strikes quickly, and I grunt as his fangs punch into my jugular. He palms my neck as he takes several heavy pulls. Immediately, my skin under his hand tingles. Light spills onto the floor around me as I begin to glow. The process is fast, but it's not fast enough. Every second I'm forced to endure his bite is a violation. He doesn't need my blood, but the power is tied to it. This is the only way to extract it. He grips my neck, and my skin grows hotter as the gift of flight leaves my body. For a brief moment, its absence is an ache that makes my eyes water. It was mine for a little while. Losing it hurts. I can only imagine how the little guy feels.

Lucius licks the puncture marks, and I want to die. He's all business as he goes to his desk, his glowing hand stretched in front of him. I sink into the chair and watch him tip his palm over the vial. Light streams into it like a miniature waterfall. Later, he'll add blood so the gift can be sold to someone with enough money to pay for the privilege of flying. The du Sang warehouse is full of such vials—all powers I've stolen for the benefit of the

family I'm supposed to rule. Instead, I watch my father's brother cork the vial and set it aside.

He sits again. "You'll return to the Sky Syndicate tonight. I want that book."

I know better, but my stupid mouth decides to run itself anyway. "If it's that important to you, maybe you should get it yourself."

His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Now why would I do that when I have you?"



TWO HOURS LATER, I'M SEATED AT THE AERIE'S MAIN BAR AND STEALING surreptitious looks at myself in the big mirror on the wall. This time, my glamour is slicked-back black hair and blue eyes not too far off from my own shade. It's a flashier look. Too flashy. I've already attracted attention.

"You look like you could use some attention," someone drawls next to me. A slight male with silver hair and startling blue eyes smiles as he seats himself on the stool beside mine. He looks away long enough to flag down the bartender. As he turns, the faint outline of wings glimmers at his back.

Pixie. The nosiest fuckers on the planet and the last creature I want sitting next to me while I'm on a job. He's gorgeous, though, as all pixies are.

"Vodka tonic, please," he tells the bartender. "And I'll take care of that," he adds with a nod toward my drink.

The bartender—a tall, blue-skinned fae with two rows of serrated teeth—raises a brow at me. "You okay with that?"

"It's fine," I say tightly. The drink is just for show anyway. Alcohol doesn't really affect me, but I still avoid it while I'm working. As Lucius pointed out, I don't need any distractions.

The bartender ambles off, and the pixie slow-walks his gaze down my body. It's a more playful perusal than the one the male in the suit gave me, but it's still blatant enough to let me know he's not buying me a drink out of altruism. "I'm Jasper Lilygully," he says, and I swear I can hear fucking bells tinkling.

"Rune," I say, using one of my go-to aliases, "and I'm here with someone."

“Of course you are.” He heaves a good-natured sigh. “The pretty ones are always taken. What’s his name?”

I meet his gaze. “How did you know it’s a *he*?”

“Well I didn’t.” One corner of his lush mouth quirks up. “Until you just told me.” The bartender sets a drink in front of him, and the pixie lifts it and winks at me. “*Bottoms* up.”

I snort and pretend to sip my drink. He’s got the pixie charm, all right. Any other time, I might ring his bells a time or two, but right now I need my dick to keep a low profile.

“Are you and your probably-very-hot boyfriend here for the show?”

My instincts go on high alert. Over the years, I’ve learned to never ignore them. Still, I’m outwardly calm as I give the pixie a mild look. “Show?”

“Mistress Dahlia and her slave, Evander.” Pale eyebrows go up. “I hear they were quite the hit the other night. It’s unusual for Lord Gothel to put on the same show twice in one month, but I guess he’s giving the people what they want.”

No. He’s laying a trap. Lucius will have to wait. Even with my new glamour, it’s too risky to linger.

I toss my drink back so I have an excuse to leave. “I’m not here for that.” I stand, already calculating the fastest way to the exit.

The pixie shrugs, dismissing me. He takes another drink, murmuring, “Must be here for the library, then. Nerd alert.”

I still. “There’s a library?”

He stares at his half-empty glass like the contents offended him. “They’re watering these down with hellhound piss. How am I supposed to drown my singlehood sorrows with this swill?”

My hand itches for a knife. People are always more forthcoming with a blade against their neck. But those tactics are off the table in this place. I glance around, then lean in and lower my voice. “Where is the library?”

Brilliant blue eyes blink at me. “In a choice between a muscle-bound, oiled-up demon getting his ass pegged and *library*, you pick the library.”

“Where is the—”

“Top floor, gorgeous. But it’s not—”

I’m off before he can finish, his “not open to the public” drifting after me. No matter. I don’t plan on asking for a library card.

The elevators are empty, which confirms my suspicions about tonight's repeat performance. Lord Gothel obviously knows someone drained one of his employees. There are a few other Myth creatures who can swipe magical gifts. There's no reason to think he knows the family was involved.

But he clearly knows something about thieves—because he's expecting another hit. Most marks think the first theft is the big one. It's not. My initial visit is usually more of a reconnaissance mission. I learn the layout and what kind of security I'm up against. I might drain one or two minor powers to throw the mark's life into chaos.

And that right there is the sweet spot. When my mark's head is spinning, I make my move.

Not this time, a voice of caution whispers. Gothel isn't spinning. He's lying in wait. He's got his security crawling the bar where I drained the little guy. He's recreating the same damn conditions, throwing out a lure and hoping I'll bite.

And part of me wants to take the bait. For the first time in a long time, this job is exciting. There's a thrill in skirting the edge of danger—in walking into the enemy's lair and daring him to catch you.

Of course, that's not the only thing that tempts me. The man in the suit floats in my mind too, and I can't help wondering if he's in his seat again, his big body relaxed against the sofa as he takes in the spectacle on the stage.

But I can't go home empty-handed again. So I ride the elevator to the top floor, and I stay in the shadows as the doors slide open.

Just as the pixie promised, a library spreads before me. But it's not just any library. This place is fucking *huge*.

And empty. No hearts beat in the cavernous, moonlit space. No little stone men are waiting to ambush me. The place is all windows and bookcases and leather furniture. The lights of Old Manhattan twinkle outside. The smell of old books perfumes the air. Beautifully patterned rugs cover the wood floors. It's kind of inviting, actually.

And there are a *lot* of fucking books. As in, tens of thousands of them lining the walls from the floor to the ceiling. The stacks are so tall the top shelves can only be reached by ladder.

My heart sinks. How the fuck am I supposed to find the *one* book Lucius wants? A book without a title, no less. I've just walked into the definition of "needle in a haystack."

Defeat and anger swirl in my chest as I wander through the room. For all I know, this is just my uncle's way of fucking with me. He's never asked for anything like this before. He likes the money I bring to the family, but he likes watching me fail even more. Anything to show the others I'm not worthy to call myself a du Sang. Anything to prove *he* deserves to sit in my father's chair.

"Fuck him," I say under my breath. I stop before a bookcase lined with the oldest books I've ever seen. The leather is cracked. The markings on the spine bear no resemblance to any human language I know. Before I can think better of it, I trace my fingertips over the faded, golden letters. These books are so old, they may very well predate human civilization entirely. For all I know, I'm looking at tomes that come from the other side of the Veil.

A floorboard creaks.

I spin just as a strong hand grips my throat and pins me to the bookcase.

The whiskey-eyed male from the Aerie looks down at me, but he's not smiling now. Fangs flash as he growls deep in his throat. "Looking for something?"

I can't answer. I can't squeeze so much as a whimper past the stranglehold he's got on my neck. Claw-tipped wings spread wide behind him, blotting out the other side of the room. His face shifts, becoming more angular. Black horns sprout from his forehead and twist into elegant points. His skin deepens to gray. He's still recognizable as the man in the suit, but now he's bigger and scarier.

And made of stone.

My eyes go as wide as his leathery wings. Because I'm so very fucking dumb. During all my preparation for this hit, I never asked what Gothel looks like. Well, now I'm an authority on the subject. If anyone asks, I'll tell them he wears three-piece suits, smokes expensive cigars, and has the grip strength of a minotaur.

At last, my shock wears off. I can't break his grip, but I can still move my legs. I kick hard, nailing him in the leg. Pain shoots up my toe and into my shin, making my eyes water.

Gargoyle. Right. I probably just broke my toe.

"Relax," he says roughly, his deep voice ringing with authority. His hot breath flutters against my cheek, and gods help me but I imagine that's exactly how he sounds in bed.

My traitorous dick stiffens. At the same moment, Gothel presses a thick thigh against my groin to hold me in place.

Surprise flares in his eyes. He loosens his grip on my neck.

“It’s nothing,” I croak, mortified and pissed off and desperate to be anywhere but *here*, trapped between a rock and a hard place. Literally.

He presses his thigh harder, and that deep voice drops so low I feel the vibration in my bones. “It doesn’t feel like nothing.” Slowly—achingly slowly—he slides his thigh up my erection, stroking me as his long fingers squeeze my throat. “It didn’t feel like nothing when you taunted me during Dahlia’s show the other night.” His wings curl forward, creating a cocoon around us. Sealing me in this space he’s created. He smells incredible—a mix of cigars, leather, and a spicy aftershave that invades my lungs and settles there.

I want him to get the fuck out of me. I want him inside me. I want to punch him, and I want to smash my mouth against his. My body has gone haywire, my fight or flight instincts shorting out and leaving confusion and lust in their place. Desire sparks through me like I’ve been connected to one of the shoddy human electrical grids.

I try to speak, but I can’t suck in more than a trickle of air at a time. Right now, *he* decides when I get to breathe, and he seems to know just how much oxygen to give me to keep me subdued but conscious. I don’t have enough air to deny it was me downstairs. But I already know I’d be wasting my breath. There’s certainty in his eyes. Some Myth creatures can peer beneath glamour. Fuck, maybe he’s known who I really am all along.

“You’re wondering if I can see under your disguises,” he murmurs, his lips perilously close to mine. He leans in and *smells* me, dragging in a deep breath that makes my aching dick leak in my briefs. “No, sweetheart,” he rumbles, “I can’t see through you.”

My body jerks, that *sweetheart* striking like a lightning bolt. It should sound stupid. It *is* stupid. I’m no one’s sweetheart. But coming from this powerful, elegant beast of a male, it’s like a wave of raw bliss. Potent and dangerous. If he wasn’t holding me up, I might sink to my knees and beg him to say it again.

It’s fucking terrifying, the things I might do to please this creature.

He pulls back, his golden eyes mesmerizing in his gray, angular face. “What I *can* do is sense power, and you’re spilling it like a dam that burst.”

He eases his grip on my neck. “Is that why you broke in here, to find instructions to tap your full potential?”

“I got lost,” I rasp. I say it unflinchingly, my eyes locked with his. I’m a good liar. I’ve had lots of practice. “And I don’t need any fucking instruction.” I almost follow it with a dig about the kind of *instruction* he obviously wants to give me, but I swallow it. With my dick ready to rip through my pants, I’m hardly in a position to cock shame anyone.

Humor gleams in his eyes. It’s almost as shocking as anything else that’s happened in the past ten minutes. Lucius would have already struck me. But this man—this gargoyle—looks...indulgent. Like he finds me entertaining and a little ridiculous.

He tilts his head, studying me like he’s considering something. Then he gives a subtle nod. “You’re right, young one. You *are* lost. It’ll take a lot of effort for you to find your way. But you can do it. I can teach you.”

“I don’t—”

“You can siphon but you can’t release. You draw power so easily it takes your breath away. You love it, the *taking*. And you wonder if maybe you love it too much, if that’s why you can’t release the gifts you steal. You try to release. You’ve tried so hard, straining and fighting. But the harder you fight, the tighter you hold on. You think you’re broken.” His voice dips deeper. “You think the only thing you’re good for is playing fetch for someone else. You’re locked up. You’ve *been* locked up, in every way it’s possible to be imprisoned. But the truth is, the worst prison is the one inside you. You’re terrified you won’t ever escape it.”

My lips part, and I know I’m gaping like a fish pulled out of water. Because that’s how I feel—like he just reached into the cool, still waters of my soul and yanked the very essence of me into the harsh light of day. He’s just turned me inside out. I can wriggle and gasp all I want, but he’s got me. I’m hooked.

His voice is a caress against the raw, tender parts of me he’s just exposed. “I’ll teach you, Tower du Sang, but first I want to see what you’ve been hiding.” He steps back, releasing me. His wings snap close to his body, and his features shift quickly into the human form he wore downstairs. But his voice stays the same, and it booms with command. “Let down your glamour.”

CHAPTER 6

GOTHEL

When I saw the nondescript male in my private library, I knew the trap I set had been sprung. He was too smart to fall for the sensual pixie at the bar, and too wary to meet me for Dahlia's second performance. But I watched and waited for that hit of power that flows from him despite the glamour.

The thing is, for a man of my particular talents, power can't truly be hidden. It's why he was so attractive to me that first night, eyefucking me across a stage. He made himself appear absolutely average, but there's just no way to hide the ribbons of potency that radiate from him.

Power—and its control—is all about choice and intent. The du Sang brat's issue is twofold: he lacks choice, and his intent is all fucked up. He came here to steal from me. But he ended up draining Raoul. He will never sort out his power without guidance.

And gods above, I want to be the one to guide him.

Pulling a cigar from my vest pocket, I light it without taking my eyes off him. He's a slippery fuck, and fast. If he can dart to the window and leap out, I wouldn't put it past him to do so. As it is, his eyes dart from side to side. He's not even considering my demand. He's a cornered, wounded animal, desperate for a way out.

I suck in a deep hit of the cigar. "We didn't have cigars beyond the Myth," I share with him. "It's one of my very favorite things about this plane, in the time I've been here."

Ages, is what I don't say aloud. But it's a simple enough reminder that I was here long before his family came into being. Long before he was born

or made. Long before anything he knows.

Blue eyes flick back to me, and he grits his jaw tightly.

“I’ll tell you a little about how this is going to go, sweetheart,” I continue. When he says nothing, I blow the cigar smoke back in his direction. He tries not to breathe, but I watch it curl around him until he opens his mouth and sucks it in. His eyes flash to me when he realizes this isn’t a normal cigar.

“Special blend,” I say with a wink. This cigar is laced with a drug that’s a powerful aphrodisiac for gargoyles. I’ve got no idea what effect it might have on a vampire, but I’m about to find out.

I narrow my gaze at him. “First you’re going to try lying again. Then you’ll try to fight. You might even try to seduce me. But eventually, you’ll give in. Better to let the glamour down now and let me get a look.”

“Why?” he snaps back. “It can’t possibly matter.”

“I like to know who I’m working with.”

He purses his lips and looks away, trying desperately not to inhale the smoke, but already his chest rises and falls a little more quickly. When I glance down, his cock is still hard, and when he notices me looking, it jumps in his pants, straining at the front.

I let out a raspy chuckle as I suck at the tip of the cigar again. His eyes follow my lips as a whine leaves his throat. “One last chance, sweetheart,” I remind him. “We can do this the hard way, if you prefer.”

I sense power flicker and build under his skin. It rises as his frustration does, his fists balling at his sides. But just as quickly, its potency wanes and recedes, and a hint of defeat shows in his eyes. That’s not uncommon for powerful beings who’ve been beaten down or have no context about their magic.

“Hard way it is, then,” I rumble, spreading my wings wide as I grip his throat and yank him to me, flying up past each level of my library until I reach the top. The glass window at the top spins when I shove through it, and then he dangles from my grip, a hundred stories above what used to be Manhattan.

His hands scramble for my arm as he tries to wrap his legs around my waist. Something, anything to keep from falling to his death. The Aerie’s lights flicker below us, and the faint sound of thumping bass is audible from here.

My lips tilt into a smirk as my horns flex and straighten behind me, growing longer. It's a sign I'm highly aroused, not that he knows.

"Let it down, du Sang," I growl, gripping his throat tighter. There's a brief moment where his power flickers and builds again, but then all the fight goes out of him and he drops the glamour.

It flows away from him in rivers, starting at the top of his head. Radiant, almost incandescent white hair flows in elegant waves down his nape, pooling somewhere around the middle of his back. Electric blue eyes look at me with a mix of misery and terror as he continues scratching at my forearm.

He's so shockingly beautiful, I fight to keep the desire from being evident on my face. A male like this will only use that to his advantage. He's not seducing me right now, but he'll try to at some point. Power flickers behind his gaze. He's brimming with it, more than any student I've ever taken.

"There you are, sweetheart," I murmur, flicking the cigar off the roof. The male in my arms shivers, his teeth chattering as he watches the cigar fall away. "I've got you," I croon. He doesn't realize this is an important first step, the one in which he chooses to trust that my words are true.

He's still riding a high from the smoke, so I bring him closer to me. Immediately, he wraps his legs around my waist. I wonder if he even knows he's rocking his hips against me as I brush my mouth along his. Our gazes connect, and I don't look away. I never do. My students always fail to maintain a steady gaze with me in the beginning, but he should be able to by the time I'm done with him.

A soft whine eases from his throat as his muscles relax one by one. I'm not doing anything but staring into those brilliant eyes, and already he's letting go.

The moment he's free of this precarious situation, he'll throw his guard back up and try to regain control, but I'll deal with that in a few minutes.

"Let me teach you," I growl. "Let me show you how to handle all this incredible power. You can release the powers you siphon. I'll show you how if you agree to become my student."

His pupils blow wider. His cock grows harder against me. Our sexual attraction is intense, something that's necessary for a gargoyle to teach. Our methods involve an intense mixture of pleasure and pain, of give and take.

If he agrees to learn from me, he'll be a ball of pent-up frustration one moment and blissfully sated the next.

"Agree," I press when he says nothing.

He gulps once, pale lashes fluttering against high cheekbones. "Let me down, Gothel."

This is a critical moment, one in which I listen to his request and heed it—something I won't often do during our training. Dropping my grip on his neck, I wrap both arms around him and spin, flipping us quickly to dart through the circular window. In a flash, we're back down the eight or so stories to the bottom of the library.

I land far harder than I normally do, dropping him from my arms as I stalk toward my cigar box. Godsdamn, this new blend is really something. If I thought it would help the brat to fuck him tonight, I'd take him to bed. But he's about to get cocky again. They always do.

He picks himself up off the floor with a snarl. "I'm leaving," he states, lifting his chin when I turn and light my second cigar. Blowing out a curl of smoke, I smile.

"Alright. Be my guest. You know where the door is."

He opens his mouth but shuts it just as quickly, confusion warring with anger as he fights to regain some semblance of control. "You won't try to stop me? Even though you found me in your 'off limits' library?" He uses air quotes, infusing a suffocating amount of snark into his words.

The laugh that rumbles out of me is deep enough to shake the floor under his feet. "You'll be back, Tower."

He startles at my use of his first name. But this is the time to really dig in and drive my point home. "I've heard about you, the brat kept in line by du Sang's powerful leader. You're an errand boy, unable to do the simplest of tasks without your uncle's help. Have I got that right?"

He's across the room and in my face in a blink, his gorgeous features twisted in fury. "You know nothing about my life, you overgrown garden troll! How dare you even—"

I cut off his vehemence with a fist wrapped in that gorgeous, shiny hair, pulling him to me as I crash my mouth to his. He's crisp snow and ruby red berries with a hint of tangy salt. Pure bliss radiates throughout my core as I harden, the cigar smoke driving my pleasure even higher. My horns are straight as arrows when I thrust my tongue into his mouth. I almost laugh at the way he sucks at it desperately.

Wrapping my wings around us to create a safe space, I devour him like the delicacy he is, kissing him soundly until he's both wound tight and limp with pleasure. Looking down, I grin at the damp spot on the front of his trousers. I palm his cock, stroking his throbbing length as a hungry growl leaves his throat. His fangs are fully out, blue eyes flashing as venom drips from him onto my chest.

If I were any other prey, this would incapacitate me, but being made of stone has some distinct advantages. With a satisfied chuckle, I shove my hand into his pants and wrap my fingers around him. Instantly, he throws his head back and pants.

"I'll help you," I say. "But my help doesn't come for free."

"I'm wealthy, money is no object," he gasps as I squeeze the spongy head of his cock lightly between my fingers.

"Sweetheart," I scold gently. I nip his chin until he brings that electric gaze back to me. "I don't want your money. All I need is your consent to become my student. I'll teach you what you need to unleash all that power you're bottling up."

He whines again, but in a flash the needy, hurting male in my arms snaps walls up around that vulnerability. He shoves away from me, battling against the cocoon of my wings and pushing hard enough that I open them so he can back away.

"Everyone wants something for their services," he snaps. "Consent isn't enough. You say it's that, and next thing you know I'm your slave for the next ten centuries. I won't do it. I will *never* do that."

Ah, so he's trapped in his current situation. He's confirming as much now. If I had to wager a guess, I'd suppose his uncle controls his ability to learn about his power. What's the human saying? Something about cutting the head off the snake?

In any case, the head of this snake is firmly in his uncle's grasp, and will be until Tower takes matters into his own hands. I sigh as I look at him the same way I've looked at all the others before him. Breaking and reforming him to his full potential will be a career highlight for me.

"While I'm your mentor, you will not be allowed to leave," I agree. "But only your power decides when it's had enough of our agreement. Once it's unleashed, our temporary bond is broken. That is all I require from you."

For a long, heavy moment, he regards me with suspicion and distaste. Then he swipes that long curtain of glorious hair over his shoulder before he glares at me. “I call bullshit. I’m leaving now, and I won’t be back.”

A smirk curls my lips as I suck at the cigar’s tip. “You’ll be back, Tower. Because when you lie in your bed tonight, dreaming of my hands and my tongue, you’ll wonder if there’s any possibility that my offer could be real. So I’d suggest this—ask your uncle what he knows of gargoyle wardens, and when he says we’re a bunch of no-good scoundrels and warns you away from me, you’ll know I’m telling the truth.”

A range of emotions parade through his eyes. Anger. Confusion. More than a little bit of interest. Finally, he settles on dismissal. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

I watch as he turns and leaves soundlessly, and then I watch the security footage from my personal station as he flits through the Aerie and the casino downstairs and heads off-property.

He’ll be back for two reasons. First, he’s desperate for help. And second, he came to steal from me. He didn’t get what he came for, and his uncle will be highly displeased by that. Like it or not, Tower will be back here sooner or later.

And I will be ready.

CHAPTER 7

TOWER

This time, Axel is waiting for me. He steps from the shadows as I enter the mansion's foyer, his big fist twisting in the back of my shirt as he hauls me toward Lucius's office.

"That's two for two, you little cocksucker. You get more worthless every day." He adjusts his grip, snagging some of my hair, which is almost certainly intentional.

My fangs throb, eager to descend and rip into his flesh. I struggle to get my feet under me, but the motherfucker is strong and he hustles me down the hall like a sack of potatoes. Outside the double doors, he slams me against the wall. My head bounces off the plaster, and I taste copper. He pins me in place and pats me down, checking for knives. It's always the same routine after I've been let off my "leash" and allowed to fetch for the family.

My homecomings are always more unpleasant when I return without a toy.

I grit my teeth as he paws at me. He probably knows I'm unarmed, since I came from the Aerie. He's just doing this to fuck with me. And because he's a bitch. "I think you like this too much, Axel. Looks like I'm not the only cocksucker in the family."

He buries his fist in my gut. I double over, my breath whooshing out. Tears of pain and anger burn my eyes. Even as I reel, an errant thought bounces around my brain.

Gothel didn't hurt me. He kissed me. He intimidated the fuck out of me, and he definitely scared me with that whole "floating in the night sky" maneuver. But he didn't hurt me. On the contrary, he promised to help me.

Axel shoves me upright. His angry, ugly face fills my vision. He hisses, tobacco-stained fangs on display. “You and I are going to be totally alone one day, and then I’m going to—”

“What is going on?”

Axel freezes. Lucius stands in his office doorway with his brow furrowed. His gaze moves between me and his lieutenant. “I told you to bring Tower to me as soon as he returned home.” He doesn’t wait for a reply. With a final look of reproach, he turns and disappears into the office.

I smile at Axel, making sure to show plenty of fang. “Guess it’ll have to be a rain check, dickhead.”

“Count on it.”

I wait until he rounds the corner before I sag and prod my ribs. Nothing’s broken. I’ve fed well enough lately that the pain is already fading. I push off the wall, straighten my clothes, and enter Lucius’s office.

“You provoke Axel,” he says as I sit. “It’s beneath you as the scion of one of the original families.”

For once, I keep my mouth shut. We both know Lucius gives his men free rein to rough me up. It’s a game he likes to play: pretending he’s a mentor or some kind of father figure. Like he gives a shit about my inheritance. It worked on me when I was younger. Before I learned the truth. He probably laughed his ass off behind my back after I ran to him crying about the beatings and the slurs.

“I sent you for a book,” he says, “and yet you don’t have one.”

I lift my shoulders. “Yep. It’s a pickle.”

For a second, murder gleams in his eyes. Then he wrestles back control. “Tell me exactly what happened tonight. And leave out the lies and bullshit or I’ll give you to Axel for a week.”

As threats go, it’s pretty effective. Especially since Lucius never fails to follow through. But he’s in luck this time, because I have no intention of lying. Accusation rings in my voice as I lean forward. “How about you tell me why you failed to mention Gothel’s power is helping Myth creatures find theirs?”

His lips curve. “You met him.”

“He said he could help me.”

“And you believed him?”

Anger builds. I squeeze the arms of my chair. “Well I sure as shit don’t believe *you*. You’ve let me”—I grope for a word—“*languish* like this for

twenty-five years. And the whole time, you've known there's a being out there who can fix me."

Lucius opens his drawer and rummages in it. He pulls something out. I expect a vial, but it's not that...

It's a cigar—and a box of matches.

Ice slides down my spine.

The match catches, the flame flaring. He lights the cigar and takes a puff. He speaks on the exhale, his eyes glowing through the smoke. "Tell me, did he offer to *teach* you?" He scoffs. "Come now, Tower, you're young but you're not that naive. Gargoyles are sensual creatures. I believe you saw that firsthand when you visited the Aerie."

I tense, remembering Evander getting fucked on stage, right out in the open. That wasn't what Gothel meant by "teaching," was it? That's ridiculous. Even if I were willing to let someone shove a dildo up my ass in front of an audience, that wouldn't help me control my siphoning power.

He kissed you, a little voice reminds me. Yeah, and he'd grabbed my dick. He'd done...something to me when he blew that smoke in my face. Something to make me desperate for him to keep touching me. I'd nearly come in my pants from a few strokes of his big hand. Gods, I was an idiot.

Lucius stabs out the cigar. "Gargoyles are also tricksters. You and I have had our differences, but I'm not willing to sign my nephew over to some pervert on the off chance he might help you solve your little problem."

My cheeks burn. My problem isn't "little." It's a fucking albatross around my neck. Lucius is an asshole, but he's right about this. I'm so eager to fix what's broken inside me, I let myself be tempted by a syndicate lord who probably just wants to mess with me and maybe get off at my expense.

Lucius's voice sharpens. "We're not the same as the rest of the Myth, son. Vampires lived on this plane long before the Veil fell. This family doesn't bow to any syndicate, and the powers who run the Hallows resent us for it. Gothel would love to claim you as a prize, but he knows the family would descend upon him if he took you by force. So he let you into his lair, hoping you would agree to whatever depravity he's got planned for you."

The "son" barely registers. I'm too pissed at myself to muster any anger over it. I walked into that library as easy as anything, which should have been my first clue the whole thing was a setup.

"Do you think Gothel knows we're after the book?" I ask, my voice hoarse with shame. I'm not good at much, but I'm good at stealing shit. I'm

stealthy and quick—a player when the situation calls for it. Getting played pisses me off.

“If he does, you can bet he’s already moved it.” Lucius shakes his head. “You’re unlikely to find it now.”

“I’ll find it.” I look my uncle in the eye. “Give me another chance, and I’ll find it.”

He studies me, and I can tell he’s trying to decide if he should throw me in my room and save himself future trouble. Finally, he nods. “One more chance. But don’t expect to succeed. I know gargoyle wardens, and they’re a bunch of no-good scoundrels. You’ve been warned, Tower. He’ll never tell you the truth.”

I leave, but his words echo in my head all the way back to my room. Because I’ve heard them before, straight from Gothel’s mouth. His whiskey eyes flash in my head, and I can smell his cigar. Feel his phantom hand stroking my dick.

“Ask your uncle what he knows of gargoyle wardens, and when he says we’re a bunch of no-good scoundrels and warns you away from me, you’ll know I’m telling the truth.”

My heart pounds as I stand before my window gazing at the moonlit grounds bisected by bars. It’s just a coincidence.

Except...what are the chances Lucius would say almost exactly what Gothel promised he would?

He never hurt me.

He kissed me.

I swallow, my eyes on the dead fountain below. It’s just a coincidence. Gothel can’t help me. But even as I try to convince myself, I know I’m going to return to the Aerie. And I don’t really care about finding that book anymore. No, this time I want to find Gothel.

There are no coincidences. Living on the fringes of the Myth has taught me that. Free will is real, yes, but Fate wields a heavy hand.

Gothel appeared in my life for a reason. And I want to know if his offer is real.

CHAPTER 8

GOTHEL

Tower will be back, of that I'm certain. He came here looking for something and left empty-handed. I'd wager he's crushed under his uncle's thumb. Lucius du Sang is a fucking asshole. I'd always heard he had a talented nephew, but the vampire gangs typically steer clear of me. Gargoyle ire isn't something anyone wants to incur. We're slow to anger but highly deadly once pushed past our limit.

But Lucius du Sang is pushing me now, and I have to wonder why. Why make it obvious by sending his prized possession of a nephew right into my clutches? It's too...convenient. There must be another angle I'm not seeing.

Or maybe he cares that little about Tower. I don't know enough about the young male's past to know why Lucius is in charge of the family, so I buzz Raoul to my office to find out.

My right-hand man opens the door softly and trudges across the carpet before meeting my gaze. There's a sorrowful set to his brows, and his horns hang down behind his head like hair. In all the time I've known Raoul, I've never seen him so dejected.

"It's time to get back to work, friend," I murmur, patting the edge of my desk so he'll jump up and stand there. It puts us eye to eye, and I'd like to be that way with him right now. Raoul looks at me, but can't meet my gaze for long before it falls. He threads his hands together in front of him, gripping them tightly as if he's struggling to maintain his composure.

"Raoul," I say more gently. "I need you to research anything you can on Tower du Sang and present it to me by the end of the day."

He looks up with sudden urgency. "Why, Gothel? Did he take my power? Can you get it back?"

There's such brittle hope in his voice, I'm disappointed I can't fix this for him right now. I gentle my tone. "I can't say with certainty, but I believe so. There's a chance he'll join us for a time as a student of mine."

Raoul's rocky gray tongue peeks between his lips as he appears to think it over. "A student? Untouchable? You can't mean to—"

"I'll do what I must," I say. "I promised to return your power to you, old friend. Have I ever failed to deliver on a promise in the entire time we've worked together?"

"Well, no, but—"

"And I won't fail to deliver on this one. But I need your help. I suspect Tower will show up here tonight. When he does, I need to know everything I possibly can about him."

Raoul nods. He leaves without another word, his horns a touch higher than when he entered.

I lean back in my chair and pull a cigar from my pocket. As I light it and take a puff, I replay the look on Tower's face when I blew smoke right at him. Gods above, he reacted beautifully. Our chemistry is entrancing, which tells me I'm the right teacher for him. If we lived beyond the Myth still, he'd have his pick of gargoyle wardens, depending on the strength of the chemistry. But even so, our connection is stronger than I've had with anyone in centuries.

That bodes extremely well for what I have in store for the conniving, beautiful male.



HOURS LATER, WORKERS ARE OPENING THE AERIE FOR AN EVENING OF debauchery when Raoul returns to my office and drops a thick manila folder onto my desk.

I raise my brows. "That was fast."

He gives me a wry, unhappy look. "Yes, well, I'd like to fly again one day. You've got everything you can possibly need to know about that asshole."

I chuckle a little at Raoul's ire. In all our time together, I've never heard him curse. Tower du Sang has brought out a new side of him.

"Good work, old friend." I rise from my desk. "I'm heading to the floor shortly."

Raoul blanches. "He'll be there, won't he?"

"I'm almost certain he will," I murmur, flipping the folder open and skimming the contents.

Raoul leaves, and I quickly absorb the intel he gathered on Tower. Then I change into evening clothes and hit my club.

But the vampire isn't here. Bass throbs as I cross plush, black carpet and round the stage. There's new entertainment tonight, but it's a similar style to what Tower watched before. I wasn't certain it would lure him in, but I figured there was at least a chance it might.

Students who come to me unwillingly or as a last resort tend to follow one of two patterns. In the first, they put up an initial half-hearted fuss. Then I break them and they spend the rest of our time together playing nicely. In the second, they fight tooth and nail. When that happens, it continues until they achieve some sort of breakthrough and decide to trust me. I suspect Tower will be the second sort, which means he won't meet me here again.

No, I think my little vampire student is likely to want me to seek him out. I descend below the Aerie to the casino floors, and when my horns exquisitely straighten, I know he's close.

I laugh to myself when I think about how he probably imagines he's leveling the playing field a bit by getting me to come to him. That couldn't be farther from the truth, because once he signs his freedom over to me, there *will* be no playing field. It'll be whatever I want, twenty-four hours a day.

Raucous laughter peels out from a corner table, and when I glance that way, a striking young male with slicked back, bright blue hair lays down a hand. He smirks as the other players yowl in disbelief. But when he glances up at me, there's a familiar smolder there.

Grinning, I lean against a marble column and watch him. His lips are painted black, and he hasn't bothered to hide beautiful, sharp fangs. He looks away for just a moment, letting the dealer know he's done, and then glittering blue eyes slide back to me. Haughty.

That's the only word for the aura he's giving off with this particular glamour. He picked something ostentatious to ensure I'd find him. But he

doesn't realize how much power rolls off him. I could pick Tower du Sang out of a pitch-black room with my eyes closed.

But he knows he's pretty. He thinks he's going to use it against me. Twist me around that slim, muscular body to get what he wants.

When the dealer hands him his checkout ticket, the other players groan. Tower inclines his head and rises gracefully, straightening the collar of a gorgeous, bespoke tuxedo. It's a shade or ten darker than his striking hair. He looks like a godsdamned model as he stalks across the playing floor and stops in front of me with a smug smile.

His pink tongue swipes over his painted lips. His eyes travel down my body before roving back up. I'd laugh at how obvious he is, but there's a fine line between crushing a student's spirit and encouraging them to come into their own.

"Come," I command, turning and striding toward my private quarters. His footsteps behind me are barely audible, but he obeys, and that's all that matters. When he follows me into a waiting elevator, I crowd him up against the wall as I insert the key that'll take us to my library. "Let it down," I order, nearly groaning when my horns go ramrod straight.

Power crackles around him. He shakes his head once, and the blue fades away in rivulets, until he's standing there in his true form.

"Good job, sweetheart," I praise.

Determination flares in his eyes. He presses his chest to mine. That sheet of incredible hair swings over his shoulder, swirling down around his chest and arms as if it's got a mind of its own.

I pick up a handful of it and stroke. "Praise," I growl. "Pain. Pleasure. Power. That's what awaits you when you agree to become my student."

"And then I'm stuck here until you decide I'm free to leave. Is that right?" There's a lyrical edge to his voice. It's still playful, but I'm good enough to sense an undercurrent of concern.

"Oh there's a contract, so no worries about me being the scoundrel your uncle said I was."

There's a flash of surprise, but he covers it quickly as I grin.

"Let me guess," I say. "Those were his exact words. Am I right?"

Tower lifts his chin but stays silent.

When we step out of the elevators, Raoul stands there with a contract in hand. Tower freezes beside me, his heart rate picking up as he looks at the diminutive grotesque.

Raoul scowls but hands me the contract.

I wanted absolute confirmation that Tower stole Raoul's gift. Now I have it.

And I have Tower du Sang.

CHAPTER 9

TOWER

Gothel is all business as he spreads the contract out on a big desk in the library. The little guy hops onto one corner and stares daggers at me. He's clearly trying to look intimidating.

Once again, he looks adorable. But I resist the urge to tease him. His tail whips back and forth behind him, reminding me of the stray cats that stalk the Free Zone. If those motherfuckers taught me anything, it's that small things can be mean as shit. I have a feeling the little guy can inflict some serious damage with those fangs and stone horns. Also, he clearly hates my guts for stealing from him.

Join the club.

Gothel turns and sweeps an arm toward the contract. "Ready for your signature. Read it carefully before you sign."

"I know how contracts work," I say, knowing how bitchy I sound as I move to the desk. But now that I'm actually here—actually making a deal with him—nerves prickles down my spine. I'm disobeying a direct order from Lucius, which means I'm completely on my own right now. The family is unlikely to bail me out if it turns out Gothel is full of shit.

And he probably is. It's obvious the guy wants in my pants. But he also knew what Lucius would say. And Myth creatures don't enter into contracts lightly. Magic has a nasty way of backfiring when you break your word.

I approach the contract, prepared for paragraphs of *wherefores* and *hithertos* and a dozen other pages of nonsensical garbage people use in formal documents to make themselves feel smart.

I look at Gothel. "Is this some kind of joke?"

He leans against the desk with his massive arms folded over his chest. Except for the wings, he might be the professor he claims to be—if professors wore priceless suits tailored to fit enough muscle for an entire werewolf pack. His biceps look ready to pop through his sleeves. He's not wearing glasses now, and I suspect he doesn't need them as he bends his dark head and reads the contract as if checking it for typos.

He lifts whiskey-colored eyes to mine. "Everything seems in order."

"This is three sentences."

"That's all we need, sweetheart. I agree to help you achieve your full potential as a vampire siphon. You agree to obey me completely. If you break your word, I release you and you can never use my services again."

"Stop calling me sweetheart."

His smile is gentle. "The best contracts are simple ones. No one is trying to trick you. I know that's what you're used to, but I don't operate that way. If at any point you want to end our arrangement, you simply say so."

"But then you'll never help me again."

His broad shoulders lift. "Those are my terms."

"Well, they suck."

The little guy makes a strangled sound. Half shock, half outrage.

Gothel straightens, making me feel about as small as the creature perched on his desk. His suit jacket is unbuttoned, revealing a waistcoat and an honest-to-goodness pocket watch chain wrapped around one of the navy-blue buttons that march down his chest. His *thick* chest. The guy is seriously stacked like a fucking bodybuilder. No one dressed like a nerdy librarian should have muscles like this, but he does, and I suddenly feel ridiculous in my slim-cut tuxedo, which looked a hell of a lot sharper when I put it on a few hours ago.

I was pretty impressed with that glamour, too, thinking I could wow Gothel, help him get his rocks off, and maybe convince him to fix my powers. I'm not above using my charms when I want something, and plenty of guys have been enamored enough with my hair and face to pay up.

But I've never faced off with someone like Gothel. As he spreads the two halves of his suit jacket aside and rests his fingertips on his hips, all my ordinary bravado deserts me.

He tips his salt-and-pepper head toward the door. "If you don't like the terms, there's the exit. But my patience isn't inexhaustible, young man. So

make up your mind.”

My throat goes instantly dry, that *young man* racketing around my brain like a pinball before zigzagging down my body, pinging against all my organs, and finally coming to rest in my dick. He didn’t even threaten me. Not really. But something about his stance and that phrase makes my stomach twist with a pleasure-pain that replaces all my brain cells with stupidity. I blink at the contract, willing my tongue to work.

Finally, words come, and I push them out, my voice breathless like I just ran up a flight of stairs instead of standing still for the past five minutes. “What does that mean, I have to obey you completely?”

“My teaching methods are unique to each student, and they change depending on the pupil’s progress. Rest assured, I’ll give you exactly what you need.”

Again, his dark rumble curls around my dick and gives it a good tug. Before I can stop myself, I rake a hand through my hair—something I haven’t done in years, since it draws attention I don’t want.

Clothing rustles, and Gothel rests a big hand on my shoulder. “It’s all right, Tower. You’re not the first potential student to change their mind once they see the contract. Isn’t that right, Raoul?”

The little guy speaks up. “Yes, Gothel. They get scared and leave.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Gothel says, his deep voice apologetic. Understanding. He reaches around me like he’s going to take the contract. “I’ll have Raoul escort you out—”

“No.” I shake his hand off. “I can handle whatever you have planned.” It can’t be any worse than what I’ve put up with at home. I toss Raoul a look. “I’m not scared. Give me a pen or whatever. I’ll sign it.”

“There’s one on the desk,” Gothel says as if it’s been there the whole time. But I know it hasn’t.

At least I don’t think so. “Black magic fuckery,” I mutter as I grab it and scrawl my signature. Gothel steps close and signs, his black wings folded against his back. He nods to Raoul, who rolls the paper into a tight scroll and tucks it under his arm.

“Right,” Gothel says, “let’s get some housekeeping matters out of the way.” He strides past me and goes to a big leather sofa in the middle of one of the plush, intricately patterned carpets that cover the wood floors. He removes his suit jacket and drapes it over the back. Then he removes a

cufflink and tucks it in his pocket. “Have you seen the old human traffic lights?”

I frown. “Yeah, I guess.” I stare at his long fingers as he starts rolling up his sleeve.

“Most of them don’t work, but you’ll probably remember the color of the lights, yes? Green meant—”

“Go.”

He smiles like I’ve said something inordinately clever. “Precisely so.” He removes the other cufflink and starts rolling, exposing a thick wrist covered in dark hair. It’s a man’s wrist, the tendons like wires under his skin. “And the red?”

“Stop.” *Duh.*

“That’s what we’ll use during your time here. I won’t always check in with you during your training, but when I ask what color you are, I’ll expect one of two answers. Green for go or red for stop.” He finishes with the shirt and gives me a serious look. “If you use red, Tower, we’re finished. Done. Contract rescinded. I don’t play with this, understand?”

The scene from the Aerie flashes in my head—Evander draped over that sawhorse while the mistress fucked his ass. My body goes hot, then cold. Lucius’s voice chimes in, reminding me what I’ve gotten myself into. *“Gothel would love to claim you as a prize... So he let you into his lair, hoping you would agree to whatever depravity he’s got planned for you.”*

“Tower?” Gothel prompts. “It’s a simple system.” He nods toward Raoul, who still has the contract tucked under his arm. “I probably don’t need to tell you what kind of catastrophes befall those who break their promises. If you want to end our arrangement, just say the word. You can even say it now if you wish.”

And be a failure before I’ve even gotten started. A running theme in my life.

I square my shoulders. “What about yellow? The traffic lights have those too.”

Amusement touches his gaze. “Red or green only, sweetheart. I don’t do half measures. Or warnings.”

About a million of them flash red in my head, but I nod. “Okay. Well, I’m green then. I guess.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” He sits and pats his knee. “Over here, please.”

I stare. “You want me to sit on your knee?”

“No. You’ll lie on your stomach so I can administer your punishment.”

My gut does another odd twist—a curious combination of pain and pleasure that makes me want to puke but also come like a fountain. “Punishment? Like spank me?” Gods, just saying those words makes my breath hitch.

“That’s right.”

Fuck. In the space of a heartbeat, I’m every color on the fucking traffic light. Just red, green, and yellow flickering all over the place.

I force myself to snort. “This is the kind of kinky shit you’re into, huh?” Even as I say it, I have to wonder if it’s the kind of kinky shit *I’m* into. Because my dick is suddenly paying attention like there’s going to be a test on this later.

His expression is calm. Patient with a hint of sternness that says he’s not going to take even an inch of crap. “You stole from Raoul. Took something precious to him but absolutely useless to you. And you haven’t apologized. That’s how children behave. So you’ll receive a child’s punishment.”

Reality hits me. He’s going to spank me in front of his little henchman. Which...no. No fucking way.

I look at Raoul. “I’m sorry I took your power.”

Gothel sighs. “Words are easy. There’s a difference between saying you’re sorry and feeling it.” He pats his tweed-covered knee again. “Come on, sweetheart. If I have to fetch you, we’ll do it bare.”

I almost swallow my own tongue. *Bare?* As in, my bare ass? My pants down, his big palm smacking my naked cheeks? I do more frozen, freaked-out staring.

He sighs again. Starts to rise.

“I’m coming!” I lurch forward, almost stumbling as I cross the small distance and stop in front of him. I swallow, struggling to get more spit in my parched throat. Even seated, he’s huge, his thighs in a manspread that makes his pants strain over his bulge. I can’t tell if he’s hard, but my boner certainly hasn’t gone anywhere. Which is ten kinds of fucked up.

He doesn’t give me any time to reconsider. Just locks one of those big hands around my wrist and pulls me down and over his lap.

I register several things at once. The fancy, patterned carpet filling my vision. My hair falling over my shoulder, the ends almost but not quite brushing the floor. The one toe I managed to keep on the ground. His rock-hard thighs under my stomach. His scent flowing around me—leather and

cigars and old books and something else that's masculine and mouthwatering and making me hard as granite.

Oh fuck, I'm hard against his thighs. As in, this is undeniably humiliating and more than a little confusing but my stupid dick isn't confused. It's *green, green, green*, full speed ahead.

Gothel flips the bottom edge of my tuxedo jacket up and smooths his palm over my ass like he's warming me up. He places his other hand between my shoulders, pinning me in place. His hands are warm. Even through the tuxedo, they heat my skin. That big hand on my ass keeps rubbing, almost kneading, and suddenly this doesn't feel like a punishment. It feels really fucking *good* and I will absolutely die if I come in my pants in front of Raoul.

I can handle pain. But this? I don't know what to make of this. I don't know how to react to things that don't make me hurt. So I reach for my most reliable weapon.

"Are you going to spank me, or are you just going to feel me up in front of your paperweight over there?"

His stomach shifts against my shoulder, and I realize he's released another sigh.

The first slap is so hard and so unexpected, I can't hold back my yelp.

And I quickly regret my taunt, because it turns out "spanking" was a euphemism and what Gothel really meant was "ass-beating."

White-hot pain explodes over my ass...and then keeps on firing. He doesn't warm up. He just launches straight into heavy, rhythmic, bone-shaking swats. Thick, heavy strikes that have me twisting and squirming in seconds, my teeth clenched against the need to scream. As it is, I grunt with every blow. I wait for my ass to go numb, and it does, but that doesn't stop the pain. It drags on, bright, electric bursts that follow the sharp whacks of his heavy palm crashing down on my cheeks.

His voice stays calm as he punctuates the slaps with a lecture. "You... stole...from...Raoul. Your behavior...was...callous and...inexcusable. Your...lack...of...remorse was...immature and...cruel."

The reminder that Raoul is observing this whole thing starts my stomach twisting again. It's bad enough that I'm slung over Gothel's knees like a naughty school boy. This isn't even really a beating. A beating is getting my face smashed in by Axel or Lucius. A beating is honorable—the sort of thing another man might respect. But this is far from respectable. As

Gothel said, it's a child's punishment. And now he's rubbing salt in the wound by telling me how bad I've been. How inappropriate and misbehaved. He's taking me down several pegs, wailing on my ass under the watchful gaze of the creature I harmed, like I'm a bully getting my comeuppance in front of the kid I picked on.

But there's no question I deserve it. I took Raoul's power. I did it because I could. Because I'm stronger. And now I'm trapped under the hands of someone a whole lot stronger than I am. Like, I can't get away no matter how hard I squirm. Gothel holds me over his knees, his merciless hand swinging, and the fucker doesn't even sound like he's out of breath. I'm here until he decides otherwise, manhandled and subdued by brute strength.

I cry out, but it sounds more like a groan. To my horror, I rock my hips, grinding my dick against his solid thigh. And despite the pain, I raise my ass higher, lifting for the blows. I'm going to come. I'm going to spurt in my pants like a teenager while Raoul watches.

As suddenly as the blows started, they stop.

Gothel rests his palm on my ass, which feels like it weighs about a thousand pounds. He slides his other hand up my back, gathers my hair, and holds it against my nape. "Look at Raoul."

I'm breathing heavily, I realize. Worse, my face is wet. I've been *crying*. He spanked me so hard I cried, which means I have to face Raoul like a sniveling baby. But I do it. Sprawled on Gothel's lap with my ass throbbing and my dick ready to explode, I look at the stone creature I robbed.

"Now apologize. Say *I'm sorry I stole from you, Raoul. I promise to make amends.*" He squeezes one smarting ass cheek like he wants to make sure I know I have to say it just like that.

My voice wobbles. "I'm sorry I stole from you, Raoul. I promise to make amends."

The little guy's eyes narrow, but he nods.

"That will be all, Raoul," Gothel says.

Another nod, and Raoul winks out of sight. Just up and fucking disappears.

Gothel chuckles. "It appears your apology worked. He feels better already."

"At least one of us does," I say under my breath.

He chuckles again—a warm sound that spreads through my insides, heating my core until it’s tingling the same as my ass. I sense he’s giving me a considering look. I can’t see it—or anything except the carpet—but I can feel him watching. Thinking. At last, his rumble vibrates against my shoulder. “I hear you have a fondness for knives.”

I tense, the traffic light in my head flashing bright yellow. My dick decides now is a good time to duck out, because this is probably going to get ugly. “I’m a vampire,” I say, as if that explains anything. It doesn’t. It’s a stupid thing to say.

Apparently, he agrees, because his tone turns disapproving. “I don’t allow weapons in any of my properties. I’m afraid we’ll have to continue this punishment, but this time I need you to take your pants down.”

More twisting in my stomach, which I’ve come to expect. My voice sounds like it was scraped from the back of my throat. “Why?”

“Tower,” he murmurs, my name wrapped in disappointment.

I swallow. “I only brought the one. It’s strapped to my ankle.”

“Stand up and lower your trousers, please.”

Face flaming, I clamber to my feet, wincing at the pain in my ass. “Is this part of the super exclusive training I signed up for? You’re going to spank me again and help me find my magic?”

He sits back against the sofa, not the least bit flustered. “I’m going to give you exactly what you need. No more, no less.”

I scoff. “And I need more ass-grabbing, is that right?”

“You know what you have to say to end our arrangement.” He lifts his big shoulders. “You can quit at any time. It’s up to you.”

That’s it? He’s just going to...get rid of me? I lift my chin. “I don’t quit. *You* might, but I don’t.”

“Then follow instructions. Quickly, sweetheart. I have several businesses to run.”

My hands work of their own accord, fumbling at my belt and zipper. My heart pounds as I drop my pants, letting them puddle around my shoes. I look ridiculous. There’s a wet spot on the front of my briefs from my dick leaking while he worked me over. If it’s possible to die of embarrassment, I should probably start planning my funeral.

“Give me the knife,” he says simply.

I remove it and hand it over. “Sorry.”

He sets it aside. Then he circles my wrist again, his big hand such a stark contrast to mine, I stare at it like it's a life form I've never seen before. "Come," he says, tugging me over his lap. When his fingers slip under the waistband of my briefs, I rear up.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

He pushes me right back down, his warm palm landing in the same spot between my shoulder blades. The other hand tugs my underwear down until they hug the bottoms of my cheeks, leaving my ass bare. The front catches against my dick, which is hard again and poking his thigh because fuck my life.

Gothel gives no indication he notices. He rubs my tender skin, smoothing like he did before. "The Sky Syndicate is different from all the others. I've never been interested in forcing people to work for me. You can't build loyalty that way. You can't trust employees who are only there because they're desperate or frightened."

His big, warm palm continues making lazy strokes over my throbbing ass, soothing the sting. It's stupid, but I feel a little bit like a lazy cat, all stretched out and petted. I have nowhere else to go, so I lie still and listen, relaxing into his voice and touch. It feels so good to just...listen. And he's got a great voice, that deep, rich rumble that unravels some of the knots in my shoulders. It vibrates all through me, including my balls, which are tight and heavy. I spread my legs a bit to relieve some of the pressure.

He continues the long sweeps of his hand. "My grotesques came with me from the other side of the Veil. They trust me to care for them. It's a responsibility I take seriously. That's leadership. Well, my idea of it, anyway. It's not just ruling. It's protecting. Knowing when to use force. Knowing when *not* to use force. The latter is just as important." He skims his fingertips down my cleft, sliding from the top of my crack all the way down to my balls.

Pleasure follows in his wake. Or maybe it's been there all along. It's such a welcome contrast to my aching ass, I chase it, rolling my hips and spreading my legs a little more. I can't get them very far apart with my pants around my ankles, but that's oddly pleasurable too.

There's a wet, popping sound above me, and then Gothel's damp finger slides between my cheeks. It teases my hole briefly before withdrawing.

My eyes fly open, which is how I learn I'd let them drift shut. "What are you—?"

“Relax,” he murmurs, the same way he did when he found me casing his library. He drags his fingers down my crack again, skimming deeper and coasting over my asshole. “Raoul and the others mean a great deal to me, which is one of many reasons I don’t allow weapons or other contraband in this syndicate. You’ve already tried smuggling one weapon in here. So I’m going to check you for more. Reach back and open yourself for me.”

A weird sound emerges from my throat. Part protest, but mostly whine. I blink rapidly, ready to pretend that whine did *not* happen. “I don’t...” I swallow again. “I don’t have anything.”

He chuckles, and the sound tightens my dick, my balls, my hole he’s skimming again and again. “I’m afraid you’re not the most trustworthy person, Tower. Now open up and let me check you. If I have to ask again, I’ll turn this pink bottom red. Then you’ll open for me. So this way is easier, don’t you think?”

“You’re a fucking pervert is what I think.”

“Is that why your dick is leaking through my trousers? Spread your ass or I’ll make sure you can’t sit for a week.”

“Gods,” I whisper, because I can’t say anything else. My mouth is too dry, probably because all the moisture in my body is, as he so helpfully pointed out, streaming from my dick. I reach back with shaking hands and grip my sore cheeks.

“Good boy,” he says. “Now open.”

“I heard you the first time,” I rasp. I pull my ass apart, that *good boy* just as effective as *young man*. Fuck.

There’s the sound of him sucking his finger again, and then he teases my hole. He lingers a moment, stroking and circling, and I gasp, my hips rocking. My cock throbs against his thigh, the head so sensitive my eyes water. He makes a deep, satisfied sound as he wets his finger some more. He dives back in, firm but gentle, and I realize he’s tasting me a little each time. Getting me wet and then gobbling me up like he’s licking something good off his fingers.

“Fuck,” I gasp, pretty much humping his leg. I spread my cheeks wider, offering myself. Shivering like I’m freezing even though I’m burning up. I’m on *fire* as he comes back, getting me so wet. Slipping inside me this time and pumping my hole. His saliva slides down my crack and tickles my balls.

“Good,” he says, voice ringing with approval. “A little more...yes, relax it, sweetheart. Let me in. That’s a good boy.”

I whimper, thrusting my hips as I clench around his finger. “I’m your good boy,” I say, the words spilling out before I can stop them. I squeeze my eyes shut like that will keep him from hearing them.

“Yes, you are.” He pushes his finger all the way inside, and I imagine what that looks like—his thick wrist with the dark hairs nudged up against my pinkened ass. “You’re empty in here. I can feel it. But it was still good to check. Just to be sure. And you’ll never put anything naughty in this hole, will you? Because you’re a very good boy.”

“Yes,” I gasp. “Fuck, yes.” I squirm on his finger, my inner muscles spasming as my balls draw up tight. “Oh fuck, I’m gonna come.”

“I know. Go ahead.”

I explode, coming so hard I’m afraid I’ve blown the top of my dick off. And in the moment, I don’t give a shit. I ride his finger, shooting and yelling like I’ve never orgasmed before. He takes me through it, keeping his finger in place even as I twist and thrash. And he knows when I’ve grown too stimulated, because he removes it just as I start to come down.

When I’m done, he pulls me up and sits me on his lap, maneuvering me like I weigh nothing. He grasps my chin and kisses me, his stubble scraping my face and making aftershocks ripple through me. He tastes expensive. I don’t know any other way to describe it. He tastes like money and red wine and *in charge*. It’s hot as fuck. Unsettling as hell.

My senses are returning when he breaks off the kiss, my ass aching inside and out. My voice is gruff as I say, “I thought you were going to spank me again.”

His whiskey eyes are amused. “When did I say that?”

“You said we were continuing my punishment. You told me to pull my pants down.”

“Lesson one, Tower: Listening. I never said I was going to spank you again. I said I was going to give you exactly what you need.” He tips me off his lap, and I tumble onto the sofa, my ass out and my pants tangled around my ankles.

I glare up at him, turned on and pissed off and wondering what the fuck I was thinking coming here.

I can always say red.

But not yet.

Gothel gets his suit jacket. “I’ll have Raoul bring you something else to wear. Since you broke into my library, you can clean it. Raoul will show you where we keep the supplies.”

I blink. “I’m not here to clean.”

He smiles. “We’ll see.” His wings snap out. In a burst of air, he shoots toward the ceiling.

Gone.

CHAPTER 10

GOTHEL

I perch myself on top of the roof of my library, where I dangled Tower just yesterday. What used to be Manhattan glitters up at me, winking playfully in the chilly evening air. My tail lashes from side to side as I pull a cigar from my pocket and light it. The red tip is a familiar friend, the smoke billowing around my head as I inhale.

My personal cigar maker has finally outdone herself. This particular blend is all mahogany and caramel and something else I can't quite place... anise? I'll have to send her a note, because this cigar is absolutely exquisite.

Although it doesn't hold a candle to the beauty of my stunning new student. It was probably foolish to take Tower on, given that he's already stolen ruthlessly from Raoul. He's after something else, too. It's going to be a problem, I know that. He's likely already hunting around my library despite the fact I gave him an assignment.

Taking another drag of the cigar, I urge my horns to relax and curl again, but they remain straight as arrows. Initially, I planned to speak with the grotesque team about setting up my next plan for Tower, but I can't go down there with my horns like this. There will be questions. Questions I can't answer.

My horns are straight as pins right now, and that's uncommon, especially for a warden. We learn during the course of our extensive training to manage our emotional reactions to our students. The fact I can't force them to return to their normal position is disconcerting. Am I losing touch or simply too far gone from my own training to care?

I mull that over as I inhale another puff of divine smoke, my tail still beating the rooftop with cutting, irritated strokes. Tower's intense reaction

to my dominance plays like an old-timey movie reel in my mind. He came so fucking beautifully in my lap, asking for more. Underneath that prickly, haughty exterior is a male just waiting to break free.

My new student is the rarest of flower buds, curled up tightly against the realities of a cruel, harsh world. He needs safety and care and support, and with all of that, he will eventually bloom and show me his true beauty.

I'm considering that analogy as Raoul appears in a puff of black smoke, plopping down next to me before he looks up at my horns. It's rude to stare at a gargoyle's straightened horns for long, so his eyes flick quickly back down, but he says nothing. He knows I'm hiding up here until this situation dissipates.

"Your new student is a brat-hole."

I chuckle at the made-up word, but it suits Tower.

"You're right, old friend. Most definitely an asshole, and a brat of the highest order. It will take me a while to break him, although he submitted beautifully after a few good swats."

Raoul sighs and pulls his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them as his tail curls protectively around his body. He looks out at the city for a long moment. "He only complained a little about cleaning the library, and only after I turned away. He was polite otherwise."

I smile down at Raoul before taking another slow drag of my cigar. "Good. He was quite rude the first time you met. I suspect underneath all the layers of bluster, he's simply protecting himself. Imagine growing up in the du Sang clan."

Raoul shrugs. "I can't feel too bad for him, not yet. He's still an asshole who stole my power, although he was nice enough just now."

"We will uncover who Tower really is soon enough," I say. "He's going to fight me tooth and nail between every session, but he's naturally submissive to me. We have excellent warden chemistry."

Raoul glances up at my rock-hard horns. "Is that all it is, Gothel?"

It's an uncomfortable question, and the very reason I'm not down in the club or my office right now.

"I have only two goals with Tower du Sang," I remind Raoul in a stern tone. "To retrieve your power, and to help a student come into his own. Tower could be a powerful ally for us within the vampire gangs. There are a few buildings I'd love to acquire, but Tower's uncle is a problem."

Raoul realizes I've changed the topic on purpose, and nods his head, lost in thought. When he looks back out at the city and sighs, I sense he's missing his gift more than ever.

"Bet you wish I'd tossed you off the Aerie the other night, huh?" I joke as I bump his shoulder with mine.

He hops up with an irritated hiss and slaps my tail with the pointed end of his. With any other gargoyle or grotesque in the world, this would be a call to fight, but between my second and myself, it's his politer version of 'shut the fuck up.'

Barreling out a laugh, I slap one of his curved horns as he launches himself at me playfully. I spin him in midair and grab him by the throat, lifting him off the ground as I give him an assessing look.

"You need a good sparring session, old friend. Let us take a flight, and then we'll go down to the training room. What say you, Raoul?"

Raoul's dark eyes are wide as he struggles. "You'd fly with me? That's...unheard of between friends. I don't want you to feel awkward."

I set Raoul down and use the tender moment to slap him again with my tail.

"I don't feel awkward, Raoul. Your gift was taken, and we've always flown together. I'd like to bring that joy back to you in whatever way I can."

A look of intense gratitude settles on his angular features, and he nods, gesturing to my much larger frame. "How will you hold me?"

Laughing, I pick him up and toss him up on my shoulders, leaping off the roof into a free fall as Raoul grabs my neck and shouts for joy. Just before hitting the street, I swerve and make my way through the buildings, winding around skyscrapers as Raoul shifts back so he's lying between my wings. His joy is palpable as he lets out a happy whoop.

Pushing harder, I dip and dive down a set of stairs that leads to the old subway tunnels. There was a time when humans traveled by train here, but now the tunnels are filled with expensive clubs and casinos and shopping.

I fucking love it. I beat my wings as the crowd clears, parting like a school of fish around a shark. I dart down a tunnel, relishing the glittering lights and shiny storefronts, and when I see the next exit, I fly up it and back out into the night.

Raoul is a quiet, happy presence on my back as my wings slow, allowing us to glide around my newest acquisition. We make a lazy perusal

of it, flying in circles until we reach the top of the building I just purchased.

“We need more,” Raoul breathes as we circle the roof and admire our new possession.

“More towers, yes,” I agree.

Raoul slaps me on the top of the head with his tail. “Stop thinking with your horns. I hate him.”

“You want to,” I laugh. “Let us return, Raoul. As we speak he’s probably either attempting to steal something or shirking his duty, and I find myself ready to break him again.”

“Bet you are,” Raoul grumbles, clinging to my neck as I beat my gigantic wings, spinning into a gust of wind as the updraft carries us back home.

CHAPTER II

TOWER

I don't know what kind of bullshit Gothel is trying to pull, but if cleaning could solve my problem with my magic, I'd be running the du Sang family right now. Wielding power as effortlessly as my father did—what I can remember of him, anyway.

Instead, I'm wielding a feather duster. Raoul didn't give me any instructions. The stone gremlin just dumped a pile of clothes on the sofa and gave me a smug look like he knew exactly what had happened there. Then he pointed to a small door tucked in a corner, grunted "supplies are in the closet," and poofed out again.

If he can move around that easily, I'm not sure why he's so pissed about me stealing his ability to fly. I'd give just about anything to disappear in a puff of smoke right now.

You can say red and leave any time you wish, a little voice in my head reminds me.

I scowl and flutter the feather duster over one of the bookcases. If I quit now, I'll have nothing to show for my trouble. Well, nothing except a sore ass.

Against my will, I twist and look at the sofa. It's big, but Gothel's body took up the whole damn thing. He handled me with the same arrogance he displayed the first night I saw him in the Aerie, when he pretty much claimed me with his eyes, those golden depths promising all sorts of filthy things.

My throat goes dry, and I tear my gaze from the sofa. Clearly, the guy has a kink for humiliation. Maybe that's all this is: just a creative way for him to rope some dumb schmuck into weird sexual shit and free cleaning

services. He certainly dressed me like a janitor. The clothing Raoul brought is the kind of low-quality garbage humans in the Free Zone wear—a plain white T-shirt and scratchy blue pants with an elastic waistband. But the underwear are the true insult. Tighty whities that strangle my junk and cut into my ass cheeks, reminding me of Gothel’s spanking every time I move.

But the alternative was spending the rest of the night and the gods know how else long in my ruined boxer briefs, and *that* is a reminder I don’t need. Not that I’m in danger of forgetting it since I’m stuck in the library with the fucking spank sofa staring at me.

I turn my back to it and fling the duster around some more. All it does is lift dust from one location and deposit it in another. My hair keeps falling in my face, so I go to Gothel’s desk. The surface is bare, not even a pencil to mar the pristine surface. I slide a look around the room, then ease the top drawer open, revealing one of those organizer things with neat rows of fountain pens and sticky notes arranged by color.

“What a fucking nerd,” I breathe, pulling a rubber band from a tidy stack of them.

Hair tied back, I return to the stacks and give dusting another try. But it’s hopeless, and this time a few feathers drop from the duster and drift to the ground. By my seventh sneeze, I’m ready to break the damn thing over my knee.

“This is stupid,” I mutter. My efforts have dislodged a few of the books, so I nudge them back into place. The irony of my situation might be hilarious if it didn’t suck so bad. Lucius wants me to find a book, and here I am surrounded by them. If Gothel has a priceless book in his possession, would he really keep it in the library? Maybe. There’s something to be said for hiding things in plain sight.

As I run my fingers down the row of spines, the titles leap out at me. *Earth Magic for Beginners. Nocturnal Spellcasting. What to Expect When You’re Expecting a Troll. The Human Flesh Cookbook.*

“Gross,” I say under my breath.

I tilt my head and keep scanning. *A Country Witch’s Grimoire, Fifty-Second Edition. The Complete Guide to Vampire Magicks.*

My fingers stop. What if I could teach myself what I need to know? Gothel seems confident my power is intact. If it’s just muzzled or hidden, there’s got to be a way for me to find it on my own. And even if I can’t, there’s no harm in learning more about my heritage. Lucius has never been

one to wax poetic about vampire lore. He's more interested in flexing power than he is explaining it.

With a glance over my shoulder, I pull the vampire book from the shelf. I skim the first few pages. Then I lean against the bookcase and start reading a chapter about the original families. I recognize most of the names, but there are a couple I've never heard of—extinct houses that perished when the humans blew up the planet and ripped the Veil.

The book is old, but it's written in a compelling style, and before I know it I'm cross-legged on the floor in front of the bookcase with my back leaning against a bunch of thick encyclopedias. I'm so engrossed in the book, I don't notice Gothel until a pair of brown wingtip shoes appear in front of me.

"Anything good in there?" his deep voice asks.

I snap the book shut and scramble to my feet. He stands closer than necessary, which forces me to tip my head back uncomfortably.

"I was just taking a break," I say.

He doesn't respond. He just...looks at me. There's no judgment or censure in his expression. He doesn't slap my face or sucker punch me like Lucius or Axel might.

He just *looks*, his whiskey eyes steady.

And there's nowhere to go. I'm caught, book in hand, with a bunch of dusty bookcases behind me. The shelves press against my back and hips.

My stomach flips over, more of that weird, twisty shit-raising waves of not-quite-nausea. If I could see around him, I know my eyes would dart to the sofa. I'm not sure if it's good or bad that he's blocking my view.

Silence stretches, and I realize he's not going anywhere. I already lost the staring contest, so I might as well make it a total sweep and lose the "who's gonna talk first" round, too.

"Fine," I sigh, "I got distracted and read a book." I hold it up, spine facing toward him, in case he's willing to give me a pass for reading about my own kind.

His gaze doesn't waver. "What were you supposed to be doing in here while I was away?"

I chew the inside of my cheek. He knows damn well what I was supposed to be doing, but making me say it is apparently part of whatever new game he's playing.

"Cleaning."

“And were you cleaning, Tower?”

“No.” For a second, I can almost hear a ghostly *sir* hovering at the end of that. Heat prickles down my spine.

Finally, he moves, gently plucking the book from my hand. Slowly, he reaches around and sets it on the shelf behind me, his shirt sleeve brushing my cheek and sending a whiff of spicy cologne up my nostrils.

I hover right along with my phantom *sir*, my insides trembling like a plucked guitar string. I wait for him to scoop me up and carry me to the sofa. Or maybe spin me around and deliver another spanking right here against the stacks. My ass clenches, my glutes squeezing together in my tacky pants.

“You signed a contract,” he says. “You agreed to obey me completely. The terms were very clear.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“I have a feeling you say that often. But I wonder if you ever mean it.”

Irritation spikes. “I mean it, all right? I just got here. Not to sound stuck up or anything, but I don’t have a lot of experience with cleaning.” I lean harder against the shelves, letting them dig into my back. “Look, just give me another chance and I’ll dust this whole place.”

“You’ll do that anyway, but we still need to address this disobedience.” He steps back, and I brace myself for my inevitable spanking, but then he sweeps an arm toward the corner. “Go stand over there, please. Nose in the corner.”

My mouth drops open, and heat flashes through me. “You’re—” My voice doesn’t work for a second. “You want me to stand in the corner.”

At last, he shows some emotion, his brow pulling low and his eyes darkening. “I take this training seriously, young man. If you don’t, you know exactly what to say to end our arrangement. I won’t remind you again.”

Anger replaces my irritation. I could say it. *Red light*. Two words and I could be home tonight. No one is making me do this. I’m in control, no matter what he says.

I fling him what I hope is a hateful look and stalk to the corner. He’s hot on my heels, like he worries I might screw this up, too.

“I think I can manage,” I say, facing the wall. He palms the back of my head, and for a second I think he’s going to shove my face into the plaster,

but then he snaps the rubber band. My hair falls down my back and over my shoulders.

His warm breath coasts over my ear as he leans forward. "This isn't part of your uniform, sweetheart. And I definitely didn't give you permission to go through my desk."

My face goes red-hot. A "sorry" forms in my throat, but I swallow it. "How long do I have to stand here?" My eyes are already crossing.

"You don't sound very contrite, so my guess is you'll be here for a while." He moves his big hand to my shoulder and pushes me forward, guiding my face more deeply into the corner. "But that's okay because I'm not going anywhere. Since you can't be trusted to follow instructions, I'm going to work at my desk while you stand here and think about the consequences of your actions and how you can make better decisions next time. Is that in any way unclear?"

My throat tightens. Interestingly, so does my ass. "It's clear," I say, my suddenly raspy voice loud in the tiny echo chamber of the corner.

He leaves, and I stare at the wall and listen to my breathing, which is heavier than it was a moment ago. Sounds drift to me. The soft thuds of his footfalls as they travel from hardwood to carpet and back again. The squealed protest of his chair. A desk drawer opening. With nothing else to do, I strain for his every movement, imagining what he looks like behind that big desk. I picture his white shirtsleeves gleaming and his dark head with those glints of silver bent as he looks over his rows of pens. When he spanked me, his wings molded to his body when he sat. I'd like to ask him more about them. Maybe...touch them. Winged Myth creatures are notoriously sensitive about their wings.

I imagine how I must look, too, with my hair cascading down my back and my ass encased in the cheap blue pants. I don't know what to do with my hands, so I stuff them in my pockets. My dick is hard, and I ease the fingers of my right hand over until they press against my shaft. I'm not really sure what I'm doing. It's not like I can whip my dick out and jerk off while I'm standing here. But this is boring and stupid and embarrassing in a way my dick seems to wholeheartedly approve of. With a silent groan, I press my forehead into the corner.

"Shoulders straight, please, Tower, this is not time for relaxing."

I pull my head off the wall and bite my tongue before I can tell him to get fucked. I'm not sure why I don't, honestly. But something keeps my

mouth shut, and something makes me hold position.

Somewhere in the room, a door opens and rapid footsteps cross the floor, growing more muffled when they reach the carpet islands. “Master Gothel,” a gruff voice says, “I have the deed for the new building.”

“Thank you, Oscar. Leave it on the corner there and I’ll look it over.”

My face burns like I just wandered into the path of a flamethrower. It’s bad enough knowing Gothel can see me. Now one of his little garden gnomes is witnessing my humiliation. Their murmured conversation continues, and the heat flows down my body like lava. They talk as if I’m not in the room, like I’m beneath their notice—a disobedient child being excluded from the world of adults. The heat concentrates in my ass, and I have a wild thought that maybe they can see it through my pants. Like two thin layers of cheap fabric are insufficient to contain my earlier punishment.

It’s not *that* insane of a thought. My healing capabilities are as good as any Myth creature’s, but not when I’m hungry. I haven’t eaten in...I don’t remember how long, and it’s been a while since I fed. I’ve endured some pretty long spells without drinking, but it’s unpleasant. The trick is not to think about it.

Unfortunately, thinking is about the only activity open to me at the moment. Time drags on, until my legs hurt and my world reduces to the corner in front of my face. I try to let my mind wander, but it circles back around to food...and blood. My fangs ache, eager to descend. I rub my tongue on one sharp tip and get a shot of my own blood. It’s a tactic I perfected when Lucius started dangling the privilege of feeding over my head like some kind of prize I had to jump for. Apparently, I’m a slow learner, because it took me a while to realize I’m never going to be able to jump high enough—and that I was never meant to.

My vision blurs again from staring at the same spot on the wall. Sleep tugs at my eyelids. I should have just cleaned the damn library. *Red*. I could say it. Red like a traffic light. Red like blood. As always, blood is a burden. Dragging through my veins, pushing me to prove I’m worthy of my name. But how do I prove something I’m not sure I believe?

“Tower.”

Gothel’s deep voice is so unexpected, I jump. “Yeah?” I clear my throat. “I mean, yes?”

“Come to me.”

The command hits me between the shoulder blades and streaks straight down to my dick. I close my eyes on a long blink, then swivel around.

He's seated behind his desk, his sleeves rolled up and his collar undone. His white dress shirt glows like a beacon in the dimly lit room, and when he beckons me forward it's like he tugs on a leash and I'm on the other end. Half dazed, I cross the room and stand before his desk, my heart thumping hard.

His forehead furrows. "You're hungry."

"I'm fine."

He leans back in his chair. "Oh Tower, what am I going to do with you?"

The affection in his voice catches me off guard. I was prepared for scolding. Or anger, I guess. But this amused exasperation is so foreign I don't know how to react.

He pushes his chair back and pats his thigh. "Come on, then. You'll feed from me."

My eyes do their best to bug from my head. "You?"

"Do you see anyone else around?"

"I can't..." My voice trails off as my gaze lands on the fat vein that runs down the side of his neck. His pulse thuds there, each beat an invitation. Saliva floods my mouth, and my fangs punch lower, the tips threatening to pierce my bottom lip.

"You can," Gothel says smoothly. He tugs his collar open a little more, and I have to wonder if he planned this. But fuck if I care, because I'm starving and he just offered to be my dinner.

"I've never fed from a gargoyle before," I hear myself say as I round his desk, my eyes locked on his jugular.

His laugh is low and warm. "I should think not. Few Myth creatures are willing to let a bloodsucker tap them."

"We don't like that term."

He pulls me between his knees and rests his hands on my hips. "Then I'll have to think of something else to call you."

"Like sweetheart?"

"Perhaps. Climb up here." When I try to sit on his knee, he shakes his head. "No. Straddle me."

I'm too far gone to argue. But as I try to obey, my stupid pants pull so tight I hear threads ripping. "Fuck," I gasp, shaking like a junkie for his

delicious blood that's *right there* and still out of my fucking reach.

"Here, let me." Big hands tug my pants down, and because the waistband is elastic, they slide easily, exposing my white briefs. He bends forward to untangle the pants from around my ankles, and I get another lungful of cologne, leather, and cigar. The scent is so intoxicating, and I'm so fucking hungry, I don't even resist. I just stand there and let him pull my shoes and pants off, and then I let him pick me up and settle me over his lap, my thighs spread and my knees tucked on either side of his hips.

His eyes narrow to burning gold slits as he takes me in, his gaze roving over my upper body. I know what he sees—my smooth jaw and lean muscles. I'm the right combination of pretty and ripped to make guys lose their shit.

"What are you thinking, baby?" he murmurs, and that *baby* startles me into blurting out the truth.

"That you're the kind of top who chases twunks like we're candy."

His sensual lips curve. "Twunks?"

"Twink. Hunk. Twunk."

Amusement glimmers in his heated gaze as he skims his hands down my waist to my ass, raising goosebumps. "Do you want me to chase you?"

I don't answer. Because I'm not chased now. I'm caught, the scent of his delicious blood flooding my lungs and making my brain scream *more, more, more*.

My dick is tenting the front of my briefs, the tip threatening to poke from the top of my waistband. I want to drain him and I want to grind on him until I pass out. I don't understand him, but I want him. Right now, it's hard to remember if I've ever wanted anything else.

He palms my nape and pulls me into him, tilting his head to the side as he guides my mouth to his vein. "Go ahead, baby. Take what you need. I've got plenty to give you." His free hand strokes under my T-shirt and caresses the bare skin over my ribs.

I strike with a hiss, nailing him in the vein and then moaning when rich blood floods my mouth. I latch on, my fingers twisting in his shirtfront, and take deep pulls. He tastes like old magic, from a time when humans worshipped the Myth as gods. Power sizzles through me, lighting me up from the inside out. My heart pounds, a heavy *thump, thump, thump* as it searches for his. It's a vampiric trait, the instinct to sync our heartbeats to our prey's.

But Gothel's heart is...

I pull back, confusion swirling.

Heavy-lidded golden eyes stare back at me. "What is it?"

"You don't have a heartbeat."

His palm stroking my ribs stops. Emotion flits through his eyes—there and gone so quickly I can't decipher it. His hand starts back up, and now the other joins it, dragging my T-shirt over my head and leaving me in nothing but the thin briefs stretched over my ass.

He tips his head farther to the side, showing me his thick neck smeared with red. "I've got blood," he murmurs. "And I think you want it, don't you, baby?"

My mouth hangs open, need gripping me like a vise. "Yeah," I croak. I strike again, my questions disappearing as I suck him in.

His rumble of approval sounds almost like a purr. "That's it, sweetheart. You were such a good boy standing in that corner, and good boys get rewards."

This crooning praise is just the flipside of whatever twisted game he's playing. I know that. I know it's not real. But I lap it up anyway, drinking it down the same way I devour his blood. By his own admission, he "teaches" others this way. He's probably had dozens of young men in his lap. He's as depraved as Lucius warned, but right now he makes me feel good and I'm too weak to resist.

And I'm depraved, too, because straddling him in nothing but a pair of cheap, cotton briefs is fucking doing it for me. The thought that one of his people could walk in at any moment cranks my lust to new heights, making me groan and rock my hips. I grind my dick against his stomach, whining deep in my throat.

He grips my cheeks in two big hands, his fingers splayed over my whole ass. "Baby boy wants something else, doesn't he?" His fingers dig into my ass, squeezing as I rut like an animal. One fingertip rubs over my hole, pushing the underwear against my clenching pucker. "Greedy baby. You're going to ruin those panties. You're a little slut, wanting it so bad. Isn't that right?"

Somehow, I'm still capable of embarrassment. My face burns even as I thrust harder, my dick ready to blow. I spread my legs more, rubbing all over him and making sounds I'd rather not acknowledge.

Without warning, he grips my hair and pulls my head back. Denied two kinds of release, I cry out in a mix of outrage and need. My dick is ready to rip through the briefs. The material is so wet it's see-through.

"No hiding, Tower. Tell me exactly what you want."

"Y-You," I gasp.

His face is hard, his voice firm. "Not good enough, young man. I haven't gotten a lick of honesty from you today, but I'll have it now." Still fisting my hair, he shoves my briefs down. My cock pops out, almost obscene as it bobs between us, my cockhead an angry red, my slit drooling. He keeps my balls trapped under the tight fabric, and I shudder.

"The truth now, little boy, or I'll pull your underpants up and march you right back to that corner. Tell me exactly what you want. Use those pretty lips for something besides excuses and deflection."

"I want you to fuck off with the games," I snap. "Put your hand on my dick and jerk me until I come."

He grabs my dick and pumps hard, his big hand working me ruthlessly. "Let's see it, then," he growls. "Make a mess, baby."

Lightning strikes. I come on a loud cry, shooting all over him. Making a big fucking mess, just like he told me to. We both watch my dick spurt, thick globs of come landing on his pristine shirt and tailored dress pants. He gentles his strokes, then lifts his hand to his mouth and licks a splash of me off his fingers.

"Fuck," I say weakly, panting and wide-eyed. It's all too much—the contract and the spanking and the punishment. And now this. The exhaustion I felt in the corner catches up to me, and I slump forward before I can stop myself. I land on his shoulder, my shuddering body plastered against his. For some inexplicable reason, tears well in my eyes.

He kisses my temple, one big hand spread over my back. "I'm proud of you. Honesty is a tough lesson to learn. Some never master it. The truth can be hard to acknowledge. It makes us vulnerable, sharing what we want. What we're thinking. You've spent so long wearing other people's faces, I'm not sure you know what yours looks like anymore."

I swallow. Now that my orgasmic haze is receding, I feel more than a little ridiculous. "Wow, that's deep. You going to delve into my daddy issues next? Or is that what we were just doing?"

His chest rumbles under my cheek. "You think I'm wrong?"

I roll my eyes. “Look, I know my childhood was fucked up. My uncle is an abusive asshole. You telling me I’ve got trauma is hardly a mind-blowing revelation. But I’m not some poor waif you have to rescue off the streets. I’m a siphon. I wear glamour so I can steal shit without riling the syndicates. And I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m also pretty hot. It’s hard to stay anonymous when you’ve got a face that launched a thousand boners.”

His smile is a warm presence above my head. His arms tighten around me. “Tower du Sang, you really are a brathole.” He tenses. “You might want to close your eyes.”

“What—?” My stomach drops out from under me as he blasts us straight upward, rocketing out of the chair like a stone loosed from a slingshot. A scream lodges in my throat. He didn’t need to tell me to close my eyes. I do it on my own, squeezing them shut as I bury my face against his chest. Wind rips at my hair. The world tips and tumbles over, and then my stomach slams into my chest as we descend. There’s a snapping sound, and then we jolt to a stop.

“Bedtime,” he says, striding forward.

I push at his chest. “I can walk.”

He hefts me higher in his arms and gives my ass a sharp swat. “Quiet or I’ll put you to bed with a sore bottom.”

Fuck.

I clamp my mouth shut. I want to ask how long he’s going to keep this “little boy” shit up, but I have no doubt at all that he’ll follow through on his threat.

And I’m not going to think too hard about how I kind of want to mouth off so he’ll do exactly as he promised.

He shoulders his way through a door, and I get a glimpse of modern decor as he carries me to a bed. Cool sheets hit my back, and he tucks me in like I’m five years old. Any other time, I’d say something snarky about it, but the mattress is soft and I’m drowsy and sated after drinking and coming. My two favorite things. Although, this bedtime thing feels kind of nice, too.

Have I ever been tucked in before? If I have, I don’t remember it. Figures my first time having this experience would come at the hands of a syndicate lord who likes to role play.

“This is one fucked up fairy tale,” I murmur, my eyes threatening to close.

Gothel pulls the sheet to my chin. “Am I the prince or the villain?”

My voice comes from far away. “No idea, but I’m sure as hell not the fair maiden.”

His chuckle speeds me toward sleep. I hear his footsteps, and as I drift off I swear I hear him say, “No, Tower, you’re not. But don’t worry. I’ll help you find out who you are.”

CHAPTER 12

GOTHEL

Tower's asleep before I even make it to the door, and where normally I'd leave and take care of things in my office, I just...don't. His peaceful snoring rings through the quiet room, and I ache to know what he looks like when he's asleep and safe.

Turning around, I press my back to the glossy wood, crossing my arms as I watch him buried deep in the pale sheets. His long hair is thrown to one side, one muscular arm up over his head as the other clutches at the silky fabric. It's not uncommon for my students to sleep like the dead when they're with me. I'm a safe haven for them. Once they've accepted it, their sleep usually improves. It wouldn't surprise me if he doesn't wake up on time tomorrow.

It'll earn him a punishment, because I like timely obedience, but I'll make it fun. He deserves rest. It's more than that, really. A person on edge and beaten down will never come into their power, not without something traumatic happening to them. I'd wager Tower is just one beating away from his power exploding and burning the du Sang estate to the ground. His uncle is playing with fire, but maybe he wants it that way.

Tower exhibits obvious signs of trauma-induced PTSD. He flinched when I found him, expecting to be hit for reading a book. I find myself wondering if this young man has *ever* had anyone in his corner a day in his life?

I pushed him hard tonight, maybe a little bit too far given the emotional work he needs to do. And then I let him drink from me, something I've never done with another ward. Pulling a cigar out of my breast pocket, I light it as I watch him sleep.

He commented on my not having a heartbeat. Gargoyles never do until they've found their true mates. I don't know what it feels like to have that steady thwomp in one's chest, that obvious evidence of life thrumming through your veins. I ponder what that might be like as Tower shifts in the bed, groaning as his hips rock under the sheets.

He's hard, a little precum dripping from him to wet the topmost bit of fabric. It sticks to his swollen cockhead as I lick my lips. I can't trust Tower du Sang. He's part of a vampire gang that's currently fucking with me, and I still need to find out why.

But gods I'm enjoying the breaking of him. Probably a little more than I should. He's my ward, and I'm his guardian until he can control his power. Not only that, but I promised Raoul I'd retrieve his gift, and I've never gone back on a promise once in my entire long existence.

I mull all of this over for a few moments, watching Tower as pale lashes flutter against his white cheeks.

So fucking gorgeous.

There's a yawn, and he wakes and sits upright, turning to where I stand at the door. How long have I been standing here? An hour? Two?

His hair is slightly mussed as he slides off the bed and braces his hands on his hips. "Watching me sleep? How very warden-esque of you." There's a tilt to one side of his smile as he snaps walls up around himself. He's a natural brat, but everything about the way he responds to me is a barb. He strikes first to protect himself.

I chuckle and blow a ring of cigar smoke in his direction. "Want a drag, sweetheart?"

He scowls at me but pads across the carpeted room and reaches for the cigar. I snatch it back and give him a meaningful look.

Blue eyes roll in annoyance. "Pretty please? Is that what you want to hear?"

I ignore the obvious barb and flip the cigar around, the hot end facing me as he takes it with a huff. It's a pleasure just watching him, the way he leans in and sniffs at the cigar's beautifully wrapped body. He breathes in, eyes closed, before hollowing his cheeks around the end of it.

A zing of need shoots straight to my cock as it throbs against my leg. My balls are ten-pound weights between my thighs as my horns lengthen and straighten. I wonder if he's noticed that characteristic yet?

I flip the cigar around and take a drag. I blow out another smoke ring, watching as it hits Tower straight in the face. The ring breaks over his skin, and he parts his lips to suck it in, pupils blowing wide as the aphrodisiac hits his system.

“You’re doing this shit on purpose, aren’t you?” he growls. “Picking a blend that’ll get me high as a kite and ready to fuck.”

A smile parts my lips, my fangs peeking out as I grin at my ward, watching the drug stoke the flames of his lust. “Why, Tower? Are you ready to fuck?”

I don’t need to say anything else, because his lips fall open, and he presses closer to me. I don’t think he even realizes he’s doing it, but his muscular chest brushes mine. I’m nearly a head taller than him, and ages older, but none of that matters as he looks up at me.

“You’re attracted to me,” he states, as if that obvious commentary could draw my attention from his own need. I don’t bother responding. Instead, I grip the back of his neck and angle his head back. Then I brush my lips across his.

With my other hand, I grab his and guide it between my thighs, holding back a grunt when he squeezes my heavy cock and moans.

“I’m always ready to fuck, sweetheart,” I rumble. “Good boys can earn this cock, but bad boys get punished until they’re ready to ask nicely.”

Tower slides his tongue along my lower lip. “I hate that I’m about to fucking ask nicely,” he rasps, biting gently at my mouth.

Another satisfied grunt leaves my throat. He’s going to try to seduce me. It’s a tactic I’ve seen time and again. He’ll be back in brat-mode by tomorrow, but I’m curious to see where he takes this.

Tower’s hand strokes along my thick length until he reaches my balls, and then he rolls them between his hands while nipping at my lips. “Gods, you’re huge, Gothel.”

I’ve heard it before. I’m big, even for a gargoyle, and I was always hung like a stallion. Most of my students have been unable to take me without magical intervention.

Something tells me that Tower will be different. That his body was made for my cock.

The thought is there and gone the moment I think it, but the damage is done. His hand is teasing at the deep pleasure we can find in each other’s bodies, and I want it. I want to unleash.

He tosses the cigar aside, sensing the change in focus the same as I do. I'm on him before he can make another move, grabbing and flipping us as I toss him against the wall and bury my tongue in his mouth. My wings come around us like a cocoon, shutting out light and noise as my claws dig into the stone wall above Tower's head.

I plunder his mouth with mine, desperate for more of the bratty, self-involved vampire who agreed to let me do whatever I want with him until I'm done.

He needs me.

He wants me.

He's mine, for a time, at least.

Flames sear at the edges of my consciousness as Tower gives back as good as he gets. His mouth slicks over mine, fangs clashing together as one of his nicks my lower lip, splitting it open wide. He growls, attacking the wound with fervor as he sucks my skin into his mouth, blue eyes nothing but black, predatory pupil as he feeds.

Fireworks dance behind my eyelids as I press my hips rhythmically against his. Long legs are wrapped around my waist as he nips and sucks my blood, but I've had enough of that, so I yank his head back and bite at his tongue, demanding another kiss. Deeper, harder, stronger. I take everything the vampire can give as our kiss becomes a frenzy of action, one of his hands still between my thighs as the other snakes up along my neck.

When his long fingers trace a path through my hair, wrapping around one of my horns, I fucking detonate. Stars explode behind my eyes as Tower lets out a surprised grunt, then a groan of pleasure. One hand milks my cock as I come all over myself, bellowing into his mouth as his tongue traces a hard path along mine.

The hand around my horn squeezes, and then slides up and down, mimicking a hand job as I fuck him with my hips, focused only on an intense, all-consuming pleasure like I've never felt before.

Ecstasy dissipates in waves, every touch of Tower's hands threatening to send me off into yet another orgasm. But bit by bit I come back to the earth, my breath nothing but heavy pants as the clock on the wall tick-tocks on, oblivious to what just happened.

Tick tock tick tock.

"Gothel," Tower gasps, his hips thrusting against mine as he chases a high. "Please." His eyes are shining sapphires in the low light as I take his

mouth again, pulling his lower lip with my teeth. He groans sweetly, clawing at my vest as cum drips down my custom pants.

Tick tock tick tock.

The fucking clock is distracting me, and I shoot it an evil look, my mouth on Tower's as he whines and rocks his hard cock against mine. He moves to pull my pants down, but I stare at the clock.

It's not moving.

Tick tock tick tock.

Surprise and concern and heat all rush my system at once as I press away from Tower, dropping him gently to the stone floor.

"What the fuck, Gothel?" he demands, running both hands through his hair as I stare at the clock like my life depends on it.

Tick tock tick tock.

It's not the clock.

It's me, my heart, more specifically.

I put everything into that kiss, and my godsdamned heart is beating.

Tower's mine, my *mate*.

Oh fuck. A million inconvenient realizations pop into my head all at once. And he's staring at me, waiting for an answer about why I stopped touching him.

I've got to get out of here.

"Sleep well," I growl, turning quickly and exiting the door even as a frustrated snarl follows me.

He calls my name, and it's everything I can do not to return to him and take him up against the wall, to hear my mate call out my name with my cock buried all the way inside his ass.

Thwomp thwomp thwomp.

My new heartbeat sounds like a death knell in my ears, so loud I can barely think above it. By the time I get to my office, I'm terrified my grotesques will hear it, but most especially Raoul, who would be heartbroken to know Tower's mine in all the ways that matter to our kind.

I can't do this now, not with Tower. He'll use it against me because he's not far along enough in his training. He can never be trusted. He's a vampire, a thief, a bully.

The million reasons why I can't and shouldn't have him ricochet around my mind like old-fashioned bullets. I can't. We shouldn't. He's my godsdamned ward.

Stalking to my desk, I rip a drawer open and retrieve a sheet of my letterhead. Scrawling in big, loopy letters, I cross to the fireplace and throw the letter in, watching it burn up with red sparks. They morph orange, then yellow, and finally a deep green. When the green remains consistent, I blow out a frustrated breath and return to my desk.

I throw myself into paperwork, even though I can't fucking concentrate around the incredibly loud sound of my heartbeat. It sounds like my heart will break through my ribcage, and it's so loud, I wonder that Raoul hasn't spirited himself into the office yet to check on me.

A miserable half hour passes before there's a knock at the door, and then Jasper the pixie sails in with a shit-eating grin on his haughty, angular features.

"My oh my, sweet stone daddy, you are looking so fine. Being mated suits you," he laughs as I flap my wings hard enough to slam the door closed behind him.

Jasper turns to look at the closed door, then sits himself down in front of me, crossing one long leg over the other as he smiles. It's wicked though, as it always is. I'll owe him for this, and I hate to be beholden to pixies.

"Guess you haven't told the mini-me's your glorious news yet? You are mated, I assume."

When I give him an angry look, he brushes invisible lint off the shoulder of a lime green three-piece suit.

"Did you bring it?" I grind out, sitting back in my chair as I steeple my fingers together.

"What if I didn't?" he teases. "Will you throw me over your big stone thighs and spank me?"

"There's nothing you need to be taught that I can teach you," I counter, opening one palm as I gesture for him to give me what I requested.

Jasper fakes a sad look, then places a small bag in my waiting hand. "You know, wouldn't it be easier to just tell everyone the joyous news? Most beings are thrilled to find a fated mate, heartmate, whatever you call it."

"Heart-bound," I remind him of the correct term. "It's a delicate situation."

Jasper leans forward, bright blue eyes gleaming. "Do tell. Let me guess, it's Raoul? Or maybe that other little guy. Oh shit, maybe it's them both? I

can just imagine you in a big bed, surrounded by fifteen little miniatures all humping your various holes like chihuahuas.”

I grimace at the horrid picture he’s painting. He’s well aware that’s never the relationship between a gargoyle and his grotesques.

“Oh come on,” he laughs, shrugging. “It’s a little funny to think of.”

When I don’t join his laughter, he stands. “No payment due now. You can owe me for something in the future. I love the idea of that, actually.”

I hold back a groan, the last thing I want as a syndicate lord is to owe something to a pixie—they’re notoriously devilish and tricky to deal with. But I’m ancient. I can handle anything Jasper wants to dish out.

“Not a word to anyone,” I remind him. “Not even anyone here in my towers.”

“Your *towers*, huh?” he enunciates, making it very fucking clear he’s onto me. “Noted, stone daddy.”

Without another word, he lets himself out, and I open the small pouch to reveal the ruby-red jewels inside. Twenty or thirty small jewels fall into my palm, glittering in the low light of my office. Grimacing, I place one under my tongue, feeling it dissolve and break apart. The moment the jewel’s magic hits my bloodstream, fire streaks to every part of my body.

Gripping my desk so hard the wood splinters, I hold back a scream of pain as the magic takes hold, and the steady thrum of my blood in my veins is no longer so obvious. My heartbeat slows and stops as the painful blood magic settles around my heart, locking it up tight so that no one—not even Tower if he drinks from me again—will know that it’s beating.

I’m in deep fucking trouble though, because gargoyles can’t take *carantura* forever; I shouldn’t even take all thirty of these doses, and I’m liable to need at least one a day.

Time is running out, and Tower du Sang is my fucking heart-bound mate.

CHAPTER 13

TOWER

“Fucking gargoyles,” I mutter as I climb the library ladder to dust yet another shelf.

Seriously, no one needs this many books. There are tens of thousands of them. I know this because I stopped counting at 10,352.

That was over a week ago.

Although, who am I kidding. It was thirteen days, twelve hours, and forty-one seconds ago.

“Forty-two,” I growl as I move books, taking care to expose the whole shelf. If I miss even a speck of dust, Raoul will find it. For the past two weeks, the little fucker has appeared every evening and inspected my work with a pair of white gloves on. The first couple days, he hissed when his fingertips revealed traces of dirt.

“The master won’t like this,” he said in his gravelly voice.

He was right. The master *didn’t* like it—and he ordered me to start over. At least, I assume the order came from Gothel. I wouldn’t know, because the only beings I’ve seen over the past thirteen days are Raoul and a few of the other little stone goblins. They come and go, trotting in with armfuls of paperwork, which they leave on the big desk.

Other times, they appear in a poof of black smoke, linger for a bit, and then disappear. Some are friendlier than others. A few even shyly offered to help me move books around, their spiky little tails waving happily when I agreed. They took a while to warm up to me, but eventually they began chatting, sharing amusing stories about happenings in the club downstairs, or incidents at Gothel’s other properties in the syndicate. When I asked for news of Lucius, a grotesque named Anton shook his head.

“Sorry, Mister Tower, we’ve heard nothing about the vampire boss.” He tilted his head, his horns drawn back and his dark, liquid eyes inquisitive. “Do you think he knows you’re here?”

I thought about lying. But then a gruff voice drifted through my memory. “*Honesty is a tough lesson to learn. Some never master it.*”

“Yeah,” I told Anton. “My uncle knows I’m here.”

Anton’s horns went flatter. “He must be worried about you.”

“I can guarantee that’s not the case.” Before I could stop myself, I added, “No one’s ever worried about me.”

The little guy hopped down from the shelf he’d been perched on and flapped over to me. He butted his horns gently against my shoulder—a gesture I’d come to recognize as one of affection. “You’re wrong, Mister Tower.” With a wink, he poofed out of sight.

But I discovered a ham sandwich made from thick slices of homemade bread, an apple, and a thermos of fresh blood on the shelf he’d left behind.

As annoying as they can sometimes be, the little creatures have grown on me.

I can’t say the same for their master—mostly because I haven’t seen him. In two weeks, I haven’t caught so much as a glimpse of Gothel’s shadow. Not a whiff of his masculine scent.

Not a hint of cigar smoke.

I still the feather duster and chew at my lower lip. For what feels like the millionth time, my thoughts return to our last meeting. He was seconds from fucking me. Even after he came, his cock was plumping in my hand again. He wanted me, *badly*. And then he stopped. Dropped me like a rock and fled the room like his ass was on fire.

Was it because I touched his horns? I probably should have asked, but we were in the heat of the moment and the damn things had looked pretty hot all ramrod straight springing from his thick waves of salt and pepper hair. When I slid off the bed and went to him, I told myself I was going to seduce him for the sole purpose of wringing some knowledge from him. Making him speed up this whole training process.

But when I felt his horns—and his cock—something changed. Up close, the silver in his stubble had looked like little sparks of glitter. And the guy knew what he was doing with his mouth. For the first time since I arrived in the Sky Syndicate, he kissed me like a lover instead of someone he was trying to manipulate. In that moment, when he spun me and pushed me

against the wall, we felt like equals. And maybe I was just imagining it, but it also felt like Gothel was losing control, all that iron resolve melting like I was a forge and he wanted to burn up inside me.

The wicked part of me wanted to push him just for the fun of it. Make the stone-cold gargoyle blow his top. But another part of me felt like going off the rails and into the flames right along with him.

I'd been ready to do just that. As stupid as it was, I was all-in on letting him fuck me. Any way he wanted it, I would have given it to him. Right there against the fucking wall for all I cared.

But then he left.

No, I correct myself mentally, the asshole came like a fountain and then stalked away, leaving me with an epic case of blue balls.

I huff and wield the feather duster more aggressively than necessary. I've weathered some lengthy droughts when it comes to sex. Working for Lucius, it's not like I have time to form romantic attachments. Quick, meaningless fucks in the Free Zone are fine, but they're also a great way to get your throat slit. More often than not, I make do with my hand.

But my usual methods haven't been cutting it over the past two weeks. Night after exhausting night, I've dragged myself to the shower in my bedroom and taken care of business with my eyes squeezed shut and thoughts of infuriating gargoyles firmly out of my head. And night after night, I've woken with the sheets twisted around my hips and my dick hard as stone with said infuriating gargoyle invading my dreams.

For the first time in my life, my hand hasn't satisfied me. And I refuse to think about how a different kind of hand might do the trick. A bigger, rougher hand. One with long, elegant fingers and square, blunt nails. A hand with sprinkles of black hair on the knuckles. Fingers that grip a cigar just so...

"Arrogant asshole," I breathe, lifting onto my tiptoes on the ladder rung. I stab the duster into the farthest corners of the shelf, wishing the feathery piece of shit was a knife. Lucius was probably right. Gothel doesn't want to help me. He just wants to humiliate me.

So why am I still here?

"You've done a good job with the place," a deep voice rumbles just behind me.

I spin so fast, I lose my balance. For a second, I flail, the feather duster clattering to the ground. Then I fall.

Gothel catches me effortlessly, like I'm a maiden with the vapors. Whiskey eyes crinkle at the corners. "For a bloodsucker, you're pretty clumsy."

In a burst of speed, I twist from his arms and land on my feet a safe distance away. His eyes gleam in a way that lets me know he *allowed* me to escape him, which is almost as enraging as him sneaking up on me. *Again.*

"Nice of you to show up," I say, shoving a strand of hair that escaped the bun behind my ear.

His eyes track the movement. "I prefer your hair down."

"Duly noted."

For a second, he says nothing. Just stands there and sort of...drinks me in. He wears another three-piece suit, the jacket open and showing his vest and another pocket watch. This one is silver and etched with a language I don't recognize. He notices me looking and glances down.

"It's elvish," he says. "From the Old Country."

Surprise flits through me. "You know elves?" They're prickly creatures, perpetually pissed off about the Veil falling. Supposedly, they used magic to create a hidden realm somewhere in Europe so they can focus on their stupid civil wars.

"A few. The King of the Summer Court is a friend."

My chest tightens in a strange way, and I barely stop myself from asking what kind of friend. Instead, I narrow my eyes. "How old are you?"

Something that might be humor flashes across his face. "Some days I feel older than dirt."

It's a very typical Myth answer—the kind of thing ancient creatures say when they don't want to confess their age. Any other time, I might quip about him robbing the cradle by fooling around with me. But the joke dies on my tongue before I can give it oxygen. The weight of two weeks settles between us, and I wait, my body tense as I hold back things I'd rather not say. Things like *why did you leave me* and *was that night in my room just another game?*

Lucius once said only stupid people ask a question when they already know the answer. I don't need to ask if I'm just a game to Gothel. I already know.

The only thing I *don't* know is why it bothers me so much.

He clears his throat. "We should test your power."

My composure slips, my cool reserve giving way to slack-jawed disbelief. “What?”

He sweeps his gaze around the library. “You’ve finished the task I set you to.” His eyes settle on me. “You had a couple false starts but you did the work once you set your mind to it. I’m impressed, Tower.”

“Cleaning your library has nothing to do with my magic.” Although, even as I say it, awareness creeps over my nape. As annoying as the past two weeks have been, they’ve also been...calming. Something about the mindless, repetitive nature of shifting books and climbing and dusting has left me more relaxed than I can remember being. I’m definitely not on edge like I am when I’m home. For one thing, I haven’t had to worry about Axel dislocating my arm when I look at him the wrong way. I haven’t had to think. I haven’t even had a chance to read, since the book on vampire magic disappeared after Gothel caught me with it.

A ghost of a smile plays around his mouth. “You seem happier. Maybe you should consider giving up your life of crime.”

I gesture at myself, sweeping a hand down my T-shirt and yet another pair of cheap pants. “I’m a vampire.”

“So?”

“You just admitted you’re old as fuck. You know what vampires do. The Dolabellas bend people to their will. The du Sangs steal. It’s not crime, Gothel, it’s survival. We’re not human and we’re not quite Myth. Not really. When you walk between two worlds, you never fit in anywhere. The Dolabellas manipulate victims for a price. In my family, we sell the gifts we steal. Money is power and protection.”

He folds his arms, looking like a nerdy bouncer. A hot, nerdy bouncer. “You could still make money with your gift. But you don’t have to steal to do it.”

I scoff. “Okay, well, when you find a way to make that happen, let me know.”

“I already have.” He taps his neck. “I injected myself with a deadly curse this morning. Now I want you to draw it out and release it.”

“What?” Before I know what I’m doing, I close the distance between us. I grip his jacket and sniff at his neck. The acrid stench of black magic is faint, but it’s enough to make me recoil. “Are you insane? Why would you do that?”

Gently, he removes my hands from his jacket but keeps them enfolded in his. “I’m a gargoyle, Tower. This particular curse won’t hurt me. One of the many benefits of nearly limitless power and having a primary form that’s made of stone.”

I open my mouth, then shut it. Eventually, I realize he’s holding my hands—and gazing at me with an expression that’s almost...tender.

He must realize it at the same moment, because he drops my hands and goes to a big leather chair in one of the sitting areas. With neat movements, he removes his jacket and unbuttons the first few buttons of his shirt. He sits and gestures me over. “Come on. You’ve been feeding regularly, so you won’t be distracted by hunger.”

“I’m familiar with feeding, thank you,” I mumble, crossing the room. Thank the gods he didn’t pick the sofa or his desk chair. On my second day of cleaning, I noticed a spot of my jizz on the carpet and just about died. Fortunately, Raoul kept his mouth shut when I asked for a wet rag and some carpet shampoo.

I shove that embarrassing memory from my head as I stop in front of Gothel. “Um, should I just...”

He snags my wrist and pulls me onto his knee. “It’s miserisollus. Do you know it?”

“The misery curse. Of course I know it,” I snap, freshly irritated by his stupidity. Gargoyle or not, he has no business sticking curses in his veins. I tug his collar farther down and prod his jugular. “Do you feel okay?”

“Mmhm.” His deep affirmation rumbles against my side all the way down to my ass. My ass that is currently perched on his rock-hard thigh. His scent swirls around me, and I suck in a little more air than necessary, letting his spicy cologne fill my lungs.

His vein pops under my fingertips. “Limitless power, huh?”

Whiskey eyes meet mine. “Nearly limitless.”

I snort. “So you have a weakness?”

“Yes,” he says quietly. “I have a couple.”

My breath hitches. The tingling awareness rushes back. He’s close enough for me to see the striations in his pupils. The thick, black lashes that are surprisingly long now that I’ve gotten a good look at them. The sharp, proud cheekbones. The sensual mouth.

Don’t look at it.

I clear my throat. “I don’t know how to release the miserisollus once I draw it out.”

“Yes, you do.”

Frustration makes my voice sharp. “Yeah, I really don’t. This is sort of my whole problem—”

“Would you rather I kept it, then?”

“No.”

He shrugs. “Then draw it out.” He shifts a little, reaching a hand into an inner vest pocket. It’s such a manly move, my mouth waters.

Fuck. I’m so fucked.

He produces a vial.

I snatch it from him. “Where did you get this?”

Humor glints in his eyes. “You think Lucius is the only one with siphoning vials?” He swats my ass. “Stop stalling and bite me.”

“You suck at foreplay,” I mutter, and then bury my head in his neck before he can see the flush in my cheeks. As I bare my fangs and strike, I desperately try to ignore my erection. There’s no way he doesn’t feel it. Not with my thin-ass pants doing nothing to hide how much that single swat excited me. Gods, he’s trained me to get hard from a spanking.

Thick, rich blood floods my mouth, his power woven through it. The grotesques have kept me fed, but the blood I’ve been drinking is swill compared to Gothel’s. I want to tap it and keep a barrel of the stuff at the ready. Swirl it in a wine glass and inhale the heady bouquet of raw power.

But there’s something else here. *Pain*. It’s black and tarry—nothing I can taste, really. If I spit it out, it wouldn’t be visible. No, curses are more subtle than that. It’s what makes them so dangerous. Unless someone like me is around to siphon it, a blood curse will always make its victim miserable. Most are irreversible, and ones like miserisollus will eventually kill.

I suck harder, grimacing as the curse pumps from Gothel’s veins into mine. My skin heats...then glows, the luminescence casting shadows on the floor around the chair.

A big hand strokes my hair. Gothel cups the back of my head, his fingers sifting through the strands and threatening to unravel my bun.

My heart races, the curse trying to find fertile soil to sink down roots within me. But it’s the nature of my magic that I can’t use the powers I steal—and the same is true for curses. In this instance, being a mere vessel is a

strength. The curse spins faster, searching for a foothold. Its desperation burns, and I grunt as I draw the last of the black magic from Gothel's neck.

"Good boy," he murmurs, but it's not a taunt this time. It's not even sexual as he strokes my hair. His tone is gentle and encouraging, like he's sorry for my pain and proud of me for trying this.

At last, the *miserisollus* gives up, going dormant in my blood. I lick Gothel's neck and straighten, my chest heaving. "All right," I pant. "Go."

He uncorks the vial and proffers it in a steady hand. "Slow. I don't give extra credit for speed."

I can't even laugh at the joke. I'm too focused on the rounded edge of the vial. In the past when I've tried this, I burned myself out, sometimes literally knocking myself unconscious. At first, Lucius had his men drag me to my room. But eventually he just left me lying on the ground until I roused, sometimes hours later.

Gothel won't do that. That knowledge, combined with his big palm spread on my back, allows me to stay focused as I tip my palm over the vial. The glow under my skin surges brighter, turning the library into a sunny day. Somewhere, pages ruffle quickly. A book I forgot to replace, maybe.

"Steady, baby," Gothel says. "You've got this."

Miserisollus, I think, rolling the word around my head. Picturing the thread of black magic in Gothel's blood. A second later, it materializes on my palm.

My eyes widen, and my heart thumps faster. Fuck me, I'm doing it. The black magic is strangely beautiful, all glittery and darker than night. It darts forward like it's hungry for the vial.

Gothel makes an appreciative sound, and I know he's admiring the magic, too. It's rare to see magic like this. Only a siphon vampire can separate a curse or gift from blood. Witnessing us work is a privilege. Not that I can really count myself among that "us." I've never been able to do what Lucius does so effortlessly. What my father and mother did, along with all the generations before me.

The vial shatters.

Gothel jerks, his short bellow of pain bouncing off the library walls.

The *miserisollus* slams back into me, slithering into my veins and going dormant.

“Shit!” I spring off Gothel’s lap. He stands, too, dusting broken glass off his clothes. His left hand is marred by a black circle that smokes as he swipes at his front.

“You’re hurt,” I croak. “I’m sorry.”

He looks at his hand like he’s just now noticing the burn. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s *not* nothing.” Anger and frustration form a knot in my throat. “I told you I couldn’t do it. That was a waste of time, and now you’re hurt. I could have killed you.”

He frowns. “The injury will heal in a few minutes. And this was far from a waste of time. You lost focus. You’ll do better next time.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? Magical rebound like that can explode in your face, literally.” I shove a hand through my hair, further dislodging my bun. “I can’t do this again. It’s too fucking dangerous.”

In a flash, Gothel is in front of me, one big hand cupping my chin. His features become more angular, and horns slide through his dark hair and curl upward. His fangs—much more prominent than mine even at my hungriest—flash. “I heard you, young man, but I’m not sure you heard me. *Can’t* isn’t a word you’re permitted to use during your training. You have the gift. We both saw it. You just have to get out of your own way.”

My stomach twists into a dozen knots, that peculiar mix of embarrassment and desire pulling tight. His scent flows around me, and before I can think better of it, I blurt, “Or what? You’ll nut all over me and then run away again?”

Whiskey eyes go wide. Another flash, and I’m pinned against the bookcase, a few hundred pounds of gargoyle staring down at me. His skin is gray now, his horns straighter than I’ve ever seen them.

I should be afraid. He’s a scary motherfucker, and I’m on his turf. In the heart of his territory and quite literally under his thumb. Instead, my dick presses hard against the front of my pants, and my gaze lands on his mouth, which I can’t help but imagine stretching around my dick.

A rock-hard finger tips my chin up. “I don’t run away, sweetheart,” he grates, his voice like something heavy dragging along granite. “That’s your play, remember?”

I suck in a breath. “No, it’s not.” It’s *his*. The fucking coward.

His chuckle is humorless, a tumbling of rocks down a mountainside. “You’ve run from yourself your whole life. You’re scared to fail, so it’s easier to stop trying, isn’t it? Too bad, baby, because I won’t let you quit.”

“Fuck off. All I have to do is say *red* and I’m out of here.”

“Try it. You’re not going anywhere. You’re my—” He snaps his mouth shut. In another impossibly fast move, he spins away, flitting across the room in a blur. When he stills, he’s in human form with his back to me, his wings folded tightly.

I ease away from the bookcase, confusion swamping me. I’m his what? “Gothel?”

His reply is muffled, like he’s talking to the floor. “It’s been a long two weeks. You deserve a bit of a break. Take the night and visit the Aerie. I’ll have Raoul bring you something to wear.”

I frown. “By myself?”

“Just for the night. I told you good boys get rewards. Consider this bit of freedom your reward for mastering your latest lesson.”

Back to the “good boy” shit. I have to unclench my jaw before I can speak again. “And what lesson is that?”

He turns his head just enough to meet my gaze. “Patience.”

“Ah. And are you referring to me cleaning your library or me wondering if you’re ever going to stop being a cock tease and a hypocrite?”

The whiskey-colored eye that’s visible to me narrows. He turns away again and snaps his wings out. “Careful, Tower. You may be new to patience, but I am not. That said, you should know that even mine has its limits.”

A gust of air knocks me back a step as he rockets from the room.

CHAPTER 14

GOTHEL

I shouldn't have left Tower like that, not after seeing him for the first time in two weeks. Well, that's a lie. I've seen him plenty, I've just spied from the shadows while he worked to learn patience. He needed space for this part of his training, but the heart in my chest that I've forced not to beat draws me to him anyhow.

Tower du Sang is my mate. It's hard to believe. We seem so unlikely, but if I know anything, it's that life has a way of surprising us.

Pumping my wings hard, I circle my buildings, searching for clarity. I've thrown myself deeply into my work as Sky Syndicate leader for the past two weeks, but that lonely, aching part of my soul that wants companionship has other ideas. I steer toward my office window and sail in.

It's not lost on me that if Tower is my mate, I'll need to be up front with him soon. But he is first and foremost my ward, and we need to solve his power issue. I have more motivation than ever. Before I knew what he was to me, I simply wanted to fix a lost and wayward man.

Everything is different now that I know the truth.

It's unlike me to grumble, but I do it now as I settle into my office chair to reread a stack of paperwork. The lines blur as I struggle to focus. Growling, I toss the contracts aside and reach under my desk, pressing the button to access a hidden drawer. It slips open soundlessly, and I pull a singular item out of it.

A book. My most important and treasured possession.

It's wrapped in the softest of leathers, and I sigh as I look upon it. The book itself is leather as well, bound with blood-red thread and gold lettering. The name on the spine is mine. Well, it's my full name.

Gothelievenus of House Cortal.

This book is the only possession I have that remains from my time before the Veil fell. It was given to me by a lover, a mountain witch with golden eyes who left the book for me after a wild night in the sheets together. I thought there was something between us, but the note he left me made it clear there wasn't. And the reason for that lies within the book's pages.

Like I have every day for the last two weeks, I open the book and let the pages flutter and fall naturally. And like every other day, the scene before me sours my gut.

On the page, there's an uncanny illustration of Tower moving stealthily through my office. The illustrated version of him tiptoes across the page as if I'm watching one of the humans' old "movies." He's beautiful in his natural form, white hair piled high on his head in a sexy bun. Tendrils of it fall around his ears as they twitch. He's listening for me, probably because I've surprised him so many times.

I ache to touch him, to push my fingers into that bun and tear it all down. To wrap those beautiful tresses around my fist and fuck him on my desk. But that's not what happens in our story.

Tower depresses the button under my desk to unlock the secret door, takes out my beloved book—this fucking book—and tiptoes out of my office without looking back.

This book spins a version of my future, and like always after I watch Tower steal from me, I flip through other pages. Happier ones. They're not in any particular order, but there's so much joy in most of the scenes. Love, passion, flying together while I fuck him. Even us relaxing with children, which warms me so much I have to close my eyes against the rise of emotion.

Despite the challenges of ruling one of the four syndicates, I always kept going, knowing my reward would be the joy written in the pages of this book. My mate was always faceless, nameless, until my heart started beating. Now the scenes are clear as day.

Tower du Sang is mine, and he's going to take my most prized possession from me.

My eyes drift to the fireplace as I hear Raoul and another grotesque trundling up the hallway. There's a puff of black smoke and Raoul appears

on my desktop, bright eyes following me as I tuck the book under my arm and sit back in my chair.

“Worried someone will steal it? Perhaps the vampire?” Raoul’s voice is less disdainful than it has been. Despite the loss of his gift, I’ve seen him talk to Tower more than once. It’s not friendship, but the hatred is gone. Tower is fascinated by my grotesques, and when he’s not aware anyone is watching, he’s almost kind to them. He still makes snippy remarks, but they pay him no mind.

Because he belongs with us.

The thought flits through my mind as Raoul crosses his chunky arms and cocks his head to the side.

Sighing, I pull a cigar from my pocket and light it, letting the hit of smoke purge my anxious energy.

For a long moment I’m silent as I consider Raoul’s question. The grotesques know that this book is precious to me because it shares knowledge about my future. None of them have ever seen inside it, though. I’ve always believed the book showed what my life *could* be.

“It has been inside my desk for long enough,” I hedge, not being completely forthright with Raoul. It’s true that I move the book’s hiding spot now and again, but there’s a secret hope inside me that being my mate might change what the book foretells. Could loving me keep Tower from betraying me?

I don’t have the answer to that, and when I say nothing in follow-up, Raoul drops the papers in his hand and disappears again. I’m certain I’ve hurt his feelings, but when I rise to find him and apologize, he pops back in. Black smoke swirls around him as he gives me a tart look.

“I came to drop off another contract, but I thought you might like to know that Tower is headed for Aerie. He was dressed in something quite dazzling. A glamour, I expect.”

Raoul is goading me, and I can’t let it show. Tower isn’t ready for the truth about what’s between us, and I’m not ready to share with my grotesques just yet either.

I give Raoul a sharp look before shrugging my shoulders and seating myself again. “He was good and I gave him the night off. I hope he has fun.”

Raoul grunts as if he doesn’t believe me. It’s almost like the grotesque can sense the swirling maelstrom of emotion in my chest. I need to take my

pill, because I'd swear that despite having taken one this morning, my heart is loud enough to be heard by anyone close to me. I resist the urge to rub at my chest. If I do that, Raoul will know something has changed.

He gives me another curious look and disappears. I'll have to tell him soon, but he won't be able to keep a secret of this magnitude. And the reality is I want to share this with Tower first. He shouldn't be the last to find out, but he's also not ready to know. If he learns he's my mate, our training will take on a decidedly different course, and he's made excellent progress.

I suck at my cigar for a few more minutes, trying desperately not to imagine Tower enjoying all that Aerie has to offer. I remember what enticed him that very first night we met. The idea of someone else using his body, of bringing him pleasure? I can barely stand it. But I can't march down there and demand he not enjoy what the club is about.

My cock rises in my tailored pants, pressing painfully against my thigh as my horns straighten. Gargoyle mating rituals are intricate and intense, and despite my suppressant gem, my body is readying itself to take Tower in the way of my kind.

But I can't take him, because as we speak he's headed to my godsdamned sex club for a hard-earned night off.

After half an hour of torturing myself with mental visions of Tower in someone else's lap, riding someone else's cock, swallowing down their release, I eventually toss my jacket off. I roll up the sleeves and head for my personal gym. I need to work off this aggression.

If I don't, I'm worried I'll do something I might regret. Something like dragging Tower to my bed by the hair and fucking him until there's no doubt what's between us.

CHAPTER 15

TOWER

The Aerie is buzzing tonight, a crush of humans and Myth creatures filling the softly lit space. The air is warm with the press of bodies. A string quartet plays some kind of classical piece I know I've heard before but can't place. It shouldn't be the perfect accompaniment for the debauchery happening on stage, but somehow it works.

Normally, I'd be in my element, weaving among the crowd in a glamour that couldn't be more different from my true appearance. My hair is black and buzzed close to my head. My eyes are a glowing yellow, and I've got a sweet double row of serrated teeth going on. Before I left, Raoul unlocked a closet in my room, giving me the pick of clothing that definitely didn't come off a rack.

"This is exactly my size," I said, sliding a jacket over a buttery soft shirt.

He gave me a mild look. "Imagine that."

I studied him. "Raoul, did Gothel have clothes made for me?"

The little guy hopped off the desk in my room, his expression inscrutable. "The master buys a lot of clothes."

I fingered my sleeve. The stitching was almost invisible. "Not like this."

Raoul folded his arms. "He teaches a lot of students. Handsome ones."

"Oh yeah?" I went to the mirror and smoothed my hands over my hair. "And he buys them expensive clothes?" I turned and checked out the view from the back. I met Raoul's gaze in the mirror and lifted my eyebrows. "Clothes that make his students' asses look slamming?"

The grotesque rolled his eyes.

“Look at this ass and tell me it’s not the nicest one to ever grace the Aerie.”

“I’m not looking at your ass,” he said, but his lips twitched as he headed for the door.

“Careful, Raoul,” I called after him. “You might start liking me.”

I smile now, my hands stuffed in the pockets of my definitely-bespoke suit pants as I wander among the tables that skirt the stage.

As quickly as it arrived, my smile fades. At first, I was excited at the prospect of a “night out.” As much as my life under Lucius sucks, I’m not typically confined to my room. My uncle likes a fully stocked warehouse, which means I’m usually free to roam the Hallows unless I’ve pissed him off. The past two weeks should have been torture for me.

But they...haven’t been. I mean, yeah, cleaning has sucked. If I never see another feather duster again it’ll be too soon. But not everything about my stay in the Sky Syndicate has been awful. The grotesques are kind of nice.

Gothel is nice, my brain supplies.

“Shut up,” I mutter.

The crowd gasps, and I jerk my head up, my heart pounding as I expect a spotlight to fall on me—

But no, everyone is focused on the stage. Scowling at my wayward thoughts, I focus, too.

Tonight, the main event is a trio of male acrobats who defy gravity with slow, controlled movements, their muscles rippling as they climb and balance and shift into impossible poses.

It doesn’t hurt that they do all of this without a stitch of clothing on. Their cocks defy gravity, too, each rigid length oiled so it catches the light. I stare because it’s impossible not to.

But after a few minutes, I don’t really see the mouthwatering display on stage. No, my thoughts are once again consumed with one extremely fickle gargoyle. I can’t get Gothel out of my head. Maybe because I can’t figure out what the fuck his problem is. One minute, he’s crawling up my nuts. The next, he’s pushing me away like I’ve got fairy pox. Out of all the ways I imagined our “encounter” ending tonight, him telling me to run off and enjoy his fucking sex club wasn’t one of them.

Seriously, does he think I’m going to strip down and join the circus on stage? Duck into one of the darkened hallways and blow a minotaur?

Anger tightens my chest, and I'm not sure why. What do I care if Gothel gives me free rein to fuck? He's been cock blocking us for two weeks. It's about time I let off some steam.

But even as I consider it, I realize I don't want that. Worse, what I want is to finish what he keeps starting. Even now, surrounded by sex and beautiful people, all I can think about are rough hands and whiskey eyes and horns that straighten when I touch them. He was proud of me tonight, when I nearly released the miserisollus. Even when he grew angry at me for saying I wouldn't try again, he wasn't really angry at *me*. He was irritated at the idea of me giving up.

"Too bad, baby, because I won't let you quit."

He won't. I know it in my bones. He won't give up on me, no matter how many vials I shatter. The knowledge wraps around me like a warm blanket. Somehow, it's just as appealing as him stroking my dick or grabbing my ass. I'm clearly starved for affection, because I want to fuck him, but I also want to sit on his knee and listen to him tell me I'm good and smart and not the unworthy, fuck-up heir to a powerful house.

He won't let me quit, so why does he keep quitting on me? On us?

I let my gaze wander past the acrobats. There's no shortage of hot guys in the crowd. If I were smart, I'd sidle up to one and flirt my way into a hand job or maybe a quick fuck in one of the club's bathrooms. Gothel pretty much told me to do just that.

"Sign me the fuck up, am I right?" someone murmurs next to me.

I jerk my gaze to my left. The pixie who hit on me that first night in the club stands at my side, his rapt gaze on the acrobats. When he feels the weight of my attention on him, he turns his head and gives me a conspiratorial wink. "I'm not really one for structured exercise, but I might make an exception if one of those flexible daddies made me an offer." He looks at the stage, and a slight frown mars his flawless features. "Although, they look like a package deal. Three dicks might be fun for one night, but all the time?" He sighs, the faint outline of wings fluttering behind him. "I'm not sure I have the stamina."

I watch him watch the acrobats. He's gorgeous—and clearly on the prowl.

"You here with someone?" I hear myself ask.

Bright blue eyes fix on me. The hint of a smile touches his lips. "Alas, I'm afraid my dance card is full tonight. Maybe another time."

Relief pounds through me, followed by a rush of irritation. Damn Gothel for making me this lame. I run a hand over my hair—a move that looks stupid with my glamour that suddenly feels like an ill-fitting coat.

“I might be busy then,” I say, turning to go.

“Stealing?” he asks, stopping me in my tracks. When I turn back, he winks again. “Or just stealing hearts?”

He can’t possibly know who I am. I wore a glamour that first night, and now I wear another. Nevertheless, the hair on my nape lifts. *Pixies*. Always meddling.

“Enjoy the show,” I mumble, and I move quickly through the crowd. I’m not sure where I’m going, but I need to get out of here. I can’t stand the noise and the crush of bodies a second longer. I walk blindly, moving through the hallways that lead to Gothel’s private residence. I skip the elevators, opting for the deserted stairwell. My steps echo as I climb, and soon my quads are screaming.

I welcome the pain, though. Anything to keep my mind off the desire that’s ridden me hard these two weeks. The damn pixie made a good point. I am here to steal. And I’ve done a piss poor job of looking for the book Lucius is after. In fact, it hasn’t crossed my mind that often.

Maybe Gothel doesn’t have it. Or maybe he knows damn well what I’m after and sticking me in the library is his idea of a joke. But that doesn’t really seem like his style. The big guy is way too straightforward for that. If he suspected me of being after more than a fix for my magic, he’d probably just dump me over his thighs and set my ass on fire until I confessed.

And, right on cue, my dick is a fucking tent pole in my trousers.

Maybe the stairs were a bad idea after all. At the next landing, I step into a shadowy hallway. I turn in a slow circle, trying to get my bearings. This hallway looks like all the others I’ve encountered during my stay. Rich, elegant decor and soft lighting. Plush carpet under my feet. The sconces on the walls drip crystals. I know what old money looks like. It’s understated—a polite murmur instead of a shout. Whatever else Gothel is, he’s loaded as fuck.

Just as I decide to go right, a muted thumping sound drifts from the left. It’s steady, like the beat of a drum. Maybe Raoul and the others have their own little rock band.

Rock band. I snort and shake my head. Two weeks of dusting have rendered me decidedly uncool. The image of the surly Raoul behind a drum

kit is too tempting, so I head toward the sound. It grows louder as I approach, and now it's not so rhythmic. The thumps are more varied, and they're punctuated with a growling, gasping sound. Memories of Axel and his fuckface friends roughing me up tighten my stomach.

Frowning, I ease my head around an open door.

And immediately forget how to breathe.

It's not Raoul or any of the other winged goblins. It's Gothel. He's shirtless and he's going at a punching bag like it insulted his mother. His hands are wrapped up in white tape. He grunts under his breath as he works the bag over.

I thought he was big before. I was wrong. The guy is *jacked*. Muscles pop everywhere, the hard curves sheened in a fine layer of sweat. He moves like poetry, ducking and dodging, his big fists snapping out in a blur. He dances on his toes, his feet bare.

And apparently I've had a foot fetish this whole time because my dick goes rigid at the sight of those high arches and well-formed toes. He's still wearing his suit pants, and they hug his perfect ass, making me jealous of tweed and thread. Black wings snap out. One darts forward and plunges the clawed tip into the bag.

A *death blow*, I think, my heart pounding. Since when is violence so fucking sexy? Swallowing hard, I let my gaze wander around the room, which is decked out with every form of exercise equipment imaginable. The walls are covered in mirrors, showing me dozens of Gothels. The floors are covered in black rubber mats. There are even a couple of big tires with treads deep enough to build a city in. I'd die if I tried to lift something like that. Gothel probably uses them for warm-ups.

I'm not sure when I notice, but at some point I realize the thumping has stopped.

And the Gothels in the mirrors are all staring at me.

With a gasp, I jerk my gaze to the real thing.

Golden eyes pin me in place. He advances toward me, slowly unwinding the tape from his hands. He drops it on the ground and keeps coming, his whiskey eyes never leaving mine. Sweat trickles down one plump pec, rounding the juicy curve and streaking down his six-pack.

He stops in front of me, his face all sharp angles and masculine aggression. The scent of clean sweat hits my nostrils. I draw a shuddering breath, gulping it down like it's the purest oxygen. And I need the air,

because I'm dizzy, my whole world spinning. Maybe because most of the blood in my body is in my dick.

Glittering eyes sweep down my body before traveling back up. "Trying out a new look?"

His deep voice hits me square in the chest. By comparison, mine sounds high and shaky. "I didn't want anyone to recognize me."

He moves closer, his broad shoulders filling my vision. "Well it's just the two of us right now, and I believe I told you I prefer your hair down."

"You did," I rasp.

A predatory smile lights his eyes. It doesn't reach his mouth. "So let's see it, baby. Show me what I like."

CHAPTER 16

GOTHEL

In a moment, that handsome charade flows away and Tower stands in front of me, a cascade of long white hair swinging gracefully down over his face. He looks up at me from underneath a curtain of gorgeous locks, his gaze cautious but interested.

Mine mine mine. Everything in me screams that I should take him and perform the ritual that will bind him to me for the rest of my very long life.

But I can't. Not here and not now. I made a decision earlier this evening. While I don't relish keeping the truth from him, I can't share it with him until he's made a breakthrough with his power. Nothing can get in the way of that, not even my temporarily still heart.

I've been on the jewels for a few weeks, and every day it gets harder to force them down my throat. All I want, all I need, is to bind the man standing in front of me. I hope my book is right, and there's a future where I'll steal Tower up into the sky to fuck him while we fly together. I'll lock myself inside him, staking my claim until he's so thoroughly bound, he'll never want anything but me.

But if I get to have that, then the rest of the book is probably true too. That means that as enticing as he is, standing in front of me, fucking me with a heated look—he's going to steal from me. Probably.

Nothing in the book is certain.

My eyes flick down his muscular, graceful body, admiring every inch of him. I'm far more attuned to him now than I was when he arrived. Even then, I was drawn to him, but this is different. My world has shifted, and whereas before he lived on the periphery of it, he's right in the fucking center now. My responsibilities as leader of the Sky Syndicate, my host of

grotesques, my beautiful library and my love of learning—all of that is second to the man standing in front of me.

And I can't tell him.

"You look like you need a good, hard lay, Gothel," Tower teases, sliding his hands into his pants as I huff out a laugh.

He has no idea that there will never be another for me, not now, not after my godsdamned heart started beating. There's a small, ruthless part of me that loves that I know and he doesn't. Because that'll make teaching him and watching him flourish all that much more satisfying.

Tower tosses his head, flicking his hair over his shoulder.

I resist the urge to pin him to the wall and gather up all that beautiful hair in my fist so I can use it as leverage while I own his mouth. Instead, I stay put. And I don't touch as I wait for our mutual desire to ebb.

But he's as horny as I am. It's obvious from the erection tenting the front of his pants. He's just been down to Aerie and left without...engaging anyone. I know because I can't scent anyone on him. His deep, heavenly smell is the only thing I sense.

I shove my hands into my pockets, mirroring his stance. "You didn't stay downstairs tonight. I thought the entertainment would intoxicate you."

Tower shrugs, leaning back against the wall as he crosses his arms and smirks, imagining he has some upper hand. "I think I've lost my touch. I hit on someone, but he was busy. All this cleaning and dusting has me off my game."

His tone is flippant. He's trying to get a rise out of me because of the natural tension between us.

I don't operate like that, so I smile and shrug. "Better luck next time, baby." I turn and stalk back to my bag.

I don't wait for him to respond, but his heated gaze on my back is almost a physical touch. Most gargoyles are big and muscular, and I'm even more so because of my age and position as syndicate leader. I grin when I think about how the view must be affecting my charge right now.

He mumbles under his breath, and I resist the urge to laugh aloud as I return to my punching bag and start my circuit over again.

There's silence for a long minute, then two, and then Tower crosses the room and inserts himself between me and the punching bag. A jab of my tail narrowly misses his cheek and sails smoothly through the hair hanging over his shoulder. Then those silky strands are wrapped around the very tip

of my spade-like tail, and all I can focus on is how good they feel, how soft they are tangled around me.

Tower gives me a devious look. “What are you really doing down here, Gothel? Surely you have syndicate or Aerie business to attend to? Are you hiding from me?”

There’s a purely devilish expression on his face, one pale brow curled sky high as he smirks at me. He looks so pleased, so self-righteous. I can’t wait to wipe that smirk off his face.

Stepping forward, I bump his chest with mine, knocking him back. He laughs lightly as I throw both wings out, gripping the punching bag and holding it in place as I press him to it. My entire front is flat to his, his hard length pressed up against mine. I rock my hips once, twice, relishing the way our bodies fit.

“Fuck,” Tower hisses, his hands coming to my waistband as he holds me close. “You’re doing this on fucking purpose, you godsdamned heathen.”

“What, baby? What is it you think I’m doing?” I lean forward to cage him in with both arms. Tower’s head hits the punching bag as my forehead comes to his, my lips nearly brushing along his own. His mouth opens slightly, a pink tongue dipping out to wet that plump lower lip.

“You know what,” he grumbles, reaching down to loosen my pants.

I don’t look away from his heated gaze when he slides one hand down the front of my pants, gripping my hard cock and stroking it. His touch is a tease, gentle enough that I couldn’t come, light enough to fire me up.

A muscle in my jaw clenches as he slides his hand along the underside of my cock, tracing a vein that throbs in time with my fucking heart. My pills are wearing off, and that need to bind him is riding me hard.

Reaching up with my tail, I gather all his hair and wind it into a knot, spearing the tip of my tail through it to hold him tightly in place.

Tower strokes harder, but when I yank his head back and place a gentle kiss in the hollow at the base of his throat, he whines. He’ll beg next, if I had to guess.

But as his hand on my cock grows more urgent, I find myself losing control for the first time in my very long life. My lips on his neck grow hungrier. I bite and suck at every inch of skin on display for me, covering him in dark bruises as he reaches a second hand down into my pants to double fist my thick length.

I don't even try to stop my hips from slamming to meet his hands. Precum coats his fingers as I piston my hips steadily into his grip.

Tower's cheeks pinken, his pretty lips falling open. He looks so desperate, so needy, so *wanting* like this. Does he feel the difference between this and the way I touched him before I knew the truth? If he knew he was mine, would it change anything the book has shown me?

Growling, I lean forward and cover those pretty lips with mine, sucking at the plump lower one as Tower gasps. His hands come off my dick, but I don't want them anywhere but doing what they were doing.

"Don't stop, baby," I command, yanking his head back again as I slick my mouth over his. I suck his tongue into my mouth and bite the tip as he pants. And then we're nothing but a clash of lips and teeth as we devour one another, his hands moving swiftly between us.

Red-hot heat clatters down my spine as I resist the urge to toss him down on all fours and fuck him through a dozen orgasms. Instead I pull him into my arms, still taking his mouth as forcefully as I've wanted to this whole time. Swooping up to the rafters of my personal gym, I grip one wooden beam with my wing claws and hang suspended above the floor.

I never move my lips from Tower's—not even when he tries to look away.

"Are we—? Fuck! Gothel! Are we fucking thirty feet above the floor right n—"

I silence that question with another kiss, shredding his suit with my secondary wing claws. I've never shown him just how powerful my wings are, but I'm doing it now. I suppose there's a part of me that wants him to see all of me even before he knows what's between us.

Once he's naked, I pull us up level with the beam and turn him, laying him over it on his stomach. His ass is perfectly positioned in front of my face. He grips the beam, his muscles quivering as I tug that long sheet of hair with my tail.

"Don't you dare fucking drop me," he wails, but that wail falls off into a deep groan when I part his ass cheeks with both hands and dive in tongue first. His groan of pleasure matches mine as I hum. My tongue dips into his hole, sucking at his delicate, sensitive skin. I linger for a moment, tasting him before licking a path straight down to his balls. I pull them gently into my mouth, one after another as his cock leaks down onto the floor below us.

A string of curses falls from Tower's lips as I grip his cock in one hand, eating his ass at the same time. With a choked roar, he explodes, cum coating my fingers as he thrashes against the wooden beam, screaming my name.

Satisfaction thrums through my veins as I lick him all the way through, until he's shuddering and gasping for air every time my tongue meets his hole. When he's oversensitized, I dig my claws out of the beam and beat my wings once, cradling his back to my front as I fly to a platform built into the top half of the room.

I constructed it a long time ago, hoping one day I'd have a mate to bring to this precise spot. Not that he knows that.

But when we land on the small wooden platform and he sees the wall of mirrors facing us, he scoffs. "Let me guess, eating my ass so good I practically pass out and bringing me to your sex platform is part of the game, right?"

I cock my head to the side and watch him. He's spewing pure sass, but he wants so badly to believe I'm not just fucking with him. I can see that. I can *feel* it.

I press my chest to his back, curling my tail around his cock as I tap his mushroom head with my tail spade.

Tower grunts, his head falling to the side as I work him over with expert, measured strokes. I bring my lips to his neck and kiss him over and over again reverently. When my kisses grow hungry to the point of pain, I meet his eyes in the mirror and growl.

"This isn't a game, baby," I reassure him. "This isn't part of your training. This is just you and me."

When he opens his mouth to snark something else out, I slide two fingers into it and silence him with a tsk. "I don't bring anyone up here, Tower," I purr into his ear. "I've *never* brought anyone up here."

Bright eyes meet mine in the mirror. The blue depths are full of surprise and something dangerously close to hope. I slide my thick fingers out from between his beautiful, bruised lips.

"Never?" His voice is low and hoarse from screaming.

Bringing my lips to his muscular shoulder, I kiss again, letting my eyes say all the things I can't tell him just yet.

"Never," I murmur into his smooth, pale skin. "Never, Tower."

CHAPTER 17

TOWER

Goethel's tail continues stroking up and down my spent dick. Except it's not so spent anymore.

I'm plumping up again, the mirrors making it impossible to hide the effect he has on me. But he's not immune to me, either. His cock prods my ass—and it's as hard as the rest of him.

Which is *really* fucking hard. He's in that in-between form, his skin gray and his features gone angular. His black horns are straight as arrows, the tips so sharp looking they make me catch my breath. His thighs are ready to split his trousers. The fabric must be even more expensive than I thought, because it's put up with a lot of rough-and-tumble over the past few minutes.

His tail makes another tight pass down my dick, and I stop thinking about his tailoring. Somewhere in my head, I register that I should be exceptionally freaked out by his tail stroking my come all over my cock, but I can't summon anything close to disgust.

Because it's hot, what he's doing. With his flexible tail wrapped around me, his hands are free to wander. And, boy, do they wander. He feels me up, sliding his palms from my ass he just ate for dinner to the six-pack I've always been proud of. He clearly likes the muscle, because he lingers there, running his damp fingertips over the ridges. When he moves to my nipples and pinches, I swallow a moan.

"You ever going to fuck me?" I ask in a voice that sounds like I smoked about a thousand of his cigars.

Golden eyes lift to mine in the mirror. For a moment, I think he won't answer. I brace myself for him to do one of his disappearing acts. Maybe

scoop me up and fly me straight to bed, no milk and cookies or anything.

Instead, he wraps one of his big hands around the front of my neck. He squeezes gently, just enough to restrict my oxygen and make my balls tingle. “Is that what you want?” he rumbles in a voice so low it was probably scraped from a quarry.

“Yeah,” I rasp with the air he’s allowed me. And just in case he’s confused, I make it extra clear. “I want your dick in my ass, Gothel. And I don’t want you to be gentle. I want to feel it tomorrow. Every time I sit down, I want to know exactly where you’ve been.”

His eyes shine brighter than the lights in the gym. A shudder ripples through him, and his tail tightens around my dick like one of the boa constrictors that have taken over what used to be Florida.

His hand squeezes my windpipe. He moves his hips, dragging his erection up and down the furrow of my ass. “I don’t have lube up here.”

Even with lust like a fog between us, I manage a smile, my fangs looking pretty hot in the mirrors. I swallow against the pressure on my throat. “You don’t have lube on your special sex platform? You’re gonna have to eat my ass again. You okay with that?”

His growl rumbles my back. “Baby boy, I’ll spread you open and make a godsdamned feast out of your hole any time you want. That’s not the issue. I’m big, and there’s no way you’re taking me without magic or something slicker than spit.”

Gods, since when is a discussion about the less-than-glamorous mechanics of sex so...sexy? Maybe it’s just him. The combination of power and attentiveness. Domination and care. He doesn’t want to hurt me—at least not in a way I’ll hate.

I swallow again. “Take me somewhere else, then. Anywhere. Just fuck me. Please.”

If possible, his horns go even straighter. Slowly, his big wings fold around us, covering me like a cloak. “You trust me?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation, surprising myself a little as I realize it’s true. I trust him. He might be the only being I ever have.

Before I can get too rocked by that revelation, he tightens his wings and shoots us into the air. As always, flying with him is equal parts exhilarating and terrifying.

Okay, like seventy percent terrifying and thirty percent exhilarating. I keep my eyes squeezed shut until cold air blasts my face. Just as I suck in a

breath to scream, he touches us down on a rooftop. He releases me and immediately puts a big hand on my shoulder so I don't fall on my ass.

Yeah, ultra sexy moment I'm having.

I ease away, my gaze on the lights. Not the city's lights, which spread out before me in a neat grid. No, I only have eyes for the fuzzy lights that seem to float above the line where the city ends and the ocean begins. "It's the harbor," I say, hearing the reverence in my voice. The lights twinkle in the distance, the soft balls of yellow more beautiful than anything a fairy could produce. They beckon to me, symbols of freedom I've been drawn to my whole life.

"The sea is a dangerous place," Gothel says behind me.

Bitterness wells, twisting my mouth. "No more dangerous than anywhere else."

His heat spreads over my back as he steps even closer, casting a shadow over me. A big hand pulls my hair over one shoulder and then firm lips slide down my throat. "You're not in any danger from me," he says against my skin. "Say the word and we'll go back downstairs."

"Say *red*, you mean?"

His lips pause their descent. He turns me and cups my jaw in both hands. Whiskey eyes stare into mine, the color remarkably similar to the lights in the harbor. Funny how I never noticed that before.

"We're long past traffic lights, Tower."

My heart speeds up. To my relief, my voice doesn't crack as I ask, "So you're keeping me here now? No more "out" clause, even if I want it?"

His voice dips into that tone that drives me crazy—the smoky, slightly chiding tone he uses when he calls me *good boy* and *sweetheart* and *young man*. The voice he puts on when he orders me over his knee or across his lap so he can punish me. But he's not punishing me now. And he never really punished me then.

No, he just gave me what I wanted. Somehow, he's always known what I wanted.

And he's a mind-reader, because he runs a thumb over my bottom lip. "I think we both know you don't want that light to turn red."

The way my dick is leaking, I couldn't lie even if I wanted to. But I don't want to.

In a bid to cover the feelings crawling inside my chest like a colony of ants, I try for coy. "Are you going to tell me why you keep lube on the roof

of your building?”

“I come up here and masturbate every time I talk to you,” he says bluntly. “You get me so hard, I can hardly fly. I stand on the roof and pump my dick and the only thing I see in my head is you. That’s why I keep lube up here.”

For a second, I just stare. “Oh.”

His thumb makes another pass across my lip. “Does that answer your question, sweetheart?”

“Yeah,” I breathe.

“Excellent. Now walk your pretty little ass over to that railing and lean against it.”

By some miracle, my legs hold me up as I obey. I rest my weight against the railing, which is warm against the middle of my back. He stalks to the other side of the roof and moves around in the shadows, his wings folded close to his body again. When he returns, he twirls a finger in the air.

“Turn around. Hands on the railing and spread your legs.”

Heart in my throat, I do as he says. There’s a rustle of cloth behind me, followed by the telltale click of a lube cap. At the first brush of his slick finger over my hole, I moan and squeeze the railing.

“Relax for me,” he murmurs, his breath fluttering against my neck. “I’m a big boy.”

I know he’s not bragging. He’s warning me. I’ve seen the monster he keeps in his pants. Had my hand around it. Stroked him to an orgasm that’s permanently burned into my brain. I bend and release a long, slow breath, willing my body to open.

“That’s it, baby,” he rasps, giving me another finger. He hooks it toward my navel, hitting that magical spot that makes me tip my head forward on a long, needy moan. My dick is so hard it’s like the gym never happened. I’m wound up tight, most of my blood pounding in my cock.

The cap clicks again, and Gothel comes back with what feels like half the bottle. He pumps moisture inside me, fingering my hole in deep, lazy strokes that have me going high on my toes and thrusting my ass at him.

Something sharp pinches one of my cheeks. *His teeth*. He licks the spot he bit and pushes a third finger inside me. “Are you going to be a little slut about this, baby boy?”

“Fuck,” I gasp, digging into the railing like it’s a lifeline. Maybe it is. The metal bends under my grip.

“Yeah,” he says, “I think you are.” He pumps his fingers, sending thick, wet sounds spiraling into the night. “You’re going to be so slutty for me. You’re halfway there already. This little hole is gobbling me up.”

“Fuck,” I say again, my vocabulary reduced to a single word, apparently. I can’t do much else but grit my teeth and drop F-bombs while he’s stroking my prostate like he’s its personal masseur. He keeps at it, fingering and stretching me. Getting me so sloppy and wet I wonder if he ever plans on giving me his dick. Because I swear to all the gods, if this is another tease, I’m going to lose it.

Just as I’m about to complain, he pulls his fingers out and slaps my ass. A rough hand turns me around, and I’m suddenly face to face with a very naked and *very* erect Gothel.

And he’s never looked less human. He looms over me, seven-feet-plus of pure monster. There’s a reason humans used to put his people’s likeness on buildings to scare evil spirits away. His civilized veneer is gone, replaced with solid, carved muscle, harsh features, and black wings that blot out the night. His cock is as long and thick as my arm, the fat mushroom tip dotted with precum. He’s slicked himself up, and his length glistens in the city’s lights.

He takes our dicks in hand and strokes us together, and I hiss through my teeth. “Gothel...”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yeah,” I grit out, my gaze locked on our dicks.

“Tower,” he says sharply, snapping my head up like he’s got me on a leash. His eyes are brighter than I’ve ever seen them. “Do you trust me?”

The question hits differently this time. It’s like my first day under his control, when he rolled out that contract and handed me a pen. Now, as then, I know my consent is more than just words on paper. Something is happening between us. Something bigger than sex.

But I also know my answer to that question hasn’t changed. It sits in my chest, as bright as the harbor beacons. But I don’t have to stretch to reach it.

“Yes,” I say, holding his gaze. “I trust you completely.”

Slowly, his wings curl around me. He lifts me by the waist and sits me on the railing. For a second, vertigo hits in a stomach-sloshing wave. I grab at the railing as I feel myself pitch. But his wings are there, the sides of his claws flush against my back. It’s like there’s a giant web behind me—a barrier between me and the street however many hundreds of feet below.

“Stay just like that,” he whispers, pushing my thighs wide. He strokes my dick, then dips under my sack and fingers me a few more times, squishing more lube into my hole. When I’m ready to beg, he grips himself and brings the tip of his dick to my entrance. “Watch,” he orders. “Watch how beautiful it looks when I’m inside you.”

The order is unnecessary. I can’t look anywhere else. I stare, wide-eyed, as the broad head of his cock disappears. The burn is tolerable, but even if it wasn’t, I wouldn’t stop this for the world. I brace my hands on his shoulders and spread my legs wider. The railing digs into my ass. The wings at my back give just a little, absorbing my movement. It’s unsettling but also inexplicably hot. I’m trusting him with my body, and I’m literally putting my life in his hands. The intimacy of it makes tears prick my eyes.

“Tower,” he rasps, his glittering gaze moving over my face, my hair, my chest. He pushes forward, filling me. Sliding deeper than anyone’s ever been before. Finally, his heavy balls press against my ass, the damp pubes around the base of his cock tickling my ass cheeks. He’s hot and hard inside me. Impaled on his dick and perched on the edge of an abyss, I’ve never been so vulnerable.

Against my will, one of the tears I’ve been holding back streaks down my cheek.

Quick as lightning, he catches it on the tip of a clawed finger. Eyes locked with mine, he touches it to his tongue. “You’re a gift I don’t deserve,” he whispers, then leans in and kisses me.

It’s a slow, easy kiss. At least, it starts out that way. In no time at all, it progresses to hot and filthy. He strokes his tongue along mine as he rolls his hips, pulling out a little and thrusting back inside. He swallows my moan and slides his hands all over me, sweeping down my torso and gripping my thighs. Tongue tangling with mine, he pushes my legs wider and starts a rhythm, giving me languid thrusts. Getting me used to him.

It doesn’t take long, mostly because the thick head of his dick nails my prostate with every pass. Within seconds, I’m a whimpering, embarrassing mess. I rock back and forth on the railing, my legs flung wide and my hands tunneling through his hair. I kiss him harder as I stroke my hands up his horns, rubbing and twisting the same way I’d handle his cock.

He rewards me with a deep growl and harder thrusts. Each pump forces a grunt from my chest. Every drive slaps his balls against my ass—a spanking that fires up memories and makes me wish I’d been a little bad

tonight. Anything to provoke him into pulling my pants down and daddying the shit out of me. Maybe pushing one of those long fingers into my hole while he sets me on fire.

“Fuck!” I cry against his mouth. My breaths explode over his face. I’m covered in sweat, my ass slippery on the railing. The drop is inconsequential. He’s got me and he’s not letting me go. He’s got me and this is exactly where I want to be.

He thrusts harder and faster, snapping his hips. Drilling his dick so deep I can’t catch my breath. My mouth opens on a cry and stays that way, high-pitched, whimpery sounds spilling from me. I dig my fingers into the unforgiving mounds of his shoulders. My hair swings wildly as he pistons in and out, growling like an animal. His mouth hangs open, and his eyes burn with lust—and knowing.

“You want to come?” he rasps. Like he doesn’t know.

“Yeah. Now.” I’ll beg for it if I have to.

But he doesn’t make me. He grabs my dick and jacks me hard. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s see it.”

I’m shooting before he finishes his sentence. Thick streams of seed spurt all over his hand and abs. My shout probably echoes all the way to the Sea Syndicate. I don’t give a single fuck.

Gothel is right behind me, shuddering and ramming home in a single, brutal thrust. He unloads deep inside me, pumping me so full of cum it leaks around his dick and dribbles down my crack. We stare at each other, huffing and sweating and struggling for air. After a long moment, he pulls from my ass and fixes his gaze on my hole.

“Show me, baby.”

I know what he wants. Biting my lip, I push, letting his semen seep from me. There’s a lot. As he put it, he’s a big boy, and his load is sized to fit.

“Fuck, baby,” he breathes, fingering my sensitive hole. He’s achingly gentle, but still absolutely filthy as he teases and strokes. “You good?”

I slide off the railing and land a little wobbly on my feet. I steady myself with my hands on his shoulders and tip my head back so I can kiss him. “Yeah,” I say against his lips. “I’m perfect.”

He returns my kiss. When he comes up for air, he rests his forehead against mine. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Out of nowhere, a thought strikes hard. I pull back so I can see his eyes.
“Was that another lesson? Trust?”

He shakes his head. “Not like you’re thinking.” His wings curl around us, nudging me even deeper into his arms. Just before he claims my mouth again, he murmurs, “That one was for both of us.”

CHAPTER 18

TOWER

No surprise, I sleep like a fucking baby after Gothel finally rails my ass. In fact, I realize as I make my way to the library the next morning, I've slept great the whole time I've been in the Sky Syndicate. I assumed it was a combination of climbing ladders and feather-dusting my fingers to the bone, but now I think it's a function of knowing I don't have to watch my back. None of Gothel's people are going to put a knife in it. Sure, his punishments have been uncomfortable, but they served a purpose.

It's not like I'm going to admit that to him, though. Then again, he obviously already knows. Whatever reservations I've had about his teaching methods, my cock has always been fully on board with the training regimen. Green light, green light, go go go.

My wayward train of thought has my face heating as I stride into the library—

—and find Gothel sitting on the spank sofa looking like every wet dream I've ever had in another three-piece suit, gold pocket watch glinting at his waist.

I freeze. "You," I say, except it comes out as a startled, sort of high-pitched gasp.

One dark eyebrow goes up. "Good morning."

"Morning." I stare at him, unsure what to do or say next. Dammit, I'm normally not this awkward. I'm not some shy virgin the morning after my deflowering. We fucked, and it was dirty, and it's not like we hadn't been leading up to it.

I clear my throat and stroll to him, flicking my hair over my shoulder as I go. His eyes track the movement, which sends a healthy shot of my usual self-confidence shooting through me.

His gaze warms, a knowing look in those golden eyes. "Sleep well?"

Filthy gargoyle. I reach him and, in a last-second decision, sit beside him. I raise my brow right back as I cross one leg over the other, giving him a good look at the curve of my ass.

"Yes, actually. Nothing but sweet dreams."

He slings an arm along the back of the sofa, his fingers perilously close to my shoulder. The gleam in his eyes intensifies as he rumbles, "I hope some of those dreams were about me."

"You might already know if you'd spent the night in my bed. I could have told you as soon as we woke up."

In an instant, the heat rolling off him subsides. His voice stays gruff, but now there's something unpleasant in it—a reserve that feels like a barrier going up between us. "I keep erratic hours. I didn't want to disturb you."

"It's fine," I say quickly. Because what the hell am I doing? He's not my boyfriend. Our relationship is already weird. We don't even *have* a relationship. There's not even a name for what we have. I definitely don't have the right to demand after-sex cuddles.

I stand and shove my hands in my pockets. "So...I'm done cleaning in here. What's next?"

It's a sloppy change of subject, but he doesn't call me on it as he rises and goes to his desk, which holds a stack of books I didn't notice at first because I was too busy staring at him. He lifts the topmost volume and shakes it a little. It's the book about vampire magic I started reading my first day in the library.

"I thought you might like to finish this," he says.

"So I passed the cleaning portion of the curriculum? Is there a final exam?" I go to him and reach for the book.

He yanks it back before I can grab it. Whatever went upside down between us a couple seconds ago flips right-side up again, because he throws off so much heat I'm suddenly longing for an ice bath. "If there's a test later, sweetheart, you can be certain it's an oral one."

"*That,*" I say deliberately, "is a straight-up dad joke, Gothel." I lunge fast, snatching the book in a blur of movement that ruffles his hair.

My speed surprises him, because his eyes widen and a smile curves his lips. And because he's such a dominant fucker, he throws out a surprise of his own by gripping my hard dick through my pants. My vision fills with smiling, turned-on gargoyle as he murmurs, "I'm not your dad, Tower, but I don't mind being your daddy." He tips his head toward the chairs set at angles in front of his desk. "Now sit your ass down and start reading, baby boy, before I heat your bottom and stick you in the corner."

Half a dozen replies skip through my head. Things like "yes, sir" and "gods, yes" and "you can't make me." That last one makes me bite my lip because apparently I'm a total slut now. Or a brat, I guess.

Yeah, I think as I flounce to the chair and fling myself in it. Definitely brat. Except brats probably don't get so hard they have to squirm and *adjust* before they can sit comfortably.

And then squirm again because the gargoyle sitting himself behind the desk rammed their ass with his oversized dick last night.

Gothel pulls a stack of paperwork toward him and gives me another smug look. "All right?"

"Totally fine," I lie.

He nods toward the book. "Get to it, then."



AT FIRST, I THINK I'LL BE TOO DISTRACTED BY GOTHEL TO READ. THEN I get into the vampire book and remember why it lured me into slacking off the first time around.

Old though it is, it's written in an engaging style. And it's packed with information. Before long, I'm turned sideways in my chair with the other chair dragged close so I can prop my feet on it.

Gothel works on gargoyle stuff, which apparently involves mostly real estate transactions. Grotesques appear every now and then, trotting deeds and blueprints in and out of the library. Around lunchtime, Raoul places a platter of sandwiches and fruit on the corner of Gothel's desk. He also leaves water bottles and a few small, rectangular-shaped containers of blood.

He's halfway to the door when I look up and spot them. "Raoul, did you bring me blood in juice boxes?"

Dark eyes regard me with a cool indifference that doesn't fool me for a second. "I don't know what you mean."

Gothel's salt-and-pepper head stays bent over his papers, but he brings his fist to his mouth, and I swear I see a smile peeking around the edges.

I hold up the book so Raoul can see the cover. "Vampires are some of the deadliest creatures on the planet, Raoul."

The little guy folds his arms over his bulky chest. "If you say so."

"It doesn't matter what I say. It says it right here in this book."

"Ah yes, the one written by a vampire." He flicks his tail and starts for the door again. "Let me know when you've finished it. I can recommend a few books that cover the true nature of grotesques."

I look at Gothel, who's eating a sandwich with the unmistakable air of someone enjoying the hell out of himself. "Is the true nature "annoying and arrogant?"

He winks at me as he swallows. "You might be surprised what they're capable of. Small doesn't mean powerless."

I snort. "Well, if I ever want someone to experience death by sarcasm, I'll know who to call."

He winks again and returns to his work. So I go back to my book...but a smile pulls at my lips as I turn the pages.

At some point, he rustles around, fumbling under his desk or something. When I glance up, he's taken out a big, heavy book that looks far more ancient than mine. He seems engrossed by it, so I leave him alone while I delve into a chapter about daywalking.

I'm starting the book's final chapter when he clears his throat and says, "All right. Time to see if last night improved your focus."

I jerk my head up, my mind immediately leaping to a hundred different dirty conclusions. "I beg your pardon?"

He pushes his chair back and gestures to himself. "I injected more miserisollus this morning. I want you to pull it from me." He sets a siphoning vial on the desk.

"Is this the final exam?" Even as I say it, I realize I don't want it to be. Because what comes next? I don't know what that looks like, and he's giving no indication that he does, either. And I don't know how to ask. I don't know how anything like this is supposed to work.

"It's not a test, Tower." His gaze is steady, but his tone softens. "You don't have to prove yourself. This is who you are. Siphoning is as vital to

your being as the need to breathe or drink blood. Stop thinking you need to be worthy of it and start claiming it as your birthright.” He taps a firm finger on the desk. “Now. Start right now.”

The words do something to me. Fill me with a warmth that has nothing to do with desire or anger. I’m well-acquainted with those two emotions. But this is foreign. Pleasant but entirely unfamiliar. There’s a hint of his usual exasperated “daddy” vibe in it. Some dash of the stern lecture that’s always gotten me flustered and horny.

But it’s also more than that. It’s almost like he’s proud of me. Like he *knows* I’m capable of something amazing and frustrated I can’t see it, too.

His whiskey eyes are uncompromising. As always, there’s no backing down from Gothel. He’ll get up and haul me over to his desk if I don’t comply. It’s not even a threat. It’s just a fact. And there’s something deeply comforting about that. “*Too bad, baby, because I won’t let you quit.*”

Yeah, I won’t let me quit, either. Not anymore.

My pulse is a steady beat in my ears as I go to him and ease onto his knee. The world slows down, and it’s almost like I’m standing outside myself—a passive observer watching as I unbutton his top few buttons and pull his shirt open. I see my hands remaining steady as I grasp his stubbled jaw and tilt his head away from me. I see his big, golden-skinned hand wrapped casually—possessively—around my waist. I see my eyes go electric blue and my gaze focus on the thick vein pumping under his skin. I see my smaller, slimmer body fitting so perfectly into all the hard hollows of his muscled form.

I see us together, and we’re beautiful.

I bare my fangs and strike. I find the miserisollus at once. It’s like the dark presence was waiting for me. *Well, here I am, bitch.* I seize it quickly and PULL, drawing the curse into my body, which glows more brightly than any harbor light. I’m the fucking beacon now. I’m not lost. The path to freedom has always led back to me. I’ve been turning in circles for two decades. But Gothel put a stop to my spinning.

And there I am. I’m an open door. All I have to do is walk through it.

Light fills the library, splashes up the bookcases and over the patterned carpets. It sets the emerald-green sofa ablaze and paints the ceiling with sunlight. I am light as I reach for the siphoning vial, my hand blazing like a ball of fire. I laugh—a sound of joy that bounces around the room—as I tip

my palm over the vial and the miserisollus slithers into the glass in an inky glide.

I've done it. For the first time in my life, I've released something I stole.

In the space of a blink, my power winks out. For a moment, it's like someone blotted out the sun. The library plunges into darkness, and I'm temporarily blinded.

Then Gothel touches my face, and the world slowly comes back into focus. "There," he murmurs. "Congratulations, Tower du Sang. Vampire siphon. Leader of House du Sang."

My lips part. It was steady before, but now my heart thumps hard. "I'm not... I mean, this doesn't change anything. Lucius is a siphon, too."

"But he's not your father's son." Gothel tugs a lock of pale hair that's fallen over my shoulder. "Didn't you pay attention to your book, sweetheart? Bloodlines are sacred. The only leader of House du Sang is the one currently occupying my lap."

More of that non-horny heat squirms through me. Because there he goes again, sounding like he's proud of me. I slide off his knee and shove my hair out of my face, which is burning a little. "Yeah, well, it's not very leaderly of me to sit on your lap, I guess."

He sits back in his chair. "When you're the leader, *leaderly* is whatever the fuck you say it is."

I shake my head, but I don't try to hide my grin. My gaze falls on his book, which he closed when I started feeding. It's a beautiful thing, all leather and blood-red thread. The spine glitters with bright-gold lettering.

Gothelevenus of House Cortal.

Recognition slams into me—the blow so powerful I stumble backward. Blood rushes in my ears. Or maybe it's wind. I'm in the center of a hurricane with a vortex whirling around me.

"*You'll know it when you see it,*" Lucius's voice says in my memory.

Yes, *Uncle*. I see it now. It's *the* book. Gothel's book. The one I'm supposed to steal. I don't know why Lucius wants it, but I know this: If I return to my family's estate with that book in hand, no one will ever question my right to lead again. No more Axel. No more beatings. No more fetching for my uncle like a dog. No more sneers about my sexuality or my fucking hair.

There are no coincidences. It's the same thought I had the night I stared at the dead fountain from behind the bars on my bedroom window. The

night before I decided to return to the Sky Syndicate and seek out Gothel.

There are no coincidences. None at all. Not when Fate decides to play her hand.

“Is everything all right?”

I jerk my gaze to Gothel. He’s as relaxed as ever, his wings tucked behind him and his big hands resting on the arms of his chair. His gaze is steady.

“Yeah,” I rasp. And because I just spent an entire day learning about vampire abilities, I dip into a deep well of power and slow my heart rate. It’s something I’ve done by instinct before, but I do it deliberately now—a gift I read about in Chapter Thirty-Five. I move around the desk, putting space between us. But I need more. I need to get the fuck out of this library so I can think.

I stand behind my chair, doing my best not to squeeze the back until it breaks. “Releasing that curse tired me out. You okay if I go to my room for a bit?”

His gaze remains steady. “Of course. Whatever you want.”

“Thanks,” I say, but I don’t move right away. I stare at him like an idiot, part of me wondering if he’ll order me to stay. Maybe bend me over his desk and swat my ass until I beg him to fuck me.

But why would he? That’s all over now.

“I guess our contract is finished,” I hear myself say.

“Not quite.” He opens his desk and pulls out a cigar and a flashy piece of silver I recognize as a cutter. “I think you need a bit more practice before we get to that point, *du Sang*.”

I loosen my death grip on the chair. I can’t help but watch as his nimble fingers trim the end of the cigar. It’s just paper and tobacco. It shouldn’t make me wish he was handling my dick with the same confidence and care.

Dammit, I’ve got to stop this. If I’m really the leader of the family now, I’ve got to figure out what the hell I’m going to do next.

“Right,” I say. “Well...talk later, then.” I turn and head for the door, and it’s not until I reach the elevators that I realize he called me *du Sang*. Not *baby* or *sweetheart* or even *Tower*.

There are no coincidences, right?

The elevator doors slide shut, enclosing me in the little box that speeds me toward my room.

No coincidences. None at all.

CHAPTER 19

GOTHEL

It's been a week since I took Tower, and every day, the need to formally claim him rides me harder and harder. It doesn't help that I took my last gem this morning, and it's only a matter of time before the thumping of my heart starts back up. That'll be a fucking mess, because my grotesques will hear it immediately. I can't keep the truth from Tower much longer.

To be honest, I'm not even certain why I haven't told him. Maybe I'm waiting for the book's foretellings to be proven true or false. Either way, I'm unsettled and anxious. I'm tense and irritated, even with him, which causes him to return that vibe tenfold.

"Again!" I snap, with vehemence I need to tone down.

Across the sparring room from me, Tower glares from behind that sheet of incredible white hair.

"You're pushing too hard." He grits his teeth. "It's been a week, and—"

"You won't always have the luxury of a handsome tutor's lap to sit on when you drain powers," I remind him for the fifth time today. "In fact, most of the time there won't be a hand playing with your ass while you take your time. Try harder."

Anger flashes in his eyes as he straightens, and I can almost see the brick walls building up around him. Making progress with his power has brought him true confidence, and I'm ruining it by pushing him faster than I should. I should be running alongside him for the last bit of his journey, simply cementing his control in place while I cheer him on.

But I don't, and I can't, because I'm so godsdamned frustrated.

I spent an hour last night flipping through my book, and every time I let go of those worn, treasured pages, they landed on the scene of him taking my book and sneaking out of my life.

I don't know what's true anymore, and my mind is awash with a mixture of anger and terror and grief as I look at him.

Don't steal from me, I beg him without saying anything aloud. Don't take a single godsdamned thing, because you've already stolen my heart, and I will never get it back.

In a flash, he's across the room, fangs bared as he makes his play.

Fucking obvious.

I grit my teeth for the onslaught, but in a surprise twist, he slips around, grabbing one of my wings as he darts behind me. Suddenly, there's a knife at my neck, and my wing is twisted into an awkward, painful angle.

"Gotcha," he snaps, sinking his fangs into my shoulder as I bellow. I toss him, but his legs are wrapped around me. I haven't injected myself with anything today. He bites me for the sheer fucking pleasure of it, and that makes me want to unleash on him.

Every sexual interaction we've had has been exactly what he needed to feel good. I've been conscientious and thoughtful.

Right now I want to throw him to the ground and simply take.

I shove us both backward, slamming him against the wall and forcing the breath from his lungs in a whoosh. I dart from him and whirl around, pain shooting through my wing as I land a punch to his gut. Anger flashes in his eyes as he throws himself at me again.

Except instead of a fight, his lips are on mine, a groan leaving his mouth as I still. He sucks and nips at my lower lip angrily, *taking* like the vampire he is.

He's going to leave soon. I know that, and that knowledge has sunk down deep into my soul, poisoning the well where love should be growing. Our days are numbered, and we're both fighting it, not admitting it aloud, and certainly not addressing it with one another.

"What's wrong, *baby?*" he taunts me, resentment evident as he pulls away.

Before he can say something shitty he doesn't mean, I shove the spade-shaped tip of my tail into his mouth. As he gags, I wrap the length around his neck so he can't spit me out.

He bites—of course he fucking bites—but I use my tail to flip him around. He shouts a curse against the wall as I shove both his hands over his head and one of mine down the front of his pants.

He's hard from the mistreatment, choking around my tail as I thrust my hips against him. Rage sears my insides. Centuries of living, of being without a partner, and now I've found him only to have all this bullshit threaten to ruin our future.

I open my mouth to tell him everything, every fucking detail, but he throws his head back and head butts me. Pain blooms across my forehead. With a growl, I latch onto his neck with my teeth. I rip into the muscle, halfway to a fucking claiming with this dominance.

Not that he knows or understands gargoyle bonding rituals.

Because I haven't told him.

I need to tell him.

I loosen the hold on his throat as he writhes in my arms, trying to shove against my much larger frame but unable to. At the end of the day, he's faster than I am, but I'm simply bigger, and I weigh far more than he does.

So I hold him there as I dig my fangs deeper, my hand making hard, slow drags up and down his leaking cock. He's harder than ever for me, his length throbbing in my hand as I chuckle cruelly into the bite. He can't help his reaction to me because he's mine, but he's so angry right now.

"Good boy," I purr into his ear, releasing the bite. I spin him to face me but keep his wrists locked in one of my hands against the wall over his head. "Get angry, Tower. Good and angry, and harness that anger for your power."

"You don't give a fuck about my power right now," he snarls, yanking against my grip.

His furious tone matches the rage and frustration spiraling higher in my chest. I want to spank him, slap him, and fuck him—in no particular order. But I lose that fight when I see the hurt behind his expression.

And then I do what I probably shouldn't, and I drop to both knees in front of him. Confusion and wariness flit across his eyes, which narrow as his cock bobs like it's trying to get in my mouth.

"Don't you dare fucking bite me again," he warns. A steady stream of blood trails down his shoulder.

I'm lost as a heavy pulse starts in my thighs, like all the blood in my body is suddenly rushing through my system. It's heady and intoxicating,

and I need more. I need all of him. So I open my mouth and suck his hot length all the way in, relishing the way he spurts a little in the back of my throat before I pull out and start all over.

I suck at him, reaching between his thighs to play with the tight pucker of his ass. And I will him to read me like a book, to pick up everything I'm thinking without me having to say it aloud. I've never struggled to communicate, but all I can do now is blow him like my life depends on it, because I can't find the words I need to tell him.

His hands find my aching horns, and I groan, pausing my onslaught as pleasure rockets through my system. It's so heavy and fast, I have to plant a big palm on the wall near his hip to hold myself up.

That steady thrum fills my senses again as Tower's hands stroke roughly along my horns. I'm lost to the sensation of us, of how right it is to be with him. When he comes hard, filling my throat with his seed, I swallow most of it down as my own orgasm rises. He screams his pleasure into the hot room, head thrown back as I drink him in.

When his ecstasy recedes, he slumps against the wall, but I'm far from done. Rising, I grip his chin and force his mouth open. He's lust-drunk, opening easily as I spit his own seed into his mouth. He sputters, cum leaking from the corners of his lips. Before he can swallow it all down, I attack his mouth with mine. My tongue tangles against his as the flavor of him explodes across my senses.

Then we're nothing but a clash of teeth and fangs as I lift him against the wall, pistoning my hips against his as he hardens again for me.

It could be like this all the time, I beg with the words I can't say aloud to him. *Please don't do it. Don't steal from me.*

Our feverish kiss stops as he grabs my horns and yanks my head back, burying his fangs in my throat. There's a pinch of pain, combined with the bliss of his hit, and that throws me over the edge into an orgasm so hard, I clench my teeth around the weight of it.

I can't even scream as blood pumps through my veins, louder than a raging river.

Thwomp. Thwomp. Thwomp.

My release batters me as I bellow my way through it, my head falling back as I spin us so I'm pressed to the wall, my wings thrown out to both sides. I've never shown them to him like this, wide open and not protectively closed.

The sound of my heartbeat is all I can hear, and when my orgasm finally dissipates, leaving me a shriveled husk of hazy exhaustion, I slump against the wall. My gaze finds Tower's as he releases the bite and pulls away from me, a look of confusion on his face.

"You...you've got a heartbeat? But before, you..."

I can't explain. Not without telling him the truth. But I can't go on like this, either. We're both out of time. So I grab his hand and slide it inside my button-down shirt, right over the spot where my heart now pulses. It's loud enough to be audible to us both. With my palm over Tower's hand, I watch him.

Pale lashes flutter with uncertainty, and then he looks up at me again. My grip on his hand tightens, and then I drop it, waiting to see what he'll do. This is the most connected we've ever been, this moment right here, right now.

A door slams open, ending the moment as Raoul trots into the gym. He spots us and freezes, obviously surprised to see us against the wall. Then his eyes go wide.

And just like that, my secret is exposed.

Raoul is across the room in a puff of smoke. He reappears next to Tower, who yanks his hand from my shirt like he's been burned.

Raoul stares at Tower with disbelief in his dark eyes. "You? After all this time, you?"

"That's enough, old friend," I say quietly. "We'll discuss this later."

My grotesque's ears flatten.

"Discuss what?" Tower demands.

My heart—my *beating* heart—sinks. He doesn't get it. Vampires don't have fated mates. I don't need to read books about their magic to know that. He doesn't feel our connection. And if I tell him about our bond now, I'll never know if he returns my love out of genuine emotion or simply duty. And there's a chance he won't return it at all.

"Nothing important," I say. "Syndicate business."

There's a moment where I can see him almost decide to push back. But it passes quickly, and the walls he arrived with snap back up around him. In an instant, I'm no longer looking at my mate. Now, I see the leader of the du Sang crime family. He's cold and distant, and so fucking powerful I can taste his magic.

Raoul puffs up onto my shoulder, his tail curling gently around my neck like my personal protection parrot. We watch as Tower does up his pants and gives us both a haughty look. His eyes fall to the bleeding wound at my neck. For a second, his gaze softens. Then the expression is replaced with boredom. Without saying a word, he leaves the gym.

I let him go, wondering which of the scenes in my book will play out next, and praying it'll be any of the happy ones.

Raoul's tail tip thumps gently against my shoulder. "I take it congratulations are not in order, Gothel?"

I grunt noncommittally, reminding myself that I still need Tower to return Raoul's power to him. That, at the very least, I need to ensure. I made a promise.

But I don't get the chance. Because Tower declines my invitation to dinner. And when I wake the next morning, he's gone.

And so is my book.

CHAPTER 20

TOWER

My heart feels like it's going to beat from my chest as I move through the crumbling streets of the Hallows. It's still so early, the sun is just a suggestion on the horizon. This stretch of city between the Sky Syndicate and my uncle's estate is so dangerous, even the shadows have shadows. In these streets, humans can be more dangerous than the Myth. Stumble into the wrong alley—or any alley, really—and there's a decent chance you won't walk back out.

But I'm not thinking about any of that now. Gothel's book is a constant weight tucked under my arm. With every step, the damn thing gets heavier.

Or maybe that's just my guilty conscience. I didn't know I was going to take the book until right before I grabbed it. Up until that moment, I was undecided. I've wrestled with regret all fucking week—and it came to a head last night.

Quite literally.

My throat tightens as I duck closer to the buildings and keep my head down. I don't run, but I don't take my time, either. And I don't stop thinking about how good Gothel's mouth felt around my dick. And how filthy he was to feed me my own come...and then follow it up with a kiss so hot I should be a pile of ash right now.

But his heat has a flipside, and it's colder than the air above his buildings. Ever since I pulled the miserisollus from him, he's alternated between screwing me senseless and freezing me out. Back and forth with no explanation. And then, finally, the brush-off in front of Raoul—his employee.

“Nothing important.”

“Syndicate business.”

Like I’m a child. Or worse, untrustworthy.

Like right now? a little voice in my head whispers.

I clench my jaw and keep moving. The sooner I return to the du Sang mansion with the book, the sooner I can unseat Lucius and take my rightful place as my father’s successor.

But now curiosity niggles at me like an itch I can’t scratch. I slow...then stop. Heart pounding painfully, I glance around and slip into a doorway. Trailing vines obscure the door, which is covered in cracked and peeling paint, the word “hardware” just visible. Magic probably ate the inside alive. Magic despises iron. It’s one of the reasons so few human structures survived the fall of the Veil.

My hands shake as I unwrap the book. I concealed it with a hand towel I grabbed from my bathroom. *More stealing.* And I can’t justify this theft. This time, I’m not pulling poison from Gothel’s neck or even taking a power I can sell. I’m just taking. I don’t even truly need his book. He’s worked with me enough over the past week for me to feel confident about my siphoning and releasing abilities. I could walk into the mansion and win over the family simply by proving I have the gift.

But it’s too late now. I’ve got his book, and I’ve broken his trust. Before I hand it over to my uncle, I want to see what’s so special about it.

And maybe part of me wants to know if taking it was worth ruining any chance I might have had with the gargoyles.

“Whatever,” I mutter, turning the book in my hands. It’s not like Gothel and I love—

My heart stops as my gaze catches on the gold lettering that runs down the book’s spine. Because the words don’t make sense.

Tower du Sang.

Cold slides down my spine. My knees loosen, and I lean hard against the door so I don’t fall on my ass. My heart speeds up again, galloping so quickly I feel lightheaded.

I flip the pages, and a sense of dissociation descends over me. There are photos—some black-and-white sketches and some full-page spreads in vibrant color. Text accompanies most of them.

And every scene is one from my life. There’s Axel and Lucius and a parade of people I’ve stolen from. Some are blurry, their faces obscured, and I realize I remember the job but can’t quite recall my victim.

Because the book is the story of my life. It's impossible, but here it is in my hands. An undeniable record of everything I've done.

My chest tightens as a new thought grips me. If the book shows my past, does it also show my future? Swallowing hard, I flip forward. Sure enough, there are scenes I've only ever been able to imagine. Dreams, really. Me behind my father's desk with an aura of authority sitting around my shoulders. Axel banished from the family...and then dead, his head severed from his body.

I read quickly, learning he tried to assassinate me after I removed him from power.

Or *will try*. Future tense. My head spins as I try to wrap my brain around what I'm seeing and reading. I flip ahead a couple chapters.

And I slide straight down the door, a cry of anguish trapped in my throat. I clap a sweaty palm over my mouth to hold in the wounded animal sounds that try to spill from me.

Because there's Gothel lying in what looks like an abandoned parking lot. Dead. There's no ambiguity. His eyes stare sightlessly at a blue sky. His body is somewhere between his human form and his gargoyle shape. Chunks of body parts litter the ground around him. One wing is bent at an unnatural angle, bits of purplish bone sticking out among the black. His neck is a shredded mess. His chest is torn open, his ribs popped wide like they were spring-loaded. His face should be gray, but it's completely colorless, all those hard planes and angles devoid of the humor and sarcasm that made him a force to be reckoned with. He's never going to smile again. Never going to raise that brow and call me on my bullshit. Never fuck me until I see stars. That's supposed to be a cliché, the whole fucking until you glimpse the universe crap. But he did it. He took me to the edge of space and hurled me among the heavens.

Tears stream down my face and splatter on the page. I hug the book to my chest and rock back and forth. "What the fuck?" I whisper. What kind of evil book is this? Because I don't fucking want it. I don't want to see this shit.

Maybe it's a joke. I scrub at my face, fragile hope trembling through me. Yeah. That makes sense. This could be some kind of twisted prank, like maybe Gothel set me up because he knows I'm a devious little shit.

I flip back a couple of pages. The scene I land on instantly has vomit rising in my throat. It's me less than an hour ago, my face pale as I slink

through the library.

Next page.

Me again, wrapping the book—the one I’m holding in hands gone numb—in a hand towel I pulled from under my bathroom sink.

There’s no way Gothel could have planted the book with this scene in it.

In a beat, my sorrow turns to cunning. If the book can update itself so quickly, maybe I can change what happens in its pages.

Fate wields a heavy hand, but we always have free will.

Fuck Fate. *Not on my watch, you bitch.*

Adrenaline pumps through me, and it lends me strength. I scramble to my feet, the book clutched against my chest even though I want to race to the harbor and hurl it into the ocean. But I can’t go to the Sea Syndicate. There’s only one place I can go right now, and that’s straight back to the Aerie. Because I’m getting some fucking answers. I don’t care if the story behind this book is some kind of top-secret, members-only intel. I want to know why the fuck my name is on the spine and the inside features a play by play of my worst moments.

And I want to know why Gothel ends up dead in a pool of blood.

As soon as the thought forms, I gasp. I jerk the book away from my body and stare at the page. Instantly, I know why the word “blood” stuck in my mind like an arrow thunking into its target. Because the Gothel in the book isn’t lying in a pool of blood.

There’s no blood around him or on him. *Anywhere.* It’s like he’s been fed upon. Drained.

“Fuck!” I shout, and I’m running. I don’t bother with the hand towel. I tuck the cursed book under my arm and sprint. Shops and dilapidated streets whiz past me. My shoes pound against cracked sidewalks and poor attempts at patching.

And the tears keep flowing. Because now I understand how Gothel dies. Lucius is going to kill him. The male I love is going to die.

And it’s all my fault. *All my fault, all my fault, all my fault.* The phrase runs on a loop in my head, the words falling in sync with the slap of my shoes on the pavement. I run without thinking, not caring if anyone sees. There’s no one and nothing in the Hallows that could hurt me more than I hurt right now.

At last, the buildings of the Sky Syndicate come into view. The sun is rising, its orange glow spreading over the city and climbing up the towers’

facades. Lights wink in some of the windows. I imagine Raoul and Anton and the others moving about their early-morning chores. Making coffee and being annoying and wonderful.

I sob and run faster. If Lucius is going to kill Gothel, he's probably going to hurt the grotesques, too. I stretch out my legs, my feet barely touching the ground. I'd give anything to poof around like Raoul does right about now. But I'm fast. It's almost like I'm flying.

The main building rears up. It's a few hundred feet through the parking garage and then I can take the elevators straight to the Aerie.

By chance, I glance up just as I near the parking garage's entrance. A dark, imposing shape perches on the Aerie's railing. I'd know him anywhere.

Gothel. My love. I was just too stubborn and stupid to realize it until now.

He spreads his wings—black, beautiful spans that blot out the sky. He leans forward, ready to swoop.

At the same moment, vampires pour from the shadows of the buildings that border the Sky Syndicate. They streak toward me, murder in their eyes.

Everything slows down.

Something hits me in the back, and I stumble forward. The book flies from my grasp and bounces on the ground. It falls open, its pages splashes of color in the morning sunlight. Lucius appears from behind the throng of vampires, his blue eyes blazing and his fangs bared in a hiss. He doesn't come for me, though.

He goes for the book.

For some reason I don't understand, I know he can't have it. With the last of my strength, I dive for it. As I do, Axel looms at my side. His hand flies. My head snaps back and I go airborne. I land with a sickening crunch.

Pain blazes up my side, then stops abruptly. He's broken my back.

A deafening roar splits the air. The pavement under me trembles.

Gasping, I shove hard and flop onto my back as Gothel roars again.

And I realize where we are.

This is the parking lot where he dies.

CHAPTER 21

GOTHEL

He came back for me. Tower came back. And that's all I have to see to know the stories in my book are true—he's my mate, and he wants me. He came back. The book was right. And I want every happy scene I cherished in its pages. I need every one of Tower's teasing smiles. The book foretold so much possible love ahead of us, and now that he's back, it feels within reach.

Except that the scene unfolding below is ripping our happy future right from my hands. Lucius du Sang hurt him to get that damned book. While it's precious to me, it's nowhere near as precious as the male my heart beats for. Even now, it pounds like the drums of war in my chest, urging me to protect what's mine.

I let out a battle cry, my roar shaking the railing I'm seated on as I call the grotesques to join me. Flaring my wings wide, I push hard off the railing, forming into a bullet as I streak down the side of the building. Tower is priority one. Everything comes second to him.

I'll never let him be crushed under Lucius's heel again. He chose me, chose us. He came back. He chose our happy future, and it's time to go to war for it. He'll never fight alone again, not while I'm by his side.

Rage colors my vision red as I watch Tower roll onto his back but struggle to rise. His lower half isn't moving at all, but he's clearly trying to keep Lucius from the book. My vision narrows with predatory focus. Lucius touched my mate, and that alone is reason enough to kill him.

Below me, dozens of grotesques pop out of thin air, surprising the dozen or so vampires with their sudden appearance. My army is small but far

mightier than their stature makes them seem. They dip and dive, disappearing and reappearing as they stab at Lucius's strike team with tails and blades.

Raoul appears in front of Lucius, snatching the book just as the vampire reaches for it. Lucius lets out an angry bellow as he swipes at Raoul, clutching at empty air.

Tower's on his side, his face screwed up. His legs aren't moving. When I drop down next to him, he lets out a pained sob. Sliding both arms carefully under his broken body, I dart to the doorway of one of my buildings and deposit him gently against the cool stones.

There's another angry roar from Lucius, and an equally wild series of snarls from my grotesques. Raoul appears in the doorway next to me. He drops the book and disappears again. Tower's name shines in bright gold letters down the spine.

The sounds of fighting rage louder.

I stroke bloodied hair out of Tower's face, cocooning my wings around us. Safe. He's safe. And he came for me. He chose us. It's all I've ever wanted from my saucy, snarky brat of a mate.

He's perfect, and he's mine.

"You came back," I murmur, staring into his beautiful eyes. They're narrowed in pain as the bloodied hand on his side comes up to my face and rests against my cheek.

"I love you," he gasps, blurting the words even as he grits his teeth. "I looked in the book, Gothel. I saw...us. I—" His voice is vehement but his face pales.

My mate is in pain, and there is one person who will answer for it, right fucking now. Lucius du Sang hurt Tower, and I'll kill him for that.

There will be time for admissions of love later. My heart beats louder as I pull Tower's hand gently to my lips, kissing his palm. Instead of terror that someone will hear the resounding beat, I feel pride. I want every being around us to know my heart beats for Tower and Tower alone.

"Stay here," I command, pulling away.

"Don't go!" Tower gasps, gripping my hand as a pained cry leaves his bloodied lips.

I pull his hand to my chest, tucking it carefully inside my shirt, right over my heart. His eyes widen when he feels the steady thump underneath his palm.

“This beats for you, Tower.” My voice is full of conviction as I continue shielding us both from the war raging around us. I’ll end it momentarily, but I need him to hear what I’m about to say. “You have fought alone your whole life, but you will never be alone again. You will always have me to fight alongside you. I am yours.” My voice is strong as tears fill Tower’s eyes, streaming down blood-stained cheeks as his fingers curl, claws digging into the hard planes of my chest.

“You’ll die here, Gothel. I saw it in the book! Don’t fight! Let’s just go. Please!” Desperation creeps into my mate’s voice. I’d banish it if I could. But there will be time for that later. Right now, my only goal is to raze Lucius du Sang and his team to the ground.

“I will always fight for you,” I say. “I will always fight for *us*, Tower. The book is full of possibilities, but it’s not set in stone. We are still the masters of our destiny, and I want us to have the time to build ours.”

His face grows even paler as he tries to sit up but can’t move anything below his waist. He reaches for me. “Please, don’t do this.” His breathing is stuttered as he pleads, his plump lower lip trembling.

I grab the book from its resting place beside him and tuck it right next to him, patting its well-worn cover. “Hold this for me, mate.”

I rise and stalk into the middle of the street. My roar echoes off the buildings as I call the grotesques to my side. As one, they poof out of existence and reappear beside me, forming a long line.

The scent of blood fills my nose as I observe the massacre in front of us. A dozen vampire bodies dot the street, some moving, most not. I hear the shuffling of feet behind Lucius. He must have called for reinforcements. Even now, he stands in front of me, just outside my territory, hands crossed as if it’s every day he attacks a syndicate lord.

The grotesques vibrate with impatience. It’s a little-known fact about them that they’re bloodthirsty savages in battle. Despite their size, they are vicious in a group, and they’re just waiting for my command to take Lucius down.

The vampire scowls at me. “Give me the book, and I’ll leave peacefully. Nobody else has to get hurt tonight.”

That’s laughable, despite the reinforcements I see hovering in the shadows. Looking around, I spread my arms wide as I observe the still bodies between us. “Your people are at far greater risk than mine. It’s a mistake to think I’d allow you to leave here with your life. You tried to steal

from me, and I heard you did the same with Wotan. Even if I could forgive your transgressions, the other syndicate lords never would. You will die here tonight.” It’s a simple statement of the truth. Lucius du Sang will not survive this encounter.

Lucius snarls, white fangs glinting in the early morning sun. “Give me the book,” he hisses. Both of his fists are balled tightly. His seething fury is nearly palpable, and my brain goes immediately to how he crushed Tower under his thumb for years. Tower came to me broken and mistrustful, and it’s entirely the fault of the male in front of me.

I’ll pull Lucius du Sang limb from limb for making Tower so desperate to escape him.

I’d laugh in du Sang’s face, but I know better than to underestimate an opponent, much less a vampire who’s been siphoning powers for decades. He’s dangerous.

“Attack,” I command. At once, the grotesques disappear from my side and reappear around Lucius, stabbing at him with their tails and knives. He roars and slashes out, sending a few of the grotesques flying. I pace to the very edge of my territory, unable to go farther.

Behind Lucius, the reinforcements dart into the sunlight in full-body daylight armor. Ah, they’re not daywalkers like he is. Good.

The moment my grotesques shove him close enough, I grab Lucius’s collar and yank him firmly over my property line as the other vampires sprint toward us.

My grotesques whirl and speed toward the oncoming vampires, bringing the fight to our attackers. One moment they’re there, then they’re gone. They morph between stone and normal forms, changing so quickly, the vampires can’t attack fast enough. It’s a beautiful dance of war, and I’d revel in it if my heartbeat wasn’t pounding ever faster in my ears.

Lucius yowls and screeches as he slashes at my hand with his claws, but Raoul and two other grotesques continue to pepper him with assaults as I pull him into the middle of the street and throw him down. I step on his chest with enough pressure to force the air from his lungs in a whoosh.

I half-shift to stone form, my foot an immovable weight on top of him. He stabs at me with his claws even as the grotesques move aside. The only thing that remains is to kill him so he can never hurt my mate again. Raoul remains by my side as the other two join the fray, driving the remaining vampires away from my property line.

“Leave here,” I bellow at the wave of vampires who now stand crowded at the edges of my property. Behind them, a small group pushes an old tank forward, its ancient tracks creaking as it stops in the middle of the road. I haven’t seen one of those in nearly a hundred years, but this one appears to be in pristine condition. It’s an odd sight here between my glittering towers.

A row of giant spikes pokes out of the tank’s front panel. The grotesques pause, unsure about this new development.

Underneath my foot, Lucius screeches angrily. “Now, you imbeci—” His voice cuts off when I step on his chest, relishing the crunch of bone. The vampire groans as I partially crush his ribcage. It’s a reminder that he isn’t getting out of this alive. His moments are numbered.

There’s a metallic click, and two of the tank’s spikes fly through the air toward us. Time and motion slow, and I watch with horror as one spike hits Raoul square in the stomach, exiting out of his back. The moment it does, there’s a click and the spike splits open into four sharp pieces. The pieces flatten against Raoul’s back, hooking him like a fishing lure. It’s then I notice the other end of the spike is attached to a thick chain, and that chain is attached to the godsdamned tank.

Next to me, Raoul shifts to stone form and drops to the ground like a rock, his features frozen in pain. Around us, the grotesques spin into a frenzy, attacking the reinforcements and the tank itself as it creaks under the brutality of their force.

There’s another whoosh of air, and a spike brushes past my ear just as a second hits me in the stomach.

The pain is unimaginable as I roar and clutch at the chain. I’ve never felt agony like this, so all-consuming that it pushes everything aside. All I can focus on is the stabbing sensation as the spike splits open and then clamps to my back.

Iron. It must be iron ore, and all Myth creatures hate that. Burning agony slashes like a knife as I stumble backward and away from Lucius. He rolls onto his side, clutching at his chest before rising. His features, so like Tower’s and yet so different, curl into an angry sneer.

“I’ll have that book,” he snarls, holding one arm across his slightly concave chest. “I’ll take it from you and I’ll take Tower too. He belongs to House du Sang.”

The vampire steps around me even as I leap forward and claw at his chest. The chain prevents me from getting any closer to him. As he strides

across the property line toward my mate, three of his strike team try to rush past me.

I flare my wings wide, stabbing out with the tips. I decapitate two of them easily. The third dips around his fallen comrades to follow Lucius. Just as I swing around to attack him, there's a yank in my core, and I'm pulled off my feet.

Blood rushes to my ears, pounding in time with my heartbeat. I look at the chain buried in my stomach. There's a metallic cranking noise. The chain impaling me pulls taut.

I bellow as the pain forces me to my knees. I'm yanked onto my back as the chain clanks and creaks. If I fall, the grotesques will be forced to defend the towers alone. If I go down, I'll never have that future with my mate. I can almost sense his terror for me, even now. I shift more fully, knowing my stone weight would be hard for any tank to pull.

My vision blurs as Lucius approaches Tower. He leans down and backhands my mate across the face.

Even in my agony, I roar. But I'm helpless as Tower's blood splatters the stones. My book is clutched to his chest, but as I watch, Lucius yanks it from Tower's grip.

In horror, I watch Tower's name disappear from the spine, and instead, a new name scrolls elegantly down it.

Lucius du Sang.

Pain floods my system as I struggle toward my mate, gripping the concrete below my foot claws until they crack under the strain. I scream for Tower as I watch Lucius rise with the book tucked under his arm. The other is still across his chest protectively.

He smiles at me, then glances over his shoulder. "Come along, boy. You've disobeyed me for the last time. You'll be lucky if I ever let you out again."

Tower's face pales as he shuffles forward on his hands and knees, one arm still clutched around his body.

He came back for me. For us. I told him I'd fight.

I dig in harder, but my body's pain response takes over. I begin to shift into stone form even as I bellow and claw against the transformation. For the first time in my life, I hate my full gargoyle form. Pain begins to fade away, but so does everything else.

Lucius rounds me, staying just out of reach as he nods to his strike team. “Do it now.”

The chain exiting my stomach clanks once, and then the tank’s engine screams as it begins to haul the chain—and me along with it—toward the property line. I can’t cross it or I’ll die. I’ll lose everything the book showed me. I told Tower I’d fight.

Grotesques attack my chains, stabbing and pulling ferociously, but the iron burns them as badly as it does me. Every foot closer to the edge of the property line weakens me. My claws are buried in the street, ripping up huge chunks as Tower screams, crawling toward me on his hands and knees.

I scratch and claw at the pavement, my actions sluggish. Every movement sends pain streaking through my body, but I look at my mate.

Tower, my love. I hope he knows how much I love him, how eager I was for the future the book held. He said he saw me die here today. Is that our destiny? Could the book be right? Is this what he saw, or do we still have a chance to write our own future?

Overwhelming grief crushes me as I struggle to shove my claws deeper and stop the slow pull of the tank. The creak of its chain is a death knell, matched only by the slowly fading heartbeat in my chest.

I crane my neck, even as I struggle to look over at Tower. He’s on his knees, dragging himself across the blood-slick street to get to me. His face is frozen in horror. He screams when I shift further into stone. An impact knocks my breath from me, and when I look down, a second spike is embedded in my shoulder. The chain pulls tight as I growl and yank at it. And then it starts pulling in the opposite direction as the first.

Tower screams. The grotesques rage, flapping around me and tearing at chains they can barely touch because of the iron. Raoul is barking orders, but it all sounds distant as my consciousness begins to fade, iron spreading like poison through my bloodstream.

“Tower, I love you,” I croak, hoping he hears and knows how true it is. I dig my claws into the street, tearing up chunks of black concrete. But then one big claw rips free of my hand, and another, and another. I’m across the fucking property line. I have no power here.

There’s a cracking sensation deep in my arm, and then a chunk of it rips free, blood spilling onto the street as I groan in pain. There’s so much pain, I can’t even think around the weight of it on my consciousness.

Stone. I need to become stone. But all I can think about is my mate and how I've failed him.

CHAPTER 22

TOWER

I *t's happening.* Gothel is dying just like the fucking book showed he would.

The book Lucius is currently striding away with. He walks past Gothel, not bothering to look back to make sure I'm following. Because he knows I will, I realize. And if I don't, he'll send the family to fetch me. Just like always. Just like forever.

Just like the way things were before Gothel showed me that life could be different. Before he taught me that the future isn't one long stretch of the same misery I've come to expect. It's bigger and better. Because he's in it. I don't care what the book says. Somebody get me a fucking pen because I'm writing my own story.

Lucius continues walking. He steps over a chunk of stone.

No, it's Gothel's fucking *hand*. Those hooks are tearing him apart. I wait for him to rise up. Shift. Spring to his feet and snap out those deadly wings. But he just lies there, blood spreading around him.

"Gothel!" I scream, pain like a blowtorch searing my veins as I struggle forward on my hands and knees. I'm dimly aware of grotesques continuing to battle vampires around me, but I can't pay them much attention. All I see is Lucius's golden hair glinting in the rising sun and Gothel's broken body scattered across the parking lot.

The tank rolls backward, pulling the chains taut.

A hook bursts from Gothel's shoulder, taking a piece of stone with it.

Taking a piece of my heart with it.

Someone screams, and I realize it's me. The blowtorch blasts my throat. Tears pour down my face.

Raoul pops into existence next to me, his stubborn, beloved face twisted in obvious pain. Blood seeps from a dozen wounds on his chest, but he's a tough motherfucker because they're already closing. "*Small doesn't mean powerless.*"

Gothel told me that.

Right before I betrayed him.

"Raoul," I croak. "You have to help me."

"Bite me," he gasps.

Outrage splinters through my fear and panic. "Gods, fuck you—"

"No, you idiot." He grabs my hair in both hands and thrusts his face in mine. "Feed. Take whatever you need. Gothel is powerless once he's outside his territory. It's the one true gargoyle weakness. You're his mate. Bring him back to us."

Understanding pounds through me. I don't think. I just bare my fangs and strike, punching my incisors through his leathery skin. Instantly, blood pumps down my throat.

And I understand what Gothel's been trying to tell me. The grotesques are a force to be reckoned with. Raoul's blood *seethes* with power—old, potent magic from the other side of the Veil. It sizzles through my veins and into my aching limbs, repairing damaged tissue and connecting severed nerves. The regeneration is so swift, I swear I feel a phantom wind blow my hair back.

I swallow a final time and seal the wound. When I pull back, Raoul's face is a pale gray but his eyes are as fierce as ever. He sways on his feet.

I'm on mine in a blink, and I steady him as his blood—and his power—crackles like lightning under my skin. "I'll get your wings back," I tell him. "I swear it."

He nods weakly. "Later. Right now, you have something more important to do."

In a beat, the sounds of battle flood back. But I don't give a shit about any of it. As I stride toward Lucius, a vampire swoops into my path with bared fangs.

I send him flying with a vicious backhanded blow that barely registers. Another comes for me. I repel him, too. The grotesques swirl around me, dipping and eddying like my own private army of tiny winged demons. Because fuck yes, they're mine now. Mine and Gothel's. I might be a du

Sang, but the family isn't *my* family anymore. No, I'm right where I belong, surrounded by creatures I'd be happy to die for.

But not today.

The only person dying here today is Lucius.

"Uncle!" I call, my voice booming across the pavement.

Lucius's shoulders stiffen. He whirls, the book clutched to his chest. The spine that once showed my name now displays his. Gothel's words ring in my head. "*The book is full of possibilities, but it's not set in stone.*" Lucius wants to know his future. He wants it so badly he's willing to kill for it.

I close the distance between us, and it takes everything I've got not to rush to Gothel's crumpled body. I'm not sure how I know, but I can't let Lucius leave with the book. The certainty of it blazes through me as brightly as the sun.

Lucius nods at me. A split second too late, I realize he's not nodding at me at all.

A thick arm wraps around my neck and Axel's voice hisses in my ear. "Sorry about your lover, pretty boy. Guess you'll have to find someone else to stick it up your ass. But maybe I can snap his dick off as a souvenir."

Red covers my vision. I thrust my elbow back hard, driving it into his gut. Bone gives in a satisfying-sounding crunch, and then his high-pitched scream fills my ears.

Such a sweet sound. Such a long time coming.

I spin and nail him with a left hook that sends him crashing to the ground. Before he can rise, I plant a foot across his neck, pinning him to the pavement.

"Don't," he gasps, his eyes wide in his pale face. Splintered ribs stick out of his chest, the bones trying to knit back together. "Please."

The wind picks up, tossing my hair. For once, I don't shove it back. I let it spill over my shoulders, knowing it's the last thing Axel will ever see.

"I promised you a rain check once," I tell him. Digging my foot harder into his neck, I look at the sky that stretches across what used to be Manhattan. When I look back down at Axel, resignation swims in his gaze. "Look at that," I say. "Nothing but clear skies."

I reach down, grip his hair in both hands, and wrench his head from his shoulders. I toss it aside and wipe my hands on my pants.

“Slight change in plans,” I say, flinging my hair over my shoulder. “At least two people are dying today.” I look at the mess that used to be Axel. “You first.” I swing my gaze to Lucius, “And now you, Uncle.”

Lucius backs up a step. Then he seems to realize what he’s done, because he straightens his shoulders. He lifts his chin, pinning me with the haughty look I’m used to seeing across his desk. “The gargoyle’s death is unfortunate, but it was avoidable. If you would have simply followed instructions and fetched the book, none of this would have happened.”

Anger boils up. “Is that why you brought a fucking tank here? Why you had a whole team at the ready so you could attack?” I gesture to the book. “I don’t need to take your word for it, Uncle. I can see the past if I flip back a couple of chapters.”

Panic flits across his gaze. It’s quick, but he doesn’t hide it fast enough, and I know he’s afraid of what I’ll find in the book. He takes another step back, his arm curled protectively around the leather. “We’re done here. It’s time to go home.”

“I *am* home,” I snarl, and I tap Raoul’s borrowed power. In a flash, I dart forward and rip the book from my uncle’s arms.

“No!” He comes at me, fangs bared, but he can’t hurt me anymore. Not when I’m filled to the brim with blood from the other side of the Veil. I shove him hard, and he lands on his ass a dozen feet away.

I turn the book in my hands just in time to catch my name scrolling down the spine. *Tower du Sang* writes itself in elegant golden script.

Tower du Sang. A name loaded with promise and expectation. A thousand generations of vampire siphons dumped on my shoulders at birth.

As the thought forms in my head, I suddenly know exactly where I need to look. With shaking hands, I flip the book to the very beginning.

And there I am, a child of no more than five years old, tears streaking my cheeks as I run from my father’s office.

I flip the page.

Next scene. My father and Lucius face each other across my father’s desk, but now it’s Lucius in one of the smaller chairs. My father sits in the position of power. The paragraphs under the image recall their conversation.

“Tower will be fine, Lucius,” my father says. “His gift will materialize in time.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Lucius asks.

“Then you’re uniquely positioned to guide him. Your own gift is dormant.”

“Thank you for the reminder.”

Heart pounding, I flip the page.

A new image. In this one, my father has rounded the desk and placed his hand on Lucius’s shoulder. He gazes down at my uncle with affection in his eyes.

“I love you, Luc. You’re my brother, not some gift. You think Fate cheated you, but everything happens for a reason. Maybe you’re meant to guide Tower as he grows.”

Next page. My hands are shaking so badly, I have to grasp at the paper more than once.

Lucius has risen from his chair. Axel and five others enter the office. It takes six members of the family to subdue my father, and even then they barely manage it. They throw him across the desk and snap his neck.

But he’s not dead. It takes more than that to kill an immortal vampire, let alone the most powerful vampire in the world—and one fighting to protect his wife and son.

Next page.

Lucius drains my father dry. Axel and the others produce siphoning vials. They steal my father’s blood. Every drop goes into the delicate glass tubes.

But there are empty vials left over.

As my father’s body cools, Lucius turns to Axel. “Lock Tower in his room. And bring me my sister-in-law.”

Next page.

Axel and the others have left. Now, Lucius stands behind the desk, a siphoning vial in his hand. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes gleaming with power.

Stolen power. I don’t need to read any further to know how my mother died.

I lower the book and meet present-day Lucius’s gaze. He hasn’t risen from the ground. He sits there still, a snake in the grass.

I fling the book aside, not caring when it hits the ground with a dull thud. My only care is for my lying, murderous uncle. “You fucking thief,” I growl.

“Yes,” he hisses, and he gets to his feet at last. “That’s what we are, Nephew. Welcome to adulthood. It’s full of hard truths and brutal lessons.”

“You killed my parents. You drained them and sipped their blood, passing their gifts off as your own. You’re a fucking fraud.”

“I did what I had to do. If my brother had been a stronger leader, he would have seen me coming.”

Rage trembles through me, and it’s so thick and bitter I can fucking taste it. “He didn’t see you coming because he trusted you, you miserable sack of shit. He loved you.”

“Yes!” Lucius screams, marching closer, his blue eyes wild with anger and a mania I’ve only glimpsed before. “And he was a fool to do so. Because *love makes us weak!*”

Wind drifts across the short space between us. The sun is fully awake now, its orange curve visible between Gothel’s buildings. The towers he loves so much. The spires he rebuilt after war and hate destroyed them.

“No,” I whisper, “love makes us strong.”

My arm shoots out, but I follow its progress as if it extends in slow-motion. My fist punches through Lucius’s chest. Hot, squishy pulp fills my hand. I yank back, pulling my uncle’s heart from his chest. It beats in my hand, blood and veins and sinew glistening in the morning sunlight. Blood coats my fingers and runs down my arm.

My uncle stares at it, his expression equal parts horrified and bemused. “You’ve killed me,” he mumbles.

“Yes. I promised I would.” I squeeze his heart in my fist. “But no matter, Uncle. You don’t need this. You never used it anyway.” I toss his heart to the ground, where it lands with a wet plop.

Lucius collapses, dead before he hits the pavement.

I don’t linger over my victory. I’m at Gothel’s side within seconds, my heart racing as I grip his stone arm and drag him backward. His body leaves a deep groove in the pavement, carving a path like a glacier through bedrock. Sweat pours down my face, but I don’t stop until we’re in the shadow of the Aerie building. In the distance, grotesques attack the tank, pulling vampires from inside and tossing them into the sun.

I only have eyes for Gothel. I go to my knees at his side and cup his face in my hands. “He’s not changing,” I cry to everyone and no one, panic tearing at me as he fails to shift from his stone form. His wounds aren’t healing. His salt-and-pepper hair is caked with drying blood. His eyes stare

sightlessly at the blue sky above us, his golden irises once again reminding me of the harbor lights I spent so many years yearning for.

But now I know I've longed for the wrong thing. And now that I've finally found the *right* thing, I've lost it.

My tears splash Gothel's frozen face. The moisture trickles over stone eyes and granite cheeks, making it look like he's the one who weeps. "All I ever wanted was you," I whisper.

The wind picks up, tugging at my hair. I bend over Gothel, ugly sobs emerging from my throat. I sprawl across his hard chest and let go, unleashing the sorrow that threatens to rip me apart. *Let it*, I think. Wherever he's going, I want to go, too. Even if it means going in pieces.

The tugging on my hair grows more persistent. Fucking wind. Fucking hair.

"Leave me alone!" I plead in a wet gurgle.

Gothel's chest vibrates against mine. "I'm afraid I can't do that, sweetheart."

I shoot upright so quickly my head spins. Whiskey eyes gaze into mine, amusement twinkling in the golden depths.

"You signed a contract," he rasps. Bloodied fingers reach up and pull at a lock of stray hair. "I probably don't need to tell you what kind of catastrophes befall those who break their promises."

With a strangled gasp, I fling my body on top of his. I plaster myself against him, grab his face in both hands, and kiss him right there on the fucking ground. Big, strong arms come around me. Fingers sift through my hair. And he kisses me back, stroking his tongue along mine. Feeding me life and love and a million memories we've yet to make.

I pull back and stare down at him. "The book—"

"What of it?" A dark eyebrow goes up. A little smile plays around his lips. Fresh blood trickles from a tiny wound that wasn't there before. I've nicked him with my fang. Oops.

I wipe the blood away, then bend and seal the cut with a swipe of my tongue. "The book shows the future, right? It showed you dead, but you're not dead."

His smile spreads. He grips my ass and thrusts his *very* alive dick against mine. "Mmm. Not dead."

"But—"

“I already told you, sweetheart. The book shows us possibilities. It can be startlingly accurate. But it can’t override our free will. Ultimately, the future is what we make it.” He pulls my hand to his chest and presses my palm over his round pec. His heart thumps steadily against my skin, each beat more precious than the last. “You chose a future with me. *That’s* what the book will show, because you decided you wanted to live something else than what you saw written.”

Tears burn my eyes. “I never want to see anything like that again. I don’t want the book anymore. Can we, like, put it somewhere? Stick it in your library and never look at it?”

His gaze softens. He strokes my hair back and rubs a rough thumb over my cheek. Even as his eyes melt, his dick presses harder against mine. “Anything you want, baby. But if you’re going to move my books around, I’ll probably need my shelves dusted again.”

My breath catches. And my dick decides to join our weird, post-bloodbath party on the edge of the parking lot. “Is there a uniform involved?”

He squeezes my hand over his heart. Wicked promises dance in his eyes. “I think I can rustle something up.”

EPILOGUE

GOTHEL

I puff at the end of my cigar, relishing the swirl of smoke around my head. I've noticed, since my heart began beating, that it's louder in my ears when I smoke.

I godsdamned love it. When I first felt that now-familiar thrum, I hid it, but now it's a homing beacon for my handsome mate, who's around here... somewhere.

Craning my neck around the corner, I look for Tower. Ostensibly, he's dusting. But we both know what he's doing—hiding to tease me, knowing I'll find and then chase him.

Reaching down, I cup my cock through my trousers with one hand, sucking at the tip of my cigar with the other. I blow circles into the air, letting the smoke fall around me as I breathe deeply.

Thwomp. Thwomp.

The other side effect of my smoking, now that Tower and I are together? My blood tastes different to him. And when I'm horny as fuck like now, he can barely resist seeking me out. It's a new development that's led to absolute debauchery in our bedroom. And my office. And this library.

Growling, I rise. I thought I could sit for a while and let the anticipation build, but I never last long.

A matching growl echoes from somewhere behind a row of shelves, and I follow it. My cock is pressed hard against the front of my pants, throbbing with anticipation as precum drips down my leg. My horns lengthen and straighten as my mate's scent brightens for me.

He's close.

I unbutton my vest and shift into full human form long enough to toss the garment away. Rolling my sleeves up to my elbows, I smile as I listen to the soft sound of Tower's bare feet somewhere up ahead.

I whirl around when a shadow moves from between book stacks. But I'm too slow. Fangs pierce my jugular. One of Tower's arms comes around my neck. The other snakes around my stomach as he wraps his legs around my waist. Pleasure spreads like wildfire through my gut as he drinks from me. Power crackles between us as I laugh and shift backward fast, slamming him into the shelves behind us.

The move presses Tower's teeth deeper into my vein, but the breath leaves his mouth on a gasp. When the arm around my neck loosens, I grab his wrist and flip us, shoving him hard into the shelves.

Tower hisses, his fangs dripping blood. I thrust my hips against his. My cock is so hard it's painful. But my mate returns the move. I shove one of his arms above his head. Even though his free hand pushes at my chest, we both know the resistance is part of the game. If I understand one thing about my gorgeous, perfect mate, it's that he desperately wants to be caught.

"You're different these days," I murmur, rolling my hips so my dick rubs against his. We're dry-humping like teenagers but it's a perfect tease. My lips hover just above his.

"Am I?" Tower bats his perfect lashes at me. "Are you all done teaching me then, Warden Gothel?"

"Never," I snarl, capturing his mouth. I plunder with my tongue, doing battle with his even as I tighten my grip on his wrist.

He gives a needy whine as he sucks the tip of my tongue.

"I could come like this," he gasps when we part. That's a lie too, though. He'll fight me in just a moment, stealing away so I can catch and spank him. Then I'll fuck him. Then we'll do it all over again.

A polite cough has us both whirling around. I quickly move one arm to cover our obvious erections.

Jasper and Raoul stand at the end of the book stack.

Jasper's pale eyes dip to my waist. He takes his time dragging his gaze back up. He covers his mouth with a hand tipped with brilliantly painted long nails, but a smirk appears around his fingers. "I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd check on your jewels, but they seem to be in good hands."

Tower snorts. "We're fine, thanks."

"You certainly are," Jasper purrs.

Raoul narrows his eyes at Tower and me, but addresses our visitor. "They're like this all the time," he mutters. "I just ignore them at this point. Eventually they'll stop fucking and we can get back to the business of running this syndicate."

Raoul's tone is irritated, but I don't miss the happy gleam in his eye. Gargoyle houses work best when the warden is mated and the grotesques are well cared for. Tower has fulfilled his role beautifully. I think he and Raoul bonded during the attack. They saved my life.

Ignoring the two males, I bury my face in my mate's neck and breathe him in. Sometimes I'm taken back to those final moments, when the only thing I could think of was how much I fucking love him. How I wanted his name to be the last thing on my lips.

"Go away," I order, turning from my mate and giving Jasper a pointed look. "I thank you for the jewels, but as you can see, it's a moot point."

Jasper's grin deepens, and much to my dismay, he doesn't turn to leave. If anything, he looks pleased with himself. "You know, it was hard to believe Wotan could fall so hard and find his mate. Now you... It's curious, don't you think?" The gleam in his eyes is more devious than usual.

Before I can question it, he continues. "It's hard to imagine Triton falling for anyone, though. Not as...embroiled as he is with his second. Still..." His voice trails off, and I find myself thinking of the Sea Syndicate's ruler, Triton.

He and his second in command, Ari, have been lovers ever since we monsters took over the Hallows. They've never taken one another as mates, but now that Jasper's mentioned it, their arrangement does seem rather unusual. Fuck buddies, I guess.

Cocking my head to the side, I give the pixie another pointed look. "Something tells me you're going to stick your nose in other people's business again, Jasper. Am I right?"

He shrugs, clicking his nails together as he slides a small pouch into his pocket and pats his velvet lapel. "As you don't need these, I'll go on about my day. Do carry on with your fucking. Although as Raoul mentioned, you've got a syndicate to run. I'd get back to that if I were you."

He turns without another word, rounds the aisle of books, and disappears. Raoul watches him go, then turns back to Tower and me. His frown softens, and he smiles at us, his expression almost tender.

Tower makes a disbelieving sound. “Raoul, are those tears in your eyes?” He slips out of my arms and drops to one knee in front of the grotesque. “Ah!” He turns to me. “Raoul is misty because we’re so in love.”

“I’m not crying, it’s just hot in here,” Raoul growls, but he slaps Tower playfully across the cheek with the end of his tail.

Love fills my chest so hot and hard, I can barely remember what life was like before Tower snarked his way through my door and signed that contract.

My mate reaches into his pants pocket and withdraws a small vial. He holds it before Raoul’s face, and his voice goes low and gentle. “I have a little something for you, my friend.”

Raoul’s gaze darts up to me. Just as quickly, he focuses on Tower as he unstoppers the vial of glowing pale smoke. Power crackles in the air around us. Raoul goes stiff as a board, but he relaxes when Tower draws the smoke out of the vial and blows gently. The smoke wraps around Raoul’s face, and then seems to seep right into his skin.

“There,” Tower says softly. “I promised to return this to you.”

Tears slide in a torrent down Raoul’s face, and I grit my teeth as my eyes water a little. I promised Raoul I’d make Tower return his gift, but watching him do it of his own accord is nearly blissful.

Raoul shrieks, and then his wings flap and he lifts off the ground, hooting happily. He zooms toward me so quickly, I have to duck to avoid being hit. His chirping follows us as he barrels around the library and then back to us, a look of joy on his face.

“We’re not even,” he shouts at Tower. “But I might, just possibly, forgive you.”

My mate grins. “Please,” he huffs. “You love me.”

Raoul harrumphs at that, but gives me a victorious look and flies out of the library.

“You’ve made his day,” I tell Tower. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

My mate smiles. “Think I’ve earned a spanking for being so good?”

I laugh at that. Tower’s never good. He constantly needles and teases me, pushing the envelope to get punished. Our teacher-student dynamic hasn’t lessened at all since the attack. If anything, it’s worse because I don’t have to rein myself in to ensure he absorbs what I’m teaching.

Tower pulls a book off the shelf—our book—the one that now has both our names written down the side in beautiful, golden letters. “I haven’t

looked in here for a few days. Did you write a future for us, Gothel?" His lips are curled up deviously. We love looking at the book, at all the happiness that lies ahead. There are bad days too, but we'll do our best to change those as they come.

I pull him into my arms, my nose just touching his. "Flip to the last page, sweetheart."

He shudders at my use of the nickname, but opens the book right to the end, grinning when he sees my curly handwriting. "And they lived happily ever after? Not very original, is it?" He shuts the book gently and tucks it back on the shelf.

I shrug, returning his happy grin. "Perhaps not, but it's the only end I ever want for us. Now come."

He follows as I turn and lead him through the long rows of books and to my bed tucked in one corner of the library. We've fucked all over the Aerie and my private levels, but our bed is still my favorite place to have him.

"Clothes off, then on your back. Spread those legs nice and wide for me, baby." My voice is gruff even to my own ears. But my mate does as he's told, stripping his shirt off and baring his muscular torso. He drops it to the floor and reaches for his pants next, letting them fall around his ankles.

With a bratty look over his shoulder, he climbs onto the bed, giving me the perfect view of that biteable ass and his thick, toned thighs.

I want to touch him, but I hold back. Anticipation is everything. It's the game we play. Touching, teasing, playing, until we can't wait any longer and we explode in a flurry of passion.

Tower flops onto his back and pulls his feet up on the bed, letting his knees fall to the sides. He's hard already, his thick cock springing up from a nest of pale curls. His incandescent hair glows in a pool just underneath him. I fucking love that hair.

Growling, I pull my own shirt off and drop it next to his. I keep my pants on though, because I'm going to enjoy my devious, powerful mate before I unleash on him.

I join him on the bed. Then I grip both of his knees and flatten them to the mattress, forcing him into a vulnerable position. He fights it, trying to bring them back together, but I'm still bigger, still stronger. Not that he couldn't use his power to bring me a real fight. It's just that we both know he wants what I'm about to deliver.

Surging forward, I take his cock all the way to the back of my throat, swirling my tongue along the underside of it.

Tower's hips jerk, but he's caught. He fists the sheets and tries to fuck my face. Laughing, I hollow my cheeks and slide up his cock, letting it fall from my mouth with a little pop. My mate groans, then shifts up onto his elbows.

"You better plan to do more of that," he snaps, his eyes flashing.

"Or what," I say, licking a stripe up his cock. It bobs, slapping me in the face as my mate whines.

"I'll remember this later when you need me to—gods! Oh fuck!" Tower's voice rises to a howl as I take him deep again, sucking hard and swirling my tongue around his throbbing length. I'd swear he's ready to come. Not that I'd ever let him explode quite this quickly.

His muscles tremble under my palms. I take him deep over and over until his cries reach a crescendo. They abruptly fade when I let go of his thighs and sit back so I can observe him. My heartbeat thumps loudly in my ears, the sound beautiful and delicious. It beats for him, only ever him. Always him.

He flies upright in bed with an exasperated snap of his fangs. "I swear to all that's holy, Gothel, if you don't—"

I press myself between his legs with a growl. "If I don't what, baby? Hmm?" Shoving my thumb between his lips, I fist his long hair and drag his head to the side. I lean over him and nip my way playfully along the muscular column of his neck, sliding my tongue down his wildly fluttering pulse. He sucks at my thumb with a groan. After a few tense, shivering seconds, he reaches between us and rubs my dick through my pants.

"Harder," I grunt. My command is met with no resistance. His hand works faster, his fingers wrapping around me.

I pull him up and curl my wings around him. In one fast movement, I pull him off the bed, flip him around, and press him back down. Now I'm standing behind him, his beautiful ass exactly where I want it.

I reach around him and swipe precum from his dick. He shudders as I give him a couple strokes before palming my own shaft and coating my length with his desire. I spit in my palm and finger saliva into his tight, pink hole. He's loose and ready for me, the little cocktease. Knowing my mate, he prepped himself before he hid from me in the library. He's already lubed up, my devious little mate.

I lick my fingers and push more spit inside him, relishing the hot, hard squeeze he gives me. “There’s never been an ass this perfect,” I growl. “You feel so godsdamned good.”

“You’re certainly taking your time with it,” he growls against the bed. “Maybe I should duck out for a bit. Leave you alone in here and let you ruminate about how fucking rude it is to—”

I silence him with a sharp smack on one delicious cheek. He cries out, and I pull both hands behind his back, manacled his wrists with my fingers. There’s a big window beside the bed.

A delicious thought spreads in my mind.

Transferring his wrists to one hand, I use my other to grasp his hair and yank his head up. “Watch me fuck you,” I demand. “Watch that gorgeous dick of yours bounce while your pretty ass takes a good pounding, sweetheart. Don’t look away, or you’ll be punished.”

He snarls at me, but watches our reflection in the window, his eyes hooded with lust. He nips at his lower lip. With a quick punch of my hips, I bury my dick to the hilt, roaring with pleasure. Tower gasps, and then I’m lost to the magic of our combined power. Feral aggression takes over, the slap of our hips building and building as my balls tighten up against my body.

When release overtakes him, it’s my name falling on repeat from his lips. It’s my name he screams when I line his ass with ropes of hot, sticky cum. It’s my name, and his, running down the pages of our story inside my head.

Ecstasy fades. I pull out of him and lay him down on the bed. I cover his sated body with mine before flipping us so he straddles me. Strands of brilliant, shiny hair stick to his sweaty forehead. His lips are swollen and flushed from my bites.

“I need you again,” I admit. “I’m not done, Tower.”

He feigns an exasperated groan, but shuffles forward on my chest, bringing his hips closer to my face. “Oh, I’m not done either, Gothel.” His voice has a teasing lilt to it, his dick bobbing close to my lips. “Teach me something new, warden. Something we’ve never done.”

With a laugh, I shove him out of the bed. Tangling my fingers with his, I pull him to the glass doors. Tower gives me a curious look, but it fades to lust as I pull him into my arms, wrapping them around his lean, muscled body.

I snake my tail between his thighs to play with his ass. “I haven’t taken you while flying yet, Tower. Are you ready to be a good boy for me? Ready to make this official?”

“Gods,” he moans. The tip of my tail slides into him, aided by the cum still dripping out of him. “Whatever you want,” he groans. “Anything you want.”

“Yes,” I agree, pushing off the floor and up into the night sky. “I want you bound to me, sweetheart.”

He groans, long and low as I tease him with the tip of my tail. His head falls back, exposing his muscular neck to me. His heartbeat throbs in a vein that runs just under his chin. It matches mine, and I want to sink my teeth in and seal his soul with a mating bite.

“It’s time, sweetheart,” I growl just below his ear. “Time to make you mine forever.”

“Gods, yes,” he whines. “Get on with it already.”

I laugh, because only Tower could infuse snark into such a significant moment. Grinning, I pull him up and into my arms, facing me. “Arms around my neck, baby. I wouldn’t want to drop you.”

His eyes flash. “You wouldn’t dare.”

My grin broadens. He clings tightly to me. “I swear to the gods if you —”

I rip the window open and push off the floor hard, rocketing up into the sky. Like always, Tower buries his face in my neck as I power up past the Hallows skyline and through the misty, wet clouds. The moment we’re above them, he pulls back enough to give me a haughty look.

“You’ve been less than forthcoming about gargoyle mating rituals. Care to fill me in now?”

I give a noncommittal grunt. “It’s better experienced in the moment.”

My wings beat the air lazily as I soar over my ever-expanding territory. Securing Tower’s ankles between my legs, I let his body go just enough to slide my tail up over his hip. I wrap the length around his cock and balls, drawing them together as I rub his crown with my tail tip.

My erection swings freely as I fly, bobbing against my mate’s perfect, round ass. I lean down to capture his mouth, using my free hand to tease my cockhead between his thighs. He’s dripping cum from our bedroom play.

“Fuck, Gothel,” he breathes. His lips open and then zip quickly shut. My sweet boy is on the verge of begging. He hates and loves begging.

I need to hear it.

Slipping the first inch or two of my cock into his ass, I give him a playful look. “Ask me nicely, mate.” My voice goes rocky and deep. I’ve waited for this moment my whole life. I’ve seen it in the book—our book. This is our happily ever after, the future we fought for and nearly lost. I’m overcome with emotion now that we’ve arrived here.

Tower’s eyes fill with unshed tears, one hand gently stroking the back of my head. “Take me, big stone daddy boss man. Take me and make me yours.” He bats his eyelashes exaggeratedly.

Fucking brat.

I snort and stop flying, plummeting hundreds of feet in seconds. Tower yowls and clings tightly to my neck, his legs tensely pressed to mine.

Right before we hit the city street, I swoop my wings wide and straighten us, gliding through glittering buildings before I dart upward again, climbing for the sky.

“You’re a fucking ass—”

I silence my mate by gripping his hair in one hand and tugging that pretty head backward. The other hand goes to my cock, which I direct inside him, sinking to the hilt in his tight ass. A growl of pleasure erupts out of me. I hold his hips steady in one hand and his hair fisted in the other.

“You’re caught,” I murmur just below his ear. “Caught and fucked by a big, powerful male. Tell me how it feels, baby.”

He whines. I drag my lips and teeth down his neck, punctuating long licks with quick bites. His hips rub against mine. He can’t control a single thing about this interaction, and I love that.

I take his ass slowly, gliding through the chilly air. His ass clenches around me. My balls pull up tight. I’m so ready to spill inside him, to claim him as mine. My tail is still wrapped around the base of his cock and balls, holding them taut between us.

“Incredible,” he finally grunts out. “Perfect. All mine!” He cries out that last bit as I surge harder and faster inside him.

“How did I get this lucky?” I pepper his neck with small bites, still gripping that gorgeous hair. I squeeze the base of his cock, slapping it lightly with my spade. Tower goes wild in my arms, thrusting his hips as much as he can, which isn’t much given how caught he is. He screams in frustration.

I strike, sinking my fangs into the perfect spot where his neck and shoulder meet. Sticky blood fills my mouth as I clench hard.

He erupts, covering his stomach and my tail spade with cum as he screams my name. He's still caught, still held captive by me as our mating bond slowly begins to form.

My cock throbs as I struggle not to explode. I want to drag this out longer. This is the first of many mating bites he'll get from me tonight, and I want to edge myself until the very last one.

A sense of his emotions begins to filter into my mind.

Exhilaration. Need. Undying love.

I release the bite. Tower goes boneless in my arms, despite the fact I'm still rhythmically taking his ass and toying with his cock.

"Gods, you're a fucking deviant," he groans. "Your emotion, I can feel it, Gothel."

"I can feel it, *mate*," I correct.

His swollen lips part, face scrunching up as he hardens again, his cock bobbing against my stomach.

"Every time I bite you, our bond will grow stronger. These bites will scar, Tower, marking you as mine."

Pride and excitement fill our strengthening bond. But the look on his face turns anxious when he senses I'm about to do something devilish.

"Don't you dare!" he shrieks as I plummet down through the clouds, reveling in the way he grips my neck. I mark him a second time on the way down, his heartbeat thudding in my ears as our connection deepens, his emotions becoming easier to read.

Frustration. Excitement. Those are the main two as I throw my wings wide and glide over the street next to the harbor.

Tower glances to his left, the harbor lights reflecting in his gorgeous eyes.

Possessive need hits me, and he looks up, smirking. His muscles contract as he squeezes my cock with his ass, and then I'm beating my wings again. I want to have him on the Aerie balcony. I'm nearly desperate to come at this point.

Tower teases my lips with hard nips until we alight on the stone platform. I release him from my clutches, but the moment he steps back, I shove him against the wall, flipping him to face it. Kicking his legs out

wide, I wrap my tail around his waist and grip the globes of his ass in my hands.

“Hands on the wall, mate,” I snarl, crushing my larger body against his.

Tower groans, placing both palms flat on the dark stone of my building. No, *our* building. I’ve already signed the paperwork to add his name next to mine on every one of my ownership contracts. I’ll tell him later.

His mating bites bleed ever so slightly. I swipe my tongue over them as I bury myself to the hilt again. The way he feels around me has me ready to come, and he knows it, arching his back to give me that perfect ass. His muscles flex and tense as his body rides the high of being taken by me.

“Mine,” I growl, marking him for a third time. My read on his emotions grows stronger, until his feelings are nearly as clear as my own. They meld together, an intoxicating mixture of sky-high lust and complete adoration.

Tower’s head falls back against my shoulder.

An offering.

I lurch forward, losing all sense of rhythm as I pound his ass. He bounces against the wall, groaning. I bite my way along both shoulders and the back of his neck, losing my mind as he barrels toward yet another orgasm.

Sinking my teeth into him a fourth and final time, I clamp hard around his shoulder. The moment my fangs enter his skin, he screams. Pleasure fills our bond to the brim, overflowing. I unleash then, giving him every inch of me, my emotions open like a book for him to read.

Orgasm batters us as I line his ass with my seed, my fangs still buried in his muscle.

Bright, beautiful joy snakes through his emotions then, clear as a damn bell. I bellow into the bite, my dick throbbing in his ass. Gods, he takes me so fucking well.

After long, blissful minutes, ecstasy fades and I release my bite.

“I love you, and I love this...” Stroking my fingers along his shoulder, I relish how good he looks with my claiming marks all down his neck and back. “It’ll serve as a good warning system, too, for when you’re feeling especially bratty.”

“No fair,” he grumbles.

Taking a step back, I turn him and pull him close to my chest. I lose myself in his swollen lips, lapping and sucking at them as both our cocks harden again.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, wonder in his tone. “I feel everything you're feeling. I know exactly what you want.” His eyes shine brightly, and it brings me back to how he looked when he arrived here. Shut down and guarded. He was in a permanent state of fight or flight.

But when I look at him now, he's confident and shining with love. A beautiful, rare treasure. Power simmers under his skin, reminding me just how formidable a male he is.

One pale brow lifts. “I know that look. You want to punish me.” He grins. Punishment is exactly what he needs and deserves most of the time.

But right now, all I feel is undying admiration and love. I let those emotions shine, knowing he can read them like a book.

Bringing my forefinger to his chin, I tilt his face up. I cup his nape with my other hand. “What I want is you, Tower. You and our happily ever after.”

He smiles, big and beautiful and open. Leaning close, I kiss him, and then I grab him and take off again for the stars. Flying fast toward our happy ending as my mate's joyful laughter rings out around us.



Bet you're wondering what a dangerous, powerful merman needed siren blood for. Dive into [Sacrifice the Sea](#) today, an MMM Little Mermaid Retelling where Ari's the bad guy, Triton's not much better, and Ursa is more than meets the eye...

AN EXCERPT FROM SACRIFICE THE SEA

AN MMM LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

TRITON

I should feel elated, but I'm numb instead. I pump my tail fins once, moving quickly down a long hall of the desecrated underwater city my clan has finally reclaimed. Giant chunks are missing out of the coral walls and ceiling, windows blown wide. Our war with the leviathans nearly cost us everything, but the mermen emerged victorious.

Up ahead, the doors to the Great Hall, where I hold court and where I used to host parties, are thrown open wide. The once vibrant castle around me, a living thing itself, is now gray and devoid of life. Yet another thing I'll have to fix. Six months ago this room was nothing but joyous, raucous celebration. The emptiness now is tangible.

The cost to banish the dangerous, selfish leviathans to the ocean's depths was high, too high, and I don't think I'm even done sacrificing for my sea. Which brings my focus back to the Great Hall ahead.

Voices ahead echo through the murky water. Silt still swirls in lazy eddies, having not settled from the fight. We won mere hours ago, but it was too hard fought, too devastating.

My second, Ari, looks up at me from his spot next to my throne. He's holding onto the edge of it with one hand, his knuckles white against his already pale skin. His lips twitch a little, his beautiful green tail stiff. He looks ready to crack.

Next to him, seated on my throne is my third, Crallek, the sea witch. His long, dark tentacles curl around the throne's legs, suctioning him firmly into place.

On my fucking throne.

“You’ve finally returned to celebrate, have you? We won, my king! We did it!” Crallek’s voice is slurred as he raises a pouch to his lips, his burnished cheeks hollowing as he sucks the liquid down. He’s always had a penchant for siren mead, despite the fact that we very infrequently interact with the all-female clans. They’re dangerous, like nearly everything else in the sea since the fall of the Veil and the subsequent nuclear wars the humans waged against us monsters.

Ari grits his teeth, emerald eyes flashing to me. He knows where I’ve been this evening, what I’ve been doing. I resist the urge to finger the shell locket around my neck. It’s hidden under the many layers of necklaces I wear, each holding a different, important meaning.

I give Crallek a displeased look. “Off the throne, third. There’s a lot of work ahead of us, but it does not include you sitting there.” If there’s one thing I won’t put up with now that we’ve won the war, it’s anyone else but me sitting on that godsdamned throne. Cementing my place as lord of the Sea Syndicate came at a high fucking cost. That throne is *mine*.

“A little touchy, are we?” Crallek’s voice goes steady and focused, his dark eyes flashing with irritation, his tentacles curling tighter around the throne’s legs.

Reaching out, I grip his throat, holding my thumb claw over his jugular to make my point clear. I yank him off my seat, relishing the sound of his suckers ripping from the dead coral surface. A chunk of throne breaks away and falls to the ground, a reminder of just how tenuous my rule is right now.

I lean close to Crallek’s face, thankful to be underwater so I can’t smell what’s sure to be mead-filled, sour breath. “The syndicate lords asked *me* to take over the Sea Syndicate. They entrusted *me* to banish the leviathans to their depths. They have empowered *me* to act on behalf of this entire godsdamned planet to keep peace for monster and human alike. Get. Off. The Fucking. Throne.”

Ari’s by my side in a beat, a supporting presence as I drag Crallek off the throne and shove him away, down the set of stairs that lead to my perch.

We grew up together, the three of us, friends our entire lives. But that’s changed in the last few years. Crallek’s powers—and desires—have grown in strength and darkness. I don’t recognize him most days. But we couldn’t have banished the leviathans to the depths without his power of persuasion. And without banishing them, I couldn’t have taken over as the Sea

Syndicate's new ruler. It's not lost on me that Crallek was the key to our success, despite the darkness that seeps from him these days.

The thing is, it's only a matter of time before he uses that darkness on Ari, or what remains of my people, or me. And what he'd have us do is terrifying.

I give him a softer look, settling against the throne that was once a beautiful, burnished peachy coral. Now it's dead. It'll start to fall apart soon, this whole godsdamned castle will. Rebuilding is my only priority now. That and not allowing the leviathans to come up from the depths ever again.

As if he can hear my thoughts, Ari pushes down to Crallek, dragging him carefully up by the elbow. "That's enough of the mead, old friend. We've celebrated, and now it's time for rest. We'll talk about rebuilding tomorrow."

"Rebuilding?" Crallek sneers, yanking his elbow from Ari's grip. "We banished the leviathans. We can do nearly anything. Let us take on the syndicates now. They won't see it coming, and we could rule this measly plane. The humans are useless, worthless pieces of shi—"

"No," I hiss. "Not now, not ever. The agreement the Syndicate lords made to protect the humans from themselves will stand. This plane was chaos before we took over. I won't allow you to risk that peace."

Crallek snarls, sharp teeth visible behind black lips. His dark hair swirls in a current flowing through a giant hole in the side of the Great Hall.

"Allow me? You won't *allow* me?" He enunciates allow, as if I'm lucky he goes along with my plans. He crosses both arms, tentacles curling and moving as he pulls himself halfway up the stairs to my throne. Ari trails him, looking up to give me a curt nod.

We knew it was coming to this, that our victory against the leviathans would give Crallek a power trip, maybe push him over the edge into a darkness he can't come back from. It feels like we're on that fucking precipice right now.

And there it is, a faint scratching at the edges of my mind, like a fish nibbling at the bones of long-dead prey. Crallek's persuasive gift slinks along the outer edges of my consciousness, searching fruitlessly for a hole to slip through to gain control of my mind. We agreed long ago that he'd never use his powers on us, that we'd all act of our own free will. We were carefree young merfolk then.

Things changed once the syndicate lords asked me to take over my fallen predecessor's role. I was happy in my kingdom. My people thrived. But agreeing to replace the former ruler put a target on this kingdom's back. The leviathans came for us, just like they came for him. Except we won. It nearly cost this clan everything, but the reward is peace.

Was it worth it? I find myself unsure as I look at the sneer on Crallek's angular, handsome face.

Hatred fills my chest, but I don't look away from the sea witch, not as his tentacles creep up the stairs and curl around my throne again. Not as he pulls himself close enough to hover just in front of me, teeth bared.

The scratching in my mind morphs into a painful stabbing sensation. But I can't let him know, giving him a lazy grin. Crallek grows frustrated, roaring at me, baring those sharklike teeth further until a noise gives him pause, and he turns.

My advisor, Bastien, click-clacks into the Great Hall, scuttling side to side on crab legs. His powerful front claws grip a sheet of paper, and he seems surprised to find Crallek hovering over me.

Bastien's top half is humanoid, a gift from Crallek long ago when we were younger and Crallek was thoughtful and kind. His bottom half remains the giant crustacean body he was born with. He crosses his thin, human arms and gives the sea witch a cold look. "Am I interrupting something?"

I don't dare look away, but this is all going down exactly like I predicted it would.

Ari sees the opening we planned for, he and Bastien and me.

My second darts across the Great Hall with a powerful flip of his fins, one scarred arm around Crallek's neck as he drags the sea witch away. Bastien scurries to our side, gripping both of Crallek's hands in one of his big claws. His other claws grip as many of Crallek's tentacles as they can, holding him immobile.

The sea witch bellows and hurls curses at us, but the damage is done. Any remaining trust we had in one another is shattered in an instant.

He'd have us ruin the tenuous peace we're trying to build. I can't allow it. Not after the sacrifices.

I pull the shell pendant from underneath my other necklaces, holding it tightly in one hand. My heart shreds in my chest at what we're about to do.

Several of Crallek's tentacles wind around my tail and waist, and one around my arm, but as the pendant in my hand begins to glow, his dark face

pales.

“What’s that? What is this? What are you doing?”

I close my eyes and speak the words Lucius du Sang taught me. They’ll grant me temporary vampiric siphon abilities, so that I can take Crallek’s power and lock it in the shell.

“No!” Crallek roars. “This power is not yours to take! You can’t leave me like this, you can’t steal it!”

Ari leans down to Crallek’s ear, his lips close enough to brush the pointed tip like a lover might.

Like he’s done to me thousands of times.

“I’m sorry, old friend,” he murmurs. And then he stabs a lavastone knife through Crallek’s chest.

Crallek screams, a high-pitched, terrified noise that freezes whatever’s left of my black soul. Black blood swirls in the air, clouding my vision as the sea witch struggles, but already his hold on my waist and tail is loosening. His tentacles unstick from my body and float away as I continue the incantation, placing the shell pendant at his throat.

He gurgles up a billowy cloud of blood, coughing on it.

My heart breaks completely, shattering in two at what I’m doing to a man I’ve called my friend my entire life.

Ari’s brilliant eyes meet mine, and I see my devastation mirrored there, along with a hint of anger that we had to do this, that it all came to this.

Bastien is quiet at my right hand side, but he shifts when the shell glows brightly from within. Of the three of us, he was the least close to Crallek, despite the gift that gave him half a human figure.

None of us say a godsdamned word as a stream of glowing power leaves Crallek’s mouth. It spins like an eddy just above his still lips. I continue the incantation, and the power funnels into the shell pendant, the glow almost too bright to look directly at. Crallek’s head falls to the side, and the shell goes dark.

A moment passes, then two. Ari pulls the knife from Crallek’s chest and tosses it aside. “It’s done,” he barks.

We didn’t want to have to do this.

When he looks up at me, I know exactly what he’ll say next. I know his mind as well as I know my own after so many years together.

“What about the child?”

Bastien hisses in a breath, clutching Crallek's body so it doesn't float away on the strengthening current. We really need to close up the damn holes in this castle. That's something for another day. My advisor looks up at me. "The child poses a threat, my king. All sea witches have power, and it is highly likely he would inherit Crallek's—"

I shake my head. "The child is off limits. I will not be party to killing an innocent. This was enough."

Ari purses his lips, the topmost one still bleeding from our battle earlier this evening against the leviathans.

Bastien's voice is firm when he speaks again. "We'll have to revisit this when the child comes of age."

"Done," I agree. "We can't let anything risk the peace the syndicates have entrusted us to keep. I want to rebuild, and I want to focus on that. Send a squadron of sea nymphs to watch over the child. They'll know when it's time for us to become involved, if we have to."

Ari shakes his head once in disagreement, but says nothing. He knows better than to argue with me. Already I can feel a wedge driving between us. We killed our childhood friend tonight. There's a stain on my soul I don't know if I'll ever recover from. I've never felt so dirty, so fucking unfit to rule.

I look at Crallek's body, and then over at Bastien. "Bury him in the graveyard. I'll have a headstone made."

Ari growls low under his breath, but I'm not having it.

I turn to my second, my lover, my best friend. "We defeated the leviathans because of Crallek. We never allowed his hunger for power to get to a point where others were hurt by it. He should be remembered as a hero."

There's a tense moment where Bastien looks between us, but then he scurries across the Great Hall's crushed shell floor, dragging Crallek's body behind him. A stream of black blood follows.

"Come," I command my lover. When I open my arms, he pumps his tail fins lazily, but the moment he sinks against my chest, the tense set of his muscles relaxes.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, bringing my lips to the shell of his ear. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"I know," Ari harrumphs, resting the side of his head against mine as both arms encircle my neck. "I know, my king."

We hold each other for a long moment, and then he pulls back, taking the shell pendant from my hand. I let it go reluctantly. He reaches up and places it around my neck, clasping it once more. His emerald eyes burn a hole into mine, and he looks as unsure as I feel.

The strength of Crallek's power burns my skin from within the shell. I was never meant to carry this. This power is his. It occurs to me that the pendant feels like a godsdamned noose, and I wonder if one day, it'll turn out to be my downfall.



ABOUT ANNA FURY

Anna Fury is a North Carolina native, fluent in snark and sarcasm, tiki decor, and an aficionado of phallic plants. Visit her on Instagram for a glimpse of the sexiest wiener wallpaper you've ever seen.

She currently lives in North Carolina with her Mr. Right, a tiny tornado, and a lovely old dog.

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