



Magic and other Mishaps

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: One moment, Pan is partying with the selkies; the next, he's on a strange beach surrounded by broken bodies.

There's no magic, and he's stuck in the human world.

How is a god supposed to survive without magic?

Without followers to whisper his name?

Wearing only a selkie's coat, Pan goes in search...

Noah has spent the last eighteen months living with his aunt in Wales, working in his grandmother's pub and avoiding going home. When the earth shakes and buildings fall as new ones grow, the world as he knows is gone. And it's not just new buildings—there are new people and creatures that belong in myth.

In the wake of the global catastrophe, borders close.

No one is going home...

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CHAPTER1

No one threw a party like selkies. Satyrs threw the best orgies, but that wasn't what Pan had been in the mood for when he'd gone searching for entertainment. He wanted dancing and bonfires and music and feasting, to be worshipped...and he'd found that on a sandy beach.

With their fur coats discarded, the selkies danced around the fires to drums and pipes. Their bare skin gleamed with sweat and firelight. His own clothes had been discarded several drinks and dances ago. Now he sprawled on a fur coat, watching as they danced in his honor.

He kissed the man on his left, then the woman on his right, basking in their delight at being chosen to worship him more intimately. They both had prayers they wanted answered, and he would get to them when the party was over...or, at most, a few days after.

There were always prayers and wishes and hopes floating around and getting caught up in magic. No god answered all prayers. Some answered those that would create the most trouble. He'd done that a few times because it was fun to watch an ill-thought-out wish come true. Sometimes, all he needed to do was send a little magic in the right direction, and the people took care of their problem themselves—and that was often more entertaining.

The selkies' lips brushed over his chest and moved lower.

Sometimes, even prayers with the best of intentions went askew. Magic was

unpredictable—more so at the moment. He'd first noticed it a year ago, a change in the vibration and a shifting of the colors.

Then there were things appearing from the human world on Tariko.

Some gods had traveled to Earth to have a look around, but there wasn't enough magic in the human world for the humans to be doing anything. Which meant it was someone on Tariko. Another god playing a prank, perhaps?

There'd been meetings and discussions with the Strega.

And then things had gotten worse.

He leaned back as their warm breath ghosted over his dick. He placed a hand on each of their heads and let the magic flow through his fingers, filling them with his benevolence and giving them a taste of his power.

He tipped his head back to stare at the stars as his shaft became slick with their spit.

The stars...flickered. He blinked. What?

Then the stars winked out.

He pushed his worshipers away. They gasped and stared up at him as he stood.

Pan reached for the magic only to find that the golden rope was nothing but a few frayed threads. If he pulled on it, it would come apart.

"The tide!" a woman screamed.

Where there had been ocean only a moment ago, now there was just an expanse of

sand, stretching for eternity as if he stood in the middle of the fucking desert.

The selkies murmured his name and dropped to their knees, begging him to do something.

“Bring the water back.”

“Bring the stars back.”

“Did we do something wrong?”

“What’s going on?”

He had no idea and no answers...which was terrifying.

The ground hummed as though he were standing on a beehive.

A bonfire collapsed, sending sparks into the air, and a log rolled out, landing on a discarded coat, which caught fire. The man kneeling at Pan’s feet screamed as he burned. Without thinking, Pan pulled on the magic to save him, but the golden strands disintegrated before he touched them.

“Do something!” The woman pawed at his legs, her face streaked with tears.

“I’m trying.” But there was nothing he could do without magic. He glanced up at the black sky. No stars remained.

The ground bucked, and he stumbled, falling to the soft sand. The fire spread, leaping from fur to fur. Selkie to selkie. “Grab your coats! Run!”

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Where did they run to?

As the beach burned, he scooped up the fur he'd been sitting on and followed his own command, sprinting over the rippling, bouncing sand. The selkies followed him as if he knew what to do and where to go, but he had no fucking idea.

There wasn't enough magic for him to escape this place, and the nearest town was a day's walk away. Not that he walked anywhere.

The ground split open and rocked as though trying to toss him into the freshly opened maw. His foot slipped in the sand, and Pan scrambled back, but there was nowhere for him to go with so many behind him.

His world was tearing apart.

Like magic, it was failing.

As quickly as the chasm opened, it rumbled closed.

"Why aren't you saving us?" It began as a whispered accusation and swelled to a shout.

It wasn't just the selkies—all of Tariko screamed to be saved. He put his hands over his ears and dropped to his knees, expecting to be ripped apart.

There was no air to breathe.

His lungs burned.

He'd never expected to die.

* * *

Pan opened his eyes and brushed aside the crow pecking at his arm. He squinted up at the pale gray sky and the equally pale sun, shooing away the crow again. He felt like a three-day-old turd. How drunk had he gotten? He reached for the magic to fix the headache, only to find there was nothing to grab.

What the fuck?

He sat up and blinked twice. Bile raced up his throat at the sight of the bloodied rocks and bodies.

This was not the remains of a party.

It was a massacre.

The bent and broken bodies of selkies were strewn over the pebbly beach. They lacked even their human-looking skin. He turned away and swallowed to avoid vomiting.

This wasn't even the beach they'd been on.

And where were his clothes?

He'd taken them off to party...

Then he remembered the way the stars had vanished and the ground had opened. He

checked the magic again, this time to find out where he was. Still nothing. Slowly, he turned, taking in the rest of his surroundings.

There were upturned boats of a kind he didn't recognize that appeared to have been dropped onto the beach, and there were unfamiliar noises. A kind of wailing. Beneath all of that was a particular resonance he hadn't felt in about two centuries. He huffed out a breath. It appeared that he was somewhere in the human world.

Not knowing exactly where was bad.

Not having clothes was inconvenient.

Not having magic was worse, as it meant he couldn't solve the first two problems.

He glanced down to check what form he was in. His feet appeared human and were smeared with blood and sand instead of being hooved. When he touched his head, the curve of his horns was hard against his fingers. That made no sense. He should have either horns and hooves or neither.

The cool morning air made his bloodied skin prickle, and it took a moment for him to realize he was cold. And thirsty. And hungry.

He put his hands on his hips. This was fucked. He was never cold or thirsty or hungry. Or if he was, it didn't last long because he had magic. He reached for magic before remembering it was gone.

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Awkward.

That also meant he couldn't contact the other gods. Or a Strega.

He certainly couldn't ask the selkies to worship him for a boost because they were dead. Which was probably a good thing, given their skinless situation. He refused to look at them in case his stomach betrayed him.

In case he screamed and lost his mind.

He was a god, so he needed to act like one.

How did a god stuck in the human world without magic act?

His fingers curled, and he gave into the panic breaking his chest and screamed his fear and frustration at the sky. How had this happened? Why had this happened, and how did he return home...assuming there was a home to return to?

He sucked in a breath, his throat raw. Without magic, what was he?

CHAPTER2

The bottles on the shelf behind the bar rattled again. The vodka danced closer to the edge as if contemplating making a fatal leap. Noah gave the bottle a nudge back to safety. They had been rumbling all week. And much to his horror, he'd learned that Wales did experience earthquakes, but not regularly and not big ones. Though there had been one six months ago that had caused a rockslide and killed one hiker, left one

wounded and another unaccounted for.

Some of the locals blamed mysterious beings. Mythological beasts, citing everything from oversized hellhounds to knockers and dragons. As much as Noah loved the local lore, he wasn't about to blame cryptids for natural occurrences. Even if the scientists couldn't agree on why the quakes were happening. When even scientists were saying it was weird...

He shook his head and poured a beer for the regular who did buy into the mythical causes, though he liked to blame ley lines and fairies.

The regular handed over some notes. "These earthquakes aren't going to stop. We have pissed off the fae, and they're going to take what's theirs." He nodded as if he was sharing a great secret.

Noah smiled. "Well, when you find out what they want, I guess we'll be able to appease them. What will it take? A cow? A barrel of beer? A wheel of cheese?"

The man wagged his finger. "Don't mock the fae, even if you don't believe."

Noah held his hands up. "You know I'm not mocking. You've explained a lot of the local legends to me. But I'm not sure any of them were up for causing earthquakes."

The glasses rattled again. This time, the vodka made its break for freedom, launching off the shelf and shattering on the ground.

"You'd best leave some milk out and hope you've got a friendly bwbach in the bar to protect you."

His grandmother already left out milk. She believed in the old lore and saw no harm in taking precautions. Noah glanced over at her as she talked to another local at the

other end of the bar. Nan had run it with her husband, and then after his death, she just kept going instead of selling and retiring. Everyone knew her and liked her, and she saw no point in sitting at home and being bored when she liked her life. Which was good for Noah, as it meant there'd been a job waiting for him when he'd arrived.

If it hadn't been for his aunt agreeing he could stay with her, he was pretty sure his parents would have refused to let him leave. Not that they could've kept him in Australia as he was legally an adult, but they might've made things difficult.

More difficult.

Linda grabbed the broom and shook her head as if the bottle had misbehaved by jumping off the shelf. "I think we should send people home."

They'd only just opened.

The rattling of bottles increased. The vibrations in the ground intensified and traveled up Noah's legs. "Should we be standing in doorways or something?"

He should be doing something other than serving beers. Or telling people to head home. There were some who would not be happy if the bar closed early.

A loud bang outside made everyone pause. The normal chatter and noise of the bar died as people listened. The pop song continued to play in the background. A couple of people pulled on their coats, choosing to flee. Others chugged down the remains of their drink as if reaching the same conclusion.

A groan echoed through the building like the undead were rising and were very unhappy with the living. Three bottles smashed on the floor behind him, splashing liquor up the back of his jeans.

It wasn't only the bottles vibrating. The walls hummed as if possessed. And that awful bone-deep groaning continued and settled in the pit of his stomach.

People who'd been making to leave hesitated. Noah didn't blame them. Was it safer in or out?

There were a few muttered curses, and then two ran for the door. Others decided that crouching under the table was a better life choice.

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There had to be a third option. Noah glanced at his grandmother. “Nan?”

The building screamed, and the wall to his left peeled away as if a giant hand had ripped it off.

“Fuck...” Noah stepped back—not that there was anywhere for him to go. His teeth buzzed in his jaw, and the world around him shuddered as if being pulled apart. The floor bucked, and he fell, landing on his ass. He wrapped his arms over his head, expecting the roof to fall on him.

Another bang. But no debris fell. He peeked out from beneath his forearm.

The wall had returned.

What the hell?

The lights flickered and went out, and the world stopped shaking and groaning. There was a breath of silence, and then it became filled with sobs, sirens, and screams.

Noah drew in a couple of slow breaths. It was over. He was fine. He took another couple of breaths as he worked out what to do next. Without the lights, the interior of the bar was dim, but there should be a torch near the cash register.

He reached out and hissed with pain. His palm stung as if he’d poured alcohol on a cut.

Oh, shit. The broken bottles.

He was sitting in spilled alcohol and broken glass. He grabbed the edge of the bar with his fingers and pulled himself up to avoid more cuts on unseen glass. His eyes adjusted to the gloom, and he inched over to the cash register and then ran his hand beneath until his fingers brushed the hard plastic of the bright yellow torch.

He flicked the button and set the torch on the bar, pointing up at the ceiling to cast light around the bar. “Is everyone alright?”

He needed to check his own hand, but he wasn’t quite ready to do that, even though something warm trickled over his skin. There should be a first aid kit beneath the cash register, too. He felt around with his other hand and then set the metal tin on the bar next to the torch.

A few people murmured that they were okay. Anyone who is dead wouldn’t answer, which wasn’t a comforting thought.

“Nan?”

When she didn’t answer, he grabbed the torch and swung it toward where she’d been standing. She slumped against the bar, eyes closed.

No, no, no.

He rushed over and crouched next to her. As he reached for her, she drew in a breath.

He also noted the torchlight glinting off the bloodied gash in his hand. His stomach turned.

“Nan.” He gave her a shake, needing her to wake up. He didn’t know what to do. This wasn’t an emergency he knew how to deal with.

Sirens bounced off the buildings as the cops, and ambulances and firetrucks dealt with worse situations.

Nan made a noise and blinked a few times. “Get the light out of my face.”

Noah exhaled and smiled. She’d be fine.

“Don’t get up yet; you banged your head.” He glanced at his hand. He needed to deal with the cut before he did anything else. Nan would insist on helping the customers before she worried about herself. “Give me a moment to check on everyone else. Promise me you’ll stay there.”

She touched the side of her forehead. “What happened?”

“Earthquake.” What else could it be? But when he glanced over his shoulder, it wasn’t the pub wall that had returned but something else entirely. Something with a large wooden door.

And that’s where the screams were coming from.

CHAPTER3

Getting home was not the easy drive it should’ve been. Powerlines were down. Trees had been uprooted. New buildings had appeared. As in, entire buildings constructed of wood and stone stood in roadways and on paths and where other buildings had previously been. The new wall in the pub belonged to a spire made of some kind of glowing marble, which appeared to have no windows. Just the door that they’d agreed not to open without knowing what lived on the other side. Even standing in the car park, the terrible wailing seemed to echo.

They’d stood there, staring at it for what seemed like hours before Nan had spoken.

“I’m not imagining the castle, am I?”

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“Nope.” Noah shook his head.

“Or the screaming?”

He wished it were imaginary. There was a part of him that wanted to see if they needed help, but he didn’t know who or what they were.

“Looks like a fairy castle.”

Noah glanced at Nan.

“What? You got a better idea?”

He didn’t. No one did. People on the radio blamed monsters, the fae, or demons. There were plenty of theories but no facts. “Aliens?”

“Pfft. It’s the fae folk. Did you leave out the milk like I said?”

“Yeah.” He’d imagined fairies as small beings. The door to the castle in the pub was bigger than human-sized. He doubted the fae in there wanted a bowl of milk. He’d left out a jug of milk and a cup and the biscuit barrel from the break room.

Nan sighed. “Well, we’d best head home. Hopefully, we still have one.”

While Noah needed to pay attention to the road—which had buckled in places—his attention was drawn to the things that didn’t belong. He tried not to panic, which was kind of futile as his heart was racing, and at some point, he’d be unable to ignore the

way fear stalked closer.

“This is a bit of a mess,” Nan said as if the destruction was something that could be cleaned up tomorrow. She didn’t seem bothered. Concerned with a side of grim, but she was acting as though it wasn’t the worst or strangest thing she’d experienced.

This was not a fix-it-tomorrow mess. He wasn’t sure it could be fixed. Where had the buildings come from? And what about the monsters the news had reported? Were there monsters on the other side of the door in the bar?

“Yeah.” Noah slowed and pulled the car over to the side. He stared at the road, or where the road should be. Down the center was a rip like a giant had tried to pull the road apart. Driving was hazardous...was walking any safer? He glanced at Nan. They weren’t that far from home. “Are you able to walk the rest of the way?”

“I hit my head. My legs work fine.” She was already getting out of the car before Noah had formed an argument.

Sure, she seemed fine and didn’t appear concussed. They’d gotten everyone out of the bar and locked up and cleaned up the worst of the broken glass.

“What about...what if there are things out there?”

“We aren’t going to be rescued. Do you want to sit here like tinned monster food?”

“No.” He didn’t want to be monster food at all.

He locked the car and hoped it would be safe. Then they trudged along the street, heading toward home. He helped Nan climb over obstacles and around detours.

“Guess we’re walking to work tomorrow.” He said lightly, not knowing if they’d

even go.

“Aye, someone has to clean up the mess we left and check on the castle.”

It took them an hour to walk home, and they didn’t see a single monster. All the neighbors were out in the street, like a meeting needed to be held about the disruptions.

Uncle David rushed over. “Linda.” He embraced his mother-in-law. “Thank God you’re alright.” He pulled Noah in. “You, too. I haven’t been able to get hold of Meredith or Isla and Rhet.”

“The middle of town is chaos. Mer will be dealing with that,” Nan said. “No new buildings here?”

“New buildings?” One of the neighbors asked, peering at them like they were drunk.

It took Noah a moment to realize that aside from cracks in the road, the lack of power, and some fallen trees, there was nothing weird on this street.

“David...it wasn’t an earthquake. It was something else,” Noah said at the same time Nan started talking about the fairy castle now joined to the pub. Which sounded slightly insane, and from the looks the neighbors gave her, it was clear they thought she’d lost it. But he’d seen it.

It was real.

David stared at Noah as if he was to blame for Nan talking about the fae folk.

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“Nan’s right. I saw the castle. And other strange buildings in town... Does anyone know what actually happened?”

David shook his head. “No, but it’s happening everywhere.”

That’s what the news reports had said, but it didn’t seem real. The castle next to the pub was real.

“How is that possible?” How did earthquakes hit everywhere? How did new buildings arrive everywhere? Oh God, he didn’t really want to be agreeing with Nan that the fae folk were real, but what else could it be? “Is the world falling apart?”

A screech in the sky made them all glance up. Something flew overhead and if Noah had been smoking a joint, or something else, he might’ve said it looked a lot like a dragon silhouetted against the gray afternoon sky. But that was ridiculous, and he was sober, and the thing was too high up to tell. It must’ve been a bird, but with the lack of lighting and the...

He ran out of excuses because he had seen the tail and the wings.

Around him, people were pointing and yelling, and someone was crying. Another man was all bluster about how it had to be a joke, some kind of promotion for a movie. Global earthquakes didn’t make sense, and dragons weren’t real.

But the cracks in the road were. The damage to the pub was. How was that promotion for anything?

Another neighbor claimed it was the end of days and that the devil was coming for the sinners—he looked at Noah as he spoke—and that they should all pray. It was the same neighbor who'd kicked his daughter out of their home for having a girlfriend. The same neighbors who spread gossip and never had a kind word to say about anyone.

Another screech, and this time the thing, the dragon, was closer.

Noah hoped the dragon ate them first. He glanced up and then at his uncle. “I should give Mum a call.”

David kept his arm around Nan. “Yes, good idea. Maybe they’ve heard more in Australia.”

Noah nodded, but he wasn’t sure what he hoped for. Did he want the news to confirm that, yes, dragons were real? Or to say that they only had twenty-four hours left to live because the Earth was falling apart? What could anyone say that made any of this okay?

He paused for a moment to take in a small amount of damage done to his street. They were lucky, and they didn’t realize it. In a movie, someone would sweep in with a bold plan on how to glue the world back together or lead a group of plucky humans to victory against the invaders or something.

All he wanted to do was call his parents and wait for someone to tell him what to do.

In the house, the TV was going. The reporter linked to reporters in other countries as they shared what they were seeing. They showed footage people had recorded on their phones. He stood frozen in the lounge room watching recordings of buildings erupting out of the ground, roads splitting in half, dragons—and other things he couldn’t name—flying overhead.

Roaming the streets as if confused. Injured. He remembered the screams in the castle. They'd abandoned them instead of helping.

Was that a werewolf limping along the street?

A hideous pale creature washed up on rocks, part human, part fish.

He wasn't sure he was blinking.

Humans attacked some other creature and left it bloody and dying on the ground.

Another fight, this time between archers and humans with guns.

It was the same devastating footage he'd seen after terrorist attacks or natural disasters. No one had any facts yet, but they wanted to share what they'd seen.

David stepped in front of the TV. "Noah, call your mother. Watching this will do you no good. No one knows anything; this is just fear-mongering."

"Yeah." He knew that, but it didn't make it any easier to look away or forget what he'd seen.

Not that he understood what he'd seen. Maybe the people were lying, and they'd taken bits from horror movies. Or gotten dressed up to make things look worse.

It was hard to imagine that this event was happening in every country.

That seemed too impossible.

David guided him to the kitchen and pulled out a chair. Noah sat while his uncle made tea.

“Nan hit her head. There was a bit of blood. She should see a doctor.”

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“I think the hospital is going to be a bit busy. I’ll give Isla a call.” He put the cup in front of Noah as if they were going to have a chat. It was easier to talk to David and his aunt than his own parents.

It wasn’t that they didn’t love him, but he’d never once met their expectations. He was never good enough or smart enough, and he didn’t have enough ambition or drive. He was sure they’d only agreed to the gap year, another gap year, because they wanted his cousins’ ambitions to rub off on him. Isla was studying medicine in London, and Rhet had joined the army.

Noah had tried that for one year, did the whole special military gap year program, hoping to appease his father and give him time to think about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. It had achieved neither.

But it had reinforced his need to be somewhere else. He’d never find out who he was around his parents. He’d been in Wales for a year and a half now.

He worked in the pub, paid rent and board to his aunt and uncle, and was doing a certificate in counseling. Even that wasn’t good enough for his parents.

So, as much as he wanted to call them and make sure they were okay, he also dreaded it. They’d use this as an excuse and tell him he needed to come home.

How did he tell them he was happier here without sounding like an ungrateful brat? He’d gone to the best private school and had everything he asked for...except parents who were there. They were too busy and successful to worry about him. And if they were really put out by his choices, they’d mention his twin.

Would things have been different if there'd been two of them? Would his mother have done fewer hours or hired a second nanny? Perhaps his brother had been the smart, ambitious one. The one who should have survived.

He was the disappointment.

He fiddled with his mobile phone, tempted to jump on social media to see what his friends in Sydney were saying. But they wouldn't have any more answers than him, and he wasn't sure they were still his friends. After all, he hadn't seen them in a year and a half, and he had new friends.

For a couple more heartbeats, he deliberated who to call: his mother or his father. Neither of them had tried to call him. Perhaps they didn't know it was global, and they thought he was safe.

If the fae castle had been a few meters over, he'd have been squashed beneath it. His lips curved at the thought. A witch squished by a castle. Not that he called himself a witch. He dabbled because that's what his friends did. It was a bit of fun and an excuse to throw a party. Midsummer, midwinter, an equinox, and a handful of other smaller festivals. His parents disapproved and called it superstitious nonsense.

He called his mother because Aunt Meredith was her sister. The phone rang three times before she answered.

"Noah...you've seen the news."

He'd lived the news. "It's here too, Mum. We're all okay." He assumed his aunt was okay. She was a cop, so no doubt she was seeing the worst of it tonight. "Is Dad okay?"

"Yes...but the house is not."

Of course she was worried about the house. “There’s a lot of damage here too, buildings, roads...”

“There are new buildings here...and monsters. People are saying we’ve been invaded by aliens.”

“Nan says it’s the fae folk.”

He almost heard his mother’s eye roll. “Of course she’d say that.”

Noah bit back his annoyance at his mother’s dismissal. “It makes as much sense as aliens.”

His mother made a noise that might have been begrudging agreement. “I’m glad you’re okay. We think you should come home.”

And there it was. Even though the world had been turned upside down, she didn’t want to let him slide free. “I don’t think now is a good time to travel.”

That trip to France he had planned next month was probably not going to happen.

“Noah...it was only meant to be a year, and then you’d come home and?—”

“Mum, I’m working and studying. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Don’t be obtuse. You need a career.”

“There are dragons flying overhead, and the pub is now half weird, shiny, fairy castle. I don’t give a fuck about a university degree and a career.” He wanted to wake up tomorrow and find out that this was a nightmare, but that wasn’t going to happen. The best he could hope for was that when he woke up tomorrow, somebody had

answers and a plan, and they weren't all going to be eaten by dragons.

As much as he loved reading fantasy books and playing fantasy games growing up, it had not prepared him for living in a world with other creatures. He was as bad as Nan at accepting that there were in fact other creatures. Was he going to bow and kneel at the feet of the invaders or join the rebels and fight them?

They were the only two options, right?

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“Dragons?” his mother asked.

“Yeah, I saw one flying overhead.” Could a dragon bring down a plane? He did not want to find out. He was also concerned at how easy it was to admit that it had been a dragon.

It felt surreal, but not in the bad trip kind of way. Or the good trip kind of way.

“Are you sure you saw a dragon and not a bird or something?”

“It had wings and a tail... I guess it might’ve been a dinosaur or something.”

“Don’t be smart with me.”

Noah bit his lip, resisting the urge to snap back. She was his mother, but he was an adult. He didn’t have to obey. “Do you want me to pass on a message to Nan, or will you call her yourself?”

“I’ll call her tomorrow. Maybe we’ll know a bit more by then.”

“Yeah.” Though knowing more may not help. “I’ll speak to you soon.”

“Please think about coming home, Noah.”

“Be safe, Mum.” He hung up.

David walked back into the kitchen. “Linda told me to stop fussing and that her head

was fine. She said you wouldn't let her stay to finish cleaning up."

"Oh my God. We had no power, and she has a head injury." He held up his hand. "And I didn't need another cut." And the screaming was unnerving.

"It's okay, son. I'm not blaming you. I don't think anybody's going to be turning up at the pub for a drink tonight."

Noah lifted his eyebrows. "Have you met the regulars?"

They were there every day for opening, ready for a pint and lunch and a bet on whatever game or race was happening. Then there was the dinner crowd.

How long would the pub be closed? Would they even be able to reopen with the fairy castle stuck on the side?

"What will happen now?" Noah asked. If the pub was closed, he didn't have a job, and without a job, he couldn't pay board, and then he'd have to go home.

He'd rather face off with a dragon.

"I think a state of emergency will be called. Everyone will be asked to stay home unless they need medical care. Emergency services will get the power back up and make sure everyone has access to water. After that, they'll start patching roads. Some parts might be closed off because there's too much to repair."

"And what about the new buildings? And the..." He couldn't bring himself to say 'monsters.' That seemed kind of disrespectful if they were fae, and from everything Nan had said, being rude to the fae was a bad idea. "Other beings?"

David scrubbed a hand over his face. "I don't know. I'm a primary school principal. I

taught math. I'm not even sure Meredith knows how to deal with this."

"I'm sure she's okay."

David nodded, but worry filled his eyes, and tension pinched the corners of his lips. Noah wanted to say something else, but words wouldn't make David feel better or change anything.

No one had a fucking clue what was going on. That was the most terrifying part.

CHAPTER4

Pan stumbled along the street. He'd spent most of the day hiding, too scared to sleep, annoyed at being scared, and consumed by hunger. Once dusk settled, he ventured out, knowing that he needed to move and that heading away from the beach and bodies and toward the town seemed like the smart thing to do. His stomach was a knot of hunger, and he was thirsty. He hated that he couldn't solve his own problems. He hated the fear that a human might not recognize him and attack him. And he hated the weight of the fucking fur coat.

He had no idea where he was or where he was going, only that he wasn't ready to deal with anyone. Every time a human in their horseless chariots screamed past—literally screamed, all noise and red and blue lights cutting through his pounding head—he crouched, not wanting to be seen. The fur coat was big enough that when he hunkered down and pulled it up, he disappeared. He wanted to make the humans in their noisy mobile boxes disappear.

He wanted to make this entire world disappear.

He wanted to go home.

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The ache in his chest and the wrongness in his blood were something he was trying to ignore. But it was like home had been cut out of him. He blamed it on the missing magic. The magic was so absent he hadn't even turned into a seal when he slipped on the coat. By rights, he should have. A selkie's coat turned the wearer into a selkie.

Or maybe it hadn't turned him because he was a god.

The last time he'd been in the human world, he'd had magic. It had been a rather glorious time. Opium, orgies, art, absinthe... He'd quite enjoyed Paris.

This was not Paris because every place had its own vibration.

It had been longer since he'd been in this place.

Had it been a thousand years?

Whenever it was, back then, there'd been people who still worshipped him, though not as Pan. Not that it mattered, as he had many names. All he needed was someone to worship him, and the magic would return. That thought kept him afloat.

But every time he breathed or tasted the air, it lacked a certain something. Was that the reason he was so hungry?

So thirsty?

He swallowed, his throat filled with dry rocks.

He didn't even remember the last time he had been so inconvenienced and never for this amount of time. He stepped over cracks in the ground, cutting his feet on sharp stones and cursing everything and everyone.

It was probably a good thing he didn't have magic; otherwise, he'd be the only one alive on this magic-forsaken world. No, there'd always been magic in the human world. There was just less of it and harder to find.

It had been more difficult to find every time he visited.

He swore again. What if there was no magic in the human world?

Had magic vanishing from the human world been the cause of this unprecedented disaster?

He ducked behind a fallen fence as another noisy human box sped past. As soon as he got his magic back, he was going to silence them. Well, as soon as he sated his thirst and hunger and got rid of the pounding in his skull.

His temples throbbed, and rubbing them only reminded him he currently had horns. Horns...but no hooves. Which was ridiculous.

And he couldn't even change his form.

He must look like some kind of curly-horned incubus.

It was a good thing he wasn't an incubus because he doubted anyone would want to fuck him while wearing a stolen fur coat and covered in blood, so he'd still be starving.

He walked past houses, tempted to bang on the door and demand food and praise. If

he was on Tariko, he would have.

He was a god. He didn't beg.

He stamped his foot and immediately regretted it as pain shot up his leg. This body was...it took a moment for him to realize what the sensation was. It wasn't only the lack of magic in his veins or the loss of connection to magic and everything it touched.

His body was mortal.

It ached and bled and needed to be fed.

He stopped, staring up at a flickering light. Was he mortal without magic?

His stomach twisted as he remembered the beach. A selkie without magic had no skin. He was wearing one of their skins. He gagged but resisted the urge to tear off the coat and wander the streets naked. From what he remembered, humans did not like nudity on the street, and he didn't want to be cold.

He had enough problems.

He kept walking until he smelled food.

The building was burning, and humans were trying to put out the flames. Other humans were watching. He slunk past, unable to offer assistance even if they'd asked him.

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Some prayed to a random god, never mentioning a name. He snorted and shook his head. If they couldn't be bothered to make the request specific, no god was going to answer.

And if he didn't have magic, it was a terrifying probability that none of the gods or goddesses had magic. It was also reassuring that he wasn't the only one stumbling around without magic.

He wasn't alone.

"It's the monsters," a man hissed from the dark alleyway.

Pan jerked back. He'd been so busy watching the fire that he hadn't paid attention to the dangers in the shadows. He wasn't used to paying attention to dangers at all. He was used to solving everything with magic.

His toes curled against the smooth stone beneath his feet. Run or stay and talk to the man. Curiosity about the monsters won.

"Monsters?" Pan asked. The word felt odd on his tongue. He hadn't spoken any human language in so long.

"I saw them. They fell out of the sky. And grew out of the ground." The man stank as though he hadn't had a bath in the better part of a month. He held a bottle of alcohol in one hand and the handle of a cart in the other.

Hadhefallen out of the sky?

Had the selkies? Every time he blinked, he saw them splayed out, raw and broken.

Were the monsters this man referred to Tarikians?

If this man had seen others, he wasn't alone. He needed to find them...no he needed to hide from them. They couldn't see their god like this. But if he found them, they'd worship him...and he'd be able to reach magic again. "Where are the monsters?"

The man took his gaze off the fire on the other side of the road and stared at Pan for several heartbeats before shrinking back. "You're one of them."

Anger flared bright and impotent at being called a monster. But he couldn't smite this man for the insult. No, he needed this man's help. "I'm not one of them...how much have you had to drink?"

He hoped the curls of his hair and the darkness hid most of the horns. There was nothing he could do about the coat. No one seemed to wear fur coats anymore, which made him stand out in an unfortunate fashion.

The man's eyes narrowed. He stared at Pan and then at the bottle.

Pan took a step forward. "I've been running from them. They're on the beach."

That wasn't a lie.

Pan sniffed dramatically. "They took everything except this coat." His stomach heaved as he shoved aside the memory. "I need food."

The man stared at him and pointed to a large box overflowing with trash.

He was a fucking god. He did not eat out of the rubbish pile like a wild pig. No one

should be eating rubbish. “Where does the rubbish come from?”

“The restaurants.”

“And they do not give you food?”

The man laughed and took a drink. “Where did you get the coat? It looks nice and warm.” His gaze hardened as if sizing up Pan for a fight.

He was shorter than the man, and he had no magic and no weapons. And no one to fight for him. He licked his lower lip. It stung where it had split open, too dry from thirst. “The humans are busy with fire. I’m going to take some food. You are welcome to join me.”

He remembered restaurants. But back then, there’d also been stalls on the street selling cheap food to the workers.

He didn’t dare walk deeper into the alley, where the shadows thickened, and the man, or others like him, might steal the fur off his back. So even though he didn’t want to be in well-lit areas until he wore more human attire, he didn’t have a choice. He turned back onto the street and walked away from the man.

He paid attention to the buildings, and since he couldn’t read the signs, he peered in the windows looking for tables and chairs, and when he saw them, he tested the doors, hoping to find one unlocked. Each time he failed, he muttered a curse and wished for a little fucking magic to smooth the path.

He shoved a door, and it opened. “Thank magic for small mercies.”

He stepped inside, noting the light coming from the back.

“What are you doing?” The man said behind him.

“Getting food.”

The man made an uncertain noise like a pained animal. “I don’t like this.”

“So do not follow.” Pan took another step in and paused for a moment to see if anyone would yell. No one did.

The man shoved past him. “Don’t dawdle.” He pulled open an illuminated cupboard and helped himself to several bottles. “Want some water?”

“Yes.” Pan held out his hand and accepted the bottle. It was cold against his skin. They didn’t use magic to keep things cold, so how did humans do it? He pushed the thought aside. “Where will the food be stored?”

The man pointed toward the light spilling through the doorway.

A woman stepped into the doorway. “Hey, you shouldn’t be in here.”

“Are you open?” Pan asked as though he had every right to be in there.

“No. You need to leave. Both of you.” Her voice was firm.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” the man hissed as he scuttled backwards.

Pan tilted his head and waited. Sure enough, the door slammed, leaving him on his

own with the woman. He didn't know how to do this without magic. Usually, he'd smile, hold out his hand, and offer a blessing.

Usually, he didn't need to ask.

She should know who he was and offer him food. He resisted the urge to stamp his foot and make demands, but only just.

"Leave," the woman said again as if she had the authority to tell a god what to do.

Pan took a step forward and tilted his head. He lowered his voice, hoping for some resonance...but there was none. "Not until I have been fed."

Her gaze skimmed over him, taking in the fur coat and pausing on the top of his head. Were his horns catching in the light?

Her lips parted. "You're one of them."

"One of what?" He silently dared her to say monster.

"There's been reports of...of...strange beings. Mythological beings."

Mythological beings. That was better than monsters. Though he was hardly mythological. "Has there?"

"You caused the earthquake."

"I caused no earthquake." That was not something he was capable of. Other gods might be able to if tested. "I woke up here. And I would very much like some food and to go home." He forced a smile. "You want to go home?"

She nodded.

“Give me some food, and I will leave.”

“What about your friend?”

“He’s not my friend. He’s a drunk from the alley who expected me to eat rubbish.” Pan snapped. The woman flinched and stepped back. “I’m not going to hurt you. But I am very hungry and very tired.” He didn’t understand how a perfectly normal day had ended up like this.

But he’d figure it out.

He would get his magic back and fix things. Because he was not spending the rest of his life as a mortal, begging for food.

This was a pile of steaming minotaur crap.

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Annoyance filled every heartbeat, ticking up with every breath.

Finally, the woman nodded. “Stay here. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

“You might go out the back and call for help.”

Her lips pressed together into a grim smile. “You may not have noticed that everyone is rather busy dealing with the earthquake.”

“Yet you’re here.”

“We closed because of the earthquake, and I’m prepping food for my husband. He’s a firefighter.”

“Was it an earthquake?”

“I don’t think so.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine, the news is on out the back. You can sit with me while I finish cleaning up.”

Pan stared at her, distrust growing in his stomach, along with hunger. He didn’t like either sensation. “Why are you suddenly helping me?”

She snorted. “You’re a kid with horns wearing a fur coat. If you wanted to attack me, you would’ve already. Plus, I know where the knives are and how to use them.”

Pan wasn’t sure he could take her on in a fight. She looked like she’d give an ogre a run for their money in an arm wrestle. Which meant he stood no chance.

While each god had different attributes, this was not the first time he wished to be built more like Zeus or Hera. But he was definitely not a kid. He had no idea how old he was. Not as old as magic.

Which made him younger than the stars. As they were already in existence when he first walked the ground. He was old enough to have forgotten his parents, the ones who had created the gods. He had been a child once, not that he remembered much more than a vague sensation of being held. It was as though those memories had been seared away the first time he connected with magic.

“I don’t like attacking people.” He wasn’t an angry, vengeful god; that had never been his thing. He liked parties and music and fucking. He actually enjoyed giving people blessings. After all, a happy worshipper was more likely to continue worshipping him, and he loved a little praise.

Or a lot.

Could he convince this woman to offer him a prayer?

“What do you like?” She said as she walked out the back into a room filled with shiny metal and sharp blades.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you want in your sandwich?”

Oh... “Anything.”

It took him two goes to figure out how to open the drink bottle, and then gulped down half, the icy water hitting his stomach like a punch to the gut.

The woman sliced bread and buttered it. His mouth watered, which was embarrassing for such a simple offering.

In the background, a voice talked. It wasn't the language they'd been speaking. He tilted his head, trying to listen better. It wouldn't take much for him to learn it.

“Shall I put on the English news?”

“Where am I?”

She studied him for several seconds. “Why do you speak English?”

Pan gave her the truthful explanation. “It's not the first time I've been in your world.”

“Oh. That's why you're in our myths. All that talk of dragons and such on the news... I knew they were real, and they just didn't live here. So you popped through a portal to visit before?”

That wasn't how it worked for him, though portals between the world existed. “There are dragons here?”

That was good news. Dragons meant a nearby city-state, and a city-state meant stability, and rulers always had a Strega. And while she wasn't as powerful as a god, she might have answers and be able to contact others. The downside was there'd be Tarikians who might expect his help, and when they realized he was useless, they'd never pray to him again.

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“Some have been sighted. Where are the portals?”

“That depends on where I am.”

She gave him that narrow-eyed look again. “Wales. The radio is speaking Welsh. Do you know where Wales is?” She pushed a plate stacked with cheese sandwiches towards him.

“It’s part of the British Empire.”

“The Empire no longer exists...it hasn’t existed for decades. What are you?”

Pan ignored her question and feigned confusion. “Decades? Time must move differently between the two worlds.”

“What two worlds?”

“Mine and yours, of course. I need to find the dragons.” Then he’d find out which Tarikian town was nearby. He took a bite of the sandwich, not caring what it tasted like, and chewed.

The woman put away the bread and cheese, then she turned, her gaze stuck on the floor. “You’re bleeding.”

Some of it was his. Some of it was not.

He’d tried to wash the selkie blood off in the sea. After all, it wasn’t a good look to

walk around covered in someone else's blood. Only a few gods pulled that look off, and he wasn't one of them.

He swallowed, the bread almost sticking in his throat. "I cut my foot."

The partial truth was near enough.

"Are you a demon with those little horns?"

Pan gave her a cold glare—he remembered that from last time. Humans tended to call anything with magic that they didn't like a demon...or a monster. "I am not a demon. They don't exist."

"Huh." She put a white box next to his plate. "First aid kit. So you can clean it and put a bandage on it."

"That's pretty pointless unless I have shoes."

"I suppose not." She returned to where there was food and knives on the bench, which is what she must've been doing before he'd let himself in. "What are you going to do?"

"Find the dragons." He took a sip of water as an idea formed. "Pray to Pan."

"I have got plenty of pans for you." She laughed and waved her frying pan at him.

He didn't laugh. "He is a god from my world."

"One of the old gods?"

"Yes." Or at least what humans thought of as old gods. The ones older than him. His

parents were not the kind of beings humans should trouble.

Confusion flicked in her eyes. “Will he be here? Will the other gods be here?”

“I hope so.” Though he wasn’t sure how the humans would react, as even two hundred years ago, most humans hadn’t worshipped them, choosing instead to worship one—one who had been banished from Tariko.

Banishing him had been a mistake, though by the time they’d realized it was far too late.

As much as he wanted to eat the second sandwich, he should save it. “Can I wrap this? Then I will leave you to your work.”

She washed her hands and gave him a tub. “Here, take an apple and berries, too.”

“Thank you.” He was so grateful he’d give her a blessing without asking, except there wasn’t even a tingle of magic in his blood. “Would you like to pray with me?”

“Sure. Might as well get in the good books of the old gods since they’re back. Some people are saying we’re being punished.”

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Pan couldn't hold back the snort of derision. "I doubt that. Whatever happened had nothing to do with the gods."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"That's not how they usually work," Pan hurried on. "I met a couple of them back home."

"Really?"

"Yes...it's all blessings and granting wishes. Only a few enjoy punishing..." He doubted any god had the power to create a cataclysmic earthquake that shook two worlds.

"And Pan is one of the nice ones?"

"As far as I am aware." He offered the woman his hands, and she placed her much larger hands in his.

Great, now he needed to pray to himself and thank himself, which was weird but not the weirdest occurrence today. And it had been a very long day. He really wanted the illusion of normality, if only for a moment.

"Thank you, Pan, for leading me to this woman and the food she provided. Please bless her, your humble servant..." Fuck, he needed a name. He dragged out one he often used when he wanted to walk around untroubled. "Silas."

The woman gave a heartfelt, “Amen.”

Pan held his breath, waiting for a spark of magic.

Nothing.

One thousand poxes on this godforsaken world.

CHAPTER5

At some point, Noah had fallen asleep. He woke with the sunlight cutting through a crack in the curtains, and for a few seconds, he didn't know where he was. He rolled over, a candle on the tallboy catching his attention, and everything fell into place.

This was his aunt's house.

Where he'd been living for over a year and doing his best not to mooch. To prove that he wasn't a burden on their family the way he was to his parents.

His mother didn't approve of his collections. She didn't go for any of that superstitious nonsense. She and Meredith couldn't have been more different if they tried. Would the same have been true for him and his brother?

He ran his fingers through his hair and hissed at the pain in his hand. The cut. The not-earthquake.

“Fuck.” He flung back the covers, and as he did, his phone launched itself into the middle of the room.

Oh, he'd fallen asleep scrolling through social media again, watching videos of...he wasn't sure what to call it. It wasn't a fucking earthquake, that's for sure. After the

initial shake and arrival of buildings and beings, there'd been no more upheaval. Now the authorities were in recovery mode, pulling people out of buildings and blocking off roads and such. They asked people to stay indoors if they could. Listed were emergency numbers for water and electrical disruptions, another for food.

Anything to reduce the number of people out.

He swung his legs out of bed and retrieved his phone.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Somehow, the screen had cracked when it landed on the carpet...and the battery was only eleven percent.

"I should be bloody grateful. I've got a signal." He plugged his phone in and opened the app to resume where he left off.

It had almost been twenty-four hours since the thing. Surely someone had answers.

Solutions.

Anything.

As much as he wanted to scroll through more videos, he didn't because he'd seen too much, and it was all fear and destruction and freaking out about monsters and dragons. Instead, he found the newsfeed of a station he followed.

The first headline read: "Scientists are referring to the global event as the Collapse."

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Which was better than calling it the thing or the what-the-fuck, and less threatening than the end of days. To be honest, it hadn't felt like the end of days. Shouldn't that involve more hellfire and demons and maybe a giant meteor so they went the way of the dinosaurs?

This collapse was much weirder. He tapped on the post to read more.

Then, he hit the link for the full article.

He'd never been good at physics, much to his engineering father's dismay, so scientists talking about other worlds adjacent to their reality and how they'd been experimenting to gather more data didn't make a lot of sense. They said an experiment had gone wrong—they were still analyzing the data—collapsing the gap between the worlds. There was a lot of what seemed like scientific jargon and reasoning to Noah that didn't make sense.

Wait, the scientists admitted to knowing about other realities?

The article included images of how scientists imagined the realities. One image stacked realities like pancakes, another placed the Earth at the center, and a whole bunch of other realities around the outside, so it looked like a dandelion made up of hundreds of realities. Each reality contained another world.

The article continued with scientists saying that other realities existed, and they'd been experimenting with reaching them. They hadn't expected to disrupt the balance and destroy the other world or damage this one.

“What does that mean?” he groaned. He wasn’t awake enough to be thinking of this shit. He wanted to be told what had happened in plain English, not some scientific explanation.

He kept scrolling, hoping there would be a short paragraph for non-technical people. He skimmed through the next couple of paragraphs, which mentioned shutting down the experiments and an apology. Followed by a warning that any attempt to separate the two worlds would be catastrophic to life on Earth.

Noah raked his fingers through his hair. More catastrophic than new buildings suddenly turning up? And roads ripping apart? Than dragons?

The article mentioned some of the various mythological beings that had been sighted around the world and reminded readers that they’d lost their world and were stranded here. Though given that they existed in human myths, they must have been able to cross between worlds at some point in the past.

Did that mean all the creatures humans told stories about were real?

Human mythology was full of creatures he didn’t want to meet in daylight, let alone at night.

The article repeated the advice to stay away from them and to leave their buildings alone. The recommendation being repeated was to remain indoors and to allow the authorities and emergency services to operate. Emergency contact numbers for the UK followed, with links for other countries.

All international travel for non-essential purposes was suspended.

He couldn’t go home, even if he wanted to.

He scrolled back up through the article, not understanding most of what it said. Or was it that he didn't want to believe?

On one hand, it was kind of cool to learn that mythology was based in reality, but it was not cool to suddenly have elves and ogres and mermaids...the article actually mentioned mermaids...

What did that mean?

What did it mean if mythology was real?

How were they supposed to go to work and stuff...

What if the mythological beings tried to kill them for destroying their world? There were already humans fighting the mythological beings, according to social media. Shooting them and trying to run them over with cars. There'd been videos of men hunting something furry and winged in the US.

He closed his eyes. It was far too easy to imagine fights breaking out on the streets. Was that the real reason they were supposed to stay home?

What were the authorities going to do if gangs of humans and gangs of mythological creatures began roaming the streets looking for trouble?

Since the mythological world had collapsed into the human world, that meant his world had changed forever.

And their world was gone...

He put the phone on his bedside table, wanting to forget everything he'd read and seen and pretend none of it was real. He wanted to go back to sleep and wake up and

discover it had been a nightmare and that everything was normal.

Even though the routine of going to work and studying was dull, he understood it. He knew his place. The one small consolation was that everyone must be feeling the same way, human or mythological.

CHAPTER6

Avoiding humans became harder the farther into town Pan walked, or more correctly, limped. He'd finished the sandwich and fruit and broken into a small building filled with tools. A workshop of some kind, he assumed. It smelled terrible but had provided a place to hide and rest during the day.

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When darkness fell, he snuck out and continued the trek to fuck knows where. Once again, he was hungry and bleeding, and his mood had gone from frustration to annoyance to wanting to burst the eyeballs of the next person who looked at him without dropping to their knees in worship.

Of course, he couldn't pop eyeballs with magic, so he'd have to use his fingers, which would be rather too much effort. Humans should show a little more gratitude that he hadn't left a trail of dead bodies behind him. If he'd had magic, he would've. If he had magic, he wouldn't be cold and hungry and filled with a thirst for murder he'd never experienced, but he understood why some gods indulged.

And he still had no idea where he needed to be, only that he wasn't there yet and that Wales was a very large area to cover on foot.

Aside from seeing one dragon fly overhead, he hadn't seen another Tarikian. Everywhere he looked, there were blessings and curses at the same time. He wanted his people as much as he wanted to avoid them until he'd reconnected to magic. Explaining his current situation to Tarikians, who'd be expecting things from him, was more than he could stomach.

He needed shelter.

And clothes.

He couldn't continue walking around wearing nothing but a fur coat. That alone attracted stares, and if humans stared too closely, they'd see his horns, which might lead to problems. If he had magic, he'd hide the horns. He'd also give himself hooves

so he didn't have sore feet.

He ranted under his breath as he trudged along the broken path and jumped over cracks. In some areas, there were no lights. He walked past crumbled buildings, where humans worked to rescue survivors.

While they weren't praying to him, he had enough of a heart that he'd have offered assistance if he had magic. Was there any magic to be found in this cursed world?

Now he remembered why it had been so long since his last visit.

It was always fun to be worshipped, to be the center of attention, and bask in the magic, but he had so few followers in this world, there had been precious little to enjoy last time...aside from the orgies and drugs.

Paris had been an empty glass liquor bottle sparkling in the sunlight. A memory of last night's excesses, so delicate that any sudden movement might cause it to shatter into one thousand deadly pieces. There'd always been a new adventure around every corner.

Why couldn't this be Paris?

He blamed the selkies for that. If he hadn't been at their party, he'd have been somewhere else. So he would've arrived somewhere else. It was definitely their fault.

When he found a Strega, he needed to find out what the fuck happened. While the weirdness had been discussed, no one knew what was causing it or why it was happening. Besides, human things arriving in Tariko had been more of a curiosity than a concern.

As much as he wanted to avoid his people until he had magic, he was also lonely and

lost. He didn't like either sensation. He didn't like being anything less than godly.

That's what he was. Or what he should be.

Being disconnected from magic was unsettling. Someone, someone powerful, had broken magic, and something horrible had happened. If he didn't know, how was a Strega supposed to know? Unless there was something now written in the fate lines that explained this disaster and how to fix it, but he doubted it. The fate lines were never that helpful.

It wasn't as though humans had never come to Tariko; humans had arrived and settled centuries before Tarikians had stopped visiting the human world.

Why had they stopped visiting?

Had it been the lack of magic?

He scowled, trying to remember what the human world had been like centuries ago when they'd still prayed to him and others. At some point, humans insisted on hunting dragons, and then they'd turned their attention to others. Anyone who wasn't human was deemed a demon.

He touched his hair. Fingers tracing over the curve of his horn. It was a good thing he didn't have hooves.

The banished one had turned the world against them. So they'd let him have it.

In hindsight, they should've done something about him, but if they started voting to kill a god, it was the opening of a door where any one of them may find themselves being snuffed out because someone didn't like their methods.

Now he was stuck in a world where some humans might try to kill him, and others might feed him a cheese sandwich. How did he tell the two apart?

It also meant that the dragons were in danger, along with all beings who didn't appear human. And what exactly was he going to do about it?

Flap his stolen coat at armed humans?

He should've stayed at the beach, even though every bone in his body had urged him to leave. While he didn't know where he was going, he wandered wherever his feet took him...did that mean there was a trace amount of magic calling him?

It was the only logical answer.

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In that breath, he didn't want to go any further. He was tired.

Not bored, he knew what boredom felt like. But his bones were tired, like he wanted to sit down and not move until he'd feasted and rested. True sleep, not the kind where he jerked awake to every sound or passed out from too much alcohol and sex. Or the kind of deep sleep some gods took, a few decades when they needed a break from everything.

Actual rest, or he'd fall over.

Ugh, this body was completely mortal and incapable of doing anything. He needed to get to wherever he needed to be, and he couldn't do that while hungry and hurting.

He stopped, watching some black ropes spark on the road.

Never had he been so disgusted in his entire life. This body was dictating his life. No. That was ridiculous. He refused to be beholden to a bag of flesh. He was a god.

He created his own appearance. He controlled his body.

Not the other way round.

Yet, he had no control over his appearance at all, and this was not an appearance that he took.

He lifted his gaze from the sparks to take in the much shorter and smaller buildings.

He'd been so busy avoiding people he hadn't paid much attention to where he was going. Not that it mattered, as he didn't know where he was, only that he needed to keep moving.

These were not restaurants or other shops. They were houses.

On Tariko, people often left boots by the door and clothes on the line. Perhaps the same was true here.

From within some houses, he heard low voices. Others were silent, the occupants asleep or away. There were no laundry lines out the front of the houses, but he saw one with a neat row of colorful boots lined up by the door. He darted up the path.

Five sets of boots in various sizes. It was a pity the red-spotted ones were far too small as they were very pretty. Keeping low, he measured his foot against the boots and pulled on the green pair that fitted. Out of habit, he offered the household a blessing for serving their god.

He wasn't their god.

And there was no magic to bestow. He was just a thief.

Wearing his stolen boots, he crept away.

Even though his feet ached, walking became more pleasant, and he felt blessed. For the first time since waking, he smiled. Magic delivered him boots to make his journey easier. He couldn't feel it, but there must be magic.

And he needed to believe it was calling to him. That magic would grace him with clothes and the other things he needed to get to where he needed to be and do whatever he was needed to do. He was, after all, a servant of magic who shared it

with those who needed it most.

Today that was him.

With a renewed sense of confidence that everything would be fine because he was a god, he kept walking. As he did, he noticed the way cars had been abandoned, unable to be driven on the cracked roads. Some of those cars had open doors.

Every time he saw one, he stopped to look inside.

The first three were fun, and he found several packets of nuts and dried fruit in one. The next ten were tedious...but the last one was parked in front of a house that had a line covered in clothes hanging under shelter. He crept up to the line to assess the clothing.

None of the items seemed familiar.

But he'd already noticed the changes in fashion.

No one on this world got around in tunics or togas anymore—they hadn't been in fashion the last time either—nor had he seen a single dapper suit. He touched the clothes on the line, thick pants made of rough material, stretchy pants made of thin material. All the clothes were damp, but he took the thin, stretchy ones, hoping they'd dry faster, along with something that appeared to be a tunic that stopped at the waist—far shorter than even elves dared to wear them.

Elves preferred tight pants and tunics that showed off the entire length of their leg. He hoped there were some elves here and not only because they were good at fighting and how to hold a wedding feast.

As well as how to dress.

Not wanting to be caught with the stolen clothes, he moved on before pausing in the shadows to pull on the tight black pants, which hugged his skin in a clammy embrace, and the equally clinging tunic. It was almost a relief to pull the coat back on.

At some point, he needed to discard the coat, which seemed like a terrible waste. Wars had been fought for selkie coats and selkie brides.

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He didn't want to be at the center of a war. That wasn't his kind of thing. Though a few gods loved a battle and got a real boost out of fighting. Bridget visited this world more than him for that exact reason. There was always a good conflict, and even though it wasn't in her name, it didn't really matter. She claimed to be checking up on the banished one and trying to unravel his work.

Though it had been a while since anyone heard from her...

He added the banished one to his list of problems. If the banished one had taken out Bridget, Pan was fucked. Had the banished one found a way to take revenge on all the gods who'd forbidden him from returning home?

That was extremely disconcerting, and there was no one to warn.

There were smarter and more powerful gods than him, and they'd reach the same conclusion. What if they didn't? What if they were all dead?

No, he refused to consider that he was the only god here. The man on the news called this a global event. That meant his people were scattered everywhere. And that the gods were everywhere.

The beating of wings made him look up as a dragon flew low over the road as if hunting.

Pan whistled, catching its attention.

"Dragon, we have met before," he called in Dragon. He wasn't sure that was entirely

true, but it was a good guess.

For a moment, he thought the dragon might ignore him—that would be a new low. But today had been a day of finding new depths, and he doubted he'd reached the bottom yet.

But the dragon circled back and landed on the road. Its golden eyes narrowed as its nostrils flapped. “What are you?”

“I am Pan, the sun eyes.”

The dragon took a step closer. “You smell of the wet furred ones. You do not smell of magic.”

He tried not to wince at the dragon noticing his lack of magic. “I wear the coat of a wet furred one. Tell me, where is the city you protected?”

“In pieces.”

As in destroyed or scattered? Or was the dragon being dramatic? “The palace. Does it stand?”

“It's broken and screaming. My mate is missing.”

That didn't sound good, though he wasn't sure what the dragon meant by the palace screaming, but it was a landmark, and there'd be a Strega and a lord and maybe a temple to him. “Take me to the palace and I will arrange for the guards to help find your mate.”

How long before the dragon started burning shit to find his mate?

The dragon pulled a face as though swallowing a rancid fish. “You have no magic.”

Pan lowered his voice and pushed power into his words, though there wasn’t much given his lack of magic and his current state of exhaustion. “That is why I need to reach the palace. Do not defy me, Dragon.” He took a step closer. “This is not our world, but I have walked this ground before.”

The dragon’s claws scraped over the road. “Everything smells strange.”

Pan nodded. “I agree. Let’s go to the palace and find the Strega.”

A brilliant plan. Once again, he thanked magic and his own ability to sense it, even if it was so faint that he couldn’t use it and the dragon couldn’t smell it. That made more sense than there being no magic at all.

That was plainly ridiculous.

A world without magic...that would be chaos.

CHAPTER7

Noah made himself a cup of instant coffee while he waited for his toast to pop. He didn’t mind tea, but in the morning, he preferred a coffee.

David glanced up from his phone. “I have to go to the school today to see how it survived and help prepare the hall to be used as emergency accommodation.”

“Is it that bad?”

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“Many homes were damaged and don’t have power or water.” He stood. “Meredith got back a few hours ago, and she’ll be heading out again this afternoon. Can you please keep an eye on Linda?”

Noah opened his mouth. His toast popped and Linda walked into the kitchen dressed in jeans, a shirt, and her favorite pink runners, as if she’d be working at the pub after being forced to take yesterday off.

“I don’t need to be supervised, David,” she said.

“It’s dangerous out there.” David put his cup in the dishwasher. “And you’re supposed to stay home unless your business is essential.”

“I’m seventy-two. Everything is dangerous. I might fart and throw my back out.”

Noah smothered a laugh and busied himself buttering his toast.

“Linda...” David sighed and sounded as though he was aware he’d already lost the argument.

“David. There are dragons, and I want to bloody see them. Besides, the pub is a community hub, and I need to report the damage to the city. Someone will want to check out the fairy castle.”

David groaned. “Please. There are monsters and?—”

“Exactly! Besides. Noah and I need to collect the car and bring it home.”

The toast in Noah's mouth turned to glue. Why was he being roped into this adventure? He didn't want to see dragons. They'd probably eat him while Nan made friends with them.

"There's a fairy castle attached to it," David said, as though that were a reason to stay home. "Leave it to the authorities."

Linda grinned. "It's my pub. There's a lot of food in the fridges that will go off if left. I can donate it."

She seemed far more enthusiastic about this collapse than Noah or David.

David pressed his lips together and shook his head. "This is...unprecedented."

"I watch the news, David. There are riots and fighting and fires and looting...it has brought out the worst of humanity. Why should I fear mythological beings? Because they have claws?"

"Because we don't know anything about them." David exhaled. "Just don't do anything risky...riskier. Don't get Noah killed."

"I won't. I'd never hear the end of it...how is your mother, Noah?"

David and Linda looked at him. He took a sip of coffee. "The pool didn't make it." That was his mother's biggest concern, apparently. "And she'd like me to come home."

"I think you're stuck here for a bit, son." David gave him a sad smile. "All flights are grounded."

Noah hid his grin behind the cup. He didn't want to act too happy about being stuck.

Linda pulled out a cup. “There’s been several incidents at sea. Talk of mermaids. No one is going anywhere...including the mythologicals. That’s what they are calling them.”

Noah nodded. “That’s nicer than monsters.”

“More correct, too,” Linda said.

David glanced at his watch. “I need to go...please be careful. Cracks are still widening and closing, and buildings are unstable. It may not be safe to go into the pub.” David gave Noah a pointed look as if he had the power to stop Nan from doing anything. “Call me if you have any problems. And if you can’t bring the car back?—”

“We’ll be fine, David.” Linda waved him away.

The front door closed, and Linda turned to him. “He worries too much.”

David had a point; it was dangerous out there. They had no idea who was in the castle or if they’d be eaten on the way to the pub. This was less of an adventure and more like the start of a B-grade movie where he’d be telling the unlucky hero not to go as it was going to end badly. But if he refused, Nan would go without him and that would be worse, as she’d be on her own and David and Meredith would worry about her.

“I also need to check on some of my friends. How are yours? Do they have water?”

“I don’t know.” He hadn’t asked, and they hadn’t said. They’d been too busy talking about the mythological sightings and discussing what they knew about those creatures. Which was not a lot.

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“Well, you should find out.” Linda made herself a cup of tea.

“If they don’t, what am I going to do?” He was one person. The government would help them and sort out those kinds of issues.

Nan gave him a look that he’d learned meant he needed to do better. “When the world is falling apart, you check in. Maybe their road is so buckled they can’t drive to the shops, or they’re hurt but not bad enough to go to the hospital. We are lucky.”

And going out wouldn’t tempt their luck?

“I’ll text my friends.”

“You do that. We’ll go the pub, and I’ll pack some food up for Maeve—she can’t leave her street, and they have no power.”

No doubt they’d also be taking Maeve a bottle of something. He’d seen her drink when she and Nan got together to play bridge—she also had some stories to tell from her younger years that made her youth sound wild.

He texted his friends, asking what state their street was in and to let them know he was venturing out to check on the pub.

Liam

No power, but we have water. Tell me what you see!

Web

All good. Make an offering. There's magic in the air.

Noah wasn't sure it was magic. More like fear from both humans and mythological beings.

Web

We need to do something special on the full moon.

Noah rolled his eyes. Of course Web wanted to do something.

And which god is in charge of global disasters?

Liam

Which god is in charge of the mythological beings?

Noah frowned.

"Problem?" Nan asked.

He glanced up. "No. But if mythological beings are here. Creatures we thought only existed in stories...what about the old gods? Like Zeus and such. They are considered myth now, but what if they are real and are here?"

Nan considered him for a couple of seconds. "If they are real, they can help fix the damage. I'm sure there's plenty of people offering prayers in church."

"So you don't think they are real?"

“If given a choice between the old gods and the fae, I’ll take the latter. Your friends need to be careful, messing with magic they don’t understand or respect.”

Noah bit his lip, knowing the warning was for him, too. He didn’t believe in magic, but he’d always liked the idea of there being more out there...turned out there was more. A whole other world.

“It’s not like that, Nan. We just get together and have a drink.”

She lifted her eyebrows in a way that reminded him of his mother. “I’m not sure if that’s worse or better.”

Noah shrugged.

“If you don’t believe, why the altar in your room?”

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“It’s not an altar. It’s a collection of things that I found and that I think are cool.” Were they magical? He doubted it. He had a bit of amber, an Aussie coin from the year he was born, a love letter and a pressed flower that had been tucked inside a vintage book of poetry that he’d ordered online, and a liquor bottle in a funky shape that he’d been using as a candle holder and was now coated in myriad colors of wax and a much smaller Victorian medicine bottle that now held an incense stick. There were a few pieces that he’d bought at auctions—nothing expensive, but things he’d wanted because he liked the vibe. He had a planchette that had once been used in seances, a funeral pocket watch that didn’t work, but he liked the black enamel and engraving on the case and the hidden lover’s eye painting on the inside, and a silver necklace that he wore all the time. There’d been other things that he’d seen and wanted but couldn’t afford.

His mother had called his collections magpie behavior and regularly threw them out when he was growing up. Until he’d learned to hide them in a shoe box under his bed. Living with his aunt was the first time he’d felt safe enough to leave them out, and he loved being able to see the things when he walked into his room.

Nan smiled. “They have meaning for you, and that’s the only magic that matters. Now put your walking shoes on and bring that big backpack of yours.”

“Why? Are we going hiking?”

“If there’s no power at the pub, there’s food we need to bring home.” She opened the freezer door. “I’ll bring the ice packs in case there’s anything to save.”

There was no point in arguing with her, and if there was no power, they couldn’t

open. Assuming anyone wanted to drink at a bar right next door to a fairy castle.

CHAPTER8

The walk and then drive to the pub was slow, with both of them keeping watch for cracks or sinkholes while taking in the damage to the houses. Amongst the ruined houses were new but ruined buildings, as well as new buildings that appeared to be pristine. There were also pockets of human areas, which appeared to be undamaged.

There was no pattern to what was saved and what was damaged.

As they approached the town center, they had to stop at the police barricade. Linda spoke to them for at least ten minutes, then they were allowed through because they had a business to check on and food that could be donated to the emergency accommodation that had been set up. They were given a number to call to report the damage. They were warned to stay away from any of the new buildings and to also report any sightings of mythological beings.

Noah glanced at Nan. “What are they going to do to the mythological beings? Like, why do we need to report sightings?”

“I don’t know what they’re going to do. Maybe they are working on the assumption they are all dangerous.”

“So we report, and they arrest? I think we’re going to run out of room in the jail.”

Nan pressed her lips together. “They might treat them like refugees.”

“As I said, we’ll run out of jail room.” How many mythological beings were now in town? Were they confused and frightened of humans? None of this world was familiar to them.

Nan made a noise of agreement. “We don’t have to report. I think it’s more of a friendly request than an order. If we see a mythological in trouble or who needs medical care, then we seek help, but otherwise, we make them a cup of tea and move on with our business.”

“Uh-huh.” It had not sounded like a request from the cops. “You realize it’s only a matter of time before the cops want to knock on the door to the fairy castle.”

“They don’t know there’s a door. And since it’s in my pub, I get to knock first.”

Noah took his gaze off the road for a second. “You’re not actually going to knock on the door?” If she did that and was dragged inside, his uncle was going to kill him. His aunt would kill him.

If Nan went through the door, he had to follow.

“Why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know, a hundred fairytales saying it’s a bad idea? You warning me not to play with things I don’t understand?” It may not be fairies on the other side. He wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse.

Nan lifted her eyebrows. “And who wrote those fairytales?”

It sounded like a trick question, so Noah wasn’t sure how to answer. “We did?”

“And what kind of fairytales do you think they tell about us? How much truth do you think is in those tales? Some of them are hundreds of years old and have been translated and re-translated and edited numerous times...who knows what the truth was?” Her eyes gleamed as though this was the most exciting thing to happen in her lifetime.

His mother had warned him that his grandmother was odd and that the death of her husband had made it worse. His mother had never believed in tales of dragons and mermaids and knockers and elves. They were for children, or they were superstitious nonsense from a time before science.

More like from a time when those beings came to the human world, which begged the question why they stopped.

“Please don’t get kidnapped by fairies. Auntie Mer will kill me.”

Nan patted his knee. “Don’t fret. I’m going to offer them a drink and some of the food before it spoils, that’s all.”

“That doesn’t mean they won’t kidnap you.”

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“And what are they going to do with me? Force me to be their guide around town? To do their shopping for them?” When put that way, it did sound rather silly.

Noah turned into the parking lot behind the pub and braked hard in the driveway. He swallowed hard and forgot how to breathe. Sitting next to the rubbish bins was a dragon the size of a bus. Butterflies erupted in his stomach. His heart beat faster with awe—part fear and part wonder.

He wasn’t sure if he should put the car in reverse and get the hell out of there or casually park on the other side of the bins and hope they didn’t look like breakfast.

Nan leaned forward. “Well, will you look at that? Looks like our new mythological neighbors have a pet.”

“Yeah, of course, the castle has a pet dragon.” Nothing that size could be considered a pet. “How about we go through the front door instead?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s only a dragon.”

“That’s kind of my point. It’s a fucking dragon.” Which was super cool, as well as super terrifying. The dragon moved and stretched, and something furry stepped out from beneath its wing. Noah blinked, not sure what he was seeing. It took several seconds for him to realize it was a dark-haired man wearing an ankle-length brown fur coat and bright green Wellington boots. That was a style choice.

The man smiled and waved.

“See, he didn’t get eaten by the dragon. Let’s talk to our neighbors.”

Noah tore his gaze away from the man to glare at Nan. “And where would you like me to park? Right up close to the dragon?”

“Don’t be silly—there’s a spot right there.” She pointed at the spot on the other side of the bins, which was the logical place to park if it had been a bus and not a dragon on the other side of the car park.

Noah eased the car forward, hoping not to spook the dragon, and inched into the bay. He turned off the car. “I don’t want to be eaten by a dragon today. Or kidnapped by fairies.”

Nan opened her car door, not waiting for him to agree. “We’re being good neighbors...and getting the inside track on all the gossip.”

Noah closed his eyes. He didn’t call himself a witch or even say that he practiced Wicca, as that involved far more attention and commitment than he put into it, but that didn’t stop him from sending a short prayer to any listening god or goddess begging for protection.

“If you arrived last night or have always been here, please don’t let anything happen to me or Nan. I’ll try to do better.” Okay, it was a shitty prayer, and Web would laugh his ass off.

“Come on, Noah.”

Noah sighed and got out of the car, slipping the keys into his pocket. He shut the door and walked around to where Nan stood next to the bins.

The man in the fur coat stopped on the other side, leaving a gap of a couple of meters

between them. The dragon waited about three meters behind the man. Which wasn't nearly far enough.

Noah sniffed and wrinkled his nose; the bins had not smelled that bad yesterday.

"Apologies. You aren't used to the sharp tang of dragon or the way it clings to the back of your throat," the man said in perfect English. "I am Silas."

Nan took a step forward. "I'm Linda, and this is my grandson, Noah. Were you inside the castle?" She pointed up at the white spire that reached several stories above the pub.

Silas grinned, his gaze lingering on Noah in a way that kept his heart beating fast. The man was pretty, all dark curls and long eyelashes. But amongst the curls of his hair were the pale curves of horns.

"No. I was hoping to go into the palace...or what remains of it. However, we couldn't find a door."

While Nan called it a fairy castle, it was, in fact, a palace. Or part of one. Did that mean there were fairies inside?

"There's a door inside. We were here when the collapse happened," Nan said. "That's what the human authorities are calling the event. Do your people have a name for it?"

Silas' features hardened for a moment. "The death of our world."

"We're very sorry about that," Noah said. Not that it was his fault. Even the scientists hadn't expected this. As Nan told him often enough, they'd been playing with magic they didn't understand. "I'll unlock the door, and you can come in."

Noah took two steps towards the back door.

“Great, I need to talk to the vampires,” Silas said.

Noah froze, hoping that he’d misheard. “Vampires?”

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“Yes, the lord of the city. They ruled, and the dragon protected it. We need to find our people and help them.”

The dragon made several clicks and coos, which Silas responded to before speaking in English. “We also need to find the dragon’s missing mate.” He nodded at the dragon, and the dragon wiggled like an oversized, scaley cat. “They mate for life, and he is distraught.”

“I’m sure we can help find a dragon. They’re very large,” Nan said. “And hard to misplace.”

Noah shot Nan a glare for involving them in the missing dragon problem. They were so going to be eaten.

“We would be most grateful.” Silas smiled, and the sun broke through the clouds and warmed Noah from the bones outward.

“Can I ask what you are...or are you also a vampire?” Nan gave Noah a nudge toward the door.

Silas laughed, and the heat in Noah’s bones thrummed through his blood and settled in his groin. The man had horns and was committing more than one fashion crime. He should not be getting hard.

He shoved the key into the lock and turned it, but he hesitated before opening the door. What if there were vampires in the pub? They might have opened the door and made themselves at home.

Shit.

Three sets of eyes watched him, waiting for him to step inside.

“Please don’t let me be eaten by vampires,” he muttered.

“Vampires ask first, and most people enjoy being bitten,” Silas said, as if that was somehow helpful. “And to answer your question, Linda, I am an incubus.”

“Well, it’s very nice to meet you and your dragon.” She used her very polite, befriend the newcomer voice so as not to scare him off. Give her a day, and she’d be giving Silas all the gossip like they’d known each other for twenty years.

“He’s not mine. But I said I’d find help search for his mate. Is the door stuck, Noah?”

Noah’s toes curled in his runners. His name on the man’s lips sounded like a purr of pleasure. What was an incubus? He knew the answer; if he hadn’t been worried about vampires, he might’ve been able to yank it out of the dark corner of his mind where it was hiding.

He pushed open the door slowly, and when he saw no one blocking the doorway, he stepped in and punched in the code to stop the alarm from going off. The battery light wasn’t flashing. “We have power.”

“That’s good news. Come on. I’ll show you where the door to the palace is, Silas.”

“Thank you. Your kindness is much appreciated and will be remembered.”

Nan and Silas followed Noah into the dim pub.

“Then I’ll put on some tea in case the vampires want some. They must be in shock. I

was when the palace appeared. Do vampires drink tea? Or do they only drink blood?"

Noah stared at his grandmother. Was she freaking out on the inside, or was this a game or an exciting adventure for her? How far was she willing to go to learn everything about the new arrivals?

She paused. "Do you drink tea, Silas?"

Silas paused for a moment as if unsure what to do with the offer. Perhaps he was still in shock or expecting to be attacked, not offered tea. "I do...and so do vampires."

"Noah, why don't you show Silas the door, and I'll make the tea."

Oh great, leave him alone with the sex demon. He remembered what an incubus was.

Silas gave him that brilliant smile, and Noah's insides melted as his dick hardened. He should not be attracted to a demon in an ugly fur coat. Maybe the fur coat was the height of fashion where he was from, but the bright green Wellington boots on his feet looked far too human.

"Do you have food to go with the tea?" Silas was still looking at him even though the question was for Nan.

Nan tilted her head. "Of course we do... Oh, you've spent all night outside with the dragon and haven't had anything to eat. Do you need a bite before you talk to the vampires?"

Silas put his hand over his heart. "If you could spare something, I would greatly appreciate it."

"I'll show him where the door is and bring him back," Noah said, not wanting to be

near the door to the vampire palace when Silas knocked. Fairies might have been better than vampires.

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Nan nodded, her gaze sharp. Could she see the effect Silas was having on him?

Just show him the door. That was all he had to do.

He led the incubus through the pub, and for a couple of heartbeats, it seemed like any other day when he walked in, ready to open up. He almost flicked on the lights and turned on the music out of habit. Then he stepped into the bar area. While the broken glass had been swept to one side, the chairs and tables lay in disarray. He curled his fingers against the cut on his hand.

And the wall on the other side was now that odd, shiny, white marble, except for the oversized and, he now noticed, ornately carved door.

“Well, that explains why I couldn’t find it on the outside.” Silas walked toward it.

“You didn’t think about breaking in?”

“It crossed my mind, but I had hoped the vampires would come out.” He turned to face Noah. “Or that someone might let me into the building. If you hadn’t shown up, I’d have chanced breaking a window.”

“You’d have triggered the alarm, and the police would’ve arrested you.” The cops wouldn’t care about the lost dragon or the vampires stuck in the palace. “The vampires haven’t come out, or they’d have triggered the alarm.”

Silas frowned and then nodded as if untangling the words.

Noah's gaze flicked from Silas' horns to the door and back as he realized why this interaction was a little strange. Why did they speak the same language? "Did you speak English on your world?"

The demon laughed and said something in another language. "No. We spoke Tarikian, mostly. I speak Dragon and others. Learning your language was a matter of listening and feeling the words." He tapped his chest, his gaze on Noah, not the door. "Much like when casting out a prayer. Do you have a god you favor?"

"Um...not really. I guess it's whoever is most applicable." Silas was from the other world; he'd be able to answer all of Noah's questions. "Are you telling me all the old gods are real? And from your world?"

Silas' eyes lit up for a second. He took a step closer. "Define old god because we may be talking about two different beings."

"Well, if mythological beings are real. Sorry, I don't mean to sound rude. You're obviously real, but I didn't know that until a couple of days ago—"

"I understand your intention."

Noah was pinned by the demon's stare. "Well, the old, what we call pagan gods are part of our mythology, which suggests that Zeus and Bran and others are real." Silas' warning there might be some confusion about the kinds of gods made him pause. "Are there other types of gods?"

"We have old gods. The gods who came before there was anything."

Noah's mouth dried. "And what was before?"

"Before anything, there was wild magic. Raw and ferocious, but also lonely. So, it

created the first gods to play with. And those gods made the worlds and all the beings who inhabit them.” Silas tilted his head and frowned. “I wonder how they feel about one of their creations being destroyed.”

Noah’s eyes widened, and his heart pattered like a panicked bird against his ribs.

“Kettle’s boiled,” Nan called out.

Silas stepped back as if he hadn’t suggested divine retribution for destroying a world by accident. “I’m starving. Let’s eat.”

CHAPTER9

The only thing Pan wanted to eat was the human man in front of him. Not only had he whispered prayers to gods and made Pan’s skin tingle in the process—not that a tingle was magic, but it was near enough at this point, and Pan was desperate—but the man had a wide-eyed innocence that begged to be corrupted. Pan wanted to rip away the veil and show him all the secrets of the universe.

It was far too easy to imagine Noah on his knees worshipping him, and Pan would be all too happy to shower him with blessings. Once again, magic had led him to where he needed to be.

The dragon had wanted to leave at dawn to recommence searching, but Pan had convinced him it would be better to stay and request help. The dragon then suggested diving through the glass window at the top of the palace until Pan pointed out that destroying the palace was not going to be taken well. Dragons never thought any further ahead than their next meal. While asking the dragon for transport had saved him days of walking, now he owed the dragon, which was galling.

However, he wasn’t going to turn down blessings. Having faith in the path that magic

created for him was all he had. And since good help was bloody hard to find, and he didn't know anyone in this world, he'd been extra nice to Linda and Noah.

When he finally reconnected with magic, he'd repay their generosity.

Perhaps the original gods were punishing the gods for letting a world be destroyed. That wasn't a pleasant thought. No one, not even gods like him, had seen or heard anything from the original gods. Ever. And yet they were all aware their parents, or grandparents, existed because it was in the magic that ran through the universe. The same way he'd known about this world, the links between them, and how to travel between them.

Without magic, all he had were questions.

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He followed Noah back to the kitchen, admiring the way his black pants hugged his ass. They were not the same as the ones Pan wore beneath the coat. He needed new clothes, and speaking with the vampires might solve some of his problems. He'd been hoping for elves, but he'd make do with vampires, and they'd be able to tell him where the Strega lived. Maybe she still had connections to her sisters, even if she didn't have a connection to magic.

Much like the kitchen he'd eaten in last night. This was all shiny and silver. Linda made three cups of tea and three plates of cake. His stomach rumbled. He wasn't used to this mortal body, and the demands it made were beyond irksome.

Not only did he have to feed it and water it, but he then needed to deal with consequences of eating. It was all very inconvenient.

"Thank you." And he actually meant it. He picked up the cup, soaking in the warmth before taking a sip.

For several heartbeats, there was silence as they ate and drank, but the questions rippled unspoken in the air. His and theirs. As much as he wanted to tell them the truth about who he was—if only to hear Noah whispering his name—he didn't know these humans or what they might do. The only reason he felt safe enough to sleep last night was because the dragon had curled around him.

"I realize with the scale of this disaster, not many people—humans, that is—are going to worry about a missing dragon." Pan used his fork and broke off a piece of cake, deliberately not looking at Noah. "Do you know anyone who might be able to assist with searching for her?"

“Most people will be helping with the disaster,” Linda said. “Buildings need stabilizing. People need to be treated at the hospital. Water, sanitation, and power need repairing. It’s going to take a long time to get things working.” She shook her head. “A lost dragon will not be high on their list of priorities.”

Pan was aware of the damage in this small area thanks to the flyover the dragon had given him last night. While some parts of the town were lit, others were dark. The holes in the roads and fallen buildings—human and Tarikian—filled him with concern. How many of his people had survived?

That only the palace spire existed was troubling. Where was the rest of it?

He still had no idea what Tarikian town this was, though the knotwork engraved on the palace door was familiar—magic would’ve told him in a heartbeat.

Linda studied Noah for several heartbeats. Pan turned his head.

Noah sat up straighter as if realizing that he was the someone who could help. “What?”

“Nothing.” Linda took a sip of tea. “Only that your friends might want to help find a dragon if they aren’t volunteering elsewhere.”

“My friends don’t want to get eaten by dragons.”

“The dragon will not eat your friends,” Pan assured him. But human friends could not talk to the dragon, which meant he’d be stuck translating unless there was a lesser dragon nearby who also spoke English. It was too soon to hope that Tarikians were already learning the language. That required immersion and a willingness to learn, and if they were wounded and hungry, learning a new language was not a priority.

He bit back the groan. Every solution created a problem. It made his head hurt.

“The vampires won’t help?” Noah asked.

Pan worried the vampires were dead since they hadn’t come out. Though he hoped that wasn’t the case. He couldn’t deal with more death. Death wasn’t his area. He rotated the cup, wanting the answers to appear in the liquid. “I had hoped they’d already be helping my...their people. I am concerned about them.”

And he needed to stop calling Tarikianshispeople, or someone might suspect he wasn’t an incubus. Given that Noah could name some of the gods, Pan was reasonably sure that his name was not far from Noah’s lips. And it was rather too tempting to try to coax it off his tongue.

“There was screaming coming from in there yesterday,” Noah said quietly.

And you did nothing! You didn’t offer aid?

Pan tamped down on the fury that raced through him. Of course they hadn’t. They didn’t know what was behind the door, and even now, they knew they were both afraid. The lies humans had spent centuries telling had stuck.

He pushed away the plate of half-eaten cake, his appetite gone. “Pray they are alright and can assist their people.” And the dragons. Because I can’t do fucking anything.

And if he didn’t help the dragon, the dragon was going to eat him. In his present state, that would be fatal and a rather unpleasant end to his previously immortal life.

“You will wait for me to return?” Pan remembered to make it sound like a question and not like an order in the last heartbeat

A look passed between the two humans.

Linda nodded. “I need to sort out the food, and there’s some broken glass to clean up. We won’t be here come dusk.”

“Understood.” Which left him with the dilemma of where he’d sleep tonight because he did not want to spend another night curled up with the dragon—the sweet oniony scent was embedded in his clothes and skin—and he didn’t know if the vampires would offer him a room. He needed a long, hot soak, preferably with a couple of pretty attendants. His gaze flicked to Noah.

Or just one.

Noah’s cheeks turned pink, and he glanced away.

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Pan wanted to grip Noah's chin and run his thumb over that plump lower lip before consuming him. Those thoughts needed to wait because the dragon outside wasn't going to. They had no sense of time, which meant they had very little patience.

Pan frowned and looked at Linda. "When you say sort out the food, what do you mean?"

"I have four days' worth of food, and we're not going to be able to open. So I need to determine what we can take home and what I can give to a friend of mine who is stuck...do your friends need feeding? Or do they need blood?"

"It depends on the age of the vampire. The young ones don't eat blood." And he didn't want to explain vampire blood magic.

That probably didn't work either. Fuck...maybe they were dead like the selkies.

He inclined his head to hide his expression. "I will check with them. It is a very generous offer. Perhaps if you have a little meat, you can spare for the dragon?"

Linda laughed. "I don't have enough to feed a dragon."

"It's about the offering, not the quantity."

"A bit like a stray cat? If you feed them, they become your friend," Noah said as if warming to the idea.

"Exactly. Though I don't recommend getting too close as you do not speak Dragon."

He stood. “Thank you for the tea and the cake. Hopefully, I’ll return with some kind of good news.”

He wasn’t even sure what good news looked like. Or what he wanted it to be. Only that he needed help. Every Tarikian needed help.

For the first time in his life, he wasn’t special. He wasn’t anything.

And he didn’t like that at all.

CHAPTER10

Noah watched Silas walk out of the kitchen, the heavy coat swinging around his ankles. He was a little shorter than him but exuded some kind of power and authority that made Noah dizzy and breathless and hungry for more. Though more of what, he couldn’t say.

“Come on. There’s work to do.” Nan gathered up the empty plates.

“Do you want me to finish cleaning up the broken glass and tidy up the bar area?” They hadn’t swept or mopped or run the dishwasher. They’d done the bare minimum and fled.

“What’s so interesting out there?”

Noah ignored the heat blooming on his cheeks. “I’m curious, that’s all.”

“Curious about the palace or Silas.” She pinned him with her gaze.

“Nan. Please. He’s an incubus.” Silas could have anyone he wanted, and Noah wasn’t about to get caught up in sex demon magic. He collected the cups and put them in the

sink.

Nan huffed, and her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what he is. But he’s not an incubus.”

“What makes you say that?” Not that he was an expert in incubi or any mythological creature.

“Because he ate and drank, and incubi feed on sexual energy.”

Noah’s cheeks burned. He never wanted to hear his grandmother mention sexual energy again. “Our myths might be wrong...he said vampires eat.”

“Hmm. Maybe, but there’s something about him.” She tapped her nose. “I can’t put my finger on it, but he doesn’t seem to be lying about wanting to help his people and the dragon.” She frowned. “He talked to the dragon. Does that make the dragon a person?”

“I have no idea. You should’ve asked him.” Noah grabbed the broom and dustpan. “Thanks for volunteering me to search for the dragon.”

“I volunteered your friends, not you.”

“You’re just hoping Web will be eaten.” Why couldn’t he go dragon hunting? Did she think he wasn’t capable?

“I hope dragons have better taste.” She put her hands on her hips. “We have work to do here. Go and clean up. I’ll start sorting out the meat situation.”

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When he walked into the bar, Silas was standing in front of the door, staring up at it as if waiting for it to open.

“Is no one answering?” The guilt of ignoring the screams resurfaced. He’d let them suffer and die.

Silas turned. “I haven’t knocked. I was debating different possibilities and preparing myself for the worst outcome. However, after everything that’s happened, I’m not sure I have the ability to imagine the worst outcome anymore. My world ended...and no one saw it coming. Not the gods, not the Strega. All the people connected to magic, the very essence of the universe, didn’t see it on the fate lines or feel it unraveling.”

“No one here realized, either. Our scientists noticed the existence of other worlds and were experimenting...” He stopped, not wanting to admit that they had caused the collapse.

Silas’ eyes tightened. “If there are no vampires in the palace, I’m not sure what to do next.”

“Who’s next in charge?”

He sighed. “This wasn’t my town. I was just in the area.”

“Oh...” Not only was he in a strange world but also a strange town. “So you don’t know where your family is?”

“I do not.” He frowned. “And I have no way to contact them.”

“Your parents must be worried. Mine are. They live on the other side of the world.”

Silas opened his mouth, but it was another heartbeat before he spoke, and Nan’s warning that something wasn’t quite right echoed in Noah’s head.

“My parents have been gone for a long time, but I have kin. Others like me.” He returned to staring at the door. “I guess I should knock, as that is the only way I’m going to find out, and there is no point in making alternative plans if they are alive.”

“Good luck.”

“Say a prayer for me.”

Noah smiled. “To which old god?”

Silas tilted his head, a curve on his lips that tied Noah in threads of heat. “Pan.”

“May Pan bless your path.”

For a moment, Noah was sure he saw a flicker of something in Silas’ eye, but it must have been the light catching in them because it was gone so fast. Silas reached out and wrapped three times on the door.

Noah held his breath.

“Who dares to knock while we mourn?” A voice from the other side called.

Silas glanced at Noah, then back at the door. “Silas Wilde.”

The door creaked and swung inward, revealing only darkness. Silas stepped up and was swallowed by the shadows, and the door closed with a heavy thud that reverberated through Noah's bones.

CHAPTER 11

It took several heartbeats for Pan's eyes to adjust to the gloom. Vampire houses and palaces were usually well-lit, with sunlight streaming through the windows in the roof and bouncing off mirrors and marble to create a soft illumination.

Now it appeared that the sun had been blotted out, and they were living in permanent night. The only illumination was the faint glow the walls held. Pan swallowed and took a cautious step forward. This was not the grand entrance—the door wasn't ornate enough for that.

The solid shadows became items of furniture. A bed. He was standing in a bedroom. He glanced behind him, not sure how that had happened.

"You entered via the balcony. How?" The man's deep voice came from a chair in the corner.

"It was the only door I could find."

He grunted. "You call yourself Silas Wilde...a name that has power. Yet you reek of death and dragon. Like selkie and sorrow. But no magic."

"You are correct on all accounts."

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The man stood, and metal rasped. “So you are a liar, impersonating a god?”

Pan stepped closer and drew up every scrap of energy he had, which was a mote over nothing. The mote only existed because Noah had given him a prayer. “I am the god, Pan. Our world no longer exists, but your people need you.”

The man laughed and slumped back into his chair. “Tell me, how did our entire world cease to exist? And then I will decide whether to drain you.”

First the dragon, now a vampire...it was a pity Noah hadn't offered. There was still time. Assuming the vampire didn't get there first.

“Our world collapsed into the human world. A world I had avoided for two hundred years. Much has changed since then. The most obvious being that there is no magic here at all. I am disconnected from the source that sustained me.”

The vampire remained silent for several breaths. “You have no magic in your blood?”

“Do you want to bite me to confirm? Perhaps then you will taste the truth that I am Pan.” He couldn't believe he'd sunk to offering his blood to a vampire. He must be desperate.

“I will consider your offer. I have never tasted a god.”

“There's a reason for that,” Pan growled. If he had magic, his blood would kill a vampire.

“I’m sure there is... However, since you do not have a connection to magic, are you a god?”

Pan tapped his foot as annoyance surged through him. “Your people need your help. Many died.”

“You believe I’m not aware?” The vampire roared as he once again stood. “Many of my family died. Many who served me died. My uncle died.” He gave a bitter laugh. “He threw himself off the stairs. The room you’re standing in is four floors up. There are bodies up to the first landing. I did not have the guts to follow them. So I sit in darkness to hide from the truth.”

It took a moment for Pan to understand what the vampire said. The palace was underground; only the top part of what would’ve been the family rooms was visible. That meant all the doorways were beneath the ground. And buried by bodies. Was that the screaming Noah heard yesterday?

What had happened to make a vampire end their long life? “Why did they jump?”

“Because when the building settled and the ground stopped shaking, we were no longer ourselves. The older the vampire, the worse the changes.”

What had happened to the vampires? It couldn’t be worse than what happened to the selkies. They didn’t even have a choice if they wanted to live or die.

“How dare you sit there and bemoan the fact that you are alive?” Pan took a step forward. “The selkies were stripped of their skin, their bodies left broken and bent and bloodied on the beach where they had partied only a heartbeat before. I picked up one of their coats to wear. That is why I smell like death and selkie. The selkies are gone. Erased from this world. From existence. While you hide, your people suffer.”

“And what are you doing about it, god?” The vampire didn’t bother to hide the sneer.

He would pay for that one day. “I have been acquiring human assistance. The humans who live here know how this world operates.” He had acquired exactly two humans, and they hadn’t done anything to help yet. “One of the city’s dragons is missing. I have no idea where the knight or Strega are. In fact, I do not even know which city this is. I came to the palace to seek the lord.”

“The lord is dead.”

Pan wanted to walk over and shake the melodrama out of him. “Then who was next to be lord? You? Are you now in charge of the city?”

“You have no power. You can’t force me to do anything.”

Pan paced closer, well aware he was unarmed while the vampire had a blade of some sort. “I do not force. I ask. If you will not serve your people, who else can step up and offer guidance? Who still lives?”

“The unblooded.”

Children. Literal children. He needed someone to take charge of the city and its occupants, not someone to be responsible for. He closed his eyes and drew in a breath that wasn’t calming.

“Fine. Tell me what city this is, and I will seek the other rulers.” There was always a Strega and, most often, a knight. Some cities had a lord and a king, one for diplomacy and one for war. Others combined the role. “And leave you to contemplate your death.”

“It is not death I crave. I’m contemplating life.”

The vampire was very much alive, which was more than could be said for some people. “What is your affliction? Are you missing all your skin?”

The vampire laughed. “I wish.”

“You do not—trust me.” That was going to give him nightmares for the rest of his life, which might only be as long as a mortal’s. He shuddered at the disconcerting notion of both nightmares and being mortal.

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“There is a sheet on the wall. Pull it free to let the light in.” He lifted his hand and pointed.

Pan strode over, his boots crunching over glass. The sheets had been stuffed into what must have been the glass over a light tunnel that went to the roof. He pulled the sheet free, and light flooded the room. Sharp and unfiltered.

He blinked a couple of times and then turned to the vampire.

The vampire held his hand over his face as if adjusting to the light. But from where Pan stood, the changes were obvious. The man’s cheeks were lined as though he were a human of eighty, and his skin was the dull gray of a week-old corpse.

Slowly, he lowered his hand. “I am only thirty. Barely blooded. Imagine the faces of those who are older.”

Pan frowned. Vampires looked like elves, eternally beautiful. They had once been the same kind, but long ago, their bloodlines had split when vampires had chosen blood magic. He had vague memories of the split; it had been acrimonious, and there had been bloodshed over whose use of magic was correct. Over time, the use of blood magic had changed them enough that they were no longer elves.

“The lack of magic took your beauty.” Pan’s voice was soft.

“That is the best theory anyone has suggested.”

“Your uncle put his vanity above the well-being of his people. I will not mourn him.

You should not mourn him.”

“He raised me, and he has abandoned me.”

Pan clamped his teeth together to stop the words from spilling out. He failed to stop his eyeballs from rolling. Was he going to have to do everything himself?

Apparently, so.

“I must return to the humans. They have offered food...perhaps the unblooded may appreciate a meal. Or do you intend to let them starve while you hide?”

“They have food. I’m not a monster.”

No, but humans might think he was. Vampires were something humans had feared for a long time, though he wasn’t sure why. He could imagine that vampires had misbehaved in this world and earned their reputation at some point.

“Your balcony door leads into a human tavern. The people who own it are under my protection.” Which amounted to a whole lot of fuck all at the moment. “Do not harm them. Or eat them. They are busy befriending the dragon. The dragon will not like it if you eat the humans who are feeding him.”

“You don’t need to threaten me with my own dragon.”

Well, what did he need to do?

“Would you consider meeting with the humans? Or sending some servants or guards, someone to assist with the search for the missing dragon and to gather your people? Can you give orders even if you cannot face the world?”

“I will think about it.”

Pan cursed in a language that had been long forgotten on this world and raked his fingers through his hair.

“I can see that you care about our people,” the vampire said, slumped in his chair.

“Of course I fucking do. Their worship gives me magic. The sooner I can gather them and receive prayers, the sooner I can start fixing shit. Do you see my problem?” He paced, the green boots squeaking on the floor.

“Do you think a few prayers will bring back your power? You said there was no magic in this world.”

Pan waved his hand. “That’s like saying there is no water in a desert...there is, it’s just very hard to find and not enough to sustain me. Yet, I have tasted the tiniest raindrop, and it has given me hope.” And that raindrop was called Noah.

Pan vowed that he’d do whatever it took to hear Noah call out his name and truly mean it. It was too easy to imagine basking in the afterglow and bathing in the magic.

The vampire considered him for several heartbeats. “You are in Beita. And while I am not ready to face this new world, I can offer you fresh clothing and to safeguard the coat.”

The cry that it wasn’t enough formed on his lips, but he released it as a sigh. It was an offer, which wouldn’t lead to more if he slapped it away. “Thank you. It will be nice to no longer smell of death.”

“I will request a pitcher of water and soap so you may bathe as you are offending my nose. While you do that, tell me what you have seen in this new world and what you

remember of it from your last visit.”

“You cannot order a god?—”

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“You confessed to being mortal and are in need of my help. Humor me.”

Pan gritted his teeth. He hadn't confessed to anything, but the vampire had drawn the correct conclusion. “Your people need your help.”

“And I will help them via you. I will tell you of my people and give you a map of the city.” The vampire pulled a gold ring off his finger. “And the city's ring. So they will know you act for me.”

“Or they will think I killed you for it.”

The vampire laughed. “In either case, you are now the acting lord.”

Pan stopped just before he touched the ring. He didn't want to be the acting ruler. He wanted his magic back. And while it was just a gold ring engraved with the city's knotwork and held no magic, it did have power. “What will you have me tell them? I cannot say the true lord is in hiding because he is no longer beautiful.”

The vampire flashed his fangs in warning. “You will say that I am ill or injured...” He sighed as if even breathing was too much effort. “There will be other vampires in the city who are also afflicted. You may send them here.”

“Here is a tavern that belongs to humans.” And he didn't want to be gathering vampires; he had a dragon to find. Yet he needed worshippers.

He also needed that bath and a change of clothes and safe storage for the coat. It was not the kind of thing one left lying around.

The ring glinted. A weighty burden that promised to distract him from his own goals. But if he didn't help the people of Beita, he wouldn't be able to encourage anyone to praise him. As delightful as Noah was, he wasn't enough.

The vampire smiled, fangs hidden. "Would it help if I got on my knees and prayed for Pan to assist with the rescuing of my city?"

That did sound pleasant. Though with a face like that, no one was going to slide into the Lord's bed. Not unless they kept their eyes closed and the lights off. "That depends on what you're doing on your knees."

The vampire grunted. "You were never my favorite god."

"Which explains why I preferred to party with the selkies." He'd been to Beita, but not in a century. He wasn't even sure they had a temple dedicated to him. Every town and city-state had its preferred gods.

"We did a lot of trade with them. And I must confess to being jealous that they didn't suffer." The vampire spun the ring between his fingers. "Do we have a deal?"

He didn't make deals. People begged him for favors. This time, there was no begging, and if he didn't help the vampire, he was only stabbing himself in the hand. "It is temporary."

"It is."

"Then how shall we determine what is the end?"

"I do not know. When you have reconnected with magic and are a god again? But what if that never happens, Silas?"

Pan swallowed. That was the lump of ice in his stomach that he didn't want to think about. "And what if you never regain your beauty? I might be stuck as acting lord of a broken city forever?"

"I propose that we renew this agreement on each full moon, sealing it with blood and a prayer. "

Pan gave a bitter laugh. "My blood and your prayer, I suppose?"

"Who better to detect traces of magic in your blood than a vampire?"

That was true, and if they turned it into a ritual, then perhaps they might scrape together whatever magic was available in this world. "Very well. I agree with those terms."

"We will seal our agreement once you are clean. The stink of you is giving me a headache."

He didn't stink that much, but then a vampire's sense of smell was more delicate than a human's. And the stench of dragon drowned out most things. "I would like you to meet with the human owners. If I am to bring more vampires here, then their passage needs to be negotiated."

"That is your problem as acting lord."

Pan grimaced. Technically, the vampire was correct. "And food and water for your unblooded?"

"That is something you need to arrange. We have enough for a few more days."

"And your dead?"

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“I will have them wrapped and brought out for burning. You will need to arrange the burning.”

They hadn't even sealed the agreement in blood, and already the list of demands was growing. He didn't know how to do any of those things. He used magic to grant prayers. He gave people what they thought they wanted, which wasn't always the case, and sometimes magic made things go askew...but that wasn't his fault. He was merely a conduit.

He wasn't even that at the moment.

He was a useless mortal.

A mortal with a to-do list.

Ugh. Could things get any worse?

He hated this place and everything about it, especially the lack of magic. Magic was being shoved to the bottom of the to-do list because he couldn't ask people to pray to him if they were busy dying—that wasn't his connection to magic.

“Can I ask which gods your city favored?” Maybe they were here. Or were they like him and visiting some other place that worshipped them?

“We had temples for Rhiannon and Arawn. I do not know what personal shrines people kept.”

Great, Rhiannon, also known as Epona, the odds of people praying to him decreased. Perhaps he could encourage them to broaden their prayers to any nearby god without mentioning his name.

Pan held out his hand to accept the ring. The ring was too big for his pointer finger. Instead, the vampire slipped it over Pan's thumb. He was a god; he wasn't supposed to have favorite cities, or to work for one. This place was a long way from being his favorite, though.

And he was a long way from being a god.

CHAPTER 12

All the broken glass was cleaned up, the floors mopped, and the tables and chairs stacked away. Noah hoped they'd be allowed to reopen. In part because this was the only job he had. Without it, how would he buy food or fuel or anything? How many other people feared the same?

Nan had already called the city to report the damage and book an assessment. Businesses were being treated separately from the damaged homes. Nan's biggest concern was whether the joint between the pub and the palace was watertight. The city seemed more concerned about the palace having a door directly into the pub.

With the cleaning done, Noah helped in the kitchen. He needed to stay busy so he couldn't dwell on everything else. He made a list of all the pantry items that would remain. However, the food in the fridge and freezer needed to be re-homed. Either taken home or given to friends and family or donated.

The pub wasn't going to be open for at least a week, so no one was going to be buying lunch or dinner or snacks. Supermarkets and hospitals, schools, and medical centers took priority over pubs. Which was fair enough.

Guess that meant he had plenty of time to go dragon hunting.

Did that pay well?

He doubted it.

Assuming he was still needed, and Silas wasn't arranging better help from the vampires. He should be hoping for that, not daydreaming about finding the dragon and saving the day. That wasn't who he was. No one turned to him for help. The fridge beeped at him while he stared at the meat. "What do you want me to give to the dragon?"

"Give him one of the Sunday roasts and a kilo of chops. Otherwise, we'll be eating them for the next two weeks."

"Not sure if there's room in the fridge at home."

"That too, and Maeve won't want them. It's too much for her...it's a pity we can't cook some of it up here and give it to people for free."

"I'm sure some of the first responders would appreciate it. Not that it will all fit in the oven." Not all at once, anyway. And once cooked, if it wasn't eaten, it needed to be stored. If they lost power, everything was gone.

Nan shut the freezer door. "I'll check with Mer. I don't want a bunch of people turning up while the dragon is parked out the back—that seems like a bad idea that will end up with people getting eaten. I hope Silas returns soon since he's the only one who can ask it to move." She made some more notes on her pad of paper.

"Do you think vampires are like the movie vampires?"

She smiled. “That depends on if you’re talking horror movie vampires or teenage fantasy vampires.”

“Either. Like, what’s the truth? Can they turn into bats? Do they have fangs?”

Nan pushed the meat towards him. “Give the dragon a snack. Fill up the bucket with water and see if it wants a drink, too.”

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Noah picked up the roast and chops.

“And don’t get too close. Don’t get eaten.”

“I’m not planning on it.”

“I know what you kids are like, always trying to take selfies while doing dumb shit.”

Noah grinned. “You did dumb shit when you were my age. You just don’t have photographic evidence.”

“And thank God for that.” Nan picked up her phone and shooed him out of the kitchen.

Noah propped open the back door. He hadn’t even stepped outside when the dragon lifted its head and clicked something at him. He assumed it was something like ‘snacks for me?’ as the dragon’s butt gave an excited little wiggle like he was an oversized cat.

“I have a nice piece of roast beef for you.” He glanced at the roast, then back at the dragon. “Which is going to be like eating a chicken nugget, given the size of you. And also some chops which will have a bit of crunch. I assume that you can eat bones... Who am I kidding? You can probably eat entire cows.”

And cows were much bigger than him. If the dragon wanted to eat him, he’d be gone in a bite.

For several seconds, he considered unwrapping the large chunk of raw beef and throwing it at the dragon, but that seemed rather rude.

The dragon chirped at him, claws flexing against the asphalt.

“I’m going to take the plastic wrap off and put the meat down a bit closer to you. But I’d really like it if you stayed where you are.” He was nervous talking now. “And you probably can’t understand me. I doubt anybody has taught you to sit and stay either...and if they tried it, you’d probably eat them.”

Should he stick the meat on the end of a broom handle and offer it to the dragon that way? Or was this one of those situations where it was best to not show any fear and pretend that he was cool with feeding lumps of meat to a large predator who was far too excited to see him, or at least the meat he was holding? He kept his gaze on the dragon as he unwrapped the meat, acknowledging that if the dragon were a lion, he would not be standing this close while holding raw meat.

This was kind of fucked up.

Yet exhilarating.

He was about to feed a fucking dragon. And despite what Nan had said, he was going to take a selfie.

Although recording it might be better.

He walked down the two steps, moving slowly and faking confidence while his heart raced fast enough that it had to be reaching unsafe levels and about to explode. When he was a meter away from the steps, he placed the roast on the ground and stepped back. He didn’t turn his back on the dragon, just walked backward until his heels hit the step.

The dragon didn't move until he stood in the doorway.

It wriggled forward on its belly and gave the meat a sniff and then a lick, the whole time cooing and clicking. Noah wiped the blood off his hands on the dishcloth hanging out of his jeans and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

He hit record, videoing the dragon. Then he turned around so he was in the frame, and the dragon was behind him. On the screen, he watched as the dragon's tongue curled around the meat and it swallowed the three-kilogram roast without taking a single bite.

The dragon didn't move backwards, and this time, when it made noises, Noah was sure the dragon had asked him a question. Maybe it could smell the chops. He put his phone away and faced the dragon. "I'll give you the chops in a moment. How about a drink first?"

He filled the bucket, but because the dragon hadn't moved back, he had no choice but to put the bucket at the bottom of the stairs, which meant if the dragon came closer again, they'd have to leave via the front door, and the chances of getting the car were slim.

"Can you back up a bit?" Noah made a shooing motion with his free hand.

The dragon's front feet pattered against the asphalt, but it didn't move.

Shit.

Once again, he slowly went down the steps and placed the bucket of water on the ground. As predicted, the dragon moved closer.

It sniffed the water and started lapping it up as if it hadn't drank in far too long. How

long had it been sitting in the car park? A ten-liter bucket of water was probably not enough.

In the doorway, he unwrapped the chops, which got the dragon's attention. There was no way he was putting the chops on the step.

He held one up, and the dragon stared at it.

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Noah moved it from side to side, and the dragon followed the movement.

Maybe a dragon was like a big cat, and they could play a little game called ‘get the dragon to move away from the door’. He tossed the chop into the air, giving it a good arc. The dragon leaned to the side and snatched it out of the air. The next second, its focus was on Noah, ready for another flying chop.

He threw this one a little higher, forcing the dragon to back up a little. He kept repeating the process with each chop until the dragon was back in the corner, and Noah was standing right where he’d placed the roast. Noah placed the last two chops on the ground before walking backward to the door. He picked up the almost empty bucket of water on his way and took it inside to refill. When he came back out, the chops were gone, and the dragon was sitting in the corner, waiting.

“Ah...you figured out that if you sit in the corner, you get fed?” He placed the bucket on the feeding spot and took a step back. The dragon didn’t lunge forward; it waited for him to reach the stairs.

Several clicks came from behind him.

He startled and turned, fully expecting to see another dragon and his death to be imminent. He blinked and stared. Silas was almost unrecognizable.

Gone was the fur coat and green wellington boots. Now, he wore close-fitted dark brown pants and dark brown leather boots with a pale green shirt, topped off with a cream knee-length waistcoat embroidered with some kind of golden Celtic knotwork design down the front. He’d been pretty before, but now... Well, Noah wouldn’t have

refused if Silas declared he wanted to eat Noah.

“The dragon thanks you for the food. He liked the crunchy things and will wait in that corner for food because he doesn’t enjoy the smell of fear while he’s eating.” Silas smiled at him.

This time, the rapid beat of his heart had nothing to do with being afraid of the dragon. “I’m glad he enjoyed the meat. I’m trying not to be afraid, but he’s the size of a bus, and I’m a snack.”

“You are a snack...” Silas considered him for several seconds with a smile on his lips and something that might have been heat in his hazel eyes. “But most things are to a dragon.”

Noah swallowed, not sure if they were talking about the dragon anymore. “Your meeting went well?”

Silas grimaced, and the warmth died. “Negotiations were made. There are mass casualties in the palace, and they are in mourning. They will not be helping to find the missing dragon. Instead, they asked me to assist in finding the vampires who used to live in this city.” He produced a rolled-up piece of paper. “I have a map of what it used to look like. I’m hoping you have a map of your city, and perhaps we can overlay the two and?”

“We will need a second reference point to orient the maps on top of each other.”

“I am aware. I have flown over the city, so it shouldn’t be that hard.”

“Or you could take the dragon out for another?—”

“I’d rather not. Do you know how hard it is to remove the stink of dragon from your

skin?”

“I don’t... You bathed and got a change of clothes in there?” Obviously, he had. Or he’d stolen them. But they fitted him too well to be stolen. He must’ve had time to try things on.

Silas shrugged. “It was part of the agreement.” He turned his hand holding the paper, revealing two neat punctures on his wrist. “When is the next full moon?”

Noah stared at the bite. A vampire bite. “They bit you?”

“A necessary part of the agreement. Vampires need blood, and the unblooded vampires will need food and water. The dead will need to be brought out and burned, as per our culture.”

“Um...how many dead are we talking about?”

Silas shrugged. “Twenty or so, apparently.”

“You can’t burn twenty bodies in the middle of the city.”

“I wasn’t planning on doing it in the middle of the city. I need to locate the temple.” He gave the map in his hand a small wave, as though locating the temple was the obvious solution.

Noah looked up at him, reminding himself that while Silas seemed human, except for the horns, he wasn’t. This wasn’t a culture clash; it was an entire world of expectations clashing. “Even if you find the temple, you’re going to need permission. You can’t just burn bodies. There’s a whole process.”

Silas’s eyebrows drew together. “They are dead. They will be wrapped and burned in

the temple. That is the process.”

“Not here, it’s not.”

“My people will not be buried in the ground. If that is the process you are referring to.”

“We also cremate people, but there’s a place for that.”

Silas pressed his lips together. “Then I will need to speak to someone in charge.”

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“Have you noticed the chaos everywhere?” Noah flung his hand out. “I’m pretty sure our dead are being refrigerated?—”

“Refrigerated?”

“Kept cold until such time they can be identified and processed.” Noah glanced back at the dragon. Some dead vampires were not going to be at the top of anyone’s list. “I can help you find the missing dragon, but I don’t know anything about dealing with dead bodies or who to talk to. My aunt will be able to help you—she’s a cop”

Silas put his finger beneath Noah’s chin and lifted, forcing him to look up at him. It was such a small, gentle move, Noah could’ve resisted or stepped back or even jerked his head away, but he didn’t.

He did, however, resist the urge to lick his lower lip.

His body betrayed him, heat sliding through his veins and making him hungry for more. More of what, he wasn’t sure, but he knew he smelled of something very different from fear. He hoped the dragon didn’t do him in.

From the curve on Silas’ lips, the dragon didn’t need to say anything.

Noah swallowed, but didn’t pull away.

“You are being most helpful. And it will be rewarded.” Silas said in a low voice that rippled straight through him and lodged in his balls.

His dick throbbed, hard and aching.

Silas was definitely a sex demon. That was the only logical explanation.

“When is the next full moon?” Silas repeated his earlier question.

“In about a week. Why, do you have a deadline?”

“No, but I will need to make a progress report. And I need to negotiate with your grandmother for the use of the bar. Then we will search for the dragon. Can your friends meet us here? Do they have cars?”

“They do, but they may not be able to leave their streets. I’ll find out.”

Silas’ thumb brushed over his chin before releasing him.

Noah drew in a breath. No man had ever affected him like that. It was much easier to admit that he was attracted to Silas now that he wore something stylish, even though it clearly wasn’t human. No, the incubus appeared to have walked off the set of a fantasy movie.

“You do that, and I will talk to Linda about the vampire palace and the other issues.” Silas sighed, and his gaze drifted to something in the distance.

Noah wanted it back on him. Instead, Silas looked as though the weight of a destroyed world had crushed him. No smile curved his lips, and his hazel eyes were haunted, not glinting with gold.

Noah needed to help, even if all he did was move a few small rocks so Silas could breathe. “We’ll sort it out. I’m sure the humans in charge will be grateful for any support; they’ll be glad someone is stepping up to be the voice of your people.”

But even as he said it, he didn't know if it was true. He'd listened to the news as he cleaned up, and some of it was awful. In some places, humans were actively hunting the monsters. And the mythological beings were retaliating. The dragons burning human buildings. Storms taking out bridges and causing landslides.

The head of the European Union had declared a state of emergency while also stating that the mythological beings were not to be hunted—they were to be treated as refugees. A civil war against people who had arrived against their will would only make it harder to rebuild. The cost of repairing the global damage was estimated in the trillions. Some people praised the decision because it set out guidelines while others decried it. Plenty of people ranted about being forced to live alongside them, fearing what vampires and werewolves and others would do.

At least one human cult, convinced the end of days had arrived, had committed mass suicide.

Insurance companies called the collapse an act of god, even though it was man-made and the scientists had taken responsibility, and they were refusing all claims.

Everything was a mess.

And this was his world. He was supposed to know what to do. Meanwhile, the mythological beings had to adapt to a new world with new rules and expectations.

Silas glanced at him. "I know you want that to be true. But I have seen city-states rise and fall. I have seen earthquakes and wars and everything in between. Disaster does not bring out the best in people."

"Not in everyone, but in enough. My aunt says that if a few people start helping, others will join in. The humans are herd animals and will follow a leader."

Silas nodded. “Most people, of any kind, are looking for a leader in times of trouble.”

“Adults are always looking for a more qualified adult.”

Silas frowned.

“It’s a human joke. No one wants to be the adultiest adult in the room because it puts you in charge.” Oh, shit, he’d fed the dragon. Did that now make him the most qualified human when it came to dragons? That wasn’t good.

Silas said something in another language and nodded. “You don’t want to be the last fisher on the fishing boat because you’re the only one left to sacrifice to the mermaids.”

Noah felt his eyebrows lift and was unable to stop them from crawling toward his hairline. “What?”

“Your fishers no longer sacrifice to the mermaids, do they?”

“No,” he said slowly, not sure where this was going or if he wanted an explanation. “Because we don’t have mermaids...or at least I don’t think we do. And if we did, they weren’t bothering anyone.”

Silas snorted. “Mermaids always bother people, and they always expect an offering so they don’t sink boats and cause storms. Which is why, if you are the last fisherman on the boat, you must do what is needed to save your city.” He sighed dramatically, and his shoulders sagged. “I am the last fisherman and the adultiest person here. I guess I should be grateful I don’t need to throw myself into the sea for the mermaids to eat.”

“Absolutely not.” Linda crossed her arms and glared at Pan. “You can’t take Noah dragon hunting. I need his help here.”

Pan tilted his head. “We are not hunting dragons. We are searching for his missing mate. She may be injured.” He hoped that she wasn’t dead. While the city was damaged, there was plenty more damage an annoyed and upset dragon could do, and it wouldn’t make a good first impression on the humans. Pan was beginning to realize how much human cooperation he needed to achieve anything.

“He’s a kid with?—”

“I’m twenty-one,” Noah said as if that disproved Linda’s point.

Only twenty-one. Yet Noah had twenty-one more years of experience in this current version of the human world than Pan. Noah had lived his entire life in this world. The bits that Pan remembered were long gone. There were no carriages or opium dens. There were no painted warriors or druids. Everything he knew about the human world no longer existed.

There were more humans, for a start.

And their technology had progressed rapidly.

Perhaps the lack of magic had forced them to develop other means of making miracles.

Linda shook her head. “Pfft, practically a child. What do you know about looking for dragons?”

“Not a lot. What does any human know about looking for dragons?” Noah countered. “But I have helped search for lost dogs. And I fed the dragon out the back.” He stood

a little straighter. “That makes me the resident human expert.”

Linda barked out a laugh. Pan was tempted to join in, but he wanted Noah on his side. He needed to keep Noah close because, somehow, he had the occasional glimmer of magic.

“You don’t really need me here, and I need to do something useful,” Noah continued.

Linda shook her head. “Given that Silas negotiated the use of this place for the vampires?—”

“I did no such thing.” Pan stamped his foot in frustration. It was less satisfying without hooves. The soft leather of the vampire boot scuffed the floor instead of offering a resounding ring. “I said that passage would need to be negotiated with the owners of the tavern. You own the tavern, and you have the right to demand payment and compensation. You can refuse.”

“And what kind of twat would I be if I refused? They’re stuck in that palace with rotting bodies and no running water. No one can survive that.” Linda jabbed her finger at the two maps on the table. “And how come their leader isn’t out here talking to me?”

“He is dealing with the dead, most of whom are his blood relations. Plus, the children left behind.” That was the easy answer. And while it was also the truth, there was a lot he was leaving out. Feryn was mourning the loss of his family, his city-state, and his world. Sometimes older vampires and elves, who had lived several centuries, developed a kind of melancholy from having seen and lived too much. He felt it occasionally, but for him, it was solved quite easily. He flitted to another continent. He found new followers and granted new prayers or reinvented himself with a different name for the different place. And if he was really tired, he visited a different world.

Elves and vampires rarely took off on a jaunt to see something new, mostly because they worried about their responsibilities and their families. Which made him believe that most of the melancholy was caused by responsibilities.

Which he now had.

What he'd give to go back two hundred years on this world and lie disheveled on a couch, drink absinthe and smoke opium, and fuck until he forgot about everything.

Moving through time was not something he'd ever wanted to do. He didn't know of a single god with that ability. Perhaps it was because magic was always expanding and growing, and to go backwards meant using magic in its current form, which didn't exist in the past. This couldn't work. Trying to make theories about magic without being able to touch it made his horns ache.

Pan lifted his hand, showing Linda the ring again. "I am acting for him. Will your human authorities know what to do when confronted by a vampire, or will they panic? What will they do if they find the dragon?" He bit off the words. "How are the human authorities dealing with my people? Are they being helped or ignored?"

"Nan, please. I want to help."

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Pan smiled at Noah. He didn't care if Noah's desire to help came from curiosity or the goodness of his heart. Or his own desire to do more than look at him. He'd seen the heat in Noah's green eyes. Smelled the lust on his skin and had wanted to kiss him on the steps in front of the dragon.

Linda narrowed her eyes. "You only want to help because he's been using sex demon magic on you."

Pan laughed. That wasn't how incubus magic worked.

"Don't you dare laugh at me, acting Lord Silas Wilde. I see the way you look at him. And now you're all dressed up, I see the way Noah looks at you."

Noah groaned and walked away from the table as if done with the conversation, even though he hadn't been dismissed by him, the acting Lord. So much for the ring giving him any kind of authority with humans.

Pan drew in a breath. "I can honestly say I am not using any magic whatsoever. There is none." He put his hands on the table and leaned over the map. "And I don't coerce people into my bed with magic."

No, but they often wanted magic from him. They loved him for what he did for them.

She held his stare as if unconcerned that she was challenging a temporarily magicless god. If the vampires didn't need her help, he'd put her on his magic-induced inconvenience list. He didn't smite; he just made sure there was always a rock to trip over, a worm in their apple or a hole in their sock. And the more frustrated they

became, the more magic plucked at their laces and spilled their drink.

Noah returned to the table with a glass of water. “Can we focus on the actual issues? Like the missing dragon, the dead in the palace, and the lack of food and water in there.”

And the lack of magic.

But that wasn’t something that could be solved before the next full moon. Or at least he didn’t think it was possible. It felt like a much bigger issue. He would sort out the vampires and the dragon and then have Noah whisper his name until he tasted magic again.

“This is only one building. How many other buildings have trapped vampires and others in them?”

“I don’t know.” Pan shook his head. “And this is only the main city. There are other smaller towns and farms that are also part of the city-state.”

“What is a city-state?” Noah asked as he peered at the map.

“It’s kind of like local government, except they’re independent. They existed in mediaeval times,” Linda said.

Pan had no idea what local government was, though he could guess. “Each city-state had trade deals and alliances with other others. It got very complicated politically. Not all of them rule the same way, either. There was a lord, or a king, or both. If a city had both, one was political, and one was military. There was also usually a Strega, who used magic and read the fate lines, and a knight who dispensed justice. Neither the Strega nor knight have come to the palace, which is troublesome.”

“You think they’re dead?” Linda asked.

“I think we need to go to their homes and check.” Another thing to do before he did what he needed to do. “We need to tell my people that they haven’t been abandoned. They need to realize that this human city isn’t out to harm them.”

It better not intend to harm them.

Not that there was much he could do if the humans decided to slaughter every mythological being. But he could hold a grudge for a very long time, and when his connection to magic returned, he’d make them all suffer. Though he suspected the humans responsible would be long dead.

“The mythological beings here are safe. There is an EU directive that they are refugees.”

They kept using words he didn’t understand and could only guess at. He didn’t like not understanding. “And the EU is?”

“The European Union,” Noah said. “You are lucky you arrived here because in other countries?—”

“We have enough problems without detailing the happenings in other countries,” Linda said rather too quickly. Pan guessed that meant other countries were not treating them as refugees. “These maps are in two different scales. We need at least two other buildings to be able to marry the two together.”

While he’d flown over the human city, it hadn’t been to identify Tarikian buildings. Nor was he familiar with Beita to recognize what he’d been looking at, especially when everything was broken.

Pan considered Noah for a couple of heartbeats. Like the cook who'd made him a sandwich while listening to the radio, Noah had news from other places. Humans didn't have Strega, so how did they get news so fast? "How do you learn what is happening in other countries if you are not connected to magic? If you have no Strega to pass the message?"

"The news and social media." Noah pulled a small black rectangle out of his pocket.

The cook had used the word news, but that didn't tell him how it worked. "How are the newspapers finding the news so fast?"

Pan had no idea what social media was. Just because he recognized the words didn't mean the meaning was conveyed.

Noah tapped the rectangle, then put it on the table. "People record what is happening on their phones and post it to social media—which is kind of like news but informal. So we can see what is happening in other countries. News stations do much the same. They record the events and report on them, and then they're posted to the Internet."

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Pan watched the images on the phone change. It was a portal into someone else's life. Not just a message passed via the Strega but a sign posted for all to see. "What is the Internet?"

"It's our magic way of connecting," Linda said.

Pan frowned. "It's not magic. I can't sense any magic."

But what if they did have magic, and he was the one who was broken? No, he'd caught a glimmer of magic off Noah. It wasn't him. It was this world.

"I think what Nan is saying is that trying to explain the technology will take far too long. But we can see what's happening around the world. Every country is affected by the collapse, and there is fighting in some places."

"Then I need to make sure that my people here don't start fighting." There were far more humans than there were Tarikians, so how he was supposed to do that, he had absolutely no idea. "When I flew over the city last night, I wasn't looking for landmarks."

Now he had a map of Beita he'd be able to locate and identify buildings. Or at least he hoped that would be the case.

He cursed Feryn again, but this time he was quite glad that he had no magic to follow through with that curse. While he understood grief, it was only because he'd seen all kinds of people be swept up in it; it wasn't something he'd ever felt himself. Though the loss of magic was deeply unpleasant and upsetting, and he'd do anything to get it

back.

Maybe that's what grief felt like for mortals.

Unlike other people, though, this wasn't his forever as he would reconnect with magic. The alternative was far too terrifying to even contemplate. But the word rolled around his head in every language he had ever known.

Mortal.

Gods didn't die...death was possible, sure, but they didn't die of natural causes. They were killed, usually by other gods. Which wasn't any more reassuring, given that in his current state, it was rather too easy to kill him.

"We don't need to fly over the city. We can walk out the door with your map," Noah said, pointing to the palace on the map. "The spire is a good landmark because it's tall."

"It would be taller if three floors weren't buried underground," Pan muttered.

"No one's going to be digging that up in a hurry," Linda said. "Noah's right. Go for a walk for a couple of blocks, identify what you can. Then, once we orientate the maps, we can make a logical plan."

"And what am I supposed to tell the dragon?" Because walking off and leaving a dragon behind the palace was not a good idea. The dragon might get hungry. Not only that, they weren't known for their patience.

"They didn't live in the city, did they?" Noah asked.

"No, they lived on the outskirts. They like hills and such." He pointed to a couple of

likely places on the map. “But maps mean nothing to a dragon. They can talk, but they have no concept of time. He doesn’t understand how he’s ended up in this strange city and why the palace is so small. It’s like talking to a small child. A lost and hungry small child.”

“How hungry?”

“That depends on how recently he hunted.”

Linda stared at him for far too long, and it was not the nice, warm stare that Noah gave him. This one was as sharp as a sword, as if she saw straight through him and knew he was hiding things. He didn’t like it. It was dangerous.

“I’ll talk to the butcher and see if he’s got any carcasses going to waste. And while you two take your walk, I will call my daughter, Meredith. Perhaps she can help with the locating of the Strega and knight or at least speak to the people in charge of this mess so they are aware they should speak to you regarding mythological issues.”

Yes, that is exactly what he needed: more people coming to him with more problems. He was already missing the euphoria of the vampire bite. At least while warm in its embrace, nothing mattered. He simply existed.

Which would have been more relaxing if he hadn’t been untethered from magic. Instead, the euphoria had made it clear he was on his own in a way he had never been, or at least didn’t remember.

Pan rolled up the map of Beita.

Noah stopped him and pointed to a labeled arrow. “What does that say?”

“Calla.”

His eyebrows lifted. “What is Calla?”

“The neighboring city-state.” Wasn’t that obvious? There had been similar markings on three sides of the map, indicating all three neighboring city-states. The fourth side was, of course, the coast and the selkie town, which technically fell under the protection of the city-state, though the selkies considered themselves independent. And much like mermaids, most sensible people left them alone.

The male selkies could be savage—both in bed and on the battlefield.

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While mermaids were friends with no one, selkies were friendly with all, until someone was stupid enough to cross one. And crossing one meant facing the wrath of all. Or it had.

“Allies or enemies?”

Pan gave him a weak smile. “That depends.”

“On what?” Noah’s frown deepened.

“Exactly that. Is it trade, and if so, for what, and if it’s for war, well, it depends on who you’re fighting.”

Both humans looked at him with disbelief etched on their faces. “Is it not the same here?”

It used to be the last time he’d been in the human world.

“No,” Linda said slowly, weighing her words. “Countries join alliances and don’t fight the countries in that alliance unless they want to be kicked out.”

That made sense, but what if there was an old enemy in the alliance? Were those grudges supposed to be ignored? “For the details on the alliances with the neighboring city-states, you will need to deal with Lord Feryn, as I am not privy to those arrangements.” He finished rolling the map. “For the moment, I don’t think the details of the old alliances matter, as we are all dealing with the same problem.”

And the more he understood about the extent of the problem, the more it seemed too big to fix. Even if he had magic and worshippers, this was beyond his power. Even gods had limits. And he was at the end of his. This mortal body needed feeding and sleep. And he wanted to sit down and let somebody else sort all of this out.

Noah handed him a water bottle and something in a crinkly wrapper. “Come on.”

He followed Noah out of the kitchen.

“Make him put a hat on so the horns are hidden,” Linda called after them.

“She’s right.” Noah pulled a black knitted hat off a hook. “It was left here a few weeks ago. No one’s returned to claim it. We also have three jackets and a pair of gloves. We threw out the underpants and socks—I don’t know how they were left behind.” His lips twitched. “I mean, I can guess about the underwear, but the socks?”

Pan took the offered hat and pulled it on.

Noah reached out and adjusted it. His fingertips grazed Pan’s cheek as he lowered his hand. “There you go. Do you want a coat as well, or will you be warm enough?”

“I’ll take a coat.” Then, the clothes that weren’t human in style would be hidden. It was safer, easier, to appear human.

Noah handed him a dark green one. “That should fit.”

It did, and he mimicked Noah shoving the bottle and what he assumed was food into a pocket. He kept the map in his hand.

“Why are you helping when it’s easier for you to walk away?”

Noah shrugged. “Because it’s the right thing to do. And if I’m doing something, I can’t freak out.” He tilted his head toward the bar. “And the palace is a bit hard to avoid, given that I work here.”

“You aren’t worried about vampires and others.”

Noah glanced away. “Of course I am. Everything that I have only ever heard of in myths and stories is real, although not in the way the stories said. I can’t go home, and I’m not sure I want to because my parents are difficult. Which makes me sound like a terrible person.”

“A terrible person does not help strangers.”

Noah gave him a wan smile. “Maybe I’m just doing it because you have a dragon.”

“He is not my dragon. He is not anyone’s dragon. But I should explain to him what is going on. Or at least part of it and hope he doesn’t eat me in the process.”

The way his life was going, getting eaten by a dragon was not going to be the worst thing that happened to him.

“Please don’t get eaten. You’re the only one who knows how to talk to him.”

Pan huffed. “For a moment, I thought you might say it was because you like me.”

Noah gave him that glance, the one where his green eyes became molten and dangerous, and Pan almost tasted magic in the air. If he kissed Noah...

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“You’re cute, but you know that given what you are.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the kitchen as if he expected Linda to be listening.

“Cute?” He was a god! He wasn’t cute. He was... He wasn’t a god at the moment, and Noah believed him to be an incubus.

“Yeah, a bit too twinkly to be my type.”

“I have no idea what that sentence means.” Noah seemed to string words together because they sounded good. But it felt as though Noah had both complimented him and turned him down in the same breath.

Noah opened the door. “I’ll explain twinks, twunks, and social media as we locate landmarks. And you can explain Strega and incubi to me.”

CHAPTER14

Noah shoved his hands into his coat pocket. Next to him, Silas did the same. It was midafternoon, but the air was cool and had a bite. With the coat and hat on, Silas appeared to be human. Almost. Maybe it was the way he carried himself. Or his expression. But there was something about him that made Noah’s skin tingle.

Not with fear. He wasn’t sure what the sensation was, but it was dangerous, as when he was around Silas, all he wanted to do was touch him.

And while Silas said he wasn’t using any magic because there wasn’t any in this world, that didn’t mean he wasn’t using something else. He was, after all, a sex

demon...unless Nan was right, and Silas was lying. But why would he?

“So yes, incubi do eat food, but the energy generated by sex is way more satisfying,” Silas said, continuing his explanation.

“How long can you go without?”

Silas glanced at him. “Without eating or without sex?”

“It’s the same for you, isn’t it?” He jumped over a rather large crack in the footpath. The crack continued up through the building, widening as it reached the roof. “How big was the palace? How far does it stretch underground?”

Silas jumped over the gap, and they both stared up at the newsagent that wouldn’t be reopening any time soon.

Silas frowned as though offended by the destruction. “I can’t answer that as I’m not familiar with the city.”

“Yet the vampire lord has made you acting lord... Why?” What was so special about Silas that the lord trusted him? The warning Nan had given him echoed in his mind.

“Because I was the first one to knock and offer?”

Noah grimaced. “You could be some kind of criminal.”

Silas snorted and walked on. “I’m glad you think so highly of me.”

“I’m trying to understand.” Because there were things that weren’t adding up. “You said there’s no magic, so what will the Strega be able to do?”

Silas turned around. “I don’t know any more than you. In fact, you know more because this is your fucking world. Your town, not mine. You understand how things work, and you understand the technology in your little magic rectangle.”

“Phone.”

“I know what it’s called. I was making a point.” He pressed his lips together and crossed his arms. “I don’t want to be acting anything. I don’t particularly want to search for a missing dragon, either. All I want is my magic.”

“So why did you agree to it?”

“Because asking the dragon to take me to the palace was the quickest way for me to get there. But the dragon would only help me if I agreed to help him.”

Noah didn’t understand Silas’ exasperation. “That sounds reasonable.”

Silas tilted his head. “I should’ve known you’d take the dragon’s side.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Silas considered him for a second. “Just that humans have a long history of either fawning over dragons or fighting them.”

Noah opened his mouth and closed it again. Even though he suspected the truth, he needed to ask. “So there used to be dragons in this world.”

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“Of course there was. But they weren’t going to stay when you were busy hunting them.” He sighed. “There used to be much more crossover between our worlds. Perhaps it was the lessening of magic here that reduced the contact, or the rise of technology, or perhaps the way humans started attacking those who weren’t like them. Our myths have as many holes as yours and just as many mistruths.”

Over the road, the florist was boarding up windows. Flowers were hardly an essential business, so it would be a low priority. Noah pointed further up to the street corner. “That’s new.”

They crossed the road. Noah was surprised that this section wasn’t too badly damaged. There was no rhyme or reason to the cracks or buckling. They stopped and stared at the meter-high piece of something. It was made of stone and about a meter square. On the ground next to it was a smashed statue. Silas bent and picked up a chunk of stone. He placed it on top of the pale brick box, then pulled out the map. “It might be part of the bridge. Or some other landscape feature around the palace. We’re definitely inside the palace grounds.”

“How can you be sure?”

Silas traced what Noah assumed was a scale bar along the side. Before tapping the palace on the map. “Because if the spire is there, we have not walked far enough to be beyond the grounds.”

“So we need to get out of the palace grounds. Perhaps you should’ve taken the dragon up.”

“I’m wearing clean clothing. Perhaps you should’ve clung onto his leg and gone up.”

“His leg? You don’t ride on a dragon’s back?”

Silas laughed, tears forming in the corner of his eyes. “I would love to see you try, but I don’t want to see you killed, either. You might manage to climb onto his back, but the first thing he’d do would be to launch up and then roll so you fall off. Then he’d probably catch you and eat you in a couple of bites. And no one would condemn him for it.”

“Right, so laws don’t apply to dragons.”

“There are definitely laws around dragons. Most of them involve being polite and not pissing them off. So, if you tried to ride one, you would be the one at fault. There are similar laws about mermaids.”

“Don’t piss them off, or the one about human sacrifices?”

“Both. Tariko is...was...made up of many cultures. Some places only had one or two different beings. Others were a mosaic of many. A city where elves and vampires and minotaurs and werewolves?—”

“Werewolves?”

“Wolf shifters. I have heard humans have tales about them and other kinds of shifters. Anyway, they all had their own culture and ways of doing things. And yes, there were clashes, but for the most part, people got along.”

“And where do incubi fit in?”

Silas was silent for several seconds. “They usually leave home and travel with others

around the same age until they find a place they want to stop.”

“And no one cares incubi feed on sex?”

“Why would they? The sheer number of people having sex in a city can sustain quite a number of incubi. It’s not as though incubi go round having sex with everyone. Though that is a very good way to feed.” Silas’ voice lowered, and the way he looked at Noah made him feel as though he were Silas’ next meal.

“Does it hurt?”

Silas’ eyebrows pinched together. “Does what hurt?”

“Being fed on.”

“No. Some people enjoy it.” Silas took a step closer.

Noah resisted the urge to lick his lower lip—not that it mattered, as that’s where Silas’ gaze landed anyway. “So, to find your magic, you need to be around people having sex?”

Silas glanced away. “It’s not that easy. I’m hoping the Strega will have some answers.”

“And if she has no connection to magic?”

“Then it’s not only me. Which is an answer. Not a good one. Although if I’m broken and can’t reconnect to magic, that’s not good either.” He shook his head, his dark curls bouncing around his cheeks. “None of this is good.”

“Yeah, the collapse kind of fucked up my world, too.”

Silas made a noise that might have been agreement. “Do we keep walking in this direction, hoping for another clue, or do we go around the block?”

“If we go around the block, we’ll still be too close to the palace. Let’s continue.”

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They left the broken statue on the ground and continued up the road. There'd be two or three businesses that appeared to be completely undamaged, then the next building would be cracked or collapsed.

Traffic lights had fallen over, along with some power poles and streetlights. Ahead, the police had blocked off the road. Noah stopped. Going through the blockade was more trouble than it was worth. He was supposed to be working at the pub, not wandering the streets.

"I think we should go down the side street." Noah also didn't want to explain to the cops that they were locating mythological buildings because they had a map of the city—though, at some point, he'd need to talk to Aunt Mer about what could be done.

He turned into the side street and stopped. Because there was no street.

Instead, two meters in front of him, a stone bridge arched out of the ground before diving into the asphalt.

"Looks like we've found the bridge over the river," Silas said as though that were a positive. "And if you look up, that statue matches the one we found. So if you know where we are, we can return to the tavern and match this up, which gives us a starting point for the missing dragon."

Noah stared up at the bridge, then back at the asphalt as an oily sensation swirled in his gut. "If that's the bridge that led out of the palace grounds, and there were people who lived and worked in the palace... Where are they?"

Most of the palace was three floors underground. If people had been standing outside when the collapse happened...did that mean they were now underground?

CHAPTER15

That was a good question. But one Pan couldn't answer and didn't want to think too deeply about. Because then he'd remember the selkies, and he didn't need the nightmares. Though he was going to have them, anyway.

"Are they stuck underground?" Noah whispered as though too scared to voice the fear.

Pan winced. It had been easier to ignore when it was only a passing thought. "I've been trying to avoid that possibility. It's possible, given that some buildings appear to have pushed out of the ground. But other others seem to have dropped. I'm pretty sure I was dropped, along with the people I was with."

"And where are they?"

"They are dead." And now thoughts of skin-less selkies were going to fill his head for the rest of the afternoon. They'd lost their skin. Vampires had lost their beauty. How had others been impacted?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't say sorry if you're not going to take any actions," He snapped. He shouldn't argue with Noah when it wasn't as though he could take any action. Without magic, he was as useless as a human.

"I said I'd help find the dragon. I don't know what else to do." He scuffed his shoe on the footpath and stared at the ground. "The authorities are ordering people to stay

home, if possible, unless they are volunteering. Because my uncle and aunt are busy, I'm supposed to be watching Nan, or she's supposed to be watching me. It's like they expect one of us to do something stupid."

"And what would they define as stupid?"

Noah smiled. "Looking for a dragon."

"So they are correct."

Noah glanced at him with one eyebrow lifted. "You're taking their side, even though I agreed to help you?"

"I'm not taking their side. Looking for a lost dragon is stupid. However, you said they expected you to do something they considered stupid. Meaning you have proved them correct." He shrugged as though it was the obvious conclusion.

Noah's expression turned to puzzlement. "Sometimes, when you talk, I'm not sure I want to help you."

Pan opened and then closed his mouth. Erring on the side of not saying anything. He'd said nothing that should upset Noah, yet he had. They turned and retraced their steps, making their way back to the palace. He needed Noah, which meant he needed to appease him.

He wasn't used to appeasing anyone; it was supposed to be the other way around. Centuries of being on the other side gave him the words to say. "I did not mean to upset you. That was not my intention."

Noah kicked a piece of rubble. "It's usually me upsetting people."

“I find that hard to believe.”

“That’s because you haven’t met my parents.” Noah stopped in the middle of the street. “Shit. There’s a cop car out the front of the pub.”

At least the car wasn’t flashing and wailing. “What does it mean, and why is it bad?”

The cops were helping people, weren’t they? Or were they only helping humans?

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“It means Aunt Meredith is here, and Nan has told her everything, and I won’t be allowed to look for the dragon. I don’t know what it means for you.”

The way the last couple of days had been, nothing good. The ring on his finger was heavy, and he couldn’t help his people on his own. He needed humans, and while Noah had agreed to help, he was a no-one as he had no authority.

He had something more valuable, a glimmer of magic.

Pan needed both, and he didn’t like needing anyone. Everything was much easier with magic. Though if he had magic, he’d be able to hear all the prayers and the calls for help, and they’d be rather deafening given the mess.

“We cannot avoid your family, and I need to speak with those in charge.” He took a couple of steps, then turned when Noah hadn’t fallen into step beside him.

Noah had his hands shoved in his pocket. “I don’t want to go home and wait to be told it’s safe to go out. I want to do something...” He sighed and glanced at the gray sky. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to you.” And it was something other than being sent home that bothered him. Pan didn’t need magic to see that. He felt it, a longing that he didn’t understand and couldn’t name because he didn’t have magic. “What do you want to do?”

“Something that matters. Like, I’ve always believed there’s more to life than getting good grades and turning up to work. And, I don’t know, I came here hoping to find it and thought meeting Liam and Web and learning about Wicca and stuff was it.” He

shook his head. “Then this happened, and what are the odds that the palace would smoosh together with the pub?”

Pan stared at the human man and attempted to decipher the ramble. Even if he didn’t understand word for word now, he understood the issue. “You are seeking a reason for being.”

Noah shrugged and returned to staring at the ground as if studying the cracks and ripples might provide the answers he sought. “It’s stupid. Mum said it was stupid. Life is about working and buying shit that made you happy.”

“And for some people, it is. Some people are very happy working hard and buying pretty things. And others are very happy making pretty things for them to buy. A smaller number of people need more, seek more, even though they cannot name it. They flit from thing to thing, trying to do what is expected, seeking a fulfillment that doesn’t exist for them in the places where others find joy.”

“So I’m doomed to endlessly seek?”

“Some live for the seeking.” But he did not think that Noah was one of them. Those people quested for knowledge, or ideas and inventions. They were dreamers who spoke to the gods not with asks for help but for greater wisdom. There was a fine line between them and madness—the latter was what they were called if the nature of their quest became destructive. “Others have a calling that has yet to find them. That is a hard path.”

“Thanks for the un-motivational talk.”

“It was helpful. After all, if you can name the problem, you are closer to solving it.”

Noah lifted his gaze and glared at him. “How the hell am I supposed to find a calling

when I don't know what the calling is?"

He doubted Hel would offer her assistance as quests and callings weren't her thing.

Usually, he'd say speak to the gods, but Noah was already doing that, and without magic, Pan wasn't able to help him. He frowned. That wasn't entirely true. "What do you like about magic?"

"I never said magic."

"You said Wicca. Witchcraft? The old gods and rituals? Is that not magic?" He fucking hoped it was. What if Noah was the key to magic returning? That little taste of sweetness when Noah whispered his name in prayer was a glimmer of his true power.

When was the last time a human witch had truly held magic? Out of habit, he reached for magic to find the answer, but there was only the hollow, raw wound.

"I guess. Not that we ever achieved much beyond some free beers or concert tickets."

"You asked and received?"

Another shrug. "Yeah... Lots of people manifest things."

So there was some form of magic still in this world. He needed to seek the glimmers that vanished as fast as they formed. Threads too tiny for him to see.

"Interesting."

"It's not." Noah shook his head. "It's mostly luck, being in the right place at the right time, and being open to ideas."

“That is more of a skill than you realize. When we find the Strega, she will be able to help you. She can read the fate lines. In the meantime...” he threw up his hands as if scattering magic. “Manifest the missing dragon.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

Pan tapped each finger in turn, marking off a to-do list. “Pray to Pan. Convince your aunt that it is the right thing to do so the dragon behind the palace doesn’t start burning buildings and eating people. Gather your friends and...I’ll come up with something else.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“Much the same to start.”

“And why are you so obsessed with Pan? There are other gods and goddesses.”

Pan opened his mouth, but he didn't have a good lie. And as soon as he met with other Tarikians, they'd take one look at his curly horns and realize he wasn't an incubus. When Noah met the vampires, he'd learn the truth, and the lie would fester between them.

Noah took a step closer, his gaze narrowed. “Nan said you aren't an incubus and that you're hiding something. And the vampire lord put you in charge, a supposed traveler he'd never met before? You also speak Dragon?—”

“It's not that hard to learn. They have a limited vocabulary.”

“And you can speak English.” Noah was now the one counting off a list on his fingers.

“Again, not that hard. I've always had a gift for languages.” He held Noah's gaze, torn between telling him the truth and wanting to see if he figured it out.

“You know an awful lot about this world, yet you only look a few years older than me.”

Pan smiled. “I am much older.”

“How much older?”

“I’m not sure.” That was the truth. At some point, centuries and millennia all blended together.

Noah took another step closer, his stare defiant as though daring to challenge a god. “I pray that Pan will reveal the truth to me because I don’t keep friends who lie.”

Ah, there it was. That flutter of magic, a sweetness on Pan’s tongue that left him craving more, and it vanished before he had a chance to use it

“Ha!” Noah stepped back and pointed at him. “Why do your eyes do that when I pray to Pan?”

Pan tilted his head. “What do my eyes do?”

“Flicker with gold.”

He gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it happened before. I thought it was the light...” His lips twisted into a grin. “You’re him. Pan.”

Pan put his hand over Noah’s mouth and lowered his voice, whispering in his ear. “Do not say that again.”

Noah licked his palm.

His tongue tickled, and Pan laughed. “I would rather you lick elsewhere, but you may worship my hand if you choose.”

Noah pulled a face.

“You are correct, and I really do love hearing my name on your lips. It is also the only way I get even a glimmer of magic. I have none. I am currently mortal, which is as horrifying as it sounds. My people need help, and I am impotent, yet if they lose faith in their gods, then magic may not return. And I hope you agree that a world without magic is a terrible place.” He removed his hand and swallowed, trusting that he hadn’t revealed too much of the truth. “I pray you understand my need for the deception.”

Noah glared at him. “So you only like me because you’re jonesing for magic, and I’m your hit.”

Pan lifted an eyebrow as he processed the words and the intent behind them. “No. Maybe. You are also very pretty, and you want to help me search for the dragon.”

“Do I?”

“I’ll introduce you to the Strega.” Assuming she was alive. He’d need a new plan if she wasn’t, and he could only plan so far ahead. “For the moment, all I ask is that you do not reveal the truth to others.”

“How can I be sure it’s the truth when you lie so easily?”

The words stung. He was a god, and he didn’t owe anyone anything. He didn’t plead for favors. Or he hadn’t. Everything was different now, including him. Now he was the petitioner, asking to be blessed by magic.

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He didn't drop to his knees, but he voiced his request as sincerely as possible without sounding desperate. "Please. I will be in your debt if you could find it in your seeking heart to assist me and my people."

"And pray to you. Do you know how weird that is?"

"No." Pan shook his head. "That's what happens. People pray to me, and I use magic to help them. Sometimes I show up, and we have a...party."

"Party?"

"There are more fun ways to worship on your knees than prayer."

Understanding and heat flickered in Noah's eyes. "Since I have more magic than you, perhaps you should be worshipping me."

Noah smiled, and Pan wondered if he also looked that smug when he reached a great conclusion or did grand acts of magic. He brushed past and walked toward the dark wooden pub door.

Pan watched with his mouth open. The nerve. The audacity. No one refused him. People begged to serve him. But Noah had a point—if they were comparing magic, which they weren't—worshipping Noah might create more magic. "Fine. I will."

Noah stopped on the footpath out the front. His nose was pink from the cold, but his eyes were bright. "What do you mean, you will?"

“Exactly that.” Pan walked over and placed his palms against Noah’s cheeks. He drew in his breath and closed his eyes. He’d never prayed to anybody. Never worshipped anybody. But he knew how it went. That for it to mean anything, the ask had to come from the heart. And given how incredibly mortal he was, he was very aware of the beating of his heart and the blood rushing through his veins. It was quite distracting at times. Like now, as he touched Noah, his blood rushed to his dick which hardened and demanded attention which it wasn’t going to get since he was the one doing the worshipping.

This was kind of fucked.

This was beneath him.

No, he was mortal, and Noah had more magic in a single word than he had in his entire body. It was almost as if the old gods, the ones who no longer existed or who no longer troubled themselves with such puny matters, were doing this deliberately.

“Noah of the seeking heart, please show me the way forward so that I may return to wholeness. Let me be your servant.” This was killing him. He wanted to snatch his hands away and demand that Noah pray to him. Noah should be begging to be blessed by him. A god humbling himself to a human was unheard of. It was needed if he ever wanted to reconnect with magic. “Allow me to bask in your benevolence and blessings. I beseech thee to turn your loving gaze on me and turn your magic to my plight.” He was close enough now that Noah’s breath whispered over his lips. “And now you respond.”

“Do you respond to everyone who prays to you?”

Pan opened his eyes. “No, because that’s rather a lot.” Did that mean Noah wasn’t going to respond to him? “But I hear their prayers and sometimes send magic.” Which made him sound like a wet streak of mermaid shit. “And sometimes the act of

asking the gods for help is enough to stir up the magic so that I didn't need to step in. Magic is unpredictable and doesn't always help."

"Yet you want it back."

"It is part of me. I am without a limb, without a sense, and unable to help my people."

"You seem to be doing okay, having already agreed to help a dragon and a vampire."

If he had magic, he'd have already found the dragon. "Did you sense anything when I prayed to you?"

"Um... yes..." His cheeks turned pink. "Though I wouldn't call it magical."

Pan leaned closer. "You might be surprised by what is considered magic."

Noah's tongue flicked over his lower lip. "Uh-huh. Why don't you show me?"

He didn't need a second ask. He closed the gap between their lips, tilting his head as if he were a suppliant, but it was Noah's lips that parted first as he gave the blessing.

Time ceased to exist.

Pan wasn't sure if his heart was beating or if his lungs were working. None of that mattered, though, because there was magic on Noah's tongue, even if it wasn't flowing through Pan's veins. There was a sharpness in the air they shared. And he made damn sure to worship Noah's mouth as if he'd never get the chance again.

The pub door opened, and the spell was broken. The tiny shimmers of magic faded away. Noah gasped, and Pan stepped backward, letting his hands fall away even though he missed Noah's skin on his palms immediately.

It wasn't Linda standing in the doorway, but a woman in dark clothes and a tight bun. Her eyes were the same green as Noah's, but she held herself with authority. This must be the aunt.

Her gaze flicked between the two of them. "Is there a problem, Noah?"

"No. The incubus was a bit hungry, so I let him have a snack."

If he was an incubus, that would've been a delicious snack. Instead, magic was edging him mercilessly.

CHAPTER16

Noah wasn't sure why he lied for Silas...or Pan, or whatever else he called himself. And even though his lips were tingling from the kiss, he wasn't entirely sure why he allowed it. It wasn't as though he went round kissing every man he found attractive. And he'd be lying if he said Silas wasn't attractive—in a smug 'I know I'm hot' kind of way.

And while Noah had never met a sex demon, he was willing to bet they didn't kiss as well as Silas. That kiss had made him never want to surface. He'd wanted to drown, and he was sure that if it had continued, he'd have come. He'd have also forgotten his name and how to breathe. He was still half hard as they once again sat in the kitchen and stared at the maps.

Pan, a god, had worshippedhim.

Askedhimfor a favor.

No one had ever spoken to him that way, and it had been weird at first. If Pan hadn't been holding his face, he'd have squirmed away. But then, something had changed, and he'd glimpsed the power and the possibilities. Was that the magic Pan craved?

Did having magic make him a god?

“Noah?” Aunt Meredith said as though she’d been trying to catch his attention.

He’d been too busy thinking about the kiss and magic to pay attention to the maps, which now had more marks on them.

Meredith was unimpressed by the find the missing dragon plan. Though she was quite happy that they had maps of Beita and were able to line them up. She was also unimpressed that he had kissed or been kissed by Pan and that Pan was the point of contact for the mythological people.

The vampire palace that was now part of her mother’s pub was another point of contention. Meredith looked like she was done with everything, but then she had been working long hours since the collapse.

“I need to help with the dragon finding because I am the only one who can speak Dragon unless you have come across the city’s knight,” Pan said. “Locating the knight and the Strega will be very helpful for my people.”

“You need to come and see them for yourself. There are only a few there who speak English, who can act as translators, which makes interviewing them very slow.”

Pan tilted his head.

Noah frowned. “How do they know English?”

“They said they were taught by someone who appeared in their world about six months ago.” Meredith glanced at Pan. “Do you know anything about that?”

Pan wrinkled his nose. “There were odd things arriving in our world. People, buildings, and other bits. We didn’t know what was causing it. Magic was also behaving strangely. Is the human who taught them there?”

“No. They said he was from Calla.” She touched the arrow on the map, which now also had Calla written in human letters. “I can take a guess where Calla is...which means I can put word out. Do they also have dragons?”

“Most city-states do.”

Meredith sighed. “Great. Is there anything else I need to know immediately? My boss will also want to talk to you.”

Pan grimaced. “The vampires are going to need blood, or at least the blooded vampires need blood. The children won’t; they’ll need food. Also, any vampires in town may be in hiding because the lack of magic has left them, well, for lack of a better word, hideous.”

“There are half a dozen werewolves who look like they stepped out of a horror movie. I doubt vampires are going to be any more terrifying,” Meredith said. “I’ll report that there are bodies to be removed. Mum, are you okay with feeding the vampires in the spire?”

Linda nodded. “I can feed them for a bit.”

Noah watched his aunt as she made a face that meant she was running through a dozen different options and not liking any of them. “We don’t have the personnel to go searching for a dragon. How did you lose something as big as a bus?”

“We didn’t deliberately lose a dragon. We didn’t choose to have our world ripped apart.” There was an edge in Pan’s voice Noah hadn’t heard before. “But I owe the dragon this favor, and where I am from, keeping your word matters.” Pan rolled up the map the vampire had given him. “Now I can find where the dragons lived.”

“You can.” Meredith agreed. “Noah, can you step outside with me?”

Noah glanced at Pan. If he sensed there was a problem, it didn't show. Noah knew from experience that this was where he got a dressing down and told to behave better.

They didn't go out the back where the dragon waited but stood on the footpath, far too close to where Pan had kissed him.

"I appreciate that you want to help, and I'm sure David could do with an extra pair of hands at the school. It will be safer than chasing after dragons."

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“You heard what Silas said.” Noah used the name Pan wanted people to use. “The dragon is tired and cranky and hungry and missing his mate?—”

“Yes, and then he’ll start burning things. And then we’ll be ordered to kill him. It’s a mess. I am aware.”

“I don’t think we should be killing dragons. They are the symbol of Wales.”

She glared at him, and it took everything he had not to step back. “There has already been violence between humans and the mythologicals. A dragon burning homes and buildings will be a danger to everyone.”

“All the more reason to help prevent it.”

“Noah, the military is being rolled out. This is a large-scale disaster that will take years, decades, to recover from.”

“I’ve seen the news. Maybe the military and the people in charge need to be asking Silas how to help. Or the other mythologicals who speak English...or something instead of rounding them up.”

“We aren’t rounding them up. We are protecting them. There are a lot of angry people in town who’ve lost people.” She lifted her hand. “On both sides. We don’t know anything about the mythologicals?—”

“They are literally in our stories.”

“Stories which are old and may only carry a grain of truth.”

She was right, but why were some myths real and others discarded as fantasy? “That hasn’t stopped people from believing some stories are entirely truthful.”

Meredith sighed. “I’m not debating religion with you.”

Noah tried to act innocent. “I might have been talking about Greek myths or Cinderella.”

“You weren’t. Look, you don’t know Silas, and he was kissing you. You’re hardly impartial.”

He knew Pan’s real name, which was more than he bothered to find out about some guys he’d fucked or let fuck him. Though that wouldn’t win him the argument. “Was I supposed to let him starve?”

She remained silent for a moment before sighing and shaking her head. “No.”

“I said I’d help with the dragon. My word matters.” He echoed Pan’s words. “Web and Liam can also help.”

Her eyebrows twitched as if she was biting back a comment about his friends. He’d seen the same expression on his mother’s face too many times not to recognize it. “And how are you going to search? Why hasn’t the other dragon been flying around searching for her mate? What are you going to do if she’s dead? This is dangerous. There might be wild mythological animals out there.”

He hadn’t considered wild animals.

Weird mythological wild animals.

“Liam lives on this side of town. We can use his car. And we’ll take water and such.”

Meredith stared at him. “You’re not using the dragon to fly around?”

“Yeah, nah, apparently riding a dragon isn’t a thing.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “We’re hoping to leave him here with a side of beef or something. And the dragon is going to need to hunt, which means farmers might lose the occasional animal. I think there’s some logistics to work out.”

“Some logistics?” She pursed her lips and blew out a breath. “It’s a logistical nightmare. It’s not one city or one?—”

“I know.” With social media and the news, there was no avoiding that this was a global problem.

“No, you don’t, Noah. When there’s a disaster, other countries and cities volunteer their resources. They can’t. Because everyone is in the same situation. Getting water and power and sewage working again is the priority, and that’s the tip of the iceberg. Roads need to be fixed, otherwise the trucks that transport food and other goods won’t be able to get through. They will be the priority, not our little suburban streets...” She shook her head. “We can’t ask London to send extra medics or cadaver dogs to go through rubble because they’re in a worse situation. The morgue is full of humans and mythologicals. It’s going to take months to check all the buildings, to make sure they’re stable. It will take years to rebuild, and it will never be the same.”

Noah swallowed. Knowing it was global was one thing, but he hadn’t thought about what that meant. Growing up in Australia, when it was bushfire season, America often sent equipment and firefighters, and Australia did the same for them. And when there’d been a tsunami in Asia, lots of countries had sent help.

They helped because they could. Now, everyone was on their own.

“I’m trying to help. I need to help. To do something. And David will have plenty of human volunteers, but who is volunteering to help the mythologicals? You heard what Silas said. If they listen to the language, they can learn it, but who is going to talk to them? Or take a radio or a TV. I’m sure they would like to help their own people.”

“It’s not that simple.”

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Noah scrubbed his hand over his face, his frustration swelling with each breath. “Why not? They didn’t choose to come here. And now they’re stuck, according to the scientists. We’re all stuck. And everything is broken. And I may never be able to go home.”

Meredith put her arms out, and Noah stepped into her embrace. He rested his head on her shoulder. As much as he constantly disappointed his parents, they were his parents, and they were supposed to tell him that everything would be fine. They wouldn’t, though. His mother would tell him to stop worrying and to get on with it. Without offering any practical advice on how to do it. At least Meredith helped nail down the practicalities.

“They grounded the planes because of dragons and other flying things. The runways were also damaged. It won’t be this week or even next month, but air travel will resume. People smarter than you and me will figure things out.”

“But it’s never going to be how it was.” And even though some countries were busy killing the mythologicals, that didn’t change the fact that they were there, and those countries would forever have blood on their hands.

“No, I have no idea what it will be like. Perhaps we’ll end up with vampire doctors.” She laughed and released him. “I’m going to call my boss and tell him about Silas and the missing dragon and the need to take action.”

“And about talking to the mythologicals so they can learn English.”

“Teaching them English is pretty low on the list.”

“You need more translators, more who can communicate. Maybe the werewolves can help find people trapped under rubble.” He shrugged. “Assuming they have a dog-like sense of smell.”

“You’re also assuming that humans trust them.”

Humans or cops? Or both? Or was it Meredith who didn’t trust them?

“I’m going to call Liam. We’ll meet him at the checkpoint. Can you make sure that Nan and I get a pass or something to be allowed through without a hassle? I’m guessing Silas will need something, too.” The ring on his finger wouldn’t mean anything to the cops.

Meredith gave him a look. “Anything else?”

“Food for the dragon?” Or was that pushing it?

“Already on my list. Go in and pack up.”

Noah took two steps away.

“For the record, I don’t like this,” Meredith said in her official voice. “You might be eaten by a dragon or used in a sex demon ritual.”

Noah grinned and put his hand to his forehead. “Oh no, however, will I cope? A hot sex demon wants to fuck me.”

“Noah, take this seriously.”

“I am.” And couldn’t promise to say no if Pan did want to fuck.

“Fine. Stay in contact, though I can’t promise help.” Meredith shooed him away.
“And come back alive. I do not want to be calling my sister with that news.”

If he died, at least he wouldn’t be the one making that phone call.

“I promise that not dying is at the top of my list.” He ducked back into the pub before Meredith could say anything else.

He texted Liam that Operation Dragon Hunt was going ahead and that they’d meet at the checkpoint.

Yes! I’ll see you in thirty.

In the kitchen, Nan and Pan were loading up his backpack. Pan was telling her about vampires, explaining the difference between the blooded and unblooded and how blood changed them and allowed them to use blood magic, which was different from the magic that elves used.

Pan glanced up and smiled at him. “Are you able to look for the dragon?”

He made it sound as though Noah needed permission to go looking for the dragon.

“She’s worried we’re all going to end up eaten.” Which wasn’t the whole truth, but it was near enough.

“The scared and hungry dragon by your door is more likely to eat you at this point,” Pan said, as though that was reassuring.

“The butcher said he’d bring something over when he’s done sorting out his shop. He’s got no power, so the meat is going to spoil, and he doesn’t want it going to waste.”

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“Dragons don’t hunt every day. They feast, and then it’ll be a handful of days before they hunt again. Feryn may part with some gold for the dragon’s upkeep.”

“I think he’s glad that he doesn’t have to dispose of tons of rotten meat. The dragon’s doing him a favor.” Nan closed the bag. “I hope you find the missing dragon, but if you don’t, what will you tell him?”

Pan frowned, staring at the table as if studying the human map. “I have not allowed myself to consider that possibility. I am concerned that she is injured and unable to fly.”

Linda patted Pan’s hand. “I hope that is the reason she is missing. Either way, though, I hope you find her so that he can have closure.”

Pan nodded, but his expression was grim. A grim god was not a good thing.

“What are you going to do, Nan? Are you going to be okay here?”

“I’m going to finish up, drop some things off to Maeve, and then walk home.”

“It’s a pity you can’t send Maeve to the emergency shelter for mythologicals.” Noah glanced at Pan. “She loves to talk and thrives on gossip.”

Nan laughed. “She has a good heart and has never said no to anyone who needs help. She’s been messaging me for updates every other minute because she feels like she’s missing out. Like you.” Nan nodded at Noah. “She needs to be doing something.”

“She cannot walk into town?” Pan asked.

“She’s got a dickie leg and heart and can’t walk far,” Nan said, avoiding telling Pan that Maeve had a dickie leg because she learned how to ride a motorbike for her sixtieth birthday and had been involved in an accident a few years later. Maeve had stories about her life that made his hookup experiences seem tame. “And her street is a mess.”

“But she wants to be here, where the gossip is?” Pan asked.

“Of course she does. She’d be in there helping them clean up and getting the children settled in their new world. She was a teacher. Now she said she lives vicariously through others.”

Noah snorted. “Which is why she’s at the pub two nights a week.”

“She likes the company, and she’s not the only one. With the pub closed, there’ll be a lot of people who are missing not only the social interaction but a meal. Some of the old guys without wives come in for dinner.” Nan spoke as though she wasn’t the same age as them. But then she liked to claim that working in the pub kept her young.

“Taverns are always important parts of the community.” Pan’s finger traced the curve of his horn. “Perhaps there is a way this place can reopen if you do not mind serving vampires.”

Nan sighed. “I doubt it. It’s not an essential service.”

“True...unless it became one. It is part of the palace now,” Noah said, not sure where his idea was going, but there needed to be a place where humans in need of food and social interaction could meet mythologicals who needed to learn English and more about the human world.

Nan pushed the backpack towards him. “Take the map and find your dragon. I can guarantee this mess will be here when you get back.”

Noah gave her a hug. “That’s because we won’t be gone long. We’ll find her, and there’ll be a dragon party in the car park before you can miss me.”

“The last time I saw a couple of dragons break into some wine barrels, it was very messy. You don’t want a dragon party in town. You’re also going to want the dragon to do his business somewhere else. Preferably downwind.”

Nan passed Pan three bottles of water. “You can pass that message on when you leave.”

Pan’s eyes widened, and for a moment, Noah thought he was going to argue.

Noah grabbed Pan’s arm. “Come on. You have to tell him we’re going looking and that he needs to sit tight, anyway.” He glanced over his shoulder at his grandmother and couldn’t help but feel he was abandoning her to go on a wild dragon chase. “I’ll text you.”

CHAPTER17

They were halfway to the checkpoint before Pan spoke. “Why did you lie for me?”

Noah had been enjoying the silence, mostly as he attempted to sort out his own thoughts. Yesterday, he’d been scared of all the changes. He was still scared about what shape the future might take. It was certainly nothing that his education or his parents had prepared him for. But he couldn’t deny the thrill of being told he actually had fucking magic.

Or the rush that urged him to do something other than sit at home and wait to be told

it was safe to go out. And Meredith was right—he could easily help David with the emergency accommodation at the school, but that was boring. It didn't involve dragons and vampires and gods and other things that were both terrifying and exhilarating.

Yesterday, he would've never considered rushing off with a virtual stranger to search for a dragon.

Yesterday, he claimed to believe in the old gods because that's what one did when learning how to be a witch.

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Yesterday, magic had been a bit of fun.

Today, he was walking along the buckled road with Pan. The actual god Pan, who had kissed him and told him how glorious he was as he offered to serve him, a human. No one had ever praised him like that. He was a disappointment, a nuisance, not trying hard enough, or being deliberately difficult.

David and Meredith had never said those things to his face. For them, it was enough that he worked at the pub, did a bit of study, and helped around the house. Would they still feel the same if he continued to help the mythologicals?

Some countries were talking about keeping them separate from humans. And while the European Union said they would be treated as refugees, they hadn't said what that meant.

No one knew what it meant.

Noah shook his head. "I figured it wasn't the right time to tell them." That sounded like a logical answer, but it wasn't the truth either. He didn't know why he lied. Maybe because he liked sharing a secret with a god.

Pan lifted one eyebrow. "I do not think that was the reason."

"What makes you say that?" Noah's boots scrunched over broken glass. Someone had broken into an abandoned car that had been unable to cross the foot-wide gap in the road. Noah peered into the crack before jumping over.

It was like walking through the set of a post-apocalyptic movie. Or being sucked into a game where his character's quest was to find a lost dragon. Thinking of the situation as something other than his new reality made it a bit easier to deal with. He wasn't smart and brave...but the character he played could be. And the character had enough magic for a god to find him interesting.

"Because it doesn't feel like the truth." Pan jumped over the gap.

"How do things feel like the truth?"

He tilted his head and gave Noah that look as if he could see into him and pick apart the pieces. It was disconcerting, yet he wanted someone to actually see him and understand him.

And care.

He didn't know if all three were possible. After all, his parents cared, but they didn't see him or understand him. His friends understood him...but they didn't really see him. He was simply the needed third member of their tiny coven.

"They just do. I can tell the difference between a request from the heart and one done for show." Pan's lips curved in a dangerous smile, and his words were as sharp as a scalpel. "The ones done for show are the most fun to fulfill because they don't really want it."

Note to self: do not piss off Pan.

"So why did you lie? I expected you to tell them the truth."

Noah adjusted the backpack. "You didn't correct me."

“Perhaps I wanted to find out how far you’d let this lie travel.”

“Give me enough rope, and I’ll hang myself?”

Pan stopped walking. “Why would I let that happen?”

“It’s a phrase, meaning I’ll get myself in trouble.”

Pan nodded. “Perhaps. Though I will not let anything happen to you. You’re under my protection.”

“Uh-huh.” Those words weren’t worth the breath they took to say. “Says the god without magic who doesn’t want his own people to find out about him.”

Pan’s expression hardened as he glared at Noah as he walked past. “This is temporary.”

Noah flung out his hand. “Is it? This is going to take years to fix. You want to be known as Silas the incubus, and I am happy to play along for the moment, but at some point, you’re going to have to face your people. They are going to need someone.”

“That is Lord Feryn’s job.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s going to do it or that he’s capable.”

Pan shoved his hands into the borrowed coat’s pockets. “He needs time to adjust.” He flicked a glance at Noah. “I am not a city ruler. While I have met plenty, I don’t know where to begin with all the negotiations.”

“Then why did you accept the ring?”

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Pan was silent for a couple of breaths. “I can’t abandon Tarikians, and the ring makes it easier, as it is a symbol of power. Feryn also said he would encourage them to pray to me, even though I am not their favorite god.” He pressed his lips together. “Tarikians will know I am not an incubus when they see me.”

“How?”

“My horns grow the wrong way.”

“I kind of wish I hadn’t lied for you now because the truth is going to come out.” And it would bite him on the ass.

“Who is going to pray to a god with no magic? Who cannot answer their prayers? I am only as useful as the next prayer I answer.”

Noah kicked a rock, and it bounced down the street to where Liam’s red car was parked. “Sounds to me like Lord Feryn prayed for the missing dragon to be found, and here we are.”

Pan snorted. “We haven’t found her yet. Pray we are successful.”

“Aren’t you the one doing the praying at the moment?”

Pan rolled his eyes. “Don’t ask me to do that again.”

“Even if it comes from my heart.” Noah grinned and waved as Liam got out of the car. They’d dated for about a nanosecond, and Liam had introduced him to Web, who

was a fellow witch and neo-pagan bandmate. The music was cool, and they got to go to festivals to play. Or they had.

His footsteps faltered. What if Liam and Web had more magic than him?

Pan would lose interest in him. He'd worship them instead.

"Is something wrong?" Pan whispered.

"No." He forced a smile, knowing it was too late to do anything about it. "Web has been practicing witchcraft for longer than me. You might find someone with more magic."

Pan pressed his lips together. "Why do your people prefer one god over another?"

"Tradition. It's what their family believed, so they don't question it."

"In part, but it was not uncommon on Tariko to go to the temple of more than one god, depending on the situation. While all gods are connected to magic, the way we use it is different. It has a different taste, for lack of a better word. And the end results of the blessing will be vastly different."

Web also got out of the car. He was dressed entirely in black, though at least his clothes were suitable for hiking.

"Silas, this is Liam and Web, the witches I told you about." He wasn't about to out Pan as a god. If Pan wanted to tell them, that was his business.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Pan's voice slipped into a low purr, and his lips curved as if finding the dragon was the last thing on his mind.

Noah bit back a sigh, wishing that he hadn't suggested his friends' help. If they weren't here, he could've spent the entire afternoon with Pan. Though he wasn't sure how much dragon finding they'd be doing if they were alone together.

CHAPTER 18

Pan studied the two men standing by the car. Web was dressed in black, with long dark hair, and Pan wondered if he was trying to impersonate a spider. He assessed Pan with what was probably meant to be a cool stare, but it came off as wary. Liam had short blonde hair and wore clothing similar to Noah, dark blue pants and shoes with a thick white sole. They looked comfy. He needed a pair of those shoes.

Liam offered his hand. "You're the first mythological being I've met. You look very human."

Only because his horns were hidden by the hat, and he didn't have hooves, which he still found strange. Pan took his hand and shook it. "Thank you for assisting with finding the dragon."

He turned to Web, clearly not his real name, and offered his hand. "Again, thank you."

Web shook his hand and lowered his eyelids until he watched Pan through slitted eyes. "You have an interesting aura."

"Do I?"

"Web has the second sight, like his mother," Noah said. "And he can read auras and such."

What the fuck was the second sight?

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He wasn't sure Web could read much of anything, as Pan didn't sense any magic around him. He glanced at Noah, wanting to know if his eyes were revealing the secrets of the universe. Noah gave no indication that anything was amiss, and so far, Noah was the only one to have caught the gleam of magic.

Noah gave him a tight smile as if expecting Pan to fall at the feet of his friends because they were supposed to be the better witches.

Ugh...humanity was lost. They'd forgotten how magic worked, but Pan played along, needing to see where this would go.

"What's interesting about my aura?" Honestly, this conversation reminded him of the parties in Paris, where humans pretended they could see ghosts and talk to the dead. If he'd been in attendance, he was usually responsible for causing those conversations.

"It's so bright... Like you're filled with magic and desire." Web's lips curved.

Had Noah mentioned he was an incubus? Or was Web expressing his own desire for magic? Web's thumb brushed over Pan's skin.

Oh... Pan recognized what was going on here, and he didn't like it one bit. He released Web's hand and stepped back as he pulled the human map of the area out of his pocket.

He unfolded the map. "This is where we think the dragons were living before."

“What are these markings?” Liam asked.

“Mythological buildings, so we could place their city over ours.” Noah pointed to the palace.

“The female dragon may be injured or dead, which is why she hasn’t taken to the sky to find her mate.” The third option he didn’t want to consider as he didn’t know how to explain to a dragon that she hadn’t arrived in this world. “Either way, we need to find her. Now, according to the map of Beita?—”

“What is Beita?” Web asked, still looking at him with soft eyes.

“Beita is the Tarikian city state. In the hills around the city, there are centaurs. They may be armed and dislike trespassers.”

“You didn’t mention that bit,” Noah hissed.

There were many things he hadn’t mentioned, but there wasn’t time to say everything. Find the dragon, help Feryn, convince the Tarikians to worship him, get magic back. And in the meantime, worship Noah until he was begging and calling his name with all of his heart.

He suspected that out of all the things on his list, the latter might be the easiest.

Though the way Web looked at him, he’d been the easier conquest. It was a pity he didn’t taste like magic.

Pan shrugged. “Because they may or may not be there.”

“Wait, like part horse, part man, centaurs?” Liam’s eyes went wide.

Pan pulled off the knitted hat to reveal his horns. He was the first Tarikian they'd both met, yet Liam didn't really believe.

Liam gasped and lifted his hand to touch the horns but pulled it back.

"Don't tell a centaur that they are half anything." Pan tugged the hat back on. "The dragon we're looking for is dark green and, as Linda put it, the size of a bus." He glanced at Noah to confirm the description.

Noah nodded. "Big, winged, and they smell funky."

"You've seen one?" Web asked, his gaze slicing toward Noah.

Noah blinked and paused for a second as if sensing the change in his friend. "In town, it's how I met Silas."

"He offered me a drink." Pan smiled at Web. He was one to watch and not in the fun way.

Web fluttered his lashes. "I thought we weren't allowed in town."

"Businesses need to check their premises and report. I've been helping Nan." Noah glanced up at the sky. "If we're going to make use of daylight, we need to move. Do you have a place you want to start?"

Pan stared at the map, wishing that he did. "For the moment, we follow the road." He traced the line on the paper. "But at some point, we'll need to walk."

"And if we run into centaurs?" Liam asked.

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Pan wasn't sure if running into them was a good plan or the worst possible outcome. "We ask them for help."

And hoped they were in the mood to help—though they might refuse out of spite when they realized who he was. And then he'd be forced to offer them a favor.

He didn't like owing people anything, especially not centaurs.

CHAPTER19

Pan wasn't quite sure how it happened, but Noah ended up in the front of the car with the map and Liam while he was stuck in the back with Web. Web wanted to know everything about incubi, especially how they fed. Having been at numerous orgies with an incubus or three, they were easy questions to answer.

Web's obvious interest, from the way he looked at him, to the way he angled his body, was flattering, but was not doing anything for him physically, or magically. The latter was disappointing as he'd been hoping Noah's witch friends might give him a little boost.

Web's fingertips brushed over his hand. If he did that one more time, Pan was going to attempt to impale him on his curly little horns. It would be unsuccessful but entertaining to listen as Web squealed and scrambled to escape the moving car.

Pan glanced at Noah, but he was too busy reading the map to notice.

Or maybe he didn't care.

He didn't like that thought at all. He wanted Noah to care for the simple reason that if he didn't, he may not want to help with the magic issue.

"We get together every full moon to celebrate...would you be interested in joining us?" Web murmured.

"That depends on what you do," Pan said, trying to be both polite and disinterested at the same time. He needed more than a kiss to access enough magic to turn Web into a spider, and a waste of what little magic he managed to grab hold of. However, it would be immensely satisfying.

Noah had left out a few things about his friends, such as the way he and Liam had once been lovers. Not that Pan was jealous. He'd forgotten the names of most of his lovers over the centuries, and that didn't include worshippers. But Web had really wanted him to know that detail.

Noah glanced back at him, his gaze flicking to Web, who had his arm on the back of the seat, and then to Pan. "Drumming, chanting, and stuff."

"You should hear Noah sing. We've gotten some gigs at festivals," Liam said. "I drum, and Web plays the cello."

"I don't play the cello on full moons," Web grumbled.

"Is it bad luck?" Pan asked.

The car lurched to a stop.

Liam peered out of the front window. "Guys...I think we might be walking."

The road they were on wound between two hills. One of those hills was now rubble

on the road that would take an ogre days to move.

Pan opened the door and tried to get out. The seatbelt dragged him back. Before he could work it out, Web had undone it for him.

He gave the human a tight smile and indulged in a little pettiness by offering no thanks, then jumped out, glad to be away from him. He pretended to examine the rock fall, though it was impossible to tell if it had happened during the collapse of his world or if it had been caused by a herd of centaurs seeking to protect their territory.

“Do you actually have a plan?” Noah whispered as he moved to stand next to him.

“Aside from roaming the hills to find the dragon? No. Do you?” “Do you have a plan to keep Web from trying to glue himself to me?”

But he suspected the answer to that question was also no.

“Can you call to her, in Dragon?”

Pan nodded. “Though that will not help if she’s dead.”

“Let’s pretend that she’s alive and injured.” Liam handed Noah one pack and shrugged into the other himself.

Web drew in a breath and closed his eyes as if reaching for magic. “Now we’re out here, we should douse for her. And pray that the spirits who live here will assist.”

Web had the act down, much like the mediums who’d claimed to speak to the dead.

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Noah pulled a necklace out from beneath his shirt.

“I’ll do it. You have no connection to this land,” Web said as he pulled his own necklace off. Liam spread the map on the hood of the car, and Noah offered a hand to stop it from fluttering.

“Noah is more accurate,” Liam said, which earned him a scowl from Web.

Noah glanced at Pan with a glint in his green eyes and a curve on his lips that he was starting to enjoy seeing. “Since the dragon is from Tariko, and Pan is one of their gods, we should offer him a prayer, too.”

“Sure.” Web nodded. He held his necklace over the map, eyes closed. “Ancient spirits who roam this land, and Pan from the dragon’s home world, if you can hear us, lead us to her so we may reunite her with her mate.” The pendant, which appeared to be some kind of tiny silver skull, began to spin.

Liam and Noah joined in with the next repetition of the prayer.

The tiniest buzz filled the air. He wanted to lick the magic off Noah’s tongue as fast as it formed. Noah lifted his eyebrows and rather pointedly glanced at the map.

Oh, his eyes must be flickering as his body tried to connect to magic. Pan pretended to study the map, with its different greens and lines.

The pendant made ever wider circles, and Web lowered his hand to a place beyond the hills and forest and in a farming area.

“Hmm. We might need to turn around and go there instead.” Web jabbed at the map.

“Dragons love farms for the easy hunting, but they prefer to live in woods and hills.” Pan looked at Noah, and all he wanted to do was kiss him while the buzz of magic was on his lips. “I want to see what Liam and Noah come up with. Please repeat your chant.”

“What?” Web snapped as if he wasn’t used to being questioned.

That made two of them.

Pan held his gaze until the human blinked. “Where I am from, magic is fickle, and it is often best to seek the wisdom of more than one. I might consult a Strega, as well as a god and also a hunter who can read the track left by prey and predator. Here, I have consulted a map, asked the vampire lord, and now I am asking three witches. My request was not meant to be offensive.” He smiled rather too sweetly, hoping that Web understood that Pan saw straight through his act.

Liam used his car keys to search and came up with a car park further up the blocked road. Web shook his head and sighed as if knowing this wasn’t Liam’s skill.

Noah took off his necklace, a silver chain with silver and turquoise fish hanging from the center. He held it over the map and murmured the prayer along with the others.

Pan bit his lip and curled his toes in the borrowed vampire boots to stop himself from walking around the hood of the car to take what he wanted—needed.

The fish spun in lazy circles, and then the tail began tugging in one direction as if dragging Noah’s hand and expecting him to follow. He did.

Pan exhaled. Nowthatwas a clear magic-led dousing. The craving in his soul

intensified. Perhaps this is what incubi felt when they needed to feed. He wanted to lick every drop from Noah's tongue and breathe the air from his lungs.

His dick hardened and throbbed, and for a couple of heartbeats, he wondered if he had become an incubus in the collapse. Was that even possible? He liked sex, but until today, he had never craved it with every cell in his body.

The fish hit the map. Still in the hills, though near water and a walking track. To be fair to Web, it was at least in that general direction. Though Pan suspected Web was not one for hiking, which is why he'd aimed for the farmland.

Now, he had three different locations to consider, and only one of them was correct. Given how close Liam's result was to Noah's, Pan was willing to bet Liam had a touch of magic too, though not enough for him to taste. Or at least not yet. Perhaps there was a way to encourage it?

What was perplexing was the way Liam and Noah seemed to look to Web for guidance for all things magical. When Web should be looking to Noah.

"What now?" Noah asked.

Pan pretended to consider the map, even though he believed Noah had found the dragon's location. Or at least something that might lead them toward her. "Given that the car park Liam pointed to is closer than the farm Web pointed to, I think it makes sense to go to the car park first and then follow the trail to where Noah pointed. If we haven't found any Tarikians or dragons, then we will need to backtrack and then drive through the farmlands."

Web put his fist on his hip. "You're leaving my location until last?"

"I am. Though if you and Liam want to take the car and go and check out the farms,

please do. I advise that you stay away from the dragon if you find her, especially if she's injured, and call Noah, as I'm the only one who can speak Dragon. I'm also the only one who knows anything about dragons and other Tarikians, so perhaps you want to listen to me."

There was probably too much of an edge in his voice, given the way Web stepped back. But he still managed to pout as if expecting Pan to apologize.

Web would be waiting a fucking long time. It was lucky Pan had no magic, as he'd have far too much fun unleashing a punishment. Instead, Pan settled for a glare.

Liam folded the map so the relevant part was on top. "I'm going with the dragon whisperer."

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“Dragon whisperer?” He didn’t whisper to dragons. That would involve getting far too close.

“It just means you can talk to them.” Noah slipped his necklace over his head and tucked the fish beneath his shirt. He tilted his head at the boulders blocking the road. “I guess we’re going up and over.”

Pan studied the boulders and nodded, hoping they’d fallen when the earth shook and that they hadn’t been placed by a pissed-off ogre or three and that there wasn’t an armed herd of centaurs waiting for them on the other side. “Looks like it.”

For several heartbeats, they all stood there considering the climb and what might be on the other side.

With a rather dramatic sigh, Web stepped up to the rocks first. “It’s not that bad.”

And with that, he started to climb.

Pan beckoned Noah closer. He obeyed with a smile on his lips, which was rather pleasing. Pan leaned in and kissed him, savoring the leftover prayer. He rocked back and noticed Liam watching.

“Is that dangerous?” Liam asked. “Feeding an incubus?”

“Um...no. Lust is a renewable resource. He’s very energy efficient.” Noah’s cheeks turned pink.

Pan had no idea what those words meant in that order, though it was clearly a good enough answer for Liam as he walked towards the boulders, giving him the chance to kiss Noah again. This time because he wanted to dabble in lust, not magic.

CHAPTER 20

It took an hour to reach the car park, and there were still no signs of dragons or centaurs or anything. The day was silent; it felt like they were the only people alive. It had taken Web about half an hour before he stopped being pissy with Noah. In that time, he'd kept trying to gain Pan's favor, even though Pan wasn't interested in even having a conversation with him.

Noah refilled his drink bottle and took a long drink, and he tugged his damp shirt away from his chest. The afternoon was cool, but they'd been walking uphill for most of it. Liam stood next to him, watching as Pan walked out to the lookout with Web at his heels.

"So what's with you and the incubus?" Liam lifted his eyebrows.

Noah shrugged, not knowing how to answer that. Pan had kissed him several times, and he'd be lying if he didn't say he liked it. "Nothing. He says he likes the way I taste."

Liam nodded. "I think Web wants a taste."

"I'm pretty sure Silas wants to throw him off the end of the lookout."

Liam straightened and glanced at the path that led to the lookout. "He wouldn't actually...would he?"

Noah opened his mouth but couldn't honestly make the denial. An incubus may not

throw Web off the end, but an annoyed god might. “We should check on them.”

They jogged along the path as if silently agreeing they should hurry. Noah’s steps faltered when he saw them.

Pan’s fingers were locked around Web’s throat. “Do not lay your hands on me again. Do you understand?”

The toes of Web’s boots scraped against the path as he nodded his head furiously.

Noah sped up, not sure if he should intervene or let this play out.

“I cannot hear you, human,” Pan growled.

His voice was low enough that the sound hit some primal part of Noah’s brain, made his knees weak and his blood hot, as if offering himself to the god might appease him. He drew in a shaky breath as Pan glanced at him, his eyes shimmering gold.

Pan released Web, and he stumbled back until his hips hit the railing. Web grabbed it as though he needed the support.

“What’s going on?” Liam found his voice before Noah did.

Noah was trying to remain upright and get his dick under control. Did Liam not feel the power radiating off Pan?

“Your friend tried to kiss me.” Pan stepped away from Web. “Where I come from, it is common to make sure that the other person wants to be kissed.”

“I just wanted to know what it’s like to be fed on by an incubus.” Web pushed himself off the railing and ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t see why Noah

should have all the fun.

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Pan smiled. "I like him. He offered to help and made no demands."

If he'd known Pan was a god, he might have made some demands, like magic he could use? What were next week's lottery numbers? As well as the other more serious things he should ask for, such as fixing the world. He was sure that if that was possible, Pan would do it. No one wanted this current mess.

"He also tastes nice. Not everyone's lust tastes nice." Pan glanced at Web. "Do you sleep with everyone who offers, or do you have tastes?"

Liam laughed. "Oh, he definitely sleeps with everyone."

"Shut up." Web shot Liam a glare. "I should've gone and checked out the farm."

"You could've, but you would be wrong." Pan pointed across the lookout.

Noah walked over expecting to see a dragon and was disappointed by the thin coil of smoke and a few knocked-over trees. "What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"Dragons knock over trees, usually to make a nest, sometimes to be defensive, other times in rage. The smoke might be from a camp or the remains of a dragon's fury. Either way, it's something."

And from the way Pan was speaking, that's where they were going. They were not going to make it home by dark, so it was a bloody good thing Liam had brought the tent.

Liam held up the map. “That’s pretty close to where Noah’s fish landed.”

Web snorted and shook his head. “It’s not Noah, it’s the fish. I told you it was cursed or something.”

Pan frowned. “What makes you say it’s cursed?”

Web flicked a glance at Noah and gave him a smug smile as if he’d won a battle. “Because as soon as he started using that to douse, he became more accurate.”

“A cursed fish? Can I see it, Noah?” Pan held out his hand.

Noah wasn’t sure that he wanted to take his necklace off, but he pulled the fish out of his shirt for Pan. “It’s old. A Victorian snuff necklace, so it opens.” He demonstrated the way the head flipped back. “There’s nothing in it now.”

Pan walked over but didn’t try to take the necklace. He lifted it off Noah’s chest, so the little silver and turquoise fish lay in his palm. For a heartbeat, Noah had a silly thought that it was going to gasp for breath and start to flop around.

“Where did you find it?”

“I sometimes go to deceased estates and auctions and stuff. Or the pawn brokers if I go to Cardiff or Bristol. There are lots of cool old things, but I only buy the ones that I...I don’t know.” He shrugged, not sure how to explain how he knew what to buy. “That I vibe with or something. Maybe I’m attracted to cursed objects.”

Pan placed the necklace back against Noah’s chest instead of letting it drop. “Perhaps. But I’m very interested in the rest of your collection.”

Behind Pan’s back, Web rolled his eyes.

He'd taken Web and Liam to an auction happening in Cornwall about six months ago. They'd spent the afternoon looking at all the bits and pieces that were available to buy. Everything from antique desks to a tiny sewing kit, complete with an ivory thimble. He didn't sew, but there'd been something about the kit that he wanted. So he'd bid, and that had been enough to make Web bid.

To avoid a bidding war, Noah had let him have it. He had no idea what had happened to it after Web brought it home, and it was now a thorn in their friendship. Sometimes, everything was fine, and other times, it was as though Web was jealous of everything Noah had.

Including his friendship with Pan.

He didn't know if it was because Web had been raised by his father, after his mother had disappeared...like legitimately, disappeared, missing person situation, or if Web just liked being the center of attention.

It wasn't as though Noah was trying to take that off him. He'd much rather be in the shadows and ignored. If he was being ignored, it meant he wasn't doing anything wrong, and he could do his own thing. So he hadn't planned on becoming the main singer of their little trio. That they'd become more popular once he'd started singing was another thorn.

And now it seemed Pan was set to become the third.

"It's not dangerous?" Noah asked, not sure if Pan could sense magic or a curse on an object.

"Not to you, or you'd know about it already. Objects with magic are very choosy about who they are handled by."

“Is there a way to make them like you?” Web tucked a strand of hair behind his ear.

Pan pressed his lips together and considered him for several seconds. “Not usually. The only way is to destroy the magic. Which often destroys the object.” He nodded at Liam. “Will the trail on the map take us there?”

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“That’s not a trail, that’s a dirt road...but it should get us near enough. I don’t think going straight down the mountain is a good idea.”

“Agreed,” Noah said. “We have about two hours of daylight left.”

Web frowned. “That’s not long enough to walk there and back.”

“Let’s hope it’s a friendly campfire,” Pan said with rather less enthusiasm than Noah wanted from him. “Shall we?”

Pan walked away, leaving them to follow. Noah sucked in a breath and followed. Between him and Liam, they had enough supplies to rough a night, but he was more concerned about the fire.

CHAPTER21

The shadows had deepened by the time Pan smelled the smoke of the campfire, along with the scent of dinner cooking. He’d also become aware that they were no longer alone in the woods. He wasn’t sure if the humans had noticed, and if they hadn’t, he wasn’t about to inform them they were being stalked. Panicking humans were not going to make things go smoother.

Web had stopped bothering him, though Pan was monitoring him. He didn’t need magic to know that Web was the kind of person to always watch. What irked him was the way he couldn’t put his finger on why, exactly. It was more of a nebulous sense made up of the way Web disregarded Noah and assumed that he had the most magical ability and that he expected Pan to find him interesting. If Web boasted about

his ability, it would be much easier to dislike him. Instead, Web was another low-grade annoyance.

While they walked, Pan entertained himself, thinking of all the different animals he could turn Web into. A spider was too obvious. He'd considered a raven, but they were smart and didn't suffer fools. Frogs and snakes also had far more sense.

In the end, he decided a rabbit was most appropriate. They were always looking for the freshest leaves, and if attacked froze.

Liam was definitely a snake. Smart, a bit of a loner, but loyal to his friends and dangerous when crossed.

"I think we should turn here." Liam pointed into the shadows. "It's going to be a lot harder to find our way if we aren't on the road, and we aren't high enough to see anything."

Pan tilted his head, sensing centaurs' heartbeats before they stepped onto the road. Nothing good ever began with centaurs. Their idea of fun involved bloodshed and somebody's death. They were great if they were on your side in a battle...and that was about the only use Pan had ever found for them.

They didn't like him as a god either. They kept their prayers for Epona...who didn't like him after a misunderstanding two thousand years ago. Since then they had avoided each other ever since, but if she was the only god in the area, they needed to work together.

"Oh shit," Noah breathed, moving close enough to Pan that the wave of Noah's fear rolled over him.

Three centaurs stood in front of them, armed with swords and spears. There would be

three more hidden in the trees and shadows.

Pan held his hands out, showing that he was unarmed, and he spoke in Tarikian. “We are seeking the female greater dragon at the request of Lord Feryn. Her mate is in the city and desperate to be reunited with her.” He wiggled the fingers, showing the city’s ring.

“Feryn is not the Lord of the city,” the male with the beard to his navel said.

Because they didn’t recognize him or because they were expecting the uncle? He should’ve found out more about the political affiliation of the centaurs. “His uncle is dead.”

Beard tapped the butt of his spear on the ground. “The city no longer exists.”

How much did they know about the events? “Not as it did on Tariko. Our world merged with the human world. A place we have not roamed in many centuries. Our city has melded with their city, and everything is damaged. My human friends, including a witch, are assisting with the search.” He turned and indicated to the humans, pausing on Noah.

Beard’s gaze tracked over the humans.

That they were all alive meant it was going great so far. Honestly, surviving the greeting with the centaur was usually a good sign. “How do your people fare?”

Beard’s expression became tight. “Half are missing. Three died on the first day. Another five are injured. One was eaten by the dragon.”

Dragons and centaurs didn’t get along either, mostly because dragons were rather fond of eating them. In the dragon’s defense, centaurs hunted dragons for their skin.

One dragon made an entire tent.

“Is the dragon alive?” Or had they already killed her and begun turning her into a tent?

He did not want to be telling the male dragon that, because then he’d fly out here and burn the entire forest to the ground. Pan was one hundred percent sure that the human authorities would not understand and would do something to make the situation even worse.

Beard grunted.

Was that a good grunt or a bad grunt?

The centaurs behind him moved closer and jabbed Pan with the butt of their spears, separating him from the humans and pushing him closer to Beard.

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He didn't like being within spear range. A spear through the chest was uncomfortable at the best of times—and something he had experienced on more than one occasion—and now was not the best of times because he was mortal.

Being killed by centaur was so plebeian.

Any idiot could be killed by a centaur. If he was going to die while mortal, it should at least have a little flair, something people would talk about for millennia. He swallowed. If he died, the humans wouldn't survive to talk about his death. He'd just be dead.

No. He was not having that. He was just going to have to survive.

Beard leaned down, his fist wrapped around his spear. "And what are you?"

Pan had to tilt his chin up to hold Beard's gaze. Beard should be on his knees in the presence of a god. All the centaurs should be. But now was not the time to enforce protocol, and his hat hid his horns.

Did Beard know what incubi looked like?

Hopefully not.

Pan pulled the hat off, revealing his horns. Beard was only a soldier, so Pan wasn't revealing anything more to him. "Does your queen live?"

If they were going to be captured, he wanted to make sure they got an audience. And

it was better to be captured instead of killed outright, as being captured gave them a chance.

Beard straightened. “The queen and the dragon are alive.”

Pan exhaled. Two bits of good news. He placed his hand over his heart. “Then I would appreciate an audience with your queen so I may update her on the city’s status.”

Beard laughed. “You will have your audience. Link them.”

“That’s really not necessary. We will follow you.” Pan said, trying to prevent the humans from panicking.

“You will do as you’re told.” Beard snapped.

I’m a fucking god. I will not be tied like a prisoner.

He glanced behind him at the worried faces of Noah and his friends.

“Be calm,” he warned in English.

“Be calm?” Noah hissed as a centaur looped a rope around his neck.

Now was not the time to resist. The spears seemed very pointy, and he’d seen how much damage hooves did in a fight. Centaurs made his hooves look dainty.

Pan tried to smile as he spoke in English. “We are being taken to see the queen, and the dragon is alive.”

“It feels like we’re being taken prisoner,” Noah said in a harsh whisper, still glaring

at him.

“Because we are,” Pan agreed.

“You’re making it sound like a good thing,” Noah muttered as he glanced at his friends.

“Well, it’s better than being dead.” While there were plenty of options between life and death that could make one wish for death, being captured wasn’t one of them.

Or at least not yet.

CHAPTER 22

Noah was trying not to freak out about the centaurs and being captured and failing. Panic twisted in his gut and squeezed his heart. He hadn’t expected either, and Pan was being rather too calm about the whole thing. A little warning that this was a possibility would’ve been nice, but while yelling at Pan might make him feel temporarily better, it would make things worse in the long term.

The centaurs had marched them to their camp and ordered them to sit on the ground. Which meant every time he glanced up, he was staring at the undercarriage of the centaur with pale gold fur guarding them.

If he didn’t look any higher, they looked a lot like horses. Big horses, with long legs and stompy feet that seemed like they’d be able to crush skulls and break bones. It wasn’t something he wanted to test.

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But instead of a horse's neck, there was a human torso. Or at least a human-like torso. There was no belly button as that was on their horse stomach. No nipples either, and both males and females seem to be flat-chested. The torso was kind of barrel-shaped, and more than a little hairy, with the males being hairier, and they were all muscular. While they had spoken to Pan in one language, amongst themselves, they seemed to use another.

“The language you spoke...is that the one from your world?”

Pan nodded but kept his gaze on the people in the camp.

“Do you also understand this language?”

Pan's lips curved. “The more you speak English, the faster they will learn it. For the moment, it is best not to speak.”

Noah bit his lower lip but couldn't keep silent. “Are we going to die?”

“I have requested a meeting with the queen.”

The guard tapped the butt of his spear on the ground and said something.

Pan replied, and they had a short conversation, before Pan spoke in English. “he said, no talking.”

Web and Liam sat on the other side of Noah, all linked by a rope around their necks.

Liam fiddled with his fingernails.

Web scowled. “I need to piss.”

Now didn’t seem to be a good time to ask for a toilet break. Was Web hoping to do a runner?

“I will ask,” Pan said. “If you attempt to flee, you will take a spear to the back.”

“That’s murder,” Web snarled.

Noah had to agree that it was a rather brutal punishment for running away, but he wasn’t about to jump into the argument, having been told to shut up by both a centaur and a god.

“Do they act like they care?” Pan tilted his head at the centaur guarding them. “Do you think your human authorities will care about one more death amongst all this chaos?”

The centaur tapped his spear again and issued an order that only Pan understood.

Pan spoke and pointed at Web.

The centaur laughed and pointed at Web as he spoke. Whatever he said didn’t sound very nice. Noah decided he disliked centaurs intensely.

Pan pressed his lips together. Noah noticed he did that when what he was about to say may not be well received. “He said you may piss where you sit.”

“I can’t even stand?”

“If you stand, we all have to stand,” Noah said. There wasn’t that much rope between them.

“Either hold it in or sit and piss, as I don’t want to choke or be stabbed by a spear.” Liam glared at Noah. “Where’s the dragon?”

Noah shrugged and glanced at Pan, not sure even the god had a clue what was going to happen.

The centaur with the long beard walked over and spoke to the guard, who then untied Pan.

Panic fluttered sharp and bright in Noah’s chest. He’d thought they’d all go to see the queen. Instead, they were being left behind.

“I’m going to see the queen. Pray for me.” He gave Noah a nod and was marched away by Beard.

“I suppose you want us to pray to Pan again?” Web said sulkily. “He’s not your usual god.”

“He’s Silas’s god.” The lie was heavy on his tongue.

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The centaur slammed the butt of his spear against the ground three times.

Silent prayers, it was.

Web decided he couldn't hold on anymore and pulled his dick out of his pants and directed the stream towards the guard's feet.

CHAPTER23

The tent was made of dragon hide. The scales gleamed in the firelight. Around Pan was the murmur of camp life, and beneath that was tension and fear. Children weren't playing, they were staying close to their parents, and their parents were tired.

And all around the camp, armed guards moved as though they feared an attack was imminent.

Beard opened the tent flap and pushed Pan in.

There was a small fire over which a metal pot of water boiled. Pan paused for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dimmer interior.

The female he assumed to be the queen lay on a blanket as if expecting him.

He kneeled in front of her as Beard introduced him as a trespasser and dragon hunter. Both of which were wrong, but he wasn't about to reveal that he spoke their language. He waited for them to address him in Tarikian.

“What is your name?” the queen demanded.

That depended on who he was talking to and what he wanted them to know. If he used any of the names that he’d gone by on Tariko, then they might work out who he was, which then meant that he had no access to magic. And admitting to being a god with no magic in the middle of a centaur camp was not the wise thing to do. However, he needed to know if Epona was around if only to avoid her in the future.

Though truthfully, she could be in any centaur camp.

She could be anywhere...or nowhere.

He could not have been the only god to have survived. That was a thought he didn’t want to dwell on. Couldn’t if he wanted to leave this camp with the dragon.

“You know me by many names, Your Majesty.” And hate me by all. And without magic, he couldn’t give her a glimpse of his power. Instead, he kneeled there, waiting for her answer.

She smiled as if she didn’t believe him. “One of many names, yet you travel with humans and seek a dragon. Why?”

“Lord Feryn, the new ruler of Beita following the death of his uncle, sent me on this quest. The male dragon is desperate for his mate.”

“And the humans? They are part of this world?”

Pan nodded. “They are. They know this place and the customs.”

“And one is a witch,” she said, as though only seeking confirmation.

Pan nodded. "He is adept at locating things and was leading us to the dragon. Your guard assured us she is alive."

Please let that be the truth.

He was starting to understand why people prayed to the gods for help. It was because they didn't have magic and needed magical help. So things were rather dire when he, a god, had no magic and no one to pray to.

Although he did have Noah...

"She is," the queen confirmed. "Though for how much longer, I am not sure. When she dies, she will make a very nice tent." The queen indicated to her lovely dead dragon tent. She placed her hand on her belly. "My daughter will need a tent. We lost so much when the world crumbled."

"We all did, Your Majesty. As did the humans of this world."

She snorted. "The humans of this world forced us out centuries ago."

"That is true. Your kind are fierce warriors who fought in many battles for much gold." Her dark hair was filled with golden beads. He didn't want to count her kills. "You did not deserve to be forced out."

She considered him for several heartbeats. "You have always had free passage between the worlds."

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He inclined his head in agreement. “My kind has.”

“Epona is not answering our prayers. Is there no way home?”

Pan pressed his lips together. The fire crackled, and the pot bubbled. Beyond the hide walls, centaurs talked. Were the humans safe? He needed to return to Noah, but he needed the dragon’s safety more. “I have not seen any others of my kind. Nor spoken to them. But if they have suffered the same as me, then they are unable to answer prayers.”

“My patience wears thin. Speak plainly, god.”

Pan drew in a breath. “My connection to magic has been severed.”

The queen blinked several times as if digesting the unwelcome news that her goddess wouldn’t be helping her. “Explain.”

“I cannot use magic. Though I can sense it, which is how I found the witch.”

“And what magic can he do?”

There was a greedy glint in the queen’s eye. Noah was his, and he was not letting a fucking centaur queen take him. “There is very little magic in this world, Your Majesty. As I said before, he can find things that are close by.”

That might be a small lie, but it was the only magic he’d seen Noah do, and he wasn’t even sure Noah considered it magic. “I need to reunite the dragon with her mate, or

he will burn what is left of Beita and the human city.”

“And why should I care?” She turned her attention to Beard and ordered him to bring the witch in her own language. “What is the witch’s name?”

“Noah.”

Beard left the tent, leaving them alone. She gave him a cold smile. “Now, give me one of yours.”

Pan sighed. There was no avoiding it, but he tried anyway. “Silas Wilde.”

She grunted. “Pan. Cernunnos. Amun.”

He inclined his head. “That is I. I wish I had better news about Epona.”

“Liar. We have tales of your feud.”

His lips curved. It wasn’t a feud that implied they sought each other out to create trouble. “It is true we are not close, but that is true of many siblings. I do not wish her ill, and I hope that she and the others of my kind are coping with this hideous loss. I do not like walking around with what feels like a gaping maw in my chest. The loss of magic is a wound that I cannot staunch. And I do not wish that on anyone.”

Except for the banished one. He hoped that, now he was mortal, someone seized the opportunity to kill him.

“That I believe. It means the gods are dead and of no use.”

That was a rather hasty and final judgement.

“Lord Feryn still has a use for me.” He lifted his hand to the ring.

“You are merely an emissary.”

She did not need a spear to be brutal, stabbing through his pride like it was already dead. He added it to his list of reasons why he did not like centaurs.

The tent flapped behind him, and Noah dropped to his knees next to him. He was both prickly with an annoyance and delightfully scented with magic from his prayers. It was unfortunate he could not kiss him in front of the queen. That would only fuel her desire to keep Noah.

“So you are the witch,” she said, looking at Noah as though expecting him to understand Tarikian and answer.

Noah glanced at Pan. “What did she say?”

Pan had planned on waiting for the queen to figure it out. Now, he needed to step in. “He does not speak Tarikian.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her tail flicked with annoyance. “How can he be a witch if he does not speak the language of magic?”

“He hasn’t learned. He is born of this world.” And if Noah had been born on Tariko, magic would have flowed through his veins. Would he have survived the collapse? Would he be without magic now?

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“Yet he is helping ours.” She tossed her head in disbelief, which wasn’t a good sign.

“Perhaps because he is drawn to all things magic.”

She nodded, the golden beads in her hair gleaming in the firelight. There were at least six. “Tell him the dragon is alive but wounded and that we plan to use her for a tent. If you were to take her, you would owe me a dragon skin tent. How many dragons survived? Perhaps he can find the bodies of the dead so we may claim the skin.”

Pan frowned, remembering her claim that the dragon may not survive long. “How injured is the dragon?”

“From what we can tell, her wing and leg are broken.”

The dragon was fucked, and the queen knew it. She didn’t need to risk her warriors when they could wait. “The male will not be happy.”

“If the city’s dragon attacks our camp, we will have no choice but to retaliate, and all treaties will be broken.”

Well, that was more tangled than an arachne’s web.

She flicked her fingers at him. “Tell your witch.”

Pan turned to Noah, rapidly trying to work out what their next step should be. “This is a delicate negotiation. We do not want to start a war between the city and the centaurs and the dragons.” It wouldn’t be the first war he’d started both on accident and

purpose, but those situations had been entirely different.

The queen ordered Beard, who was probably her consort, given the freedom with which he moved around her tent and the authority he held in camp, to make her tea.

Noah's eyebrows lifted.

“Don't say anything yet. Let me rush through the rest. The dragon is injured. Broken wing and leg, which means she can't move on her own. They are waiting for her to die, to use her hide as a tent. It's what they make their tents with. Dragons and centaurs do not get on. She wants you to find the bodies of dragons that didn't survive the collapse. Then we can take our dragon. Which doesn't help us as she's dying, and then the male will attack the centaurs and start a war. And you've seen enough centaurs to realize that's a bad idea.”

Noah licked his lower lip, which was a tease, as he'd taste like lightning and honey and all the best bits of magic. “I don't know if I can find dragon corpses. Also eww. But how big does she want the tent? Because we can get her tents. Liam has a two-person tent in his backpack. It's not fancy, and it is tiny, but there are some big tents out there. Hell, I'll raid the camping store for them, and they can have all the tents and stoves and shit they want.”

“Slow down because while I speak English, the way you speak it is different from how I last spoke it. I understand the gist of what you are saying, but sometimes the meaning is fuzzy. You have a tent shop?”

“Yes. And the dragon needs a vet...an animal doctor. And we can figure out a way to move her. We have cranes and massive trucks.” Noah paused for a moment, his eyebrows drawing together. “And given that dragons can fly, they can't be that heavy.”

“Is a crane not a bird?”

Noah exhaled. “Yes, but it’s also a machine for lifting big, heavy things. And a truck is a really, really, big car used for transporting things.”

Pan nodded, understanding how that might work. It was, without a doubt, better than starting a war out of sheer incompetence.

The queen sipped her tea. “Your witch understands?”

“The witch has informed me that his friend has a tent in his bag. It is a small tent intended for two humans. But he will show it to you because they come in many sizes. He said it is far superior to dragon skin.”

The queen and Beard laughed.

“That doesn’t seem good,” Noah murmured.

“I want to see this tent,” Beard said. “He will set it up so we may all enjoy a laugh. Nothing is better than dragon skin.”

“You may see for yourselves.” He turned to Noah and smiled as if everything was fine. “Your tent is better than dragon skin?”

Noah gave him a stiff smile. “How am I supposed to know? I’d never seen a dragon until today. Oh my god, did you just tell her that?”

Pan held his gaze, lips pressed together, not sure if he was Noah’s god, but that was a question for later. “If she doesn’t like the tent, you are going to be spending the rest of your life as her pet witch, looking for dead dragons.”

“It’s a base model tent, nothing flash. If I’d known we needed a fancy tent, I’d have borrowed my uncle’s.”

“You need to sell it to them.” He turned back to the queen. “Should you like our offer of tents, we will need to bring a healer to assist the dragon and some...” How did he translate cranes and trucks into Tarikian? “Oversized human wagons to transport her.”

“A healer without magic cannot fix broken legs.” The queen sneered.

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There was something in her expression that gave Pan a moment of pause. The centaurs had injured and no healer. Yet humans had no magic, but they had healers. He glanced at Noah. "Can vets fix broken legs?"

"Bones take time to heal, but they can set them or even operate and put metal rods in. Why?"

Pan didn't answer Noah. He addressed the queen. "Any healer we summon to tend the dragon will also tend your wounded."

Beard and the queen had a short discussion about taking the offer of tents and a healer. Even though they both agreed nothing was as good as dragon hide for making tents, their people needed help now.

The queen set down her metal cup and stood, towering over him. "Very well. Let us see the tent."

"Pray they like the tent," Pan murmured. Though he was almost sure they wanted the healer more than the tent at this point.

Noah rolled his eyes. "You should do the same. If there is a war, they won't let you go since you wear the city's ring."

Selkie shit. He owed a dragon and a vampire. He did not have time to be a hostage for the other side.

Pan stood and offered his hand to Noah. "By all the magic on this cursed world. I

fucking hope the human tent is better than dragon hide.”

“Wow, that got me right in the feels.” Noah patted his chest.

“I have no idea what you mean.” Though it did not sound sincere.

Noah lowered his voice. “That your prayers need more practice.”

Beard wrapped a meaty hand around each of their arms. “Move. I need to see this tent.”

“I have received thousands of years of prayers. I do not need practice.” Pan whispered.

“Uh-huh.”

He was going to show Noah exactly how someone should worship a god with his tongue and then demand the same. He thought about all the ways he’d been worshipped over the years and debated how best to use that knowledge on Noah when the strong scent of centaur piss and a human yelling interrupted.

CHAPTER24

Web was losing his shit, shouting at the centaur guarding them. Liam was gripping the rope that linked their necks and telling Web to sit. Noah’s gaze flicked between the three of them.

“He fucking pissed on me!” Web pointed at the guard. “I’m not fucking sitting.”

The guard swung his spear. Noah took two steps forward even though he wasn’t sure what to do, but Pan grabbed his arm, pulling him up short.

The spear hit Web across the stomach, and he folded over as if bowing.

Liam dragged Web down to the log before Web had a chance to recover.

“What is going on?” Pan asked. His voice was crisp like a frosty morning that promised no warmth.

The guard and Beard spoke rapidly, pointing at Web and then Liam in a way that sounded very unfriendly. This wasn’t going well. According to Pan, they were trying to stop a war, not start one.

Beard issued an order, then turned to Pan and explained. Noah hated the way he didn’t understand what was being said...that, and he didn’t entirely trust Pan’s translation.

“It appears that Web pissed on the guard’s hoof and the guard retaliated.” Pan kept his voice low. “There is some debate among the centaurs, if that was the correct response.”

Noah stared at him. “How is that ever the correct response? Also, do you really think Web could pee that far?”

“No, it is more likely that the stream ran over the ground and hit the hoof. However?—”

“Don’t however this situation,” Noah hissed. Web was drenched in centaur piss.

“We are prisoners, Noah. There are a hundred different howevers. So unless you would like to spend the rest of your days polishing hooves and scraping dragon skins, I suggest you find the tent. Soothing Web’s ego is the least of our problems.”

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Noah snorted. “That’s because you don’t know him.” Web was going to be bringing this up forever. Liam glared at Noah like he was the traitor, and Noah pointed at the bags against a tree. “Am I allowed to walk over there? Are you acting as translator?”

Pan nodded and spoke to Beard.

Noah left them to it.

He stalked over to the bags and grabbed Liam’s, hauling it over to a dry piece of ground to set it up.

“What’s going on?” Liam’s voice was little more than a whisper.

“Isn’t that clear? Noah’s made friends with the freaks while we’re prisoners,” Web spat.

Noah pulled the tent bag out of the backpack with more aggression than was needed. It really wasn’t that big, and it barely fitted two people, but it was all Liam had. He placed it on the ground and spoke without looking at his friends.

“We are all prisoners. They are waiting for the dragon to die to make a new tent.” He spread the pieces of the tent out. “I am showing them human tents in the hope of convincing them it’s better. All you had to do was sit tight and let Silas negotiate. Instead, you fucked us over.”

“He’s one of them. The only reason he gives a shit about you is because he’s feeding off you,” Web snarled.

“Like you didn’t want the same thing.” Noah pushed poles together, annoyance surging through his veins at the way Web had put them all in danger because he only cared about what he wanted.

“That is not a shining example of human tents,” Liam said.

“I’m aware. But since I know nothing about dragon skin tents, I’m assuming this is better.” He glanced at Liam. “Any ideas?”

“It has zips.”

Noah nodded. That was about all he had, too.

“And it’s lighter. Leather is heavy,” Liam added as if enjoying the idea of making up features.

“Is leather warmer?”

Liam shrugged. “No idea. But it has ventilation windows with mesh to keep out the bugs.”

“What happens if they don’t like the tent?” Web muttered, trying to hold the wet clothes off his skin.

Noah paused and glanced over. “Then we’re fucked. The dragon dies, her mate burns the city, and everything else, and the centaurs start a war with the survivors because they like fighting. So if you can think of any fancy tent features, please share.”

He finished sliding the poles into place and the tent snapped into position. Then he put the outer layer on and pushed the stakes into the ground. He stood and held out his hand as if he were a magician. “Behold the human tent.”

While he'd been occupied, he'd gathered an audience.

The gathered centaurs laughed.

Pan stepped closer. "They are saying it's very small and making comparisons?—"

"Are they making dick jokes? They're..." He drew in a breath and stopped himself from saying half horse. Because they weren't really, nor were they half human. They just looked kind of human and kind of horse.

Pan gave a single nod.

Noah undid the window flap and folded it up. Then he undid the zip and crawled inside. How the fuck did he convince them it was better than a dragon skin tent?

He sat in the tent, knees drawn up to his chest. Meredith was right. This was a dangerous, foolhardy quest. He was going to die out here, not understanding a word anyone was saying.

Pan stuck his head in. "It would help if I could tell them how big other tents are."

Noah swiped at his cheek. Right. Now was not the time to have a breakdown.

Pan got into the tent and kneeled in the entrance. "Please don't fall apart, as I don't know how to put you back together and I need you."

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Noah blinked and wiped his face. “I’m trying not to. I really am, but this is all fucking weird and scary, and we’re fucked. Over a barrel, no lube, and with a horse’s dick.”

“I have been to many orgies, and I do not think you’d like it...” He tilted his head as if considering the idea. “Though it might be fun for some people.”

Noah frowned, not understanding what was going on in Pan’s head. “It’s a saying. An expression that means everything is bad and we’re going to die horribly.”

“Oh, in that case. Yes, we are weighed down with silver and swimming with mermaids. That is a similar expression.”

“Yeah. You’re...you...you’re a god. You’re supposed to be making this right.”

“I’m trying, Noah. But you are the most magical being here.” He lifted one of Noah’s hands and kissed his fingertips. “You are drawn to magic, or it is drawn to you. Either way, you have the power to get us out of?—”

“Thanks, I needed the pressure.” His throat was tight, and he wanted to curl into a ball and make everything go away, but Pan held his hand as if to anchor him in the moment. “I can’t even understand what they’re saying.”

Pan moved closer and placed his hand over Noah’s heart. “You are listening for words, not for the feeling. Words have their own magic, ask any elf.”

Noah glanced up at him. He did not need another mythological being turning up with

more demands. “I cannot learn a language like you. I don’t...” But according to Pan, he did have magic. He had the most magic out of anyone there. “I can use magic to learn your language?”

“Which one? I speak many.”

“The one you use with the centaurs.” Pan’s hand was warm against his chest, and he wanted to lean into the heat.

“Tarikian, that is the main language of my world. Though many kinds also have their own language.”

Noah lowered his voice. “And I have more magic than Web?”

Pan laughed. “A random rock on this world has more magic than him.”

“Oh...” He frowned. “It might be best if he didn’t find out that you know that.”

“Yes, his fragile ego might implode.” Pan’s hand lifted from Noah’s chest to cup his cheek. “Witch Noah, by the magic in your blood you have the power to convince the centaur queen that a human tent is superior to one made of a dead dragon. I beg your favor, your blessing, to save us and the dragon.”

Noah smiled. “That was better.”

Pan leaned closer, but it was Noah who closed the gap, knowing that Pan wanted to taste the magic, and since he knew how to use it was only fair that he had some.

Pan blinked as if startled. “Thank you for sharing.”

“It seemed like the right thing to do. Was it?”

“Perhaps. Even if it wasn’t, I liked it. Ready?”

“No. But I’ll try.” He shifted his weight and his phone out of his pocket. “I can show them pictures of more.” He pulled up the camping store website and searched up tents. “And here are the qualities of human made tents.” He showed Pan.

Pan stared at the screen for several seconds. “I have learned to speak your language, but I cannot read it. The pictures are very impressive, though. The colors might win them over.”

“The colors?”

“They have to paint the dragon skin; otherwise, it’s only green.”

“They don’t all come in bright colors. And I doubt many tents will be big enough. Tall enough.” He scrolled through the website, hoping to find one big enough for a couple of horses.

Pan put his hand over Noah’s. “We need to go back out there.”

Noah nodded and lifted his gaze. A centaur child peered through the door. They grinned and asked a question in Tarikian, that was probably something like ‘can I come in’.

Pan responded and moved to the side. The child—or should that be foal?—walked in. They pressed a hand to the mesh and asked another question. It was easy to guess that it was about the mesh, something the child had never seen before. Pan answered.

He indicated for Noah to step out of the tent.

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He put his phone in his pocket and crawled out with Pan following. His gaze took in the waiting centaurs, their harsh expressions and sharp spears, and his heartbeat quickened with fear. His throat was dry, but he needed to sell this.

He swallowed twice before finding his voice. “This is what is called a two-man tent, because it sleeps two humans comfortably, though you can squeeze three in.” Noah pointed to Web and Liam. They had discussed chipping in to buy a four-man tent, so they’d have a bit more room, but they never had. Sometimes he took David’s family sized tent, but that was too big for the three of them, and much more cumbersome to carry around and set up.

The child in the tent called out and two other children cantered over and dived inside.

Beard made a joke, and the others laughed. If they were comparing tent sizes again ...Noah glared at Pan.

Pan smiled at him and translated what they were saying into English. “Three humans or three centaur children. They want a tent for a family.”

Noah looked at Beard as he spoke. “Humans also like family tents. My uncle has one, which also has an awning and an annex.”

Pan’s translation halted. “What is an awning and an annex? Perhaps you can show them. And by them, I mean the queen. Address her please.”

Right, just because Beard was doing the talking didn’t mean he was in charge.

Noah pulled his phone out and Pan seemed to describe it to them, as mixed in with the Tarikian, Noah heard the word phone. Which the centaurs then repeated, as if testing out the new word.

Pan ran his fingers through his hair and tugged on a curl. “They are asking what a phone does. I said it is a herald for news and also takes pictures like a painter, but they move. I do not think they believe me.”

“It also searches the Internet, but how are you going to explain that to people who’ve never had the Internet...which includes you. Shit. The Internet is like a giant library, but it’s the kind of library where anyone can add to it, so some of it is truthful and useful and some of it is not. There’s also social media where you can keep in contact with people. I use it to message my friends in Australia. Which is on the other side of the world. And I use it to call my parents and speak to them.”

Pan’s eyebrows drew together. “I know it’s not magic, and yet, it is a powerful magic. Your world created new technologies because you lack true magic.” He was silent for a couple of seconds before turning to the queen to tell her more about the phone.

“What about the yurt where the meditations were held at the last festival? That was a big tent,” Liam said.

“That’s a good idea, but I don’t know anything about them. Or where to get one.”

“What are you going to do? Rob a camping store?” Web asked.

He hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I’ll worry when they have agreed human tents are better, then I’ll ask my aunt to requisition one, or something?”

The queen beckoned Noah forward. He pulled up the camping store website to show

her and scrolled through some photos. When he reached the biggest tent, he tapped on it, so she could see a bigger picture.

She asked questions he couldn't answer, and from the look on Pan's face, he didn't know where to start. There was a little conversation between the queen and Pan. Which involved Pan pursing his lips and tugging on his horn again.

Noah had the feeling that if Pan had magic, they'd have all been smited so he could have some peace.

"She wants you to explain how the phone works," Pan said eventually.

Noah blew out a breath. "I don't know the details. Like, a website is made with coding. It's a language made for technology that tells it how to work."

Pan told her something, and she gave what appeared to be a very sage nod before responding and waving at Pan to translate.

"It is the same as the vampire language, which is only written, never spoken. She thinks you are a powerful witch for being able to operate the phone."

Web laughed but stopped with his mouth still open at Pan's glare.

That was enough for Noah to remember Pan had called him the most magical being there. That he either attracted magic to himself or was drawn to it. He had a whole ass god on his side. And Web had nothing except for a collection of black clothes and an attitude.

"Please tell her more about the tents," Pan said.

So Noah showed her the video on the website of the tent being set up. And he listed

off the features, before demonstrating how a zipper worked. Which everyone was very impressed with, and they all wanted a turn to see if they could operate it.

“The queen said she will keep the small tent for the children, and that she will take two big ones in exchange for the dragon.” Pan nodded, as if agreeing that the queen had made the correct choice.

Great, now he needed two large tents, not just one, but he wasn’t about to argue if that’s what got them out of there. “When can we see the dragon?”

Pan winced at the answer. “Tomorrow, it is too dark now. We are their guests for tonight.”

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“Guests?” Noah didn’t want to stay there tonight. Though he didn’t really want to be camping near a dragon either. “I need to know where the dragon is, so I can organize for the vet to meet us there.”

Pan gave him a small smile. “You know where she is.”

No, he didn’t. He’d let his necklace land on the map, that didn’t mean the dragon was there. He didn’t trust it. He didn’t trust himself or his magic. But Pan did.

CHAPTER25

Pan didn’t tell Noah the only reason they were being treated as guests was because he had agreed to owe the queen a favor, which he’d need to repay at some point in the future. Two tents in exchange for a dragon. The healer in exchange for Liam and Web. The favor in exchange for him and Noah.

Well, mostly Noah at this point, since he was the one with magic.

He was trying not to let that bother him because at the moment his only skill was translating. And that wasn’t going to be needed for long. The more English they spoke, the sooner the centaurs would understand them. The more Noah listened to the centaurs, the sooner he’d be able to understand them—if he listened for the intent, for the magic in the words, instead of listening with his mind and hoping to make sense of the words.

Noah had offered to share the snacks from the backpack in a show of goodwill, which had not been well received because the centaurs didn’t like chocolate. Liam had then

shared several muesli bars, which had been much more popular.

And while they were allowed to move around freely, they were followed by a guard, which was irksome. Did they not realize they were dealing with a god?

They did not.

It seemed the queen and her consort were keeping that knowledge to themselves. Perhaps the rest of the herd would panic if they realized Epona had no magic and no power to answer their prayers. She may even be dead.

He refused to believe he was the only god alive.

Or that he would be stuck without magic for the rest of his life. That he would be a no one. But without magic, that's exactly who he was. Where once the queen would have bowed to him even as she hated him, now she did not care, and she insulted him with impunity while favoring Noah. He was only sitting with them to be the interpreter.

And also to make sure Noah didn't say something that resulted with him on the end of a spear. That would be inconvenient.

So he kept his smile fixed in place and did as expected. The centaurs shared their food, and he politely took a couple of bites, but he much preferred what Linda had packed for them. The centaurs also liked the human bread, which was unsurprising.

Noah leaned over. "I need to call my aunt about tomorrow. Is there a way to leave this party politely?"

Pan glanced up at the stars to judge the time, but they were too unfamiliar and without magic to whisper in his ear, he had no idea how late it was. "I will tell her

that you need to talk to the tent supplier and arrange the healer.”

He relayed the message to the queen.

“He will use the phone to talk to people far away like a Strega?”

“Yes.” In one way it was the same, while also being completely different. And if he understood the technology, he might have been able to explain it better. Telephones hadn’t been around when he was last in the human world. Photographs had been black-and-white. Now Noah pulled the phone out of his pocket and had taken a photo of everyone around the fire like they were friends. He called it a selfie.

“Tell him to do it now so we can watch.” The queen smiled. She had been answering all of Noah’s questions, and Pan was sure that if Noah asked for a ride, she’d order Beard to trot around the camp with Noah on his back. She wanted him to stay with them. That much was clear.

Noah’s expression was tight, as if he knew the answer before Pan passed along the message. “Meredith may not answer.”

“Then you will call Linda or David and be diplomatic.” While he’d never met David, since he was married to Meredith, and Meredith was Linda’s daughter, it made sense that he was like them and had the connections to make something happen. The whole family seemed to be involved in the community and making things better for those in town. They were the kind of people he liked giving his blessing to because they multiplied the magic and used it in ways he couldn’t envision.

Whereas people like Web deserved what they prayed for. The kind of people where giving them what they wanted and letting it go askew was entertaining. Those people often wished ill on others to make themselves feel better, and that kind of magic never turned into anything good.

Noah tapped the phone a few times, and it started to make a noise.

The centaurs stared, the firelight catching in their eyes and gold beads.

A woman's voice came out of the device. "Thank god, Noah, I was worried."

"Everything is fine, Mer." Noah glanced at Pan as if seeking confirmation. "You are on speaker phone, as we met up with some centaurs who know where the dragon's mate is."

At least Noah chose his words carefully, because like him, the queen and her consort wouldn't reveal when they had gained an inkling of English, the same way he had not revealed that he spoke their language.

"Centaurs...I shouldn't be surprised, yet I am. Where are you?"

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“It doesn’t matter where I am tonight, but I need you to be at this location tomorrow.” he read coordinates off the map. “And I’m going to send you a link to a particular tent. I need two of them. I also need a vet who is used to working with large farm animals...and broken bones.”

“What’s going on?”

“The dragon is injured. Apparently, her wing and her leg are broken. We’re going to have to load her up onto a truck to move her, or she will be turned into a tent.”

“We don’t have the resources for that.”

Pan leaned over and spoke into the phone. “You will have fewer resources if the dragon burns everything.”

Meredith made a noise that Pan didn’t like. “Silas.” Her tone hardened. “I’m sure there is more you’re not telling me, but you cannot threaten a city with dragon fire.”

How about attacking centaurs? Would that be more to her liking? Or perhaps she’d be more inclined to do more if she was aware that Noah might be kept prisoner. “Without this help, we may not be able to return, and I am acting Lord. I am also the only one who speaks dragon. The male will become upset, and everything will turn to selkie shit.”

Meredith said something in the other language which Pan had not heard enough to learn aside to know it was called Welsh in English.

Whatever it was she said, Noah agreed with. Though it was clear, he did not speak that language very well, either.

Noah tapped the screen and there was no more talk. Instead, he kept tapping, filling the screen with letters. Letters Pan couldn't read. He'd never needed to know how to read.

He cursed his lack of magic once again.

"What is he doing now?" The queen asked.

Clearly, Noah didn't want any of them eavesdropping on his conversation. He was being secretive, not diplomatic, which meant he needed to smooth this over.

"He is sending the details of the tent you requested, as well as the requirements for the healer, so they know what treatments to bring. What are the injuries your people have?" That was a pile of lies, but they were plausible, and he relayed the injury list to Noah. With luck, if there was any of that in this magic forsaken world, everything would work out tomorrow.

He stared up at the unfamiliar stars, regretting becoming acting lord and agreeing to help the dragon. But without the dragon he'd be wandering around, wearing a selkie coat and the bright green boots. It would've taken him so much longer to run into Noah, and by that time, the female dragon might have been dead.

The queen gave him a description of the various injuries, and he passed the details on to Noah. "Will your healer be able to help?"

"I assume so. Meredith is going to ask the farm vet to attend. It's not like anyone's got experience healing dragons. The farm vet deals with cows and horses and such. She told me to conserve my phone battery and not turn it on until morning, so that's

what I'm going to do." He pressed the button and put the phone back in his pocket. "So what now?"

"Now we wait for dawn, and we pray."

Noah shook his head and laughed. "I should've known that's what you'd say. That's all I'm good for it isn't it? You can't get these guys to pray?"

"No." He considered Noah for several heartbeats. "It is not all you are good for. Without you, none of this would've been possible."

"Without me, we wouldn't be in this mess. I led us here."

"I choose to believe magic leads us to where we need to be. And this is where we need to be."

"You said you have no magic."

Pan put his hand on Noah's thigh. His lips were just a whisper away from his ear and the temptation to do more than talk was almost too much. If there were no audience, he'd have bitten the lobe and moved his hand higher. "I have no connection to it, but that does not mean it does not exist because you have magic. So I will follow you and pray that you led me in the right direction to find my own." And if they weren't in the middle of a centaur camp, he'd have given Noah a proper worship to taste the magic on his lips.

Noah gave him a weak smile. "Right now, all I want is some sleep."

That was the last thing Pan wanted. He needed magic.

The ache was so bad that he finally understood why humans claimed they'd sell their

soul for something, not that he had a soul. “I will find out where they intend for us to sleep.”

He hoped it wasn't in the tent with the queen and her consort.

He made a joke about humans needing more rest than gods and centaurs before asking about their plans. And because Noah would expect him to ask, he also enquired after Web and Liam.

“They will sleep with the guards,” Beard said. “You and the witch may sleep in the human tent.”

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Pan inclined his head, grateful they had some privacy. “Thank you.”

He stood and offered Noah his hand. When they were both standing, he gave a small bow, which Noah mimicked. Gods shouldn’t bow. However, he had little choice but to grovel and beg. Without his magic, no one gave a shit about him.

He was insignificant, and it rankled.

The queen should be bowing to him. She should be asking him for favors, instead he owed her. He was fast becoming an errand boy for all the Tarikians who needed help. First the dragon and then the vampire, and now the bloody centaurs.

The urge to yell in frustration bubbled in his throat.

He wanted to stamp his foot and scream for the old gods to do something. To put things right. But if they still existed, he doubted they cared as they hadn’t done anything. Instead, they’d stranded all of creation in this mess.

How the fuck was he supposed to fix it?

“Should we check on Liam and Web?” Noah asked.

“No, doing that shows distrust. Better to ready ourselves for bed. I trust your friends will not offend our hosts during the night.”

“That’s asking a lot of Liam to keep Web in check.”

As much as Pan wanted to ask about Web, and why he thought he had magic and behaved like some kind of leader, that is not where he wanted to direct Noah's thoughts.

No children played in the tent now, as their elders had put them to bed. Inside the tent someone had placed several blankets that were not human, as one was decorated with one of Epona's tales. No doubt that blanket had been selected especially for him. Given the chill in the air, he wasn't inclined to refuse, despite the jab at his current situation.

Noah crawled into the tent and took off his shoes, placing them in one corner. Then he stripped off his coat and rolled it up to act as a pillow, before lying on his back as if to stare at the stars. He didn't remove any other item of clothing, which was rather unfortunate.

Pan did the same with his boots and coat, as if familiar with camping in a tent. He didn't stare at the roof, instead he lay next to Noah, facing him, and pulled the blanket over them both.

"You do not seem very sleepy." He kept his words low in case one of the guards settled nearby.

"I am exhausted, but my mind is not. It's spinning furiously, as if trying to make sense of everything. It's like every thought is sliding on ice and there's nothing I can grab onto. And if I catch my breath for a moment, whatever stability I thought I had melts and sends me in a new direction." Noah turned his head and looked at him. "So yeah, I'm tired, but I don't know if I can sleep surrounded by centaur guards who hunt dragons and want a pet witch and a god."

When put like that, Noah made a very good case for not sleeping ever again, or at least until they were somewhere much safer. "I agree this is not ideal."

“Ideal?” Noah rolled onto his side, so they were almost nose to nose. His voice was little more than a harsh whisper. “Everything I have ever known, everything you have ever known, no longer exists. Why are you so calm?”

“I’m not. But I must appear to be untroubled. Because if I lose my shit in front of other people, people who once prayed to me to fix their problems, how do you think they will respond?” The fury beneath the surface caught in his throat and sharpened his words. “I want to scream until I have no voice. Until someone answers. But there is no one. My life until this point...” He closed his eyes, remembering the parties and the way using magic was no different to breathing. He chose who to bless and who to punish. He jumped from place to place, wherever there was a temple, or wherever people called one of his many names.

His names because they like the way he used magic.

He was only as good as his last blessing. Gods fell out of favor if their worshippers didn’t like what they were doing. If they didn’t like the way the magic unfolded, not that he had a lot of control over that. It’s why he was choosy with what prayers he granted.

“You were important, and now you’re like the rest of us. Sucks to be you.”

Pan opened his eyes. It was too dark to read Noah’s features. “You are not like the rest of them.”

“So you keep saying, but I can assure you I am. I’ve spent my entire life trying to live up to my parent’s expectations, and I’m preparing you for the inevitable failure. Whatever it is, you’re looking for...I’m not it.”

“You are. Magic lead me?—”

“I’m tired of hearing about magic.”

For several heartbeats, Pan didn’t know what to say. No one had ever told him they were tired of magic. Magic held everything together. It was the weave of the universe and threaded through everyone, some more than others. And while most could never touch that thread within them, it still existed.

“Then let me show you.”

“Show me what?”

“Your connection to magic.” Let me touch that connection for just one heartbeat.

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Noah leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “There. Is that what you want?”

“No.” He wanted Noah calling out his name. Noah was his connection to magic. Sure, it was only a trickle when he was used to a rushing river, but it was there. Perhaps he could encourage Noah to grow that connection. “I was not lying when I said you are the most powerful being here, and while the others will not acknowledge that, I will. And I will give you the deference deserved.”

He pressed Noah onto his back and moved over him.

“What are you doing?”

“And giving you one of my favorite kinds of worship.” He straddled Noah’s thighs and undid the button and zipper on his pants.

“Sex?”

Pan traced one finger over Noah’s firming dick. “Sex is so banal. Anyone can do it, and most do it badly, seeking only pleasure. They never consider what is possible.”

“Sex is for pleasure...and you need to ask first before getting into someone’s pants.” But he didn’t push Pan’s hands away.

Pan leaned over him. He licked the curve of his ear. “Please allow me to show you. Worship you.”

While the words sounded innocent enough, there was nothing innocent about Pan's touch. It was slow and sure, as he used exactly the right pressure and speed to make him hard.

Noah licked his lip. The moment Pan had confessed to being a god, he should've known he was out of his depth, and that Pan was out of his league. But it was rather hard to refuse him when Pan made him feel important, special.

And he was one hundred percent sure Pan was using him because he had magic.

He'd be lying if he denied enjoying the attention from a god. From a mythological being who hadn't existed, or at least not existed in this world. That more he wanted growing up now existed, not that he could've said back then what he was searching for. Maybe it was magic that he'd been seeking, or magic had been seeking him, the entire time.

Is that why it hurt so much every time his mother had thrown out one of his collections? Pan's teeth raked over his earlobe, dragging his attention back to the present, and sent a shiver of heat all the way to his toes.

He should agree for no other reason than this might be the only chance he had to sleep with a god. Someone who had been around for...for near enough to forever and knew what to do. This wasn't a random hook up, or a drunk fumble to take advantage of an opportunity.

A small part of him remembered that giving carte blanche to a god was a bad idea. "That depends on what you're going to do."

Pan made a noise like a purr in his ear. "Smart. I like that. I will not do anything more than suck your dick."

Again, Noah sensed something beneath the words. “But there’s definitely more to it.”

That purr again, another lick and nibble that made him gasp. “Physically, I will not do more than that. I assume you have experienced that pleasure before.”

Pan’s fingertips brushed the head of his dick. The thin layer of his briefs offering no protection from the touch.

“Um, yeah. And non-physically?”

“I’ll show you what is possible.” His lips brushed over Noah’s in promise.

He was about three seconds from agreeing to anything. “Meaning?”

“You are tired of hearing about magic, so stop listening and start feeling. Allow me to treat you as I have been treated.”

Noah closed his eyes, his entire body thrumming with need. He should not be this wound up from a few touches. They were practically hostages.

The world was fucked up, and he was trying to save a fucking dragon.

A god was about to give him a blow job.

None of these sentences made sense. Last week, if someone had told him this was how he’d be spending his evening, he’d have wondered what they’d taken and where he could get some.

“Okay.”

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Pan drew back a little. “That was not very convincing.”

That’s because he didn’t know what he was diving into. “Fine, I will allow you to worship me by giving me a blow job.”

Pan rocked back, and Noah expected him to remove clothing.

He didn’t.

Every touch was through layers of fabric. Over his chest, his stomach, his thighs, but not where he wanted to be touched. He was tempted to guide Pan’s hand to his dick, but he’d agreed to let Pan do this his way.

Which meant every time he lifted his hand to touch him, it was gently moved away.

“You are not expected to do anything,” Pan murmured, as his fingers slid beneath Noah’s shirt and skated over his ribs, pushing up the shirt. Pan’s tongue licked a wet line from his navel up to one nipple.

Which was the wrong direction, but didn’t stop his back from arching for more. He wanted to do something. He couldn’t lie there and be worshipped.

Beyond the tent, the night quietened as most of the centaurs settled down for the night.

When Pan’s hand finally grazed his dick, Noah bit his lip to stay quiet, but his moan was still too loud in his ears. Aside from desperation, he wasn’t sure what else he

should be feeling.

He lifted his hips, without Pan needing to say anything, and his jeans were peeled down, then pulled off. The cool air on his skin was a blessing but offered no relief from the heat in his blood. His dick pulsed with every heartbeat, leaking pre-cum onto his belly, and he existed only for each touch, and the promise of what was to come. He needed Pan to continue and never stop at the same time.

The soft caress of Pan's lips along his aching shaft was almost too much. He sucked in a shuddering breath, not sure when his underwear had been removed. Things like that no longer mattered. Time didn't matter.

His entire existence ebbed and flowed with the tide of desire.

Somehow Noah's fingers threaded into Pan's hair and held his horn as though it was the only thing keeping him grounded as the god's tongue flicked over the head of his cock.

Each breath was a gasp as everything became too much. There was a whisper in him, around him, that he should let go and stop fighting.

What was he fighting? What was he trying to hold on to?

And if he let go, what would happen?

For a moment, he didn't think he could give in. If he did, he'd never be the same again, but he couldn't resist as lust consumed him. The whisper became a shout, drowning out every thought.

This is what it felt like to die. In the clarity of his last heartbeat, everything in the universe became clear. His life and all the paths he could've taken. The lives of

everyone around him. The ripples and the holes, the ropes, and the weave. It glimmered golden around him and through him, all-encompassing.

He understood everything and nothing, yet the answer to every question was there. All he needed to do was...

It all broke apart.

“No,” he gasped as he reached for it, only to find nothing. No heart, no light, no magic.

What had he done wrong?

He opened his eyes to darkness. Then Pan’s mouth slid off his dick, and he looked up, his pupils filled with the golden light.

Noah needed it. He wanted it. He struggled to sit up, reaching for Pan and pulling him closer, claiming his lips and tasting himself on the god’s tongue.

Pan held his jaw, his eyes too bright to gaze at. “Sleep. Dream. Accept the gift of magic instead of hiding from it.”

CHAPTER27

Noah groaned and rolled over, aware that something wasn’t quite right but unable to put his finger on what. He cracked his eyes open, not sure where he was, only that it was daylight and he appeared to be in a tent not wearing any pants or underwear, and the blanket wrapped around him smelled like horse.

He also felt vaguely hung over, even though he hadn’t been drinking. There was a fuzziness in his mind when he thought about last night, as if he had been drinking,

and the pulse in his temples indicated he hadn't drunk enough water.

He was also alone in the tent.

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He lay still for several seconds, waiting for the memories to assemble into some kind of logical order. Pan's sun bright pupils, and bathing in that golden light like he was one with the universe. No, one with magic.

That Pan had...

Oh. Pan had nearly killed him with a blowjob.

And they were in the middle of a centaur camp.

Given the shit happening, dying from a blow job was not a bad option. Had he died? That might explain the hangover. He pushed himself upright and took a couple of breaths.

Nope, he definitely felt weird. Was it the centaur food?

Shit, what if he'd caught a mythological virus?

Was that a thing? If he needed to be vaccinated before traveling to some countries, surely there were things he should worry about when hanging around with mythological beings.

Which meant he shouldn't be kissing them either.

And while the logical explanation was that he was coming down with something, it didn't feel right. And he couldn't explain why. It was like when he saw something in the pawnshop or at an estate sale and had to have it. He didn't always buy it because

money only went so far, but that knowing sensation was there, and stronger.

The tent door unzipped, and he pulled the blanket tighter around his body.

Pan stuck his head in and smiled. “You are awake. Good. Liam made you some breakfast.” He offered Noah a plate of food, which looked suspiciously like two bacon sandwiches. Nan had sent them off with about a kilo. “They are strange but delicious. He called them bacon butties. Not something I am familiar with.”

There was no sign of the golden light in Pan’s eyes. And what he’d dreamed had been far more intense than the glimmers he’d glimpsed before. Noah frowned, not sure what to say.

His body knew what it wanted, his dick hardening with each heartbeat.

Pan.

He blinked and glanced away. He was being ridiculous. “Thank you. I didn’t mean to sleep so long.”

“You have not overslept. Your friends are packing the bags, and the centaurs are preparing to lead us to the dragon. I would not have left you here, nor made us late.”

All of that sounded like the truth, yet there was something missing.

“What am I forgetting?”

“Why do you think you have forgotten something?” Pan countered without answering the question.

“I slept all night without waking once, despite the noises of the camp, and I woke up

with a headache and..." He studied his hand and let it fall back to the blanket, unable to even describe what was going on. Pan studied him with one eyebrow raised, as if he'd lost his mind. Maybe he had. Or maybe he was still sleeping, and this was all a dream. "Don't look at me like that. I remember you..." Heat rushed to his cheeks.

"I showed you what humans are doing wrong when they seek only pleasure."

That was one way to put it. "What did you do to me?"

"I let you experience magic."

Noah shook his head. "You edged me until I passed out."

Pan shrugged. "Same thing."

"What?" Noah peered up at him. "It's not."

"You were able to enter the in between state and channel magic."

Noah's lips parted, but it was a couple of seconds before he found any words. "The golden threads."

Pan nodded, a smile curving his lips. "The magic that connects everything. You accessed the tiniest thread that you don't know how to use."

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“And you did, I suppose?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to let it go to waste.” His smile took on an edge, and he appeared far too happy with himself.

“What did you do?”

“Not nearly enough, because you were only open to magic for a few heartbeats.”

Noah tossed a sandwich at him. Pan fumbled and almost dropped it. “What did you do while I was unconscious?”

Pan took a bite and spoke around the food in his mouth. “You weren’t unconscious.”

“You used me.”

“I showed you what you are capable of.”

“You wanted a magical hit.”

Pan leaned in and put the sandwich on the plate. His eyes narrowed. “I am a god. I am a conduit for magic. And you are the only one with magic I can reach. You would deny me the chance to answer prayers?”

Noah swallowed and held the god’s stare.

Pan used him to touch magic. That’s all it had been. Yet at the same time, Noah

couldn't deny he wanted to touch magic, and Pan, again. "You should have told me how to use magic beforehand."

"That will take practice and time. Last night was an opportunity for you to experience being one with the universe."

That sounded like a good thing, yet it wasn't. "I'm not your magical battery."

A shout came from outside.

Pan glanced up, listening to the chatter. "They are ready to leave. Finish eating and put on some pants."

Noah glared at him as he backed out of the tent, his stomach and chest bursting with rivaling emotions that threatened to tear him apart. How was he supposed to marry lust and curiosity with fear of the unknown?

How could he trust a god who only cared about magic?

Who'd never answered his question about what he'd done with the magic?

And how did he go back to human lovers, who didn't make his brain explode with magic?

CHAPTER 28

The hike to the dragon was filled with talk about before the collapse. Beard led the walk and was happy to tell Pan all about Beita. Though he was closed lipped about the herd and their losses.

Noah was also tight of tongue. Whether it was because he was thinking or because he

was annoyed, it was hard to tell as he spoke to no one, not even his friends and his gaze was fixed ahead on the trail as he walked next to a centaur who was equally silent. At the back of the line were Web and Liam, who passed the occasional whisper, but appeared to have no intention of trying to draw Noah into conversation.

The longer the silence dragged on, the more concerned Pan became. He should not be troubling himself with the whims of a single person, but right now, that person was all he had.

Noah needed to be his world, the one whose prayers he answered before they were spoken aloud. He laughed as Beard made a joke about the city's minotaur population. The old one about minotaurs, satyrs and centaurs.

The joke stemmed from an incident that had been lost to history for the mortals. He remembered, and he doubted the elves had forgotten, either.

As a result, centaurs refused to deal with satyrs and elves, minotaurs didn't deal with elves, and satyrs loathed centaurs. Given that most cities were made of many different peoples it often made things tricky. The city state of Calla, Beita's nearest neighbor, was ruled by minotaurs, which must make the politics difficult because of course the centaurs hated that Beita traded with Calla.

The petty squabbles of mortals who didn't have the life span to waste was exhausting. They had the ability to create wonderful things, if they laid down their spears and swords.

"Given the situation and the dire circumstances of all mythological beings, do you not think it would be wise to work together, instead of continuing ancient feuds?" Pan tried to keep the snap out of his voice.

"You believe we should unite against a common enemy?" Beard asked.

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“Yes... No! Humans are not the enemy. Plenty lived on Tariko.” Which meant there may be Tarikian born humans in the human town. “We need to work together to create a home.”

“Now is the time to seize a home, while everyone is in disarray.” Beard tapped his spear on the ground.

Pan bit back on the sigh and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He couldn't resist running his fingers through his hair and tugging on the end of his horn in frustration. Which only reminded him of the way Noah had held his horns last night. No one ever did that. They were too busy being grateful that he allowed them to touch him at all, but Noah had held on as if he had the power to control a god. In that moment he had, and that was not something Pan planned on admitting to anyone.

Beard had a point, even the humans didn't know what was going on, but it didn't feel right to launch an attack and carve out territory, creating further chaos and havoc and injury. He was sure that had Ares or Diana been having this conversation, they would have agreed to war. Epona would've ridden into battle with the centaurs and blessed their spears.

None of that was his scene.

And sure, there had been times where the other gods had teased him for his unwillingness to fight. While he longed for their counsel and company, fighting over ruins seemed pointless.

“You want to make fresh enemies in a world we know little about? You want to ask

your fellow Tarikians to fight when they have lost their home and their loved ones? You want people to ignore their wounds and to attack those who may become friends?”

“That is my point. They may become friends. They may not. The longer we wait, the stronger they become.”

Pan shook his head. “I may only be acting lord of the city, but I will not ask traumatized people to find makeshift weapons to fight in a war that does not need to be fought.”

Beard spat on the ground. “You never had the heart for a fight.”

“Because there are other ways.” He stared ahead and considered his next words very carefully. Because he did not want to be the one starting a fight while discussing war. “You are allied with Beita...do not act rashly to change that.”

“You wield threats with nothing to back them up.”

“I worked with you in good faith, to secure the return of the dragon and your tents. I promised a healer to tend your wounded.” You were the ones who made threats. And if he’d had an iota of magic, he would have made them pay. As it was the small amount he gained last night, he’d quickly spent, with no idea if it had been enough to be successful.

The scent of charred wood and dragon shit filled his nose and lungs. It was almost enough to make him retch. Others did. They’d better not start vomiting or he may not be able to hold back, and he had little enough pride that he did not want to lose what was left. Or the breakfast he’d eaten what felt like half a day ago but was only a quarter-day.

“We are close now,” Beard announced, as if that wasn’t obvious. “I suggest you announce yourself, so she does not turn her fire on you.”

Hopefully, he’d finish this without making another deal with a dragon. He called out a greeting in Dragon announcing who he was and that the centaurs were allowing her to go free.

When she didn’t answer, he walked faster, afraid that she’d died overnight. He should have insisted on going to her last night, instead of waiting. What if she had given up?

Then she chirped a welcome.

Beard sped up, so Pan had no chance of reaching her first. The path hooked around and there she was, in the clearing. Her wing pierced by a tree and her front leg at an awkward angle. She couldn’t move to hunt or eat or drink.

This was a rather large and fetid pile of dragon shit. Literally and figuratively.

Pan turned around, sensing Noah but not seeing him. “Noah, call your people. The situation is rather more serious than we were led to believe.”

Noah must have heard him as he broke into the clearing at a run and skidded to a stop next to Pan with his eyes wide and a curse on his lips. “That’s not good.”

That was rather understating the problem. “Your people need to bring food and water for her.”

Noah nodded. “And a chainsaw.”

“A what-saw?”

“It’s a machine to cut through the tree. I’ll also update our location.”

Beard grinned. “I warned you. She was only good for a tent. She’ll never fly again.”

Pan glared at the centaur, and wondered how he would enjoy having a spear through his hand and one broken leg and then being abandoned to suffer in pain, consumed by hunger and thirst. If he’d had magic...

“Leaving her like that is cruel,” Noah muttered.

Pan grunted. “But killing her breaks the treaty with the city.” That treaty was the only reason the dragon was alive, and he couldn’t break it by feeding Beard to the dragon, no matter how tempting.

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“She might die before we can save her.” Noah tapped on his phone, crafting a message to his aunt. No courier pigeons or magic required. Amazing. He wanted a phone. Perhaps it was a technological magic he’d be able to use.

Perhaps the other gods would also acquire one so they could discuss how best to fix this world before the humans and mythological beings fucked it up further. While he loved to place bets, he didn’t know who was going to make the biggest mess. And he didn’t want to be the only god fixing it.

Pan cast a closer eye over the dragon. While she was dehydrated, dragons didn’t eat every day, so the lack of food probably wasn’t hurting her. Nor was there any fresh blood around her. “Dragons are hardy.”

And no doubt the reason for all the burned grass was because she’d threatened the centaurs, who while not willing to kill her, were quite happy to hasten her demise.

Noah gave him a concerned look, as if he didn’t believe any living creature could survive having their wings impaled by a tree and then not eating for several days.

Pan turned to Beard and spoke in Tarikian. “Where is the nearest water source?”

“There is a river not far.” He jerked his head in the direction.

“Excellent. Then I suggest you find a very large bucket and start filling it so the dragon can have a drink.” He should’ve ordered that last night. And if the centaurs had been honest and told him she was impaled and unable to move, he might have thought of it. Instead, they’d led him to believe she couldn’t fly or walk.

“We have completed the end of our deal. Now we wait for our tents.”

Pan growled and stalked over to the much larger being. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

However, he had not made sure one of the requirements of the deal was that the dragon should be alive. This was why he shouldn’t be in charge of a city. He wasn’t good at negotiations. And truthfully, he’d been more concerned about getting him and Noah away from the camp.

“This is your city’s dragon. How do you think her mate will feel when he finds out that you were too lazy to fetch her water and left her to die?”

Beard lifted his chin and tapped his spear on the ground, but didn’t seem as confident. “You will not tell him. He will attack us and then there will be war.”

“I don’t need to say anything. The humans will. They are not bound by our treaties and rules.” He indicated to Noah’s friends and watched as Beard did the same calculations that he had done far too many times over the last couple of days.

Who was lying, who was telling the truth, and what might the cost be? Was it a chance he was willing to take or a risk that should be mitigated? There was no right answer. There was no clarity anymore, and he hated it with every fiber of his being.

He drew in a breath, wanting nothing more than to go back to how things had been. If he could go back, he swore he would visit the human world more frequently. Perhaps it was the gods ignoring this world that had contributed to the loss of magic.

But all the gods, with all their magic, lacked the power to recreate an entire world. That kind of magic belonged to the old ones and if they existed, they were sleeping or otherwise occupied, and he was not about to do anything that might attract their

attention. They might consider ending this world to eliminate any additional problems.

Beard gave the water orders to three centaurs. They bowed and cantered away.

It was about fucking time someone started listening to him.

“The vet...doctor...is almost here. She’s got a local farmer with a tractor and...oh never mind.” Noah shook his head. “The farmer is going to help transport the dragon into town. His land backs onto this park. Forest.”

“Thank you...though how will she locate us?”

Noah waved his phone. “It has a map, and I sent our location. We should head downhill toward the farm, and get out from under the trees, so they can find us more easily.”

Pan glanced at Web and Liam. They would be the least useful with the dragon and if something happened, they’d talk. “Send them. Tell them to speak to Linda and Lord Feryn if we are not back in town by tomorrow.” He doubted the vampire would do anything, but Linda would. Though if the centaurs betrayed them, Pan did not expect to live.

Noah hesitated for a couple of heartbeats, as if he wanted to ask questions, but after studying Pan’s expression, he turned and walked away. Pan did not like this frost between them, but he did not know what he had done wrong, or what he should’ve done differently.

He’d worshipped Noah like a god and shown him how to touch magic—that it still existed had been a blessed relief. Most people would be grateful for the opportunity. Most people would’ve been thanking him for both the pleasure and the magic. He

watched Web and Liam skirt the edge of the clearing, and head in the direction Noah pointed.

Web most definitely would've thanked him. But showing magic to Web was like trying to teach a mermaid to paint. Pointless and painful for everyone, though mostly him.

The dragon called to Pan, and he walked around until she saw him. "There are thin skins coming to help."

'Human' in Dragon was 'thin skin'.

"You will help, sun eyes?"

Pan gave her a sad smile. "I am wounded. No magic."

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Her nostrils flared as she sniffed him. “What happened?”

With the limited vocabulary of Dragon, he didn’t know where to start. “This is not our world. This one has no magic.”

Her tail twitched in anger at the loss or because she didn’t understand? “My mate?”

“He is in the city. He was searching for you when he found me.”

She wriggled as though she wanted to join him but only hissed in pain.

“Be still. You will be free soon.”

She looked at her front leg, which was broken from the strange angle it created. “I am too wounded.”

“The thin skins have a healer with a different kind of magic.” And if the vet didn’t help, they were going to be eaten, which was not a good outcome for anyone. He glanced in the direction that Web and Liam had gone.

Where were they?

CHAPTER29

“Tell the vet to hurry,” Noah said.

“You aren’t coming with us?” Liam asked

“I need to stay here.” Though that wasn’t quite true. Pan didn’t need him; he’d be able to talk to the vet just fine. But he didn’t understand some of the terminology and he didn’t understand how things worked. It wasn’t the language he needed help with, it was everything else.

Web rolled his eyes. “He’s fucking the incubus. Of course he wants to stay with him. By cozying up to the acting Lord of the city, he can feel important.”

“Give it a rest, Web. You were pretty keen to come searching for the dragon. We found a dragon and had dinner with centaurs.” Liam grinned, as if it had been a great adventure.

Web snorted. “We were captured, held prisoner, and pissed on.”

Both could be true. “Their rules are different. And that’s why I’m staying. We’ll get the dragon out of here and be back in town soon enough, and if we aren’t, you know who to talk to.”

Liam hugged him. “I’d tell you to be careful, but I’m not sure if you can in this situation.”

Noah held onto him for a moment longer, not wanting to admit that he was afraid. Dragons were big, and this one was hurt and while it was technically a wild animal, that she talked and helped guard the city meant that she wasn’t really wild. And then there was Pan, who was also wild and unpredictable and dangerous.

And addictive.

Or was that the magic?

Noah patted Liam on the back and stepped away. “I’m glad you came with me. When

I get home, I'll see if I can introduce you to the vampire in the pub."

Web narrowed his eyes. "So you're going to be hanging out with them now?"

"Everything changed with the collapse. I'm taking one day at a time and helping where I can. Since there's plenty of people helping humans, I might as well help the mythologicals." He glanced over his shoulder. "I should head back... Say a prayer to Pan for me?"

Liam laughed. "Will do. And I'll light a candle."

"Yeah. Will you be coming round for the full moon?"

He wanted to. It's what they'd been doing for the last year. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason." Web shrugged. "Come on, the sooner we spot the vet, the sooner we can leave." Web started walking away.

"He's jealous."

Noah had figured that out already, but he wasn't sure what he could do about it. No one was ever jealous of him. Web would be more upset if he learned the only reason Pan had done that was because Noah had magic. For the first time in his life, he had something that people wanted. Needed.

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He'd looked up to Web, believing he had the sight and magic when it had all been posturing and pretend. He was the one with the power, but he didn't know how to use it. No, but there was someone who could teach him.

He didn't need to trust Pan to learn more about magic. He didn't need to like Pan to have sex with him to reach the magic.

Perhaps the only honest thing between them was that Pan was using him for magic. If he used Pan to learn about magic, he was only balancing the scales. Though none of those things sat well within him.

He should have been able to trust a god.

CHAPTER30

When the vet and the farmer arrived, the area around the dragon dissolved from tense waiting into a rush of activity. As the vet walked over, Pan kept a hand on her neck, reminding the dragon to be calm because these people were here to help. The dragon had drunk all the water the centaurs brought, and they'd scurried back and forth three times.

Beard demanded his tents before leaving and was unimpressed that the human boys were carrying them, so he needed to wait for them. So, while the vet unpacked her things, and the farmer assessed the tree piercing the wing, with one eye on the dragon, Beard sent a centaur to meet Liam and Web and collect the tents.

Pan was surprised Meredith wasn't there. "Where is your aunt?"

“Working. She organized this...or delegated someone to sort it. Either way, this is all we have as everyone is rather busy.” Noah was careful to stay back from the dragon, even though Pan was sure the dragon wouldn’t hurt him.

The vet finished her lap of the dragon and stopped near Pan. “I’ve never treated a dragon. And this is not a situation I trained for.” She kept looking at the dragon as if unable to believe it was real. “However, I am a farm vet, which means I am trained and dealing with large animals...they aren’t typically this large.”

“If you have questions for her, keep them simple and I will translate.” Pan smiled, glad that the vet wasn’t pretending to know anything.

“Of course.” She nodded. “I’m not used to talking animals either. Is she an animal, or is that offensive?”

“A dragon is considered an animal, as they cannot learn another language.”

The vet thought about that for a moment, her eyebrows drawing together. “And the centaurs...how horse-like are they?”

“They are not animals, and I know nothing of their inner workings. They do not speak your language yet, so I will translate.” And he was getting very tired of doing all the talking. He really needed Noah to learn Tarikian.

Perhaps his friends could too, then they may be of some use.

“Let’s start with something easy. Can she tell me how she is feeling and what hurts aside from her leg and wing?”

The vet spent what seemed like forever touching various parts of the dragon and asking questions that didn’t do anything. Noah brought him a bottle of water and a

muesli bar, which was like eating sticky horse food. “Do you not have any chocolate?”

Noah laughed.

The dragon asked for something to eat.

The vet said no, and the dragon thumped her tail in disgust.

“Why can’t the dragon eat?” Pan muttered, not wanting to be caught in the middle of an argument between the dragon and the vet.

“If the vet needs to operate, it’s usual to not eat before anesthetic...um...” Noah frowned. “It’s a drug they give you to make you unconscious during surgery.”

The vet had mentioned something about operating on both the wing and the leg. Something about metal rods to hold the bones in place, but she didn’t seem keen, calling it a last resort. “Is it dangerous?”

“It can be. Being cut open carries risks.”

Pan sighed and stared up at the sky. The day was sliding past far too quickly. “If there was magic?—”

“Well, there’s not. And you’ve already used what I tapped into.”

“There wasn’t enough to fix a broken leg.” There’d been enough for one small blessing out of the thousands of cries for help that he’d heard in that heartbeat. He responded to the one that would do the most good. It hadn’t been the most desperate one. And while it wasn’t the first time he’d weighed the various pleas, or even picked the one most beneficial to him, it was the first time he’d responded with someone

else's magic. He had no idea how the blessing would behave.

“Can you tell the dragon I want to straighten and splint her leg and that it might hurt? Also remind her that if she eats me, no one else will treat her injuries.” The vet gave him an entirely justified nervous smile.

Pan murmured in the dragon's ear. Her claws flexed in the dirt.

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“I am in great pain. I do not want to hurt the thin skin healer, but I may snap.”

“I do not want to ask this, but will you let her tie your muzzle closed so you cannot?”

Her tail thumped and the ground beneath his feet reverberated as if the world might collapse again. Standing by her neck, she couldn't bite him, but she still had claws on her rear legs and was capable of tearing him apart.

She huffed a breath out of her snout. “I do not trust myself, so yes. You will make sure it is removed.”

“I will. You have my word.” He told the vet, who then handed him a length of rope as if expecting him to tie the dragon's mouth closed. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“If I have to risk being eaten, I thought you might enjoy sharing the fun.” She lifted her eyebrows. “At least you can soothe her.”

Between the two of them, they tied her muzzle closed, and the farmer tied the end around a tree to keep her head out of the way.

Because he was the only one who spoke Dragon, he was told to remain by her neck and relay instructions. He attempted to argue that he didn't take orders, but this wasn't actually about him, even though it was his deal being fulfilled.

It was Noah who helped the vet straighten the leg and steady it with metal splints and bedsheets, while Pan stood there talking to the dragon, hoping she didn't kill anyone

by accident.

And it was Noah who explained the chainsaw and had the farmer give a demonstration, so the dragon understood how they would be cutting the tree that pierced her wing, not her wing even though she might feel the vibrations.

It was an awful noise and had to be done in several stages to prevent more damage. Each time, he reminded the dragon not to move. And she dug her claws into the earth and made noises he'd never heard a dragon make and never wanted to hear again.

The noise finally stopped when everyone's lungs were full of sawdust. That didn't stop the vet from shouting more instructions.

"The healer is going to check your wing. She doesn't want you to move it."

He watched the vet as she worked, as she ordered Noah around and he obeyed without question, then as the vet, Noah, and the farmer carefully lifted the wing free of the stump. The vet walked underneath and popped out next to him.

"It's a mess. Two broken bones and ripped skin. Not only that, it's been stretched out for several days, and the skin has dried and shrunk. I don't think I can fix that."

Pan patted the dragon's neck, not wanting to deliver the bad news. "But someone will be able to? You have birds and creatures that fly here? Can no one repair wings?"

"Usually, I'd say that I'll call my colleagues or speak to a specialist at the zoo but..."

"But everything and everyone is hurting." Which meant no one had the time to worry about one dragon who may never fly again.

"I'm sorry. The only reason I'm free is because the farm animals have already been

put down or helped. There is a dead cow on the trailer for her. It was killed yesterday. If you have beings who need meat in large quantities, the farmers are disposing...” Her eyes became glassy. “It’s the worst part of the job. It’s why when I got the call, I figured I had to try to save the dragon, right? I had to do something. I don’t want to be remembered as the vet who refused.”

“You will not be remembered that way. Even though you are afraid, you did everything possible,” Pan said softly. There was only so much that could be done without magic, and he hated it. Why did everyone need to suffer because he couldn’t do the one thing he existed to do? “Can she fold her wing, or do you want to do something with the bones?”

“With birds, the usual treatment is to stop the wing from moving, but if I do that, she won’t be able to maneuver out of the clearing. I don’t know anything about dragon flight either. If I can examine her mate, I might be able to figure something out.”

“So what you’re saying is get her out of the clearing, and reunited with her mate, and then you will visit with another cow tomorrow, and see if there is more you can do?”

She nodded. “I’d like the opportunity, and I will arrange a cow. Her mate is at the pub...which is also the palace, I’ve been told. Is that where you’ll take her?”

Pan nodded. “Noah will go with the farmer. I will stay with you to examine the centaurs. There is a car a quarter day’s walk out of the camp.”

Her fair eyebrows pulled together. “Quarter day? Is that like three hours or six?”

“The time it takes for the sun to complete a quarter of its path.” He pointed at the sky and moved his finger in an arc. “I will tell the dragon that it’s time to go.”

“She shouldn’t put any weight on the broken leg.”

Pan nodded. “Pack up. We will walk with the dragon to the trailer and then go to the centaur camp.” And hopefully they’d both be able to leave when the vet was done.

With Noah and the farmer’s help, the wing was folded, and the dragon stood for the first time since the collapse. It took several steps to learn how to walk on three legs, and she seemed uncomfortable. The walk to the trailer was slow, although her interest, and speed, picked up when she smelled the meat.

Trying to explain she was getting a ride into the city took a bit of effort, as did getting her up onto the trailer. She ended up sitting with her chin resting on the tractor, and the cow between her feet, ready to share with her mate.

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Web and Liam had returned to the vet's vehicle as asked. Pan was surprised they were still there.

The vet gave them the key and asked them to drive it around to where they'd left their car, and showed them where to hide the key so that it would be waiting for her when she was done.

Pan took Noah's hands. "Thank you for your help. I could not have done this without you."

Noah glanced away and shrugged. "I'm sure you would've figured something out."

"No. You know the people in this world who can help, and you know how this world works."

"And you know how magic works. It seems like a fair trade."

Pan considered him for several heartbeats. "Are you making a deal with a god?"

"Maybe? Is that a bad thing?" Noah held his gaze as if unafraid.

"It's not a done thing."

"Maybe not on your world, but you're in my world now."

As unsavory as it was, Noah had a point. "Very well. You will teach me of this world, and I will teach you magic." He smiled as he realized he had the perfect gift

for Noah. “As a thank you, I have a magical object for you, since you are a collector.”

Noah grinned. “Is it a cursed object?”

“No, though it is the last of its kind.” His voice caught as if the loss of the selkies was still raw. No one would’ve mourned the loss of all the centaurs.

“Come on, I want to deliver this and get home before dark,” the farmer called.

“I will see you at the palace.”

“The pub,” Noah corrected, even though both were true.

Pan nodded. “Safe travels.”

“You, too.”

Pan wasn’t sure who was going to face the most difficulties, Noah taking the dragon into town, or him and the vet dealing with more fucking centaurs.

CHAPTER31

If there was one thing Noah never wanted to do again, it was to ride in a tractor towing a trailer loaded up with a dragon. It wasn’t that the dragon was making a scene or being difficult—though what Pan had said to her to make her behave, he had no idea—it was the smell of being so close to a dragon.

It was like someone had shoved two pickled onions up his nostrils and doused him in raspberry cordial. It was a pickled sweet scent that he was never getting out of his lungs, his skin or his clothes. He’d noticed the stink of the dragon behind the pub, but being close to one for the best part of the day had given him an entirely new

appreciation for the scent.

And the toxic funk of dragon shit.

He was sure he could still taste it, clinging to the back of his throat. He wanted to soak in a hot bath and scrub every inch.

No, there was something worse than being in the tractor—holding the wing that also smelled of blood and decaying skin. He was impressed with himself for not throwing up when a clot landed at his feet.

He called Meredith to tell her what was going on and that they were on their way with the female dragon. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes. At least he was away from the centaurs. He had no plans of ever getting close to them again.

A cop on a motorbike greeted them as they got closer to town and then escorted them the rest of the way in. The dragon must've smelled her mate because she started making noises. Noah was sure Pan would've been able to translate the sounds, as it was, he had no idea.

When the trailer rocked due to her excitement, the farmer glanced at him. "Is this safe?"

How was he supposed to know? "I guess. As long as she doesn't tip the trailer?"

"I meant, is her mate gonna eat us?"

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“Probably not?” Noah assumed the female dragon would tell her mate that they’d helped her and everything would be cool. That didn’t stop a ball of cold fear from growing in his belly. He needed Pan here to translate...but the vet also needed him to translate. They needed another translator.

“I thought you knew all about dragons?” the farmer said, as though this was Noah’s fault.

“What made you think that? I’d never seen one until a couple of days ago.”

“You looked like you knew what you’re doing.”

“So did you.” And the farmer had more experience with animals than he did.

A cry cut through the air. Oh, shit. Noah peered up at the sky as the other dragon flew toward them. He swallowed hard and tried to shrink into the seat or become invisible or something. He wasn’t getting paid enough to deal with this. He wasn’t getting paid at all, although Pan had promised him a magical object. A magical object wasn’t going to do shit if a dragon ate him.

The dragon on the trailer chirped and clicked, no doubt updating her mate about the situation. He disappeared from view for several seconds. The farmer pointed in the mirror. Noah leaned to the side and saw the male dragon bringing up the rear, chatting to his mate as if catching her up on all the gossip.

Pan had said they were as smart as small children. Things beyond the immediate were hard for them to comprehend, as was losing their entire world.

The spire of the palace came into view and Noah breathed a little easier. He was home. Or near enough to it, and the dragon had been found.

It was far more of an adventure than he'd planned on having. Now all he wanted was a long hot shower and a lie down. "Do you want to come in for a drink before you head home?"

The farmer stared at him like he'd lost his mind. Maybe he had. "With those two parked out the back. No, son, you're on your own. I only offered because the vet said I'd be able to offload some carcasses. I'll drop them here tomorrow."

"Um...how many are we talking about?"

"I've got another ten."

That seemed like rather a lot of cows, even for a dragon. "Give me your number and I'll call you. But dragons only eat sort of once a week or something."

"Huh...I can't keep them for that long. They'll rot."

"Yeah, and it's a terrible waste of meat, so give me tonight to work something out."

The farmer wagged his finger at him. "Ay, but they can't be used for human consumption."

Noah nodded and pulled out his phone to add the farmer to his list of contacts. How the fuck was he supposed to find a home for ten dead cows? Was this his problem to solve?

No one else was going to do it. And offloading the dead animals had been part of the deal. "I'll call you tomorrow, after lunch."

“If you don’t call, I’ll be dropping them here before dinner.”

Nan was going to love that. They’d have dragons and dead cows in the car park behind the pub. That was not a sentence that would’ve made sense a week ago. This was like a fever dream or a bad trip where everything made just enough sense that it could be real, but there was no way...

“You’d best be unloading that dragon so I can go home.” The farmer gave him a nod.

Noah forced a smile. “Sure.” Not that he had any idea how to get a dragon off the trailer. “Thanks for your help.”

“Let’s not be doing it again.”

Noah slid out of the cab and landed on the street. The jolt reverberated through his bones. The male dragon saw him and clicked excitedly, prancing his feet like a dog who wanted to play catch.

“Hey, mate. We need to get your girlfriend off the trailer. And she can’t put any weight on that leg.” The dragon didn’t understand a word that he was saying, but it made him feel better to be talking.

He glanced over his shoulder at the cop who was sitting on his bike about ten meters in front, like he had no intention of helping but planned on enjoying the show. Noah scrubbed his hand over his face, feeling like the only thing he was capable of doing was having a breakdown in the middle of the street.

Keep it together for a few more minutes. Then I can have a drink...or three.

How far away was Pan? How long would it take to treat all the centaurs?

Would the centaurs let him go?

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They were problems for later.

The male dragon moved closer and cooed at him. That sounded friendly but, it might have also been ‘you look delicious’. “Yeah mate, she’s going to be fine, and you guys can hang out in the car park for a bit until we find a better place.” Because they couldn’t stay there. Could they?

“Put the ramp down so she can get off,” the farmer called. Then he swore and got out. Stomping around to the end of the trailer. It was fine for the farmer to walk to the end of the trailer. His side was free of dragon. The male was so close to him his hot breath swept over his skin. He gagged but kept on smiling, because vomiting on a dragon’s foot was rude—he didn’t need anyone to tell him that.

With the ramp down, the female seemed to understand what to do. And she remembered not to put weight on the leg as she limped off the trailer.

The male nuzzled against her neck and licked her face. He sniffed her leg and clicked as though asking about it. Then he moved onto her wing, and while Noah was no expert on dragons, his tone changed as though concerned.

Had the female already realized she would never fly again?

Noah bit his lower lip at their obvious care and affection for each other. And for a couple of heartbeats, the chaos of the last couple of days didn’t matter. He’d helped reunite them.

He’d saved a fucking dragon!

He sniffed as his eyes prickled.

The male gave his mate a nudge towards the car park, and she limped over. He leaned over the trailer and grabbed the cow in his teeth. Maybe the conversation had simply been. ‘I’m too tired. You can carry the cow.’ But it hadn’t seemed that simple.

The farmer folded up the ramp. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You, too.” Then he followed the dragons into the car park. They retreated to their corner, and he walked up the steps to the back door. It was unlocked, and there was music playing.

Noah hesitated, then went in and shut the door. “Nan?”

He took a few more steps, but there was no one in the kitchen. “Nan?”

Had someone broken in to take advantage of some free drinks?

“At the bar. Come and join us,” Nan called.

Noah heard Maeve’s laughter—it was hard to forget; she sounded like an overexcited guinea pig.

He walked more cautiously toward the bar and paused in the doorway, taking in the scene. Nan was behind the bar, and there were four long-haired...somethings with Maeve sitting opposite.

The long-haired beings looked like they were a thousand years old and had never used moisturizer. Their skin was sallow and deeply wrinkled and they wore the same strange clothes that Pan had been wearing.

His gaze flicked to the door that led to the palace. It was open. He swallowed. They were vampires. His grandmother was serving drinks to vampires.

She turned and smiled at him. “Don’t mind the bodies. They’ll be collected tomorrow. We’re having a bit of a wake.”

It was only then that Noah noticed the bodies wrapped in sheets stacked to one side. Right. A wake for the dead vampires. All completely normal.

Like being the centaurs’ guests. And the dragons out the back and the fact that he had more magic than a god.

Was he sure he wasn’t injured and in a coma or something?

“How did it go with the dragon?”

“Yeah. Pa—Silas is helping the vet with the centaurs. He won’t be back until later.” He leaned against the door frame, like his battery had hit zero, having skipped low-power mode.

“Have a seat. You can tell us about it. This is Lord Feryn. He’s still learning English, but he’s picking it up very fast,” Nan said, pointing to one of the vampires.

The lord gave a single nod. His lips turned down as though the weight of two worlds was crushing him. “Thank you for your assistance.”

When he spoke, the tips of two fangs became visible. Noah’s heart stuttered and stopped. Dragons were one thing. A god with no magic another. But vampires having a wake in his grandmother’s pub—vampires with actual fangs, who looked like something out of a horror movie—that was too much.

“Let the boy sit,” Maeve said. “He’s exhausted. You know what he needs? He needs a bit of that euphoria. That’ll perk him up.”

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Noah doubted Maeve was dealing drugs harder than dope but the way things were going, why not. Sure. Not that he'd ever heard of euphoria.

"Silas will not like it if I bite him," Feryn said.

It took several seconds for Noah's brain to process the words. Who cared what Pan wanted? "I will not like it if you bite me."

Maeve laughed. "Ooh, you will. It takes away all your worries and pain for a bit. My dicky leg has never been better."

It wasn't Maeve dealing drugs, it was the vampires. Strangely, that made more sense.

"Have a seat. I made stew with the leftover food. Would you like some?" Nan asked.

Noah sat on the nearest stool, which also happened to be the furthest from the vampires. "I stink of dragon, sorry. If I'd known we had company..." It wasn't like he could've gone anywhere for a shower or a change of clothes.

Nan placed a glass of whiskey and ice in front of him. "I'll be right back with the stew."

Noah took a sip and then a gulp. The burn of the liquor as it raced down his throat and hit his stomach. It was grounding, and it was familiar. And with his eyes closed, he could pretend that everything was normal. Except for the smell. He exhaled and opened his eyes.

Hating the way he wished Pan was there. But everything was easier because Pan knew all about the mythological beings, and no doubt felt the same way about him because he understood this world.

“It is a hard season,” Feryn said. “For everyone. Too much death and ruin.” He lifted his glass as if inviting Noah to join in the grim toast.

He did, raising his glass and taking another drink. “The female dragon may never fly. And the farmer is delivering ten dead cows tomorrow. Do you know anyone who needs ten dead cows? I was warned they’re not fit for human consumption because they weren’t killed in accordance with food safety or because they’ve been sitting out too long...fuck. I don’t know. How many cows does a dragon eat?”

How many words did Feryn understand?

Noah drained his glass and set it on the bar.

“One each, every five days or so. The werewolves may appreciate the meat.”

Noah nodded. Yeah, of course, werewolves, why didn’t he think of that?

Because werewolves being real was not at the top of his mind. His brain wanted to explode from trying to process this new reality. It hadn’t been a week since the collapse.

In that time, he’d gone from shock and numbness to a need to do something, anything to help, and to have a distraction. Now the reality was soaking in. He was marinating in the truth, and dragon stink. This wasn’t a game or a horror movie, and going off to save a dragon wasn’t a fun jaunt one did to play at being helpful. It was dangerous.

Nan placed a bowl of stew in front of him. “I think we’ve all had enough of sad

stories for a bit. Since the dragon survived, why don't you give us a tale with a happy ending?"

The vampires thumped their fists on the bar as if agreeing.

As Noah started talking, he realized this wouldn't be the last time he told this story. It was only the first.

CHAPTER 32

He was never going to get the stink of dragon and centaur out of his skin. By the time he and the vet hiked out of the centaurs' camp, Pan was exhausted. The only reason he hadn't accepted the offer to spend the night in the camp was because he didn't want to risk never being allowed to leave.

The idea that anyone thought it was acceptable to imprison a god was unheard of, but then, if he had magic, no one would've been able to imprison him, anyway. Despite not having magic, he had tried to magically transport himself to the car, because walking back to where they had left the car, what felt like forever ago—and he was a good judge of forever—was the last thing he wanted to do, or second last.

The last thing was spending more time with centaurs.

The vet, who he'd gotten to know quite well, was called Elise. While she'd tried to hide her awe at dealing with dragons and centaurs, he hadn't translated everything she said because the centaurs would not have been thrilled by a running comparison of their differences and similarities to horses.

Elise had told the centaurs she'd be back in a week to check up on them. And Pan had clarified that a week was seven days. Which meant he needed to return in a week to translate unless he could find someone else to do the job.

She hadn't asked many questions about him, which was a good thing, because he didn't want to lie to her. Nor did he want to tell the truth. It was almost a relief when the rockfall came into view.

Elise stopped and put her hands on her hips, staring up at the rocks blocking the road. "I'm guessing we have to climb over."

"Correct." He didn't remember the pile of rocks being quite that high. Maybe it was the starlight and shadows that made them look bigger.

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“And then we hope Liam and Web didn’t steal my car and that it’s waiting for us.”

If they had stolen her car, he was going to spend the rest of his life making sure they suffered. He would personally gather the spiders to put in their boots, stick thorns in their clothes and piss in their beer. He’d put pins in their pillows and fleas in their blankets.

Pan never usually put in much effort with punishments, trusting his magic to do the work, but he was feeling vengeful. He forced the breath out between his teeth, so he didn’t make those promises out loud, just in case magic chose that moment to return.

“Drink?” Elise handed him the water bottle. There was only a mouthful left.

“Thank you.” It was tepid, like tea left sitting for too long but without any flavor.

“This whole time you’ve talked about dragons and centaurs and your world. But not about yourself.” Elise took her gaze off the rocks and glanced at him.

“Because I’m not injured and there’s not much to tell.”

“I don’t believe that. For a start, you speak English. You’re acting like a lord and the centaurs don’t like you.”

“We have a history.”

“Please, you don’t look much older than twenty-five. How do you have history?”

Pan laughed. "I'm not twenty-five."

"I figured. You were too calm and too composed...and too knowledgeable."

He pressed his lips together and gave a single nod. "Would it have been better for you if I had panicked that the dragon might lash out and kill us? Or if I had lost my temper with the centaurs." He had been close to both of those options at various points.

"No. I was politely asking about you. What you are."

"And I was politely ignoring your unspoken request." He let an edge form in his voice.

"Hmm. I hoped that since we spent the day together, you'd trusted me."

"I don't trust many." He handed the empty water bottle to her.

"You trust Noah with the dragon."

Noah knew the truth and had negotiated a deal. A mortal witch, who didn't even understand his own power, had made a deal with a god. On Tariko Pan would've laughed at the request and turned him into a spoon until he learned some manners.

Now the idea of keeping the deal held an appeal.

While he wasn't an incubus who needed to feed on sexual energy, he craved magic. Which was worse. He needed Noah, far more than Noah needed him.

"Good point. He doesn't speak Dragon, so I should check on them." Pan started climbing over the pile of rocks.

If no car waited on the other side, he was going to scream and curse the old ones, regardless of the possible consequences.

“Nice deflection,” Elise said as she climbed after him.

“I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“So, are you closer to two hundred years old?”

Pan pulled himself up and peered over the top of the pile. Waiting on the other side was the vet’s white car. “Thank magic, Liam and Web did not fail us.”

“Great, I didn’t fancy our odds of calling a taxi this late.” She joined him at the top as though they were pausing to appreciate the clarity of the stars. “You’re really not going to tell me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Are you something that human mythology doesn’t like?”

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“Human mythology has so many errors, I don’t give a shit what you think you know.”

“Fair.” She started down the other side, and he followed. “This may be incorrect to say, but some of your people might be too different for human doctors to treat, and the hospitals may be full of humans. If you have someone who needs urgent care, you can call me.”

“You helped with the dragon because you were curious and because it helped your friend dispose of his dead animals. My people have arrived here with nothing. I cannot promise payment.” He jumped the rest of the way, glad to be on the other side of the rock wall, while already resenting the need to cross it again in seven days.

“I understand that, but I don’t like seeing animals?—”

Pan shot her a glare. “My people are not animals.”

“Or anyone suffer,” Elise said as if he hadn’t interrupted.

“We have our own healers.”

“You said there’s no magic. If your healers are used to using it, what will they do?” She reached beneath the car and pulled out the keys. She pressed the button, and the lights flashed.

Pan turned his head away, momentarily blinded.

“I’ll give you my card just in case. Am I dropping you at the pub?”

“Yes.” He hoped Noah was at the pub. “I will take your card in case your assistance is needed.”

“Great. I’ll stop by and see the dragon tomorrow, and I’ll pick you up in seven days for a return visit.”

Pan sighed, but he needed to show a little gratitude, because if Elise didn’t return, the centaurs might search for her. She had been careful to point out that for things to work, both sides needed to show some grace and compassion. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 33

The dragons were sleeping, taking up most of the car park behind the pub. The male lifted his head and chirped a thank you as Pan walked to the door. He paused and put his hand over his heart and nodded, glad that he had fulfilled one promise. Overhead, the moon was creeping to fullness. He turned the ring on his finger. He had no followers and had done nothing for the people of Beita.

Perhaps Feryn would take back the ring and resume his position as lord. That’s what should happen. But without magic, or borrowed power, who was he?

It was a bitter realization that he needed the ring because without it he had nothing, and no one would listen to him...except for the dragons and possibly Noah.

As much as he hoped Noah was there, he wouldn’t be surprised if he’d gone home to bathe. Something he also wanted to do. However, another night spent with the dragons was better than being a guest of the centaurs.

But when he turned the door handle, it opened, and music filtered out along with

laughter. The scent of food made his stomach gurgle with anticipation.

“Linda? Noah?” he called as he shut the door.

When no one answered, he walked toward the light and music.

Noah stepped into the hallway. “You made it back.”

His eyes were bright and his words soft, the edges filed away with alcohol.

“And you managed to reunite the dragons. Well done.” It was a shock how much he meant it as the words left his lips. A human, who didn’t speak any Dragon, had managed to get her to her mate. “I’m assuming no one got eaten.”

Noah smiled. “No one got eaten. When he saw her, it was so cute. They were so chatty and excited. Come and have a drink. Lord Feryn has been telling us about Beita.”

Pan blinked. “He’s in the pub?”

Everything was slipping away.

Noah ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, they were having a wake for the dead and the loss of their looks when I got here.”

Oh. Feryn had left the palace to bring out the dead.

And he’d missed the party. He hated missing parties.

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His stomach grumbled, loud enough that he was sure everyone in the bar heard. “Is there food?”

“I’ll heat you a bowl of stew.”

Instead of going into the bar, he followed Noah into the kitchen, unable to walk away from him. It was the magic that was drawing them together, that was all.

Noah put a bowl into a box with a glass door and jabbed a few buttons. It lit up and hummed. He turned, resting his hip on the kitchen counter, then beckoned Pan closer.

He hesitated for a second, because who was Noah to order him around? To make demands of a god?

But they had established that Noah was the one with power, so why shouldn’t he act as a supplicant, pleading for a blessing?

He took that first step, and it was easy to close the few steps between them.

Noah slid his hand around Pan’s waist and kissed him, without pausing to ask. And Pan didn’t mind at all as their lips met. The heat and sweetness of Noah’s lips took every thought. And it wasn’t magic that he wanted.

It was the man.

Which was odd, because he was so used to having whoever he wanted that he never craved anyone. Noah’s tongue traced over his lower lip and Pan invited him in. A

shiver of expectation raced through his blood, and he didn't want this to end.

Is this how others felt when he had invited them closer?

Something beeped.

Noah drew back, his teeth raking over Pan's lower lip. "I wasn't sure if it was a one off."

Pan frowned. One off?

"You know, in the tent..." His cheeks reddened.

"Ohh, I know." He ran his thumb over Noah's lower lip. "Not a one off. You are turning me into a sex demon."

Noah licked the end of his thumb, then pulled away. "Your dinner's ready. Come and have a drink."

A drink was the last thing he wanted. He wanted to take him to bed. Not that he had a bed. He had nowhere to sleep.

"Were you waiting for me to get back?"

"Yeah. And everyone has had too much to drink to drive home. Feryn said we can sleep in the palace."

Feryn must be impressed with the humans...or he planned to ask them for a favor. "That is quite the honor."

"Well, it was that, or sleep with the dead vampires, which to be honest, sounds like

the start of a horror movie.”

Pan lifted one eyebrow, not understanding the words, yet sensing the vibration of fear. “You fear the dead?”

Noah lowered his voice. “They are vampires,” he said as if that explained everything.

While Pan had questions about Noah’s assumptions about vampires, they could wait for another time. “If Feryn has offered you a place to sleep in the palace, you will be safe. It is his duty as host.”

Noah nodded and opened the box. He pulled out the now steaming bowl of stew, which smelled amazing. “That’s what he said.”

What else had Feryn said? Did they all know what he was?

If all the people from Tariko knew he had no magic, they’d never worship him again. While it was interesting to be on the other side of magic use, he didn’t want to live like this forever. He wanted Noah to whisper his name in prayer...and he wanted to be able to respond and give him everything he wanted.

Which was magical objects. That’s what Noah liked.

“Feryn has been keeping the magical object I promised you.”

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Noah's eyes lit up. "It's from your world?"

Pan nodded. He took the bowl out of Noah's hands and grabbed a spoon out of the drawer. "Come on."

He led the way to the bar but stopped in the doorway as if unable to take another step. The pile of sheet wrapped bodies was so neat, and the lighting was so dim, that at first glance it almost looked like rolls of blankets.

Almost.

How many were family and how many were staff?

Were they vampire, human, werewolf or something else?

Noah put his hand on Pan's lower back. "There are twenty-seven. They are being collected tomorrow. The human authorities said they will photograph and document them before they are cremated. My grandmother and her friend helped the vampires write their details in English, as no human can read Tarikian."

"That was very kind of her." He forced the words out, not sure what else to say.

"It needed to be done."

But plenty wouldn't have done it. They'd have run away, especially given the way vampires looked now. He needed to find a way to thank Linda and her friend, unless Feryn had already done it. Perhaps offering them a safe place to stay was part of the

deal.

Laughter broke through his thoughts. Still standing in the doorway, he took a spoonful of the stew, fortifying himself to step into the bar.

“Silas, you have returned. And returned the dragon to me.” Feryn put his hand over his heart as if the dragons were his own. “I hear you have also appeased the centaurs.”

Pan inclined his head. “As much as anyone can.”

One of the other vampires gave a soft laugh. All of them wore their hair loose and kept their faces tilted down and away from the light. Linda was behind the bar, and another woman with short white hair was sitting next to the vampires as if they were old friends.

He should pull up a stool at the bar and eat his stew with them, but he was too tired for conversation and stories, and he didn’t want to hear about the lives of the dead. Which was a callous thought, as the dead only lived in memories. But he had dealt with enough pain and suffering today.

Tomorrow, he’d ask about them.

Tomorrow, there were living Tarikians who needed help. And the only way he could help was by asking humans for favors.

“Feryn said we should all thank Pan for the return of the dragon,” Linda said, her gaze a little too sharp.

“The centaurs also praised him for the vet’s aid.” It wasn’t a lie, and they had. But he hadn’t felt a fucking thing. It was only with Noah that he tasted magic. He turned to

Feryn and spoke in Tarikian, “It has been a long and difficult day, and while I ache for your loss, I need stillness.”

He would not beg for a bed, but he hoped one might be offered.

“And I need the coat I asked you to mind. The witch collects magical objects, and it may be of use.”

“Of course.” Feryn stood and spoke in English. “I will return once I have shown Silas his room.”

Pan glanced at Noah, needing him to follow but not wanting to ask. He was so used to people obeying his every inclination that thinking about asking grated.

Noah picked a glass of the bar and drained it.

Pan didn’t miss the shake of Linda’s head. It wasn’t that she didn’t like him...no it was worse, she didn’t trust him. And since she loved Noah, she viewed him as a hazard. He needed to tell her how important Noah was to him and magic.

But he needed all of his energy to eat the stew, take off his boots and fall into bed.

Another problem for tomorrow.

Tomorrow already had far too many problems with no easy solutions.

“Any news on the Strega?” Pan asked in Tarikian, hoping he didn’t sound too desperate.

“None, nor the knight.” Feryn said as he walked toward the palace door. “You will need to visit the temporary housing for what they are calling mythological beings.

You will need to?—”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:43 am

“And what will you be doing?” Why was it all on him?

Feryn bared his fangs. “Stopping the rest of the vampires from flinging themselves down the stairs.” He stepped through the doorway into the palace and was swallowed by shadows.

Vampires, always ones for drama. Like they were the only ones suffering from the loss of magic.

“You are my public face, Silas. Encourage my people to pray to a new god, so that Pan may deliver us a place in this world.”

Which is what he wanted. It is what they deserved. But even if he had magic, he didn’t know how to make it happen. It was too big and too vague. He couldn’t create something that affected the entire world, even if all the other gods had magic and helped him. He wasn’t sure that was possible as every person would hold a different idea about what that place should be.

“That is a very big ask of magic.”

“I am aware,” Feryn sighed. “Which is why I have given you my power.” Light flared and Feryn lifted the lamp. “We want the same thing. I could not have helped the dragon. Your success proves that you came to me for a reason. And that reason is to help our people.”

“Is everything okay?” Noah asked in English, stepping up into the palace.

“Yes. We are discussing plans for tomorrow.” And so far, none of them included a bath, a bath with Noah, or spending the day in bed with him. For the sake of magic, because he wasn’t interested in anything else. And not because he liked the way Noah kissed him in the kitchen.

He was thousands of years old and had been kissed more times than Noah had drawn breath. It meant nothing.

Feryn didn’t call him on the lie. He opened the wardrobe door and reached into the back, pulling out the coat. “When you step out of this room.” He pointed to a door the lead deeper into the palace. “Turn right. A room has been made up for you both.” Feryn cast his gaze over Noah and spoke in Tarikian. “I assume your witch is staying with you. I do look forward to tasting the magic in his blood.”

That was a conversation for another time in the distant future.

“I cannot make those promises for him.”

Feryn arched one eyebrow. “But you will gift him a selkie’s coat.”

“As I said, he collects magical items, or they are drawn to him. After all, your palace arrived here, which is where he was working at the time.”

“So you are merely following threads of magic.”

“I am a servant of magic.” Pan inclined his head. His entire reason for existing had been erased in the collapse. He was a conduit with nothing to conduct, and the emptiness was an ache that was only soothed by Noah’s touch. “Do you have a better plan?” An edge formed in his voice. “Do you know more about magic than me?”

“I do not. I know nothing of human witches, either. So I pray he is worthy of such a

gift.”

So did Pan. But an instinct born of thousands of years of magic use told him it was the right thing to do. So even though he couldn't sense magic or use it, he was not going to ignore that sensation. He had to believe in magic even if it was beyond his reach.

Feryn placed the coat on the end of his bed. “Rest well.”

“Is that possible?”

“I hope so. I do not want this waking nightmare to continue.” Feryn handed Pan the lamp and returned to the bar, pulling the door closed.

Pan had no idea how many vampires and other beings still lived in the palace. Given that there were children living here, someone must be watching them. And he had no idea where in the palace the children were, or how much was spread underground.

“Just because you two were speaking another language doesn't mean I can't tell that you were arguing.”

Pan took another spoonful of stew and ate it before answering. Noah was becoming more perceptive to the language. How long until he spoke Tarikian? Vampires and elves were adept at learning languages, more so than other kinds. He was not surprised that Feryn had learned after spending time with Linda. “He wants to remain hidden in the castle while I rule his city.”

“Human horror stories are filled with vampires who rise from the dead and bite and kill people. And given the way he looks, he kind of has a point.”

Great.

“He also asked if you intend on staying with me tonight. I assumed you do not need a room of your own.” Or was that something he should’ve asked Noah first?

Noah moved closer. “I do not.” He paused and stared at the coat, before reaching out and running his fingers over the sleek dark fur. “Is this the coat you were wearing when I met you?”

“It is. I do not think it was me you were drawn to, given that I have no magic. I think perhaps it was the coat calling to you. Do you feel anything?”

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Noah's lips curved. "Are we still talking about the coat?"

"I smell like dragon, need a bath, and this painfully mortal body needs to sleep...we are still talking about the coat."

"We could bathe together."

As much as Pan liked the idea of bathing, he doubted they would fill up an actual bath. The water supply that had once fed the castle no longer existed. "I suspect there will be a jug of water and cloths in our room and that will have to suffice."

Noah sighed. "I should've gone home. At least then I could've showered."

"Showered?"

"Um, like standing in rain, but it comes from a tap in the roof. Do you have taps?"

Pan rolled his eyes. "Of course we have taps and hot water...but it all used magic. You can show me your shower another day."

"Can I pick up the coat?"

"Of course. Bring it to our room."

CHAPTER34

The fur coat was so soft beneath his fingers, as if it was a living thing. Perhaps that

was the magic. When Pan had been wearing the coat, it had seemed old and dull; now it gleamed in the lamplight, begging to be worn.

He was too scared to ask what it was made of. Or how it had been made. It was a gift, and it was definitely magical. But like all the objects he collected, he didn't know what they did, or why he was drawn to them until Pan said it was because of the magic.

That part of his life now made sense.

He picked up the coat and was surprised how light it was. Pan was smaller than him, so it wouldn't fit. Not that he was ever going to wear a fur coat in public. He glanced up as Pan set down the lamp and opened the door to lead him to their room.

They weren't being forced to share a tent. This time, he chose to share Pan's bed.

In his ears, he heard the rushing of his blood. Or was it the ocean? No, it was the coat; it smelled of salt and sand.

He took a step, then he hesitated. It would be a shame to not even try it on...he could wear it around the palace. He slid his arms in, surprised at how well it fit. It wasn't too snug around the shoulders, and surprisingly, it reached his ankles. He drew the front together and did up the button.

The room spun, and he fell, rolling over the floor. He cursed, but it wasn't his voice coming out of his mouth. He went to push himself up but only flopped on the floor.

Pan dropped the bowl and swore, in what sounded like several different languages.

Shit. If Pan was freaking out, this was bad.

Noah tried to stand again and rolled over onto his back. "What's wrong with me?"

What were those weird noises he was making?

He tried to get up but kept rolling, knocking into things with his... Why the fuck did his feet look like that? Where were his feet? That was a... It was some kind of tail. A tail covered in brown fur, just like the coat. “What did you do to me?”

Pan ran over and dropped to his knees. He placed his hands on Noah’s face the way he had before. “Please stop panicking.” Which was hard to do when Pan’s eyes were wide, and he looked like he was dabbling in a little panic. “The coat didn’t do this to me when I wore it.”

“That’s not reassuring, you fuckwit.” More stupid noises came out of his mouth. He slapped his tail in disgust. He shouldn’t be slapping his tail; he shouldn’t have a tail.

Pan gave him a grim smile and didn’t remove his hands. “Stop swearing at me. I can speak selkie.”

“Selkie?” He knew what they were, and he did not like the implications. “I’m a fucking a seal?”

“No, a selkie, which is different. I swear I didn’t know this would happen.” Pan scowled, which was worse than panic.

“Not helping. Un-seal me,” Noah barked.

Pan shook his head. “I can’t.”

No. This was not happening.

* * *