



Siren's Gift

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: A failing talisman.

An unexpected betrayal.

A dragon shifter who will stop at nothing to reclaim what's his...

I may have been born a siren princess, but scrubbing toilets sure beats sleeping next to one. After leaving Subliminal, Frankie, and Dominic behind forever, my sister and I drift in a sea of uncertainty. AKA, we're riding the couch surfing waves for the foreseeable future. But when the talismans allowing us to walk on land start to fail, I have to face my worst nightmare and return to the ocean. I must convince the Sea Witch to help us once again.

Her price is high, perhaps too high, but the heartbreak gnawing at my soul leaves me with little choice. To protect my little sister's freedom, I have to accept the unthinkable and leave my life on land forever.

Just when it seems I've hit rock bottom, fate unveils a grimmer reality, thrusting me deeper into the depths of despair...

My father's enemies have found me.

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CHAPTER 1

Bree

As I stood over the man's body, beads of sweat trickled down my chin. My chest heaved from the exertion of the fight, and I stared at my bloodied knuckles in horror.

Sweet Tethys...

My mouth ran dry.

I had just killed a man.

The crowd's stunned silence shattered into a deafening roar, the sound bouncing off the cement floor and walls. The sheer force of it drowned out everything else. But instead of joining in their excitement, a tidal wave of guilt and dread crashed over me.

As usual, the people attending tonight's fight thrived on the brutality, craved the blood and gore to the point of addiction. Fatalities were commonplace, but never by my hand.

Not until tonight.

Unconcerned with the blood and sweat splattered across the floor, the rowdy mob rushed forward to congratulate me. Unlike at Subliminal, no roped-off ring or fae magic was keeping the spectators back.

No, everyone here was a non-Gifted human besides me. They just didn't know I was the exception, or that an exception even existed.

Someone knelt to check the man's pulse. "He's still alive."

Oh, thank the tides.

The crushing weight of the near-tragedy lifted, but the adrenaline crash hit me hard. My knees shook, threatening to give way beneath me, and I brushed wet strands of my dark brown hair off my face with a trembling hand. The realization of what I'd almost done was finally sinking in.

I'd gotten careless with that last swing. Yes, I might have broken the man's jaw, but at least I hadn't killed him. A small victory, but one I would cling to as tightly as a barnacle to a whale.

The basements where most of these brawls took place were dingy and grim, vivid reminders of the life I'd run from—well, thesecondlife. Flickering bulbs provided just enough light for me to wish they would stay off. Dark stains covered the floor and walls, revealing the true nature of this place.

The Gifted—as in those of us with any sort of magic—weren't the only ones who liked illegal fights. Except with non-Gifted humans, cheating was just as rampant as police raids.

Somehow, these sites kept popping back into existence, rotating between several locations whenever one drew too much attention. Human police didn't seem to care too much. They had bigger crimes to solve.

Brutus pushed through the crowd until he reached me. As the bouncer for most fights I signed up for, his six-foot-five frame and hulking muscles made people around him

take an involuntary step back. Myself included the first time we'd met.

He rocked a shaved head that was covered in swirling blue and black tattoos, one of which was a snake slithering down his right arm. A black tank top stretched tight across his broad chest, and giant steel-toe boots promised pain to anyone who stood in his way.

His dark, narrowed eyes stared out over the crowd, and his lips were almost always pressed together in a frown. I called it RBF—Resting Brutus Face.

Using his arm to shove people out of his way, Brutus led me to a corner where I could catch my breath before the next match. His sturdy presence was a comforting anchor amidst the storm. Few knew that underneath his rough exterior, he was a big ol' softie. At least towards me.

I grabbed my water bottle off the ground and chugged.

Yep, this was my life now.

For the past month since fleeing my home, job, and life at Subliminal—a boxing gym for Gifted folks like me—I'd scrambled to find sustainable work. I'd taken on a few random janitorial jobs and somehow wound up fighting once again just to make ends meet. Only this time, I fought against the non-Gifted.

The money was better than most minimum wage jobs, and I didn't have the skills to do much else. I saved every extra penny for a place of my own someday, for me and my sister, Marissa.

Besides, fighting these humans was a piece of cake compared to fights at Subliminal. Except, the fact that I'd been reduced to brawling in dingy basements was so depressing. I tried not to dwell on it for too long.

Once Marissa finished her massage therapy school, she could start working and building her client list. Until then, our survival was up to me.

"You ready for round two?" Brutus asked. His dark eyes surveyed the crowd, always on constant alert. Ex-military, if I had to guess. We didn't talk about our personal lives much, but old habits die hard.

Someone had moved my last opponent out of sight and wiped up the floor. I crinkled my nose. The blood didn't bother me, but the sloppy clean-up job sure did. I had taken pride in my janitorial duties at Subliminal.

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I wouldn't complain, though, since I certainly wasn't volunteering for this job.

The next contender was already in the center of the room, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. He was a big guy, toned and muscled and with more than a few scars etched into his light brown skin. It was clear he was experienced, and for most people, he would be a tough opponent.

Just not for me.

Even without using my magic, I was stronger, faster, and healed quicker than anyone here. I was a shark in a school of minnows. The trick was holding back just enough so gamblers bet on the other guy, then wham! Winner winner, tuna dinner.

"How many more after this one?" I asked Brutus between gulps of water.

The main problem was that winning one round meant I moved on to the next, and the next, and the next until we cleared the list. Some nights, it was only two or three rounds. Other times, it was over a dozen.

I never signed up for those longer nights, though. The money would be amazing, but the only way anyone walked away with anything was by winning all the way through. I was sure it would be too suspicious if a woman defeated twelve tough-as-nails dudes in one night. Too many fragile egos to deal with.

As I'd done for the past ten years, I needed to stay off the radar. Especially now that the right-hand man—er, the right-hand siren of my father's greatest enemy had shown up during my fight with Dominic.

My lungs squeezed painfully, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. While the close call with Sidon had rattled my nerves and forced Marissa and me to flee, it was the image of the Red Dragon that had stolen my breath.

I tried my best not to think about Dominic because of how much it hurt. Every inch of me missed every inch of him, missed his touch as much as his mere presence. We'd only known each other for a short time, but it had felt so right. It felt real.

I never wanted to deceive him, but I'd run out of time and options. He needed to win more than I did. His grandfather would have killed him otherwise.

"Just two more rounds after this." Brutus's deep voice shook me free of my dark thoughts. "It's go time."

I took another quick drink before following the bouncer back through the crowd. His bulky size created an easy path to follow through the sea of humans.

My life on land was exhausting, and I wondered more often than not why I bothered fighting against fate. Wondered why I didn't just return to the sea and embrace the future my father planned for me.

Sure, it meant giving in to the whims of a siren male I hardly knew all in the name of an alliance, but at least someone would take care of me for a change. That was the fantasy I tried to sell myself, anyway.

But then I would head home to Calvin's house where Marissa and I were staying for now, "couch surfing" as landlubbers called it. My sister would laugh at something the wizard had said, while Finley, our axolotl, perched happily on her shoulder or cupped in her hands. And I would remember why I was doing this. Why it was all worth it.

I would paste on a smile and do this all over again the next day.

The dark-haired man facing me raised his fists and smirked, appraising me head to foot. "I can't wait to get you on your back."

I rolled my eyes. It was always the same with these human men eager to fight. They didn't see me as a worthy opponent no matter how many times I knocked them flat on their butts. All they saw was my appeal as a woman and always considered me less than.

Oh, how I loved proving them wrong.

"Fight!" Brutus called out.

Immediately, the human fighter launched himself at me with a flurry of jabs. His attack didn't have the element of surprise he hoped for.

I easily sidestepped his fists and shook my head. How could it be a surprise when they all did the same thing? Did none of them pay attention to previous fights?

As he barreled past me, I swept his feet out from beneath him. He stumbled but didn't fall. Bouncing away, he scowled at me as he regained his balance.

I could end this fight in two seconds flat. One if I used even an ounce of magic. But that wasn't the game. Not when I needed to pretend to be human.

I raised my arm to cover a yawn as never-ending exhaustion made itself known. Except when my gaze landed on my arm, I froze.

Crab on a hot plate.

Instead of my usual pure white skin, sleek purple scales dotted my arm.

What the heck was happening?

A sharp blow to my head sent me careening sideways. I allowed hits to get in from time to time so the crowd got the brutality they wanted, but I rarely got hit because I wasn't paying attention.

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But scales—freakingscales—were showing up on my arm.

Could anyone else see them in this dark lighting?

I spun away and reached for my talisman. The tooth necklace still hung from my neck, and a glance down showed nothing appeared damaged.

Only partially paying attention, I blocked the human's next few attacks and considered the issue, my heartbeat speeding up as panic started to settle in. If my talisman was failing, I needed to get out of here quickly. But if I won this round, I still had two more fights before they'd let me leave with any money.

Son of a sea biscuit!

Ireallyneeded that money.

My hands and fingers tingled just before webbing crept up between my middle and index fingers.

Time was up. I needed to get out of here—fast.

I made an obvious feint to the left and let the human's fist connect with my stomach, then my face, before I threw myself to the ground. The blows hurt, but not enough to send me to the ground. Desperate times called for overly dramatic measures.

Marissa had taught me well.

He was on me in an instant, pinning me down and leering into my face. His breath stank like rotten cheese. Ugh.

I slapped the ground three times, the universal sign of surrender.

Brutus's booming voice called the fight, announcing the human as the winner.

Except the man made no attempt to get off me. Instead, he leaned closer to my face and grinned. "Just as you should be—on your back like a good little bitch."

CHAPTER 2

Dominic

My entire body ached. A deep, bone-breaking ache that promised intense pain as soon as I could move again. I had wedged myself between crates inside a shipping container for the better part of six hours, waiting for Keiko's signal that it was safe enough to emerge.

It was also cold. The kind of cold where I knew if I closed my eyes to rest, even for a minute, I might never open them again. Even in the dark, my breath fogged out with each exhale. It was the kind of cold that might make one wish for death.

Thankfully, my dragon, Joubunaryuo—Jou, for short—was more than capable of keeping my body warm enough to avoid hypothermia. The Baltimore warehouse storing the shipping container had to keep temperatures near freezing to ensure the massive amount of pyrocrystals stored within didn't combust on their own. Finding that fact out had been a fun surprise for all involved.

A veryexpensivesurprise.

My leg spasmed in protest, demanding movement. I gritted my teeth against the pain, and Jou flooded my muscles with warmth, soothing the spasm until it ceased.

It was the fifth time it had happened in the last hour.

Fuck this.

As quietly and slowly as possible, I slid a crate a few inches away and stretched out my leg. My knee popped loudly with the movement.

Atop another crate near me, two large yellow cat eyes popped into existence. They focused on me and narrowed.

I ignored the leopard's glare as the blood rushed back into my legs and I massaged my muscles. Since my sight had long since adjusted to the limited light that crept through the container's various cracks, I could make out the leopard's big head resting on his equally massive paws.

"We're not all built for day-long naps," I muttered quietly.

Something soft and fuzzy swept across the back of my neck. With a silent curse and a shudder, I swatted away the cat's tail. "Quit it."

The black cat yawned. Teeth the length of my fingers glinted briefly before they and the yellow orbs disappeared into the darkness again.

Unlike their wolf counterparts, most cat shifters were solitary creatures, and Aaron was no exception. He preferred to live and work alone, though he was never opposed to a nightly cuddle with some gorgeous woman warming his bed. He just never let them stay longer than a night.

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His family was also leopards, each connected with their cat spirits at birth, much like the wolves. They enjoyed getting together at holidays and other events but knew when enough was enough and were happy to go their separate ways again.

The Sato family had lucked out getting someone like Aaron involved in our businesses. Not only was he a whip-smart accountant who cooked the books with precision, but his feline abilities made him an excellent spy.

Normally, I didn't do the sneaking around part of our jobs, but we were getting close to finally tracking down the source of Ichiro's pyrocrystal supply. With all the precautions my friends and I had taken to keep our activities hidden from Ichiro, it had taken over a month just to get this far.

We needed to know how my grandfather was manufacturing so many crystals so quickly, and we needed evidence to prove it. Plus, I needed a distraction to keep from thinking abouther.

I curled my hand into a fist as anger and hurt swept through me for the thousandth time. For the first time in years, I was failing. And it wasn't from doing a task poorly or not meeting expectations—all of which Ichiro would argue I did every day.

No, I was failing at finding someone with my near-unlimited resources.

I still hadn't found Bree. She and her sister had vanished after the fight, and no matter how much money I spent on resources or who I sent looking, I'd turned up empty-handed. Not even that stubborn fae woman knew where they went.

Marissa should have been easy to find, but her massage school claimed they had no records of a student named Marissa Johnson, nor anyone matching her description. There was only one explanation at this point—magic was involved.

Just as Frankie had said, the siren left a note apologizing for deceiving us both. I'd read it a hundred times, hoping to discover a clue in her words.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but the constant heartache her absence caused ever since her siren song had released its grip on my mind.

I wouldn't stop until I found Bree, if only to ensure she was safe. But it was becoming increasingly obvious she truly wanted nothing to do with me, a fact that threatened to consume me if I thought about it too much.

Shaking my head, I refocused on the current task. Besides looking for the siren woman who'd stolen my heart, my friends and I had been digging into the Sato holdings, trying to find everything we could about the dangerous pyrocrystal trade. But because it was illegal and forbidden amongst dragonkind to do what Ichiro was doing, information was hidden deep.

The more we dug, the more questions that popped up. The amount of pyrocrystals my grandfather could produce in such a short amount of time was impossible unless magic was used. And let's face it, of course he'd used magic. There were no other logical alternatives.

So now the questions had become which kind of magic and who supplied it. Dragon magic wasn't enough. There was more to this equation; I just needed to know what I was missing.

Although the Gifted Interests Government governed most of the Gifted population, we dragons had a hierarchy all of our own. The High Draconic Council had overseen all dragon activities around the globe for centuries, and the next Council meeting was coming up quickly. It was at that meeting that I planned to expose my grandfather's actions.

Ichiro had tried many times over the decades to gain a seat within those esteemed ranks, but his business acquisitions and dealings had made him too risky a choice.

Needless to say, he was not pleased.

I had a gut feeling the pyrocrystals were somehow tied to my grandfather's revenge against the Council. That he had exploited the dragon community at large as a big 'fuck you' to the Council. I certainly wouldn't put it past the grumpy old bastard.

Mentally, I snorted. The only bastard in the Sato family was me. The only known bastard, at any rate. I was sure there were plenty of others, even some sired by Ichiro himself. But none were as offensive as the babe who'd cost him his daughter's life.

Aaron lifted his head and tilted his ears toward the container's door.

The bolt slid sideways, and the door cracked open.

I tensed for a fight.

CHAPTER 3

Bree

As much as I tried not to let these human guys get to me, my patience had run dry after the unexpected reappearance of my scales. Rage surged through me like a

tsunami, and I flexed my hands, ready to unleash.

But before I accidentally outed myself as Gifted, the human was lifted off me.

Brutus threw the guy halfway across the basement, where he crashed into a group of gaping onlookers. They fell into a heap of scrambling bodies, and my anger dissipated into a laugh.

I accepted the bouncer's offered hand and let him pull me to my feet. "Thanks."

"I know you didn't need the help, but I gotta keep up a reputation, you know?" He winked before turning to handle the fighter, who was now yelling like a madman as he struggled to disentangle himself from the others.

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Thankful for the distraction, I slipped through the crowd, grabbed my duffel bag, and headed up the stairs leading out to street level.

A few underground Metro train stops later, I was back in Tenleytown, a quaint and semi-quiet neighborhood in D.C.'s northwest quadrant. Calvin's small house was a five-minute walk from the station, through tree-lined streets and fenced-in yards. The walk was amazingly peaceful considering it existed in such a populated city.

The wizard—who was trying to work his way up the Gifted Interests Government's ladder via the cryptozoology department—had let Marissa and me stay with him after leaving Subliminal. He had a tiny second bedroom stuffed with boxes full of research and artifacts from his college days, and there was just enough space left over to hold a twin-sized bed.

To be honest, I wasn't convinced anyone would consider the cot a twin, but I also wasn't about to complain.

I'd told Marissa to take the bed so she would be well-rested for school—not that she needed much convincing—and I slept on the wizard's couch. Both were way better than any other option, especially one like sleeping next to a Metro station toilet. One night ten years ago was more than enough for a lifetime, thank you very much.

"I'm home," I called out as I dropped my bag next to the front door and slipped off my shoes. The adrenaline from earlier had long since faded, leaving my limbs sluggish with fatigue—physical, emotional, and mental.

Unfortunately, the scales hadn't faded.

"Why are you home so early?" Marissa's voice called back from down the hallway.

"I lost."

My younger sister padded into view from the hallway, rubbing something greasy onto her face. She had clipped her curly red hair—so similar to our mother's—into a mass of chaos atop her head, and she wore a white silk robe that barely covered her curvaceous butt.

There was no denying we were sisters, but her looks were as vibrant and full of life as her personality. Only crammed into a tiny yet curvy package. I loved the natural red and gold highlights in my otherwise brown hair, and I was glad I didn't have to deal with all the special care her curls required.

The only part of her I truly envied was her eyes—they were this bright blue rimmed with silver that sparkled in the light. Mine were more of a stormy ocean blue. Pretty, but not sparkly.

"Since when do you lose?" she asked. As I sank onto the couch, she scrunched up her nose. "Ew. You need to shower and change before you get your stink all over that."

"I sleep on it every night. Trust me, my stink is already all over it. But the couch is the least of my concerns right now." I grasped the talisman around my neck. "We have a problem."

Rubbing the extra grease or cream or whatever it was into her hands, Marissa arched an eyebrow. "Like what?"

I held up my arm, revealing the purple scales. "Like this."

Her eyes widened, and she grabbed my arm. "When did that happen?"

"During the fight." I grimaced as her hands left a greasy film on my skin. I rubbed my arm against my shirt, trying to wipe it off.

"You can help yourself to my lotions, you know." She gave me a pointed look. "It'll keep you looking young, and you could definitely use that these days."

"What do you—" I snapped my mouth closed and held up a hand. "No, not a concern right now."

"Right, the scales." She chewed on her lower lip. "So, don't get mad, but I may have the same problem."

I stared at her. "Since when?"

"I noticed it yesterday." She pulled aside her robe just enough to reveal a patch of purple scales on her chest.

"Yesterday?" It was hard to keep the panic out of my voice. "Rissa! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I mean, duh. I didn't want you to freak out like you are right now." She put her hands on her hips. "You've got enough on your plate to worry about."

I dropped my head into my hands and groaned. Fin-freaking-tastic. Losing our ability to walk on land was just what we needed right now.

The only good that had come from leaving Subliminal was Marissa's behavior. Ever since our father's enemy showed up and scared the bubbles out of us, Marissa had taken on more responsibility. She was still much more carefree and impulsive than me, but she was growing up. Maturing, as hard as that was to believe sometimes.

I was so flipping proud of her.

And also terrified that we were about to lose everything we'd worked so hard to achieve. She was this close to finishing massage school and getting her license. According to the sea witch, these talismans should have worked forever as long as they remained intact, which they were. Not a scratch or chip on them.

"I know this is, like, impossible for you to do, but try not to worry. Not tonight, anyway. There's nothing we can do right now, and you need to get some sleep." Marissa leaned down for a rare hug, only to pause and wrinkle her nose. She backed away again. "Well, shower first. You look and smell like legit shit."

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I huffed out a laugh. "Thanks."

"That's what little sisters are for." She pulled a nail file from her robe's pocket and headed for the kitchen, where I knew she would make her evening chamomile tea. Nothing fancy, mind you. We couldn't afford that. Just a cheap bag dunked in microwaved water. "Now go. You seriously reek."

Leaving her to her nightly primping, I did as I was told, at least on the shower part. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop worrying about what was to come. Without working talismans, our life on land was over. We'd have no choice but to return to the sea.

But where would we go?

We couldn't go back home, not unless we were willing to give up our freedom. After getting a taste of what freedom truly meant, there was no way Marissa would do that. No way she could. And I wouldn't force her to make that decision.

After my shower, I popped into Marissa's room to feed Finley and say goodnight. He was aluminara axolotl, a rare species of salamander with magical abilities. But he wasn't just a pet; he was my friend.

In his aquarium tank, Finley's opalescent scales shimmered like moonlit pearls, and his iridescent skin transitioned through a myriad of colors and intricate patterns. On either side of his head, fringed pink gills fluttered softly in the aquarium's water and framed his pale blue eyes.

He wriggled up to the surface and chirped in greeting.

Despite the recent dilemma plaguing my thoughts, I smiled. I never got over how ridiculously cute he was. "Well, hello to you, too. I hope you're hungry."

I laughed as he bobbed his head up and down vigorously, sending splashes of water over the tank's edge. That little guy was always hungry, especially for crab, even the canned kind.

When Marissa had retreated to her room for the night and I finally turned off the lights, I tossed and turned on the couch. Grim futures played on repeat in my thoughts and, eventually, my nightmares. My heart raced as if each beat echoed the anxiety that consumed me.

The weight of my worries made it impossible to get comfortable, and the couch creaked beneath me with each movement. It was a restless symphony that matched my turbulent thoughts. Scenes of failing and disappointing my sister taunted me, and the vivid imagery intensified with each passing moment.

But it wasn't just failing my sister that plagued me. I would lose the life I'd worked so hard to cobble together here, no matter how crappy. Not to mention I'd be forced to marry for political reasons and lose any—however impossible—chance at being with Dominic. Or even just marrying for love.

I longed for the first rays of dawn, hoping that the light would bring an end to the relentless torment. Until then, I was trapped in a never-ending nightmare, unable to escape the clutches of my fears.

CHAPTER 4

Dominic

Seconds crept by in the dark container, but I kept my attention on the cracked open door. There was no way to know if it was Keiko or if the guards were about to get the surprise of their lives.

I stiffened as a small hand wrapped around my mouth.

"Don't scream," the devil whispered in my ear, amusement in her tone.

Keiko was the only person alive who could sneak up on me like that, and it had more to do with her unique hybrid abilities than her training as an assassin. Although that lethal training certainly helped.

I nodded once to let her know I had heard, and her hand slipped away. We both knew I was more likely to kill than scream when snuck up on.

"They're changing shifts now," she said quietly as the leopard jumped down to join us. His big padded paws didn't make a sound. "We'll meet with the guy as soon as the coast is clear."

As luck would have it, Keiko had run into the man we were meeting tonight at a bar not too far from the warehouse. She'd followed some workers there after their warehouse shifts, and Scott had expressed his job frustrations loudly and to any who would listen.

It had only taken a few more drinks and the promise of a hefty deposit to his bank account to get him to agree to meet inside the warehouse. The whole situation had seemed too easy, an obvious setup.

Yet a deep dive into the man's background suggested otherwise. He had gambling debts he was struggling to pay back, and money always worked wonders in these scenarios. Although I doubted he'd use any of what we gave him to pay back what he

already owed. He'd likely owe more before the night was over.

My grandfather's reach was growing too thin, and now he was being betrayed by a disgruntled, underpaid employee.

It seemed fitting.

"Have you confirmed there have been no changes to the guards on duty?" I asked.

Even in the limited light, I could make out Keiko's eye roll. "Of course I have. I'm not a rookie."

"No, but we can't risk uncertainties."

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"I've confirmed it. Let's go." Silent as a ghost, she headed for the door.

Aaron padded after her with a quiet chuff of feline laughter.

I trusted Keiko with my life, just as I did with Rin and Aaron, but the risks involved were too great not to double and triple-check everything. It had nothing to do with doubting anyone's skills—least of all hers—and everything to do with keeping my chosen family as safe as possible. Not just safe, but alive and well.

If we were discovered, Ichiro would skin us all and hang our hides in his trophy room. That would be after weeks of torture.

I followed the other two out of the container, pausing at the door to ensure the way was clear before slipping out. While I didn't have the big cat's ability to slink around corners or Keiko's ability to hop from shadow to shadow, I was far from inept. My dragon prowled restlessly in my mind, alert and ready for trouble should it appear.

The container spat us out into a row of similar containers stacked on top of each other like building blocks. A vaulted roof soared three stories above our heads, and stairwells on either end led up and out.

This warehouse was at least twice the size of the one back in D.C., the one we had burned down. But the size difference wasn't unusual considering Baltimore had an actual shipping harbor. That Ichiro's operation had grown so quickly was a cause of concern and the reason behind my inability to sleep at night.

One reason, at any rate. The other major reason haunted my dreams like a wraith, her

sea-foam gaze meeting mine before fading into the mists.

The crackle of a walkie-talkie stopped me in my tracks. A shadow appeared at my side and a small hand pressed me back against the nearest container. Keiko held a finger to her lips and pointed back the way I'd come.

Quickly, I slipped around the side of the container just as an armed and armored guard walked by. Had I not moved, I would have run right into him.

I released my breath slowly. This was another reason I preferred fighting to sneaking. It was far easier to bash a few skulls in rather than slink around in the dark, hoping no one saw.

Alas, I couldn't let Ichiro or anyone else know we were here, which meant sneakery was our only option. At least I was moving now and no longer stuck inside a shipping container with an oversized cat.

Keiko waved me forward and I followed her, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. At the far end of the warehouse, a dark figure waited, his back to us.

Before the man turned around, Keiko gave me a quick nod, then slipped away into the darkness. Her role here was to be the look-out.

Silently, Aaron crept along the top of the containers, where he would monitor our informant from above, ready to pounce should this be a trap.

As I approached the informant, Scott, he turned at the slight noise I allowed my shoes to make against the floor. His eyes widened when he recognized me, and his muscles tensed, ready to flee.

The human man might not have known about the Gifted world, but Ichiro would have

made sure his people knew my face.

I held up my hands in a show of peace. "I'm only here for information."

As if expecting an attack, Scott remained alert, his gaze darting all around.

"I need your help to put an end to this operation," I said quietly, taking a step closer. "It's more dangerous than you realize."

He eyed me again, his eyebrows drawn together in a look of uncertainty. "How do I know you're not here to bust me? Or kill me?"

I chuckled darkly. "If that were the case, I wouldn't have bothered with the pleasantries."

After a tense pause, Scott nodded. "We don't have much time, so I'll get to the point. The smaller crystals get distributed to the basic population, while the larger ones are reserved for special clients." He pointed to a few containers in the center of the warehouse. "They keep the biggest ones in those."

My gaze slid over the containers he pointed to, which were marked differently than the others. "Who are these special clients?"

"As far as I can tell, they've been some of the Sato family's closest connections."

So Ichiro was ensuring the biggest and most powerful crystals were going to people who could help him directly. It didn't surprise me that my grandfather would do such a thing; it was a reasonable business tactic.

But Ichiro had also scaled up his production significantly in such a short period, and I still didn't know the old man's end game. It couldn't just be about money. He'd

hoarded more than enough to last several lifetimes of limitless luxury.

"Can you get a list of names for these special clients?" I asked.

The guard licked his lips and looked around nervously. "Maybe. That's not all, though. I saw?—"

A call through his walkie-talkie interrupted him. He unhooked the receiver from his belt and answered it. The person on the other end announced trucks had arrived.

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"Copy," he said into his radio before clipping it back to his belt. "I have to get back to my post before they grow suspicious."

"Wait, you had something else to tell me?"

Scott shook his head as he started up the stairs. "I'll be in touch. No time right now."

As if to prove his point, his radio crackled again and someone asked his location. He disappeared up the steps, muttering something about their impatience under his breath.

My jaw cracked as I clenched it tight. A loud metal clanking sounded from the opposite end of the warehouse as a tall garage door began rolling up.

Keiko appeared at my side. "Time to go."

Whatever the man had been about to say, it was important. He was far too jumpy for anything else. It might even be the key to unraveling this mystery once and for all.

With a low growl of frustration, I followed Keiko and Aaron from the warehouse.

CHAPTER 5

Bree

The next morning, the smell of freshly brewed coffee drifted into the living room, where I had finally fallen asleep. Ah, such a glorious smell to wake up to.

For some unknown but absolutely evil reason, Frankie had never kept a coffee pot back at her place or the gym. Enjoying the delicious drink had always required a special trip to a nearby coffee shop rather than a push of a button at home in my pajamas. Not to mention it was far less expensive to brew at home.

Calvin was the true angel.

I winced as I sat up, my body sore from head to foot. Not just from the fights or the lumpy couch, though. Not completely.

No, this pain was as much from my never-ending exhaustion as it was from physical tasks. No amount of sleep or rest seemed to help, and I often wondered if this was how new mothers felt. I could understand why sleep deprivation was used as a method of torture.

I stretched my arms above my head, groaning as everything popped and cracked, then padded into the kitchen, still rubbing sleep from my eyes.

Calvin leaned against the laminate counter, holding a steaming mug in one hand and an old hardcover book in the other. He was a book lover just like me, but his books were almost always for work, including this one: *Rare Cryptids in the 21st Century*.

I hoped he got his big break soon. The GIG was proving their ineptitude by not recognizing his innate talent for wizardry. I was so thankful I didn't have to deal with office politics on top of everything else in my life, even if that sort of job came with benefits.

Calvin's thick, wavy blond hair was as unruly as ever, which is why he kept it short despite us begging him to grow it out. His hair was the envy of women everywhere, but he always claimed it would get in the way when he was in the field.

According to him, ponytails were too difficult to learn, and man buns weren't his "thing."

He tilted his head to the side, and I noticed he'd tucked his wand behind his ear like a pencil. "Coffee's still hot."

"Thanks." I grabbed a clean mug from a hook under the upper cabinet and added two sugar cubes before filling it from the carafe. I didn't need much, but straight black was still too much for my tastes. "Hey, can I get your help with something?"

"Sure. What kind of something?" Behind glasses he wore everywhere except the gym, his dark hazel eyes never left his book. He flipped to the book's next page with his thumb, still scanning the text.

"Siren stuff."

Immediately, he slammed the text shut and met my gaze. Eagerness lit up his youthful face. "Always."

Calvin was a literal lifesaver. After leaving Subliminal in an unexpected rush, Marissa and I realized we had nowhere to go. A spur-of-the-moment decision had me message the wizard, asking if he knew of anyone with a couch or even a floor we could crash on for a night or two.

Without hesitation, he'd offered us his home. He'd tried to give me his bed, but I'd adamantly refused. The guy was being nice enough just letting us stay here for free. I didn't need to take his bed too.

We were so lucky to have him on our side. He'd also cast a not-quite-legal spell that protected us from being discovered by anyone trying to find us, by Gifted or non-Gifted means.

Even when Marissa was at school, we were virtually untraceable. If anyone not enrolled or employed by the school asked about her there, the spell would activate, temporarily removing their memories of her.

Magic could be pretty awesome sometimes.

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With his knowledge of all things Gifted thanks to his job at the GIG—not to mention his obsession with research—he might be able to help us with these talismans. If nothing else, he would enjoy learning more about siren magic. I felt less guilty knowing he was getting something out of this arrangement.

"Our talismans seem to be struggling." I blew on my coffee, sending wisps of steam dancing into the air. "Scales showed up on my arm last night during a fight, and Marissa has some on her chest."

As I showed him my arm and the slight amount of webbing growing between my fingers, his eyes narrowed in thought.

While he didn't know everything about our past and who we really were, we'd revealed our siren nature to Calvin shortly after we moved in. Well, more like he walked in on Marissa and her tail in the bathtub after she'd taken off her talisman.

We could laugh about it now, but it was quite a chaotic scene back then. The entire bathroom had gotten soaked in her panic at being caught topless. Tail be darned, in her mind; it was the naked part that had her frantic.

"Can I see it?" he asked, his gaze fixed on my amulet.

"I can't take it off, but you can look." I held it up for him as he approached. His soothing honeysuckle scent made me smile.

Calvin was a good-looking man, but he wasn't the delicious temptation that Dominic was. At least not for me, and I was pretty sure not for Marissa, either.

Thankfully, the wizard had been nothing but a gentleman since the first day we'd met, never once making us feel uncomfortable with unwanted flirtation. I'd wondered if he preferred men, or maybe was asexual, but he'd laughed when I once asked about his dating life. I hadn't been as subtle with my questions as I thought.

Apparently, he just hadn't found the right lady to catch his eye yet. "No offense to you," he'd said quickly. But that had only made me chuckle.

He'd also admitted he had little time for dating and was too focused on his career to care. Moving up the ladder at the GIG was a tough...gig...

Oh.

I suddenly understood why some gym members snickered when the GIG came up in conversation. Yeesh, it had taken me way too long to put that together. Some days, I couldn't help but wonder about my sanity. As in, how much did I have left, if any?

Calvin turned the tooth to study it from all sides. "Looks perfectly intact. Can I try something?"

"Go for it. Just don't blow me up."

He grinned, flashing deep dimples in both cheeks. "No promises."

That might sound ominous coming from anyone else, but I trusted him completely. He was a talented wizard who wasn't getting the advancement he deserved. Someday, I was sure he'd get his opportunity.

The main difference between wizards and witches was how they used their magic. Whereas witches typically drew on the elements to harness their spells as needed, wizards performed complex rituals with runes and used wands.

Because they could store extra mana in their wands, wizards didn't need to rely on elemental particles being nearby like witches did. Most people considered wizards as more powerful than witches, and they often worked for the GIG.

Calvin slid his wand out from behind his ear and traced some sigils in the air, all while muttering some words in a language I didn't understand. The tooth glowed bright pink, and the potion within started to bubble and fizz.

"Uh, Cal, it's?—"

An explosion sent us both flying.

CHAPTER 6

Bree

Steaming coffee flew in a messy arc through the air, splattering against the walls and ceiling. I hit the ground with a thud and a grunt, my body jarred from the impact. Miraculously, I didn't drop the now-empty mug.

"Ow." I shook hot coffee off my hand and stood. The room was a caffeinated mess. "I thought I said no blowing me up."

Calvin rubbed his head where he'd smacked it against a cabinet. "Sorry about that, but it answered my question."

"What question?"

He used the counter to pull himself to his feet and adjusted his glasses, which had fallen askew. "The magic used in that spell is unique to the sea. I'd bet my career that only the person—er, siren who created it can fix it."

Ugh. I'd dreaded that answer. I didn't bother correcting him on Calypso being a sea serpent, not a siren. Not like it mattered anyway. A sea creature was a sea creature to most landlubbers.

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If the witch was the only one who could help us, then it was becoming more likely she had tricked us. Maybe the talismans were never meant to last forever, despite her promise. The thought of her deceiving and taking advantage of us when we were just naïve pups made me sick to my stomach.

But then again, what if it was all just an honest mistake? What if she could fix them after all? And hopefully do so without charging us a fortune, although that scenario seemed highly unlikely. She wasn't exactly the charitable type, and my good luck only extended so far.

I let out a heavy sigh. The familiar weight of defeat settled into my bones as I set my empty mug in the sink. "Thanks for trying."

Calvin rubbed a kitchen towel up his coffee-covered arm. "I wish I could be of more help," he said sincerely. "I'll do what I can at work, asking around discreetly, of course. But deep down, I'm almost positive I'm right."

"I appreciate it." I glanced at the microwave clock and groaned. "Gotta go soon. I picked up a cleaning shift."

As I reached for another towel to clean up the coffee that dripped down the walls and from the ceiling, he shooed me away. "I got this. You go."

I managed a small smile. "Thanks, Cal."

Silently, I vowed to repay the favor someday. All of them.

Leaving the wizard to clean up the mess, I trudged to the bathroom to change into something with long sleeves. My heart felt heavy, and I nearly rubbed my chest as if that would ease the ache. If the only way to fix these talismans was to visit the sea witch, then that's what I would have to do.

I wouldn't let Marissa lose everything just because I was scared. Okay, more liketerrifiedof returning to the ocean, but losing Marissa was even scarier. And that's exactly what would happen if our talismans completely failed and we had to return home to the Naftes kingdom.

Demetrius—the captain of my father's guard who'd stopped me on the street a month ago—had warned me to stay away fromthe ocean, so I couldn't help feeling like I was going to get caught if I returned. Almost like his appearance was a ruse, designed to make me worry that something was truly wrong, and then capture me when I didn't heed his warning.

I wouldn't put it past my father to do something like that, but Demetrius?

No. He had told the truth.

Something was happening back home, and I hoped it would be enough of a distraction that I could slip into Calypso's lair unnoticed.

Our talismans had worked for over ten years now. Why were they suddenly failing? And how long would it take until they failed completely?

So many questions, but not nearly enough answers.

For today, I'd focus on work and hope that Calvin turned something up at the GIG, even if that chance was merely a fantasy.

Long after the sun had set, I collapsed onto the couch and groaned. The janitorial shift I'd picked up had been for a local university, and after spending the day scrubbing three floors of classrooms, windows, and bathrooms, exhausted didn't even come close to describing how I felt.

You would think adults—even young ones—would clean up after themselves better. But nope. No such luck.

The front door opened and Marissa stomped in. Tears glistened in her eyes as she slammed the door shut behind her.

Adrenaline surged through my body, all but erasing my exhaustion in a heartbeat. Quickly, I sat up and assessed her from head to foot but didn't see any injuries. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"No, I am not okay." She tugged the sleeve of her jacket up to her elbow. Light purple scales glittered up her forearm. "It's almost summer. People were giving me weird looks for wearing a jacket. I can't go out like this!"

I could all but guarantee no one gave a second thought to her wearing a jacket. People wore all kinds of strange things these days. So while her dramatic flair was laughable, the situation was not. Far from it. The talismans' magic was fading faster than I hoped it would.

Calvin had messaged me earlier that afternoon, saying he hadn't found any answers yet. He also said he would get home late because he was going out for drinks with some coworkers. He would do a little digging amongst his peers in a more casual setting.

I sighed and sank back into the couch cushions. "Cal is trying to find someone who may know how to help us. We can't give up yet."

I didn't bother telling her what he'd said about the talismans likely having to be fixed by the creator. Not yet. She'd go straight to catastrophizing and claim we were doomed.

Only one of us needed to feel that way right now. As the older sister, I would shoulder the burden for both of us.

Her eyes lit up as she removed her jacket and tossed it on the coat rack beside the door. "Do you think he'll find someone?"

"If anyone can, Cal can," I said with much more confidence than I felt.

"So true. Let's just hope he does before my party tomorrow night. I have the cutest dress to wear."

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I couldn't believe she was turning twenty-one already. Her actual birthday wasn't until the following weekend, but she wanted to hit up the bar scene for when she was officially twenty-one. Not that an age limit had ever stopped her from getting into a bar, but then she would be legally of age. Somehow, that meant something to her and her friends. I didn't get it.

Tomorrow would be the house party.

Marissa headed for the kitchen with a spring in her step, her worries forgotten in the blink of an eye. "You hungry? I'm making ramen."

I longed for her ability to brush off concerns so easily. I hadn't eaten since lunch, but the thought of eating right now made me nauseous. "Nah, I'm good. Too tired to eat. I'm just going to bed."

"Suit yourself."

As the sounds of Marissa rummaging around the kitchen drifted into the living room, I pulled out my phone and shot a quick message to Calvin: Can I borrow your car tomorrow?

His reply was nearly instantaneous: Go for it.

I smiled at his generosity once again, even though my heart ached for what I had planned.

It was the only way.

CHAPTER 7

Dominic

Patience was a virtue, and one I had been exceptionally good at for most of my life.

Until now.

Noises from the coffee shop surrounded me as I waited for the informant to arrive. It was risky to meet like this, so out in the open, but the owner of this branch of The Morning Grind diner was a friend of mine and a talented witch—Jade Bullard. On short notice, she'd whipped up a potion that altered my appearance and scent so that no one would be the wiser.

I was just some random guy having an afternoon coffee with a friend.

And that friend had better show up soon. I glanced at my watch. I'd been waiting almost fifteen minutes now, which might not have been that long realistically, but I wasn't used to waiting for anyone. Usually, people tripped over themselves to make a good impression with a Sato or to stay in our good graces.

There was a first time for everything.

Jade stopped by my table and dropped off a double espresso. It was the third I'd ordered, but if I got the right intel today, I would need the caffeine boost to keep me up all night.

"Working hard or hardly working?" she asked.

As usual, the owner wore ripped black jeans and a faded dark hoodie tied around her waist. A white sleeveless crop top displayed tattoos covering her entire left arm, and

her blonde hair was streaked with red and slicked up into a short mohawk.

Her looks always garnered plenty of glances, but it was her friendly smile that always drew the most attention. That, and the multiple nose piercings that sparkled in the light.

Although most of her family was now deceased, the Bullards had been renowned in the Gifted community for crafting high-quality potions. Jade was also well known for her high-quality coffee.

A camouflaging potion and a half dozen shots of perfectly brewed espresso?

It was turning out to be my lucky day.

Despite the tension tightening my shoulders, I smiled. "Right now, I'm hardly working. But I appreciate your help. And your discretion."

Her green eyes twinkled with mischief. "You know I love a good mystery. I'll be conjuring up some epic soap opera story to explain..." she waved a hand at my disguised face, "this."

I chuckled. "I can't wait to hear it."

The door opened and Scott—the security guard I'd met in the warehouse—ducked inside. His eyes darted around the shop.

Jade glanced his way. "That your guy?"

"That's him."

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When Scott's gaze landed on me, I nodded toward the open seat across from me. I had messaged him in advance, letting him know where I was sitting.

His eyes widened briefly at my altered appearance, but he zigzagged through the maze of tables and slipped into the seat.

Jade smiled warmly at him. "Can I get you anything?"

"Uh, sure, a mocha frappé with extra whip."

"Be right back." She patted me on the back and headed to the counter.

Scott wiped his palms on his jeans and continued to look around. "You sure about this place, man?"

This branch of The Morning Grind was one of the safest places for us to meet in public. Like Subliminal, it was a place for Gifted types to gather safely. But unlike the gym, the diner wasn't hidden from non-Gifted sight. Plenty of humans had the pleasure of enjoying Jade's coffee.

Because of that, the GIG strictly forbade magic use here, except by the owner in case of an emergency. However, like most things in life, there were always loopholes. The potion disguising my appearance and scent wasn't considered magic. At least not enough to enforce.

I still wasn't sure what loophole Frankie, the fae woman who owned Subliminal, had found to hide her illegal fight nights from the authorities. She was an enigma I hadn't

figured out yet. Too many other priorities took up my time.

I sipped my espresso, savoring the rich flavor as it slid across my tongue. "Everything will be fine if you act like everything's fine."

"Easy for you to say. I wasn't sure it was you at first. That's one hell of a good potion. Only the best for you Satos, though, right?" A blender roared to life behind the counter, making Scott flinch. "But if shit goes down, your dragon is also a whole lot more powerful than mine." He smiled affectionately, as if reassuring his own beast after his degrading words.

Not that he was wrong. My dragon was one of the most powerful alive today. But I didn't plan on either of us getting caught.

I also wasn't here for small talk. "What did you want to tell me last time?"

The man licked his lips. I cleared my throat to catch his attention, then shook my head. Scott's nervous behavior was the only problem here, even if we were virtually alone. Two other patrons were working on their laptops and wearing headphones, but they'd wisely chosen to sit on the other side of the diner.

My face might not have been recognizable right now, but the warning in my glare had done the job.

Jade stopped by again to drop off Scott's drink. "One mocha frappé, extra whip."

"You can add it to my bill," I said.

Smiling, she nodded and moved to clean the condiments bar near the counter.

I stared at Scott, waiting for him to continue.

"I haven't figured out what it is yet, but I happened across a delivery receipt from an address I didn't recognize." He took a sip from his frothy frozen concoction. Something way too sugary for my taste. Then he pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and slid it across the table.

Suddenly, he slapped the side of his leg. "Ugh. Damned mosquitos. I hate this time of year."

"And you think this place is important?" I scanned the paper. It was an address, but I didn't recognize it either.

"That's just it—it's so plain and ordinary, it stands out." He licked whipped cream from his upper lip and took another long drink. "It's some sort of science place, like a lab."

My interest was piqued at the mention of a lab. That was unusual for our line of work. Common for human dealings, maybe, but trafficking illegal magical artifacts didn't require labs; it required storage and access to witches and wizards.

Had Ichiro figured out a way to manufacture faux pyrocrystals? The few rocks I'd seen had looked real, but I wouldn't put it past my grandfather to replicate them for profit.

But how would he have created the magical element? There was no faking the blaze that had come from the pawnshop owner. Perhaps Ichiro had mixed real and synthetic together so his stash of actual crystals would last longer and idiots would be none the wiser.

There were still too many unanswered questions.

"Like I said, I don't know what it is, but?—"

Scott clutched his throat. His eyes bulged from his head, and his face took on a deep shade of red.

Knocking my chair backward, I leaped to my feet, ready to help him expel whatever he'd choked on. Except the veins in his face turned black, writhing and wriggling from the magic held within.

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In less than ten seconds, the man slumped across the table, dead.

My wide-eyed gaze met Jade's across the room. One look at her confused and afraid face told me everything. She was just as shocked as I was.

There was only one logical reason.

Ichiro.

Somehow, somebody must have discovered this man was giving out information, and they had informed my grandfather. Considering how easily Keiko had learned of Scott's job frustrations, it was practically inevitable.

But how much did this mystery person or Ichiro know about my involvement?

Thankfully, it wasn't the morning rush hour, but the two other people here were going to figure out sooner rather than later that a man had just died in their presence.

Jade appeared at my side. "What happened?" she asked, horror evident in her hushed tone.

"Magic. A poison of some sort, but not mine. I'm not sure how it was administered."

I wasn't above killing people, but I hadn't killed this guy. He was a source, after all. I needed him. He hadn't even given me all the information yet, and if I wanted him dead, it wouldn't be with poison.

The likeliest of answers was in Scott's drink, except Jade had prepared the frappé herself. Plus, it was unlikely that Ichiro would have known what Scott was going to order to poison the right ingredients. It was possible he'd been poisoned before arriving, a delayed-action type.

"I didn't do this, I swear," she said.

"I know," I reassured her.

A glint of metal beneath Scott's seat caught my eye, and I bent to pick up the object. It looked like a bug of some sort.

"That's a hexbeetle," Jade said, her eyes wide. "Old coven tech. Nasty little things and super illegal."

I knew all about hexbeetles, but I'd never seen one in person. The user could fill the bug's body with whatever they wished—poison, notes, or otherwise—and command the beetle to deliver it anywhere in the world. Poison wasn't my method and email worked just fine for me.

A car door slammed shut outside the diner, and I glanced out the front windows. An older bald man wearing dark sunglasses adjusted his jacket. Heat rushed through my veins in a blaze of fury. It was him—Ichiro. That confirmed it. There was no way his appearance here at this exact moment was a coincidence.

I pocketed the hexbeetle and turned toward the back of the coffee shop. "Is there a back door?"

Jade nodded, her wide eyes still fixed on the dead man in front of us. Not everyone was as familiar with death as I was.

"Jade, I need your help. Please."

She took a deep breath and looked up at me. Wariness, or perhaps even outright suspicion, creased her brow.

"I didn't do this either, I promise," I said calmly but earnestly. "But I know who did, and I need your help getting out of here before he tries to frame me."

Her eyes widened even more. "Yes, there's a back door. It leads out to the street."

I nodded and moved briskly toward the back of the diner, knowing that she understood what I was truly asking of her, even without speaking the words.

Covering up each other's tracks was pretty common in the Gifted community. We often had to cover for each other so that humans wouldn't suspect that magic existed, any more than they already did, anyway. Witches were always a favorite for fantasy shows and books, and plenty of non-Gifted humans practiced what they believed to be actual magic.

Just as I slipped around the corner and into the shadows, the coffee shop door opened and Kenzo's annoyingly loud voice reached my ears. As usual, my cousin was babbling about something mundane.

Ichiro's sharp command rang out, cutting off my cousin. "What's happened?"

Something toppled over, followed by splashing sounds. Kenzo shouted, and an unfamiliar voice let out a high-pitched shriek. They must have discovered the body.

I chanced a glance around the corner. One of the other patrons continued to work on his laptop, oblivious to what was happening thanks to his giant headphones. The other had a slack jaw as he stared at the body. Kenzo had climbed onto a table, and

Jade was holding out her arm, keeping Ichiro back as soapy water splashed all over the floor from an overturned bucket.

Damn, she was a smart witch. That bleach smell would cover my tracks completely, just in case her camouflaging potion wasn't enough.

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"Someone call 9-1-1," she shouted. "I'm going to grab some towels before someone slips and breaks their neck!"

A moment later, she popped around the corner and jumped when she nearly ran into me. She clutched a hand to her chest. "Luna, help me. You need to get out of here."

"Thank you, Jade. I'll make it up to you."

"We can worry about that later." She waved me away. "Shoo."

I turned and quickly made my way to the back door, relieved to know Ichiro hadn't seen me and wouldn't pick up my scent. But somehow, he'd found out about this meeting. He knew that his operation had been compromised.

Did he suspect my involvement? Did he know about my friends being involved as well? Had he known something was amiss with Scott, or did he know what we planned?

I pushed the door open and was greeted with an interesting sight. One of Ichiro's men lay crumpled against the alley wall. Beside him, wearing a bright yellow sundress and looking rather annoyed, was Keiko.

She held up her hand and pouted. "He broke my nail."

I tilted my head toward the street and started walking. We needed to get farther away before Ichiro came looking for his man. "How did he break it?"

Her pout turned into a dramatic sigh as she fell into step beside me. "He tried to dodge my punch, and I scraped the wall. As if he could beat me." She scoffed and pushed her straight black hair over one shoulder. "He should have just taken the hit. Now I need to call my nail lady and beg her to get me on the schedule ASAP before my dinner with Rin. Like I have the time..."

I let her ramble on as we merged into the pedestrian traffic. Afternoon hours meant it was busy as people started leaving work early or headed in for a later shift.

I had already memorized the address on the paper from Scott, so I crumpled it in my fist and set it on fire. I let the ashes flutter away in the wind.

Scott hadn't exactly been subtle about his frustrations with the job. Maybe Ichiro didn't know what information the man was sharing, only that he was sharing. My grandfather had always been paranoid, but it came with the mob boss territory. With any luck, he didn't know of my betrayal.

No, that I knew for certain. If Ichiro knew what I was doing—the full extent of my betrayal—I would already be dead.

CHAPTER 8

Bree

Since it was midweek, the drive from D.C. to Delaware would only take a few hours. On warm weekends and during the summer, those same few hours turned into half a day or longer, as everyone had the same idea of escaping city life for the beach.

Finley rode on the seat next to me in a small bowl of water. The water wasn't necessary for his magical species of axolotl thanks to the ancient sigils etched into his skin, especially for such a short time, but it would keep him calm before our journey.

Plus, the gentle rocking as the water sloshed with the car's movements made him happy.

I had only a few hours of practice driving a car and a fake license Frankie had gotten me years ago, but highway driving was a breeze compared to the dense city streets. No real need to watch for pedestrians or bikes. I rolled down the Honda Accord's windows, breathing in the fresh air outside the city.

As much as I tried to focus on the road and scenery since I had never traveled this far outside the city—after Marissa's and my initial wide-eyed arrival—my thoughts always brought me back to Dominic. The only other time I'd ventured farther away from home was on the back of his motorcycle. My arms wrapped tight around the dragon's hard body, my hair flying in the wind.

And that experience had been nothing short of life-changing.

Not just because of the amazing orgasm he'd given me after we parked, but because I'd realized how much I'd missed out on by always playing it safe. Always following the rules to the detriment of my own happiness.

I glanced over at Finley, basking in a sun puddle with a smile on his sweet little face, and winced as a pang of regret tore through my insides. Marissa and I weren't the only ones who had sacrificed our homes and lives among others of our kind.

As guilt resumed its residence in my heart, I gripped the steering wheel tighter. The orphaned axolotl would never leave us, not of his own free will. The least I could do was bring him along for a swim in salt-filled waters.

When we neared the Delaware beaches, a cool breeze carried the distinct scent of seaweed through the car windows, and my heartbeat fluttered with anticipation. It had been years since Marissa and I swam in the ocean. Over a decade now. I was just as

excited as I was terrified.

Finley must have caught the scent or change in the air because his eyes snapped open. He moved to the edge of the bowl, tilting his head curiously. His eyes were wide with excitement.

"Almost there," I said with a smile.

He wiggled his tail eagerly.

Only a few minutes later, I found a public parking lot and pulled into a space. I turned off the car and faced Finley. "You ready, buddy?"

The axolotl gripped the lip of the bowl and chirped, his head bobbing up and down. The movement nearly tipped over the bowl.

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I laughed and scooped him up before he could fall out and spill water everywhere.

Yep, he was ready.

After settling Finley onto my shoulder—his favorite perch—I grabbed my duffel bag and headed for the beach. The sun climbed high in the cloudless sky, casting a warmth on sand that seemed to stretch out endlessly along the shoreline.

As soon as I reached the sand's edge, I took off my sandals and a relaxed sigh escaped my lips. The heat from the sun-soaked ground enveloped my bare feet, sending a tingling sensation through my entire body. Grains of sand shifted beneath my weight, soft and yielding, like a comforting embrace from the earth herself.

I took my time wandering away from the parking lot and civilization in general, relishing the feeling spreading up from the soles of my feet and deep into my very soul. It was a simple joy, grounding and invigorating, as if the essence of the ocean reached out to welcome me home.

A silly thought to humans, maybe, but sirens knew how alive the ocean truly was.

When I found a secluded section of the beach, I quickly stripped down to the two-piece swimsuit I wore beneath my clothes. I turned off my phone and tucked everything except a small satchel into the duffel I'd brought before hiding it all among the tall grasses growing along the beach's edge. Hopefully, everything would still be there when I returned.

I swallowed hard.

If I returned.

No, don't think like that, I chided myself.

I would come back, even if it was with bad news.

My heart pounded as I stood on the beach and stared out over the water. The rhythmic sound of waves crashing against the shore filled the air and thrummed inside me. A breeze tousled my hair into a dance around my face, and the salt-laden air caressed my skin.

It was time.

I approached the gently lapping waves and let the water rush over my feet. The cool touch of the ocean sent shivers down my spine, and I sucked in a breath as the sand buried my toes. I hesitated before going farther, but not because of the cold. Nostalgia surged within me, as did fear.

The sea had been my home and sanctuary for more than half my life, and yet the bustling city had also become home, weaving its way into the fabric of my existence. I had grown accustomed to the constant noise, the distinct hum of urban living.

I had even known a taste of love for the briefest of moments. Dominic had shown me a side to life I didn't know existed, a side I thought only belonged in fairytales and fantasies. I wasn't sure I'd ever find that real of a feeling again, and if my father had any say in the matter, I never would.

A soft touch against my cheek brought me back to the present. Finley rubbed his head against my skin, trilling softly. Even without words, I knew he could sense my conflicted thoughts.

Never going back to that crazy human world was a genuine risk, but it was a risk I had to take. I clenched my fists at my sides.

It was now or never.

Taking a deep breath, I ran into the waves and dove beneath the surface. The reunion with the cold, briny water was everything I hoped it would be, and more. Judging by Finley's trills as he pushed away from me and disappeared in the surge, he agreed.

I took a moment to soak in the sensation before resurfacing for air. Finley returned to my side as I swam farther out, away from the waves tugging us back toward the beach.

When I was sure I was far enough to avoid any notice from the few humans walking the beach, I ducked beneath the surface. The water enveloped me again, and a sense of weightlessness embraced me like a long-lost friend. The gentle melody of the ocean replaced the sounds of the world above, like whispers that echoed through the underwater world.

Without another thought, I grasped the talisman and pulled it over my head. The pain was immediate and excruciating. I cried out, only to suck water down my still-human lungs.

I thrashed against the throbbing in my chest, competing with the agony ripping through my entire body. Fear clawed at my throat.

Oh, sweet Tethys...

I was going to drown.

A fiery heat swept down my legs as they rejoined, my skin seeming to melt as my

limbs fused. Purple scales erupted along the length of my merging legs, covering them and continuing to rise toward my belly, and shimmery webbing grew between my fingers. My body jerked uncontrollably as my lungs fought for air despite the water filling them.

Then suddenly, I could breathe again. I sucked in gasping breaths through my gills, thankful Marissa wouldn't be attending my funeral later. At least not from this ridiculous moment.

I had experienced the transformation's pain during our few swims over the years, but I had been smarter those times and stayed above the surface until the change was complete. This time, excitement and nerves had gotten the better of me, and I'd nearly paid the ultimate price.

This is amazing! Finley's tinkling voice chimed in my mind.

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I let out a surprised bubble. Oh, how I'd missed his voice! I had almost forgotten our ability to communicate this way underwater.

Whee! He swam in circles around me and through the shredded pieces of my swimsuit bottoms. Luminara axolotl had a longer-than-normal lifespan, often outliving sirens by two or three generations. At nineteen years old, he was hardly more than a toddler.

His happiness was contagious, and I gave in to the moment. I laughed and spun around, my hair floating like a curtain around me.

I wished I didn't have to choose one or the other, legs or a tail. I wanted both. But my father's strict demands for my life meant having both was impossible.

Shaking off my frustration before it could ruin this moment, I dove forward. My tail fin caught the currents, and the membranes unfolded completely. The ocean welcomed me with a tapestry of blues and greens that sparkled in the sunlight, and I let out a trill of joy, a sound that resonated through the water.

Miles away, a pod of whales sang back, recognizing me for what I was. I couldn't help the wide grin that tugged at my cheeks. Since this might be the last time I got to swim in salty waters for a long time, I was going to make the most of it.

Of course, it could also be the first time for the rest of my life if we were forced to leave our human lives.

Nope. No more of that. Focusing on the bright side was the only way I was going to get through this day.

Finley and I swam together, taking our time as we stretched muscles we hadn't used in years.

Memories flooded back to me the farther we went—childhood games with dolphins, the vibrant coral gardens I had called my backyard, and the lullabies of the ocean currents that had sung me to sleep.

My heart swelled with a mixture of happiness and longing. It was a bittersweet collision of emotions that seemed to reach across time and distance. A connection to my true self spreadthrough me, like a part of my identity that had been dormant for far too long.

As I swam deeper, the ethereal glow of bioluminescent creatures replaced the sunlight. The gentle hum of currents and schools of fish surrounded me.

I knew that the human city and the people within it had changed me, leaving unforgettable marks on my soul. Yet, as I swam through the depths, a sense of homecoming rekindled the ties that bound me to the sea.

The siren who had walked the streets as a human was a part of me and always would be. But so was the creature of the deep.

Today, beneath the waves, I embraced the duality of my existence.

As much as I wanted to take my time and enjoy the reunion with my first home, I was only here for one reason. Finley could swim fast, but not as fast as a siren, so I scooped him into the small satchel I'd brought with me, along with the talisman.

With a final glance back at the sloping sand that would lead back to the beach, I dove farther into the deep. Powerful strokes of my tail took us down fast.

As the hours passed, I utilized various currents to keep from exhausting myself. Pods of dolphins, random sea turtles, and even a few whale families rushed by as I swam. Everything here felt so much more familiar than the world above, even though I'd lived there almost as long as I did beneath the waves.

At last, I saw the dark gap in the ocean floor that would lead me deeper into the trench where the sea witch kept her lair. It had taken far less time than our original journey. Thanks to my time on land, I knew the Delaware beach would bring me closer to Naftes' territory.

Closer to home, and closer to the witch.

In the ocean, we called this trench theAvyssos—the Abyss. It was dark and bleak and perfectly suited to her kind.

My father's land, the Naftes Kingdom, spread from just beyond the western edge of the trench to the eastern edges of North America. I had followed the northern Naftes' border to avoid running into any patrols.

Farther south was the Thalasses Kingdom, home to King Ateleíotes, my father's greatest enemy. Or so I had been taught, but my father had also promised my hand in marriage to Ateleíotes' son to solidify a truce. Mend broken bridges and all that.

I only felt a small amount of guilt for putting my father in a tough spot after my disappearance. He should have known I wouldn't go along with a forced marriage, just as my mother had been against the idea.

Far to the southwest was the Kalyteros Kingdom, a smaller territory but also one of our allies. King Cyreus had three sons, and while I would always prefer the freedom of choice, I might not have swum away from home had my father promised me to one of them. At least they were tolerable. Mostly.

As I closed in on the cliff's edge, the haunting melody of sirens reached my ears. It was a sound that was both alluring and foreboding, and panic surged through me. I instinctively dove for cover behind a large outcropping of coral.

My pulse thrummed in my ears as I peered around the coral.

A group of four sirens emerged from the depths of the trench. Their iridescent blue and green tails shimmered like liquid silver, and their blue eyes almost seemed to glow with an otherworldly light.

Each siren kingdom had guards that patrolled their boundaries, their keen senses attuned to any intruders. But these guards wore distinctively marked whalebone armor and familiar weapons that made my heart skip a beat.

This was a Naftes patrol, some of my father's sirens.

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Wait a second...

I frowned. The Avyssos was outside Naftes' territory in a sort of no-man's land. Why were they this far out? Had they visited the sea witch? For what purpose?

There was nothing else down that trench but her lair, and I highly doubted my father would approve a visit. He wouldn't have sent anyone else, either; he would have gone himself if a visit was necessary.

The siren guards swam in my direction, and my heart pounded against my ribs. It would be just my luck getting caught by my father's men on my very first return to the sea. Slowly, so as not to cause a disturbance in the water, I scooped sand onto my tail, hiding it from view as much as I could.

As the guards edged dangerously close to my hiding spot, I closed my gills to avoid releasing bubbles. The ocean seemed to hold its breath with me, the only sound the echo of the sirens' haunting song.

Any moment now, one of them was sure to see me. They were scouring the ocean around them as if looking for something—or someone. There was no way they could know I was coming today, but an eerie sensation still prickled across my skin. Something felt off about this encounter, like it was planned.

Had Demetrius laid a trap, after all?

I pressed my body against the coral, wincing as its sharp edges dug into my skin, and prayed that the limited shadows would conceal me.

The guards swam overhead, their eyes scanning the surroundings, and for a moment, I believed I had escaped their notice.

But then one guard paused as if sensing something amiss. My heart lodged in my throat as the siren turned in my direction. A ripple of uncertainty passed through his expression.

This was it.

I was caught.

CHAPTER 9

Bree

My satchel jiggled, and Finley stuck his head out. He blinked once at me before communicating telepathically: Did you forget I was here?

I clamped a hand over my mouth to keep from letting out a laugh. I hadn't forgotten he was with me, but I had certainly forgotten about his unique magic.

The axolotl shivered and the arcane sigils along his body glowed blue within the satchel. A moment later, we both disappeared from view.

It wasn't true invisibility, though. More of a camouflaging like a chameleon. We blended in perfectly with the coral and sand, and I remained motionless, hoping beyond hope that his concealment spell would shield us from the sirens' scrutiny.

The guards hovered above us, their gaze settling and lingering on the area where we hid. Fear coiled in my stomach as I questioned the wisdom of returning to the ocean, of risking exposure to the very beings who guarded these depths.

Seconds stretched into agonizing minutes, and then, as if deciding there was nothing amiss, the siren guards resumed their patrol and their song. The melody faded as they swam away.

Breathless and grateful for the narrow escape, I waited a few more minutes until they were completely out of sight. I could ask Calypso about their appearance, but I had a strong suspicion that whatever response she gave wouldn't be the truth. I wasn't even sure I'd get the truth about the talismans, but I had to try.

I pushed my thoughts toward Finley: Okay, let's go.

He released his spell, bringing us both back into view. Then he wriggled deeper into the safety of my satchel. I pushed myself off the ocean floor and flipped my tail a few times to shake off any remaining sand.

I swam for the trench's edge as quickly as I could and dove into the depths. The water grew darker and colder as I descended.

As I approached the entrance to the sea witch's home, I spied two sand sharks among the coral—the witch's creatures. Like the last time I'd arrived, their black eyes glinted in the limited light that struggled to penetrate this far below the surface. Each beast remained unnervingly still as if waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

Behind them, a series of tunnels designed to deceive and disorient intruders led deeper into the witch's lair. Although I had been here twice before, a troubled feeling crept over me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

I was older now and supposedly wiser. Making a deal with the sea witch—another deal—had to be on a list of bad ideas somewhere. Maybe even the top of a list. I should know better than to push my luck.

But I couldn't turn back now. I had to do this, if not for me, then for Marissa.

I squared my shoulders and passed through the archway of dead coral. The gnarled white fingers reached toward me as I entered the tunnel's darkness.

Glowing phosphorus glistened along the coral walls, and a few fish darted close to the light, their bright hues easy to spot. The pulsating light cast a blue tint on my skin, adding to the otherworldly atmosphere.

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The ocean here was cold and silent, holding its breath as if death itself watched and waited. Perhaps Calypso was death incarnate. Despite the drum of my panicked heartbeat, no other sound penetrated the depths of the witch's home.

I followed the twists and turns I'd used previously until the tunnel opened into a vast chamber—the heart of the sea witch's lair. Shelves lined the dimly lit cavern walls, crammed with mysterious objects and strange concoctions. In the center of it all stood a throne formed from twisted white coral that resembled bones.

Just like before, Calypso sat on her throne as if she were expecting me, which was impossible.

Wasn't it?

The witch's dark hair fanned out around her head like a tangled mass of snakes. A reddish hue tinted her skin and scales, and her ribs stuck out prominently from her gaunt frame. Flowing black seaweed covered most of her dark red serpentine tail, which was so long it curled around her throne. The end was nowhere in sight.

The sea serpent's dark gaze was the most terrifying part about her. The bottomless depths of the oceans stared back, seductive in their mystery but promising a sure death if one swam too deep.

"Well, isn't this quite the surprise?" Calypso's full red lips curled up, revealing her fangs. The very same fangs I had helped her recover ten years ago. The ones I had stolen from my father. It wasn't really a smile, more of a predatory look. "To what do I owe the pleasure after, what, nine years or so?"

I wasn't as naïve as the first time we met. Well, I hoped I wasn't, anyway. But she knew exactly how long it had been.

I reached into my satchel and pulled the talisman free. Finley remained hidden inside. "The talismans are failing when you said they would last forever."

"Oh, dear." She drew her eyebrows together and held out a crimson hand. "Let me see it."

I dropped the tooth necklace into her palm, avoiding her wickedly sharp claws.

She clenched the talisman in her fist and closed her eyes. After a moment, she pierced me with her dark gaze again. "Dreadful news, I'm afraid. It seems one item you collected for the spell had been tainted somehow. Impure. The spell will continue to fail because of it."

I accepted the talisman back from her and scrutinized it. "What do you mean 'tainted?' I got exactly what you asked for."

"Yes, my child, but you must have damaged the piece of seaweed cloak somehow. Did you seal it in a clamshell for protection before bringing it to me, like I'd explained?"

The seaweed in question came from one of the rarest plants in the entire ocean. Similar to Finley's magic, the plant's properties rendered itself and anything under it invisible, which made it invaluable as a fabric. That scrap had come from a cloak hanging in my palace's Hall of Mysteries.

My mouth slammed shut. All of this, everything we'd worked so hard to achieve over the past ten years, would be lost because of a simple error. I hadn't sealed it in a clamshell, even though she'd told me it would be wise to protect it.

But there was a big difference between should and must. I hadn't realized failing to seal it would alter the spell and cause it to fail. Now we were destined to return to the sea because of a careless mistake.

My careless mistake.

Devastation gripped my stomach in a vise, clenching painfully. There was no way I could pay the witch to make new talismans or even fix our current ones. The only way I could even try would be to beg my father for payment or for him to create them for us, and neither of those options was going to happen.

I had failed. Worse, I had failed my sister. I had made a promise to our mother before she died to protect Marissa, no matter what, and I couldn't even do that.

I'd let Frankie down, Dominic, and now my sister.

My heart was about to shatter.

"I may have a solution for you." The corners of the witch's blood-red lips tilted up slowly as if tasting something delicious. "But, as with everything worthwhile, it'll cost you."

"What solution?" Apparently, I was a sucker for pain. There was no chance I could afford her price, but I had to know what she proposed.

Calypso slid off her throne and swam toward me, curling her tail around my waist in a way-too-friendly move. It was weird and unnerving, but I remained still.

"I happen to have a potion on hand that would allow you to change shapes at will...permanently."

My pulse raced as the possibilities of such a life ran through my mind. Never having to worry about wearing a talisman again? Never fearing what would happen if someone removed it or if it broke? She was talking about a dream come true for Marissa and me.

"There's just one tiny catch—I only have enough for one of you." Calypso pouted. "It's extremely difficult to create."

Of course there was a catch. "Why didn't you offer it the first time I visited?"

"It was a risky spell I'd never tried before. I couldn't possibly test it on you first, especially if it had deadly consequences. Your father would've done far worse than banishing me." She still pouted, but the glint in her gaze didn't match the look. "Thankfully, I've had plenty of years since then to fine-tune the spell. It works beautifully now. Perfectly."

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Her reasoning made sense, but I still felt uneasy. Like she was hiding or holding something back from me, which was more than likely true. Her pitying expression gave nothing away.

However, my paranoia could have been jumping into high gear, seeing danger where there was none. But it could have been my intuition just as easily. Unfortunately, I didn't have any other options but forward. I couldn't afford to get stuck in analysis paralysis right now.

"What would your price be?"

Calypso's gaze traced my figure from head to tail. "You."

I blinked. That was certainly not what I expected. "Excuse me?"

"The price is you. You will remain here with me."

"Like, as your partner?" I swallowed the knot forming in my throat. "Or as a...a sex slave?"

Her lips curled up into an amused smirk. "Neither, sweet child. I have no need for such things. No, you will simply be mine to do with as I please. You will obey my every command."

Her price was too high. And yet...

...it was a price I could afford. She wasn't asking for gold or priceless artifacts. She

simply wanted me.

Okay, sure, it was an odd request. Beyond odd. She wanted me to be her slave, just not for sex, thankfully. If she was telling the truth, anyway, which was highly questionable. I wouldn't dwell on that for too long and hope for the best.

But why me?

Was this some sort of weird revenge against my father? Would she use me as a slave to get back at him for exiling her and her kind?

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed too easy.

What was I missing?

"Why me?" I asked. "Surely there's something out there you want more than just a cleaner fish."

A darkness gathered in her eyes, a swirling tempest of emotions. But it was gone in a blink. She smiled and plucked a bottle off a shelf. "You are my price. Take it or leave it."

She tossed the bottle to me as though I'd already agreed. I stared at the contents swirling within. This was the key to saving Marissa, this small potion in my hands.

How could I not do this for her?

Agony twisted at my heart as the weight of the life I would leave behind pressed against my chest. The quiet mornings, the freedom I'd fought so hard to claim—they'd vanish the moment I agreed.

For my sister, I'd give up everything. I had to. But as the words formed on my tongue, a jagged ache clawed at my ribs and silenced me. I didn't want to say yes. Not this time. Not when the price was everything I'd fought for—the fragile little life I'd finally called mine.

Not only that, but I'd be giving up a chance to see if maybe, just maybe, I could fix things with Dominic. Dive headfirst into the potential for love. The kind of fairytale I'd only fantasized about.

But that was just it. It was a fairytale. A fantasy. What I'd experienced with Dominic was likely the result of raging hormones after a nearly celibate life. Nothing more...

Right?

I needed to stop analyzing it because this wasn't about me. It couldn't be. There was only one way forward, and I was wasting time I didn't have.

"Okay." I met the witch's gaze. "You have a deal."

Her grin was almost feral, madness swirling within her eyes. "Wise choice, child. We'll go over all the formalities later, but for now, simply sign here."

With a snap of her whip-like tail, a piece of parchment appeared before me, floating in the water. The script was tiny and difficult to read but covered just about everything I could think of. A line at the bottom indicated where I needed to sign.

"How do I sign it?" I looked around for something to write with.

Her tail wrapped around my wrist in a deadly grip, pulling my arm toward her. Before I could yank it back, she sliced my thumb with a claw.

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"Hey!" I tugged at my arm, which she released.

"Sign with your blood."

This was it. My last chance to change my mind. But my decision had been made the day my mother had died.

Without another thought, I gulped and smeared my blood across the line.

The paper rolled up by itself and drifted into Calypso's hand. "Add in a strand of your sister's hair and get her to drink it. She must drink every last drop. Then you only need to return to me."

There wasn't much in the bottle, so I didn't expect to have too much trouble getting Marissa to drink it. I would just have to mix it with something like one of her protein shakes.

I frowned. "How did you know I'd give it to Rissa?"

"Oh, child," her sinister gaze pierced mine, "that was never in question."

As I turned to leave, I paused. "But how do you know I'll return?"

"Somany questions." Her tone dripped with condescension. "As with all my contracts, breaking it comes with near-fatal consequences. Should you attempt to flee... Well, trust me—it won't be pretty."

Gripping the potion tight, I swam away.

CHAPTER 10

Dominic

I leaned against the railing overlooking the Jefferson Memorial and Tidal Basin. Although spring had arrived, the cherry blossoms had yet to bloom, which meant crowds weren't too thick right now. There were still enough people milling about to keep my meeting less likely to draw attention.

The Tidal Basin was first built in the 1800s to harness the power of the Potomac River's tides, flushing silt and sediment from the Washington Channel. Today, it's most well-known for the annual Cherry Blossom Festival, celebrating the enduring friendship between the United States and Japan. The entire area would soon explode with the iconic pink and white flowers.

As I surveyed the area, a million thoughts and emotions flooded my mind, none of which concerned the cherry blossoms. With our informant's untimely death, it was clear Ichiro knew Scott had talked. But what wasn't clear was how my grandfather had found that fact out.

Had he learned that Scott was giving out information the same way Keiko had? More importantly, were there any crumbs that would lead Ichiro to me or my friends?

It was also possible, though highly unlikely, that this was all some sort of strange coincidence. Perhaps the man had done something else to gain Ichiro's attention and earn his subsequent execution, something to do with his gambling debts.

There was no way any of my friends had betrayed me or the others. Keiko, Rin, and Aaron were loyal to a fault. They would give their lives for me just as I would give

my life for any of theirs. But something wasn't adding up.

I gripped the railing tighter, my eyes tracking a small family of ducks swimming past. What was I missing? I needed more information about this man, Scott, about what else he might have been involved in. There had to be more about him that would explain his death, like who he owed money to.

Although Ichiro's involvement in the man's death was still technically unconfirmed, it was the obvious answer. Scott had met with me at the warehouse then Ichiro had shown up during our meeting at the diner.

But there were too many unknowns and uncertainties. Poison wasn't my grandfather's usual way of killing someone. Like all dragons, he thirsted for blood—literally.

I needed evidence. Cold, hard facts.

I turned as the others arrived, a curious look on Aaron and Rin's faces while Keiko sucked on a lollipop. To ensure secrecy, I hadn't told them what this impromptu meeting was about. Only Keiko knew.

The two men were complete opposites, Aaron's blond hair and blue eyes contrasting with Rin's dark. Where Aaron was more lithe muscle, Rin was a beast.

Then there was pint-sized Keiko with her yellow sundress, sleek black hair, and lollipop. Next to the rest of us, no one would ever expect her to be the deadliest of the bunch.

No tourists were close enough to overhear our conversation, so there was no sense in beating around the bush. "Scott is dead."

"What?" Rin's jaw dropped. "How?"

Aaron's eyes narrowed. "Ichiro found out?"

"Looks that way. Some sort of poison-filled hexbeetle at the coffee shop this morning," I explained.

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"I've been thinking about that, and I still don't get it," Keiko said around her lollipop. "That's not his style. He prefers grand gestures to make sure everyone knows what happens to those who talk."

"Exactly what I thought," I said.

"You knew about this?" Rin's eyebrows drew together as he glanced down at his girlfriend. They had been inseparable since they met, and there was little they kept from one another.

She offered him an apologetic look. "Barely. I showed up at the last minute, but then I was forced to squeeze in an emergency salon visit." She held up her perfectly manicured nails and beamed.

Aaron stared at her hand. "What do your nails have to do with any of this?"

"One of Ichiro's goons was waiting outside the diner's back door, and he broke my nail." She shrugged. "So rude, right?"

I cut in before the conversation went even more off-track. "If it wasn't him, was it a coincidence?"

Aaron's gaze turned toward the water, his eyebrows drawn together in thought. "That would be one hell of a coincidence. Not just that Scott died, but that it was while he was with you. It may not be Ichiro's typical way, but perhaps he wanted to send you a message directly without drawing attention to himself."

We contemplated that thought in silence for a moment.

"I don't think he knows for sure you're involved," Keiko said. "He's testing you, to see how you'd react to the man's death."

That made more sense than some of the other scenarios I had considered. "So he suspects me, but isn't certain."

The others nodded as they saw the logic of the idea.

"If he thinks to scare me off, he doesn't know me. No surprise there." I pulled out my phone and sent them the address I'd gotten from Scott. "Do any of you recognize this place?"

"Not the name, but I know the address," Aaron said as the others shook their heads. "From the ledgers. But it never had a name attached." His eyes widened. "Shit. The supply list makes more sense now."

"Makes sense how?" I asked.

Aaron smoothed his blond hair back, his only excited tell. "They've been ordering tubing and beakers, stuff like that. Usually, I only keep an eye out for weapons and magical items, so I hadn't given the place more thought. But knowing what we do now..." He met my gaze just as I came to the same conclusion as my friend. "He must be producing the crystals there."

Eagerness rolled through me, though I kept it in check. We hadn't confirmed this information, but if it was true, then we'd just made a huge leap forward in our investigation. Not only that but maybe Scott's death wouldn't be in vain after all. He might have given us the win we needed to bring Ichiro down.

"Keiko, Aaron, I need you two to stake out the place over the next few days. Learn what you can about their movements," I said, knowing they already knew what to look for. "Rin and I will gather information from the servers—blueprints, guard schedules, et cetera. I don't want to do anything to tip Ichiro off, so we'll need to be extremely cautious. More so than usual."

Finally, this was the lead we'd been searching for over the past few months.

Although I still had questions about our informant's death and what Ichiro might know about my involvement, I wouldn't let those thoughts stop me. I was more determined than ever.

The old man was going down.

It had taken my team four days to gather enough information to make a move after our meeting at the Tidal Basin. We'd scouted guard rotations, hacked into the city planning department's database to retrieve the lab's layout, and stolen an access card, allowing us to disable key cameras and alarms.

Our plan wasn't perfect—jobs like this never were—but we knew where the weak points were, and we had each other. It would work. Tonight, we would get the evidence we needed.

Darkness surrounded me as I stepped out of the car. We'd chosen a meeting spot that had few sources of light, and clouds obscured the moon. It was a few blocks away from the lab and would give us the secrecy we needed to prepare before breaking in.

I met the others on the sidewalk, our breaths appearing as small puffs in the crisp spring air. Crickets chirped around the site. This kind of evening would be peaceful if it weren't for the tension building in my body.

Aaron glanced up and down the street. "I wish you'd reconsider doing it tonight. We don't have enough intel yet and?—"

I cut him off with a sharp glance. "Most plans are better with more time, but we don't have that luxury. We can't wait for the perfect moment."

"I get it, Aaron, but Dominic's right," Keiko said as she tugged a black mask over her head. While she could use her magic to encase herself in shadows, the mask acted as a backup in case the guards utilized some sort of anti-magic defenses. The fabric covered her entire face and neck, leaving just two slits for her eyes. "We have enough info to do this as long as we stick to the plan. No heroics."

"No heroics?" Rin stuck his lower lip out in a fake pout before pulling on his mask. "You're taking all the fun out of this, babe."

"Someone has to keep you boys in line."

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As they continued their playful banter while strapping on various weapons, Aaron moved closer to me. "I don't like this. Something feels off, like it's too easy."

I checked my gun's magazine, chambered a round, and holstered it. "We haven't even gotten inside yet."

"I mean getting the information we've gotten. It's all too easy. It feels like a setup."

"Then let's expect a setup and be prepared to act accordingly." I eyed my friend. "We can't wait any longer. I can't wait. This needs to end."

The sooner I brought down Ichiro, the sooner I could get back to my other priorities.

Aaron's expression softened. "We'll find her, Nic. But getting yourself or someone else injured or killed tonight isn't going to help."

A sliver of doubt crept into my mind. I didn't want to brush off Aaron's concerns, but I couldn't risk any more time. It wasn't about Bree—every second counted when it came to bringing down Ichiro Sato. If he caught even a whiff of something amiss here, all traces would be gone within the hour. I clenched my jaw tight.

No, it had to be now.

Now, before Ichiro could figure out what we were up to. Now, before Ichiro moved the entire operation and the lab emptied, taking our one chance with it.

I adjusted the fit of my last holster. "No one is dying tonight." No one from our

group, anyway. I couldn't make any promises for Ichiro's people.

Without waiting for another retort, I gestured for the others to head out. We needed to be in position before the shift change.

As expected, floodlights surrounded the building. It would be next to impossible to get close without being seen by patrolling guards or cameras.

Impossible for anyone other than Keiko.

Once we were in place and waiting for her signal, the petite assassin let out a series of clicks, using echolocation to enhance her senses. A moment later, she disappeared from view only to materialize on the other side of the floodlights' reach, within a stretch of shadows.

She was more than capable of handling fights on her own, and I sometimes wondered how easy it would be for her to take down Ichiro without all this need for hiding and gathering evidence. But I wasn't willing to risk her life to try. The High Draconic Council wouldn't go easy on her if they found out, no matter who—or what—she was.

She was one of a kind. No one knew who her parents were or how she'd ended up wandering the streets of D.C. when she was barely old enough to walk. In Ichiro's mind, her skills and abilities were limited to the other, far more lethal side of the hybrid woman.

But as soon as I recognized the unique lunar magic she also wielded, I helped her hide and develop it without Ichiro knowing. The old man would have exploited her even more than he already did had he found out, and the only people in the world who knew about her witchy side were here tonight.

As much as I hated to admit it, raising her to become an assassin had been a smart move. She had a way to channel her need to feed on human blood without worrying about killing innocent people.

If the GIG ever discovered her existence, they'd lock her in a cage and study her, likely even dissect or clone her. But that would never happen while Rin, Aaron, or I still breathed. We would burn the GIG to ashes if they tried, and she was far too valuable to Ichiro for him to let anything happen.

She was a creature the GIG would kill to get their hands on. A creature more rare than her lunar witch side or even a siren.

My heart squeezed painfully. In reality, I hardly knew the siren woman. But time didn't matter when it came to her. I wanted to spend every waking moment for the rest of my life making her happy. She was worth it.

Once we'd handled this mess with Ichiro, I would pour every resource I had into finding Bree again. She was my future, no matter how short-lived.

But first, I needed to focus on tonight.

A shadow leaped over my head, jumping from one building's roof to the next without a sound. The leopard landed beside Keiko, who cloaked them both in shadows. A moment later, the door opened and shut as if by a ghost.

Once they handled the guards within the security room, they would turn off a floodlight for thirty seconds to allow Rin and me time to make it to the door. Aaron would hack into the system to loop the external camera aimed at that spot until we were inside.

Like clockwork, the floodlight clicked off, allowing us a sliver of shadows to sneak

across. If all went according to plan, we would be inside before any of the patrolling guards noticed the light come back on.

Keeping low, Rin and I hurried across the asphalt. Just as we reached the door leading inside, the floodlight clicked back on. A grim smile tugged at my lips. Perfect timing.

If only the rest of the night had continued without a hitch.

CHAPTER 11

Bree

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By the time I got back to D.C., the sun had set. I hated driving in the dark, but thankfully, rush hour had mostly died down. Street lamps and headlights lit the roads well enough to see as I navigated the less busy roads back to Calvin's.

I pulled into the carport, surprised by how many cars lined the street. Seeing people heading for his front door, I drew my eyebrows together in confusion.

And then it hit me.

Crab cakes! Tonight was Marissa's party for her twenty-first birthday. I'd completely forgotten about it thanks to all the upheaval with the talismans.

Despite everything, I smiled, content knowing she'd get to celebrate exactly as she wanted to. No more worrying about faulty talismans and having to wear jackets in warmer weather. After tonight, she'd never have to wear either again if she didn't want to.

Sighing, I turned the car off and double-checked that the vial Calypso had given me was still sealed tight before slipping it into my pocket. "You'll need to get in the bag again, Fin."

The axolotl rolled in the water to wet his scales before clambering out of the bowl and into the duffel. Already, I missed hearing his little voice.

The house Calvin rented in Tenleytown was small and cheaply built, which meant the music boomed just as loud outside as inside. I'd worry about the neighbors complaining, except most of them were college kids living similar lives. Besides, I

wouldn't be surprised to find most of them inside celebrating with Marissa already.

Preferring books and quiet nights, I was the odd fish out once again. No complaints on my end—or at least, there shouldn't have been. This was exactly the kind of scene I wouldn't miss. Loud music, small talk, waking up to an absolute mess.

But the realization hit like a wave crashing over me. After tonight, there wouldn't be books or quiet nights. No more escapes into my favorite stories, no safety of my room to shut out the world. Whatever awaited me in the sea witch's lair, it wouldn't include the minor comforts I'd taken for granted.

I opened the door and winced as the music and bright lights practically smacked into me. My senses were on overload after the peacefulness of the ocean.

My chest tightened as the surrounding noise grew sharper, every laugh and cheer a reminder that this world was slipping through my fingers. I swallowed hard, forcing down the ache. I couldn't afford to fall apart now.

"Bree!" my sister's voice squealed among the throng of bodies crammed into the living room before she plowed her way through. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. The distinct reek of alcohol on her breath made me scrunch up my nose. "I thought you forgot."

"Like you would ever let me forget." I laughed as I extracted myself from her arms. "I'll be right back, then I'm making your next drink."

She grinned and turned to the closest group, instantly joining the conversation with her usual exuberance. She could get along with anyone, and I loved that about her. Some people lived for the spotlight, and I was happy to stay out of it.

I headed for Marissa's room, where we kept Finley's aquarium. Calvin had

performed a spell that hid the tank from everyone but the three of us. I owed that wizard a fortune by now.

After locking the door behind me, I gently lifted Finley from the bag and placed him in the water. Immediately, he tried to scramble out, and I had to hold him back to keep him from falling. Drops of water splashed onto the table.

"No, buddy, you can't come with me this time. For real." Deep sadness threatened to spill from my eyes. "Calypso is far too dangerous and cunning. I don't know what I signed up for, but it didn't include you."

Clinging to the tank's edge, he blinked at me with wide, sorrowful eyes. A tear slipped down my cheek.

"I'm going to miss you, too. But I need you to look after Marissa for me, okay?" I sniffled and ran a finger down his slick head. He leaned into the touch. "You guys will have each other, and that makes me happier than anything."

He chirped before sinking into the water. Blinking slowly, he gave a great big yawn that released a stream of bubbles. All that swimming had worn the little guy out, even after spending most of the journey in my satchel. It was a good thing too, because I was sure he'd keep trying to come with me if he could hold his eyes open long enough.

Before leaving, I tugged a strand of hair free from Marissa's brush. My fingers hesitated over the potion's cork. Could I trust anything that the sea witch said? For all I knew, this could turn my sister into a toad instead of a siren. Or worse, leave her stuck halfway between shapes. The thought twisted my stomach.

But what choice did I have? Calypso's terms had been clear, and if I didn't try, Marissa would never be free. Besides, the contract had some serious consequences

for the witch if she failed to meet her end of the bargain. Maybe I was being naïve, but I trusted the witch in this. I had to.

I uncorked the potion and added the hair. The liquid fizzed and bubbled, rising almost to the lip of the vial before settling. The strand had dissolved. It was ready. Hopefully.

Last but not least, I grabbed the notebook and pen Marissa kept by her bed and flipped to a blank page. My note was brief but explained the basics as vaguely as possible, just in case someone stumbled in looking for the bathroom.

But after having that thought, I ripped the page out and tucked it under her pillow as an extra precaution. She was a stomach sleeper, so it shouldn't take her long to find it.

I blew Finley a kiss and left the room before I could break down sobbing or chicken out. I took a deep breath and wiped any traces of tears from my face, then rejoined the party.

Smiling at the few people I knew from Marissa's school and next door, I zigzagged my way into the kitchen and poured the fruity concoction someone had brought over into an empty cup. When I was sure no one was looking, I quickly added the potion and swirled the contents.

I couldn't trust the sea witch fully, but I knew deep down that this potion was legit. Calypso dealt in half-truths. There would be no reason for her to lie about this—she'd gotten exactly what she wanted.

I found Marissa with some of her friends and handed her the drink. "Okay, birthday girl, drink up."

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Laughing, she raised the cup in a toast before downing the entire contents. Every. Last. Drop. She shuddered slightly after swallowing but grinned as her friends cheered. A subtle green color flashed in her irises before disappearing.

Well, that went even easier than expected.

The jean jacket over her dress made it impossible to tell if it had worked, but a whale-sized weight lifted from my shoulders. Finally, she was free. Truly free to make her own choices. She would pass her massage therapist licensing test later this week, then celebrate all weekend long.

I watched my little sister mingle and laugh with her friends, all grown up and ready to take on the world. I was so freaking proud of her, and I hoped she would forgive me for leaving one day. I hoped she would understand why I did what I did. That I would give up anything, including my life, for her.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I could no longer hold them back. I turned and left the house on foot, heading for the bus depot. I bought a one-way ticket that would take me to Delaware, getting me close to the beach, and settled back against the seat, watching the city I'd fallen in love with pass by.

Our lives had been good—well, maybe just good enough—until recently. Then I'd met Dominic and everything in my world had changed. Not in a bad way, of course, but meeting him seemed to be the catalyst for everything else that followed.

Getting to know him, even for such a short time, was worth it. I regretted nothing except having to lie to him. I hoped he would forgive me one day, too. And Frankie,

Finley, even Calvin. The list kept growing.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I finally let myself cry.

CHAPTER 12

Bree

Back in Calypso's lair, I stared at the witch in horror. My ribs seemed to fuse and constrict, gripping my heart in a vise.

Oh, goddess...

What had I done?

"That can't possibly be part of the deal."

Calypso sat on her bone-white coral throne, her red lips curled up as if she was enjoying my reaction. Because she was. "It's the most important part, child. And you've already agreed to it."

She was right. I'd signed the contract, but I had thought the statement, "Service provider will have full access and authority over recipient's magic," meant the sea witch could order me to use my magic however she wished. I never would have agreed to give up my song completely, the very essence of who and what I was.

The witch wanted my magic as part of the deal to control me. She didn't trust that I wouldn't try to do to her what my father did.

"I'm not my father," I argued, clenching my fists by my side. "And you're stronger now. Even if I wanted to try something like that, you'd overpower me easily."

The end of her long tail twitched against her throne in agitation. "It's not up for debate, princess. The deal is done. Now sing."

There was no getting out of this—the consequences for backing out now would be fatal. I'd willingly signed my life away without fully understanding the terms. The thought of relinquishing my siren song filled me with such a profound sense of loss. There had to be another way, something I was missing.

Calypso extended the conch shell she gripped in her clawed hand toward me, demanding the vocal currency that would seal our pact. Tendrils of her dark green magic swirled around the shell, waiting to collect my magic.

Was I really about to do this?

Did I even have a choice?

As my inner voice tossed around arguments in my mind, I succumbed to the decision I'd already made. My heart was heavy with the bittersweet awareness that I had surrendered a piece of my soul to the sea witch's enchantment. But in doing so, I had truly freed Marissa.

So, I did the only thing I could do—I opened my mouth and sang.

The magic twisting around the shell shot forward and wrapped around my throat like a noose. Instinctively, I reached up to defend myself, but my hands passed through the green swirls like they weren't even there.

As I sang, they dove into my mouth and down my throat, reaching for my magic. I gasped at the feeling, which was unpleasant but didn't cause me to gag.

"Keep singing!" the witch demanded, her eyes narrowed with excitement.

The invading tendrils wrapped around the core of my magic deep within me and tightened. If I'd thought heartbreak was painful, it was nothing compared to this. Every fiber of my being screamed out in agony and utter wrongness as the tendrils tugged my magic free and retreated through my open mouth.

The moment they left my body, I sagged, too exhausted to continue singing. I hovered in the dark water, my once vibrant purple scales now dull and muted. An emptiness resonated within me as the realization settled in—I had given away more than just a piece of my soul.

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As I tried to summon the power to grasp the once-familiar currents, they slipped through my fingers like elusive memories. The ebb and flow of the tides, once responsive to my every thought, felt indifferent, as if losing my magic had severed my connection to the sea.

My magic had been an extension of my identity. Where I had once enjoyed creating a beautiful symphony with the natural forces of the sea, now I floated as a mere observer. I was no longer a participant in the ocean's wonders.

And that realization hurt so much more than I ever thought it would.

The green tendrils sucked my magic into the conch shell, which glowed pink as my magic swirled within it, trapped. The contract I'd signed earlier appeared in a puff of green. With a snap of the witch's fingers, the paper splintered into hundreds of pieces that drifted into the shell.

Calypso stroked the shell and smiled. "At last."

At last? I opened my mouth to ask her what she meant, but no sound came out. Trying again, I released nothing but a bubble, and my eyes widened. I wrapped my hands around my throat as true terror set in.

"Yes, child, no siren song means no magic and no voice. Period." She smirked as I met her amused gaze. "You should always read the fine print, you know. Ah well, lesson learned."

Ice crystallized within my veins as I realized how thoroughly I'd been deceived. I had

known she was cunning, but I had grossly underestimated the depths to which she'd descend in her greed.

The melodies I had woven into the ocean, the laughter shared with my sister, the simple notes hummed during solitary moments—all of it had been silenced...

...forever.

CHAPTER 13

Dominic

Rin and I met Keiko and Aaron inside the laboratory's security room, where they were studying the various monitors. Keiko had pulled her mask off, and the cat shifter was back in his two-legged form.

Two guards sat back to back on the floor, their hands bound behind them and their chins against their chests. They were out cold. From our limited surveillance and knowledge of Ichiro's activities, most, if not all, of his guards here would be non-Gifted humans. Less chance of drawing attention that way.

To be certain, I inhaled deeply, allowing Jou to analyze the scents. He confirmed they were indeed non-Gifted.

The monitors matched the blueprints we'd studied, showing a handful of rooms and hallways, as well as a series of closed doors leading off from the hallways. Not a single camera aimed beyond any of those doors, which instantly piqued my interest.

What was Ichiro hiding behind those doors that he didn't want captured on camera? At least not by the security team.

A single man in a white lab coat continued to work in an open, office-like space with desks and tables. He was eyeing aslide under a microscope. Other than that, no one else appeared to be inside.

"We haven't seen anyone but him," Keiko said, gesturing to the man.

Aaron checked his watch. "We're good on time, too. Should have at least forty minutes until the next patrol is due."

I double-checked that the guards were secured. "Rin, you good here?"

"You bet, boss." Rin bent to smooch Keiko on the cheek, then slid onto a chair in front of the monitors. "Get us something good."

I nodded to Keiko and Aaron, and we entered the building's main hallway. The first thing I noticed was the warm air. Warmer than I expected, at any rate.

The Sato warehouses I'd entered recently had been kept cold, nearly freezing to keep the pyrocrystals from overheating and combusting. If this lab had anything to do with the pyrocrystals, then I didn't understand why I was feeling this much warmth.

Wouldn't he be concerned with the crystals combusting and bringing down the entire building?

With that in mind, I surveyed the area more thoroughly, my scalp prickling with unease. Maybe Aaron's intuition hadn't been picking up a trap, just the wrong location. This could very well be nothing but a wild dragon chase.

Except I didn't believe that was true either. Something strange was happening here, and I would find out what that was, even if it had nothing to do with the crystals. If Ichiro was involved, it was worth investigating.

As the blueprints and cameras had shown, this main hall branched in three directions.

"Okay, we each take our assigned hallway and report on any findings," I said. "If you come across anyone else, do not engage unless necessary. I trust you both can find a place to hide easier than I can."

Keiko grinned, flashing a hint of sharp canines. "That's an understatement."

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Cute, but she wasn't wrong. "Check in every two minutes. Go."

We split up with Keiko going left, Aaron right, and I ventured straight ahead. Rin would remain in the control room to monitor the cameras and alert us of any potential issues. We were nothing if not efficient.

Swiftly but quietly, I moved down the sparse, sterile hallway. The fluorescent lights hummed and flickered overhead.

The way the doors were uniformly spaced apart with small viewing windows made this place feel like a prison or an asylum. I didn't scare easily—or, possibly, at all—but this place was eerily quiet, even for an after-hours excursion. A chill crept down my spine.

As I continued forward on light feet, high-pitched screams erupted from the room just ahead and to the left.

I stopped and hovered my hand above my knife's hilt, waiting to see if someone was about to barge out of a door. Until we knew more about what we were dealing with, I couldn't risk using a gun. The sound wasn't the issue, but I didn't make it a habit to go around shooting people who might be innocent.

Jou prowled restlessly, reminding me of his presence, but I couldn't risk letting him out either. The beast was anything but stealthy or quiet. Destruction was hismodus operandi.

My dragon growled. While dragonkind couldn't telepathically communicate the way

other shifters could, we were more than capable of understanding each other's emotions. He'd caught the intention behind my thought about his love of destruction.

Now was not the time to pacify a grumpy dragon, but I'd make sure he had time to come out and play before tomorrow's Council meeting. I would need him to blow off some literal steam before his emotions and desires could override my own.

The screaming continued for another moment before falling silent. Nobody appeared.

Keiko's whispered voice crackled in my earpiece, "Eesh, this place gives me the creeps."

Glad I wasn't the only badass feeling that way.

I inched closer to the door where the screams had come from and peeked through the small window. At first, I wasn't sure what was happening inside the mostly empty room, which was encased in steel.

A brunette woman was strapped face down on a metal table, sobbing and throwing her head from side to side. Her back was bare, but there was a large red mark across her left shoulder blade where a tattoo must have been. Now, it was only angrily inflamed raw skin that was vaguely dragon-shaped.

Suddenly, her back bowed upward, and a blood-curdling scream erupted from her throat. Tendons bulged in her neck and arms as she attempted to break free of the restraints, tugging uselessly against the steel bindings.

Her entire body glowed red moments before a fiery dragon spirit ripped from beneath her skin, bellowing with fury. Flames engulfed the room as the beast took out its wrath on everything in its path, the woman included. Her exposed skin blackened beneath the onslaught.

Horrified, I tried the door handle, but it was locked.

What the fuck was happening?

Next to the table, a machine that was enclosed in steel like the rest of the room came to life with a whirring and clicking sound. A blue liquid flowed from the machine via a tube into a syringe in the woman's arm.

The dragon flung itself around the room and clawed at the walls, desperate to escape and clearly confused. As the blue liquid seeped into her veins and spread, the dragon whined pitifully. He dove for the woman's body, disappearing into her skin through the spot where there had once been a tattoo.

The woman groaned once before going limp as the dragon's fiery essence dissipated within her. Red droplets rose from her skin like sweat before hardening and crystallizing.

The newly formed pyrocrystals fell into an awaiting trough surrounding the table. The trough was angled in such a way that the crystals rolled toward the floor until they disappeared into some sort of collection barrel.

My mouth ran dry as the realization hit me. No, this couldn't possibly be how Ichiro was manufacturing crystals en masse. Was this just his way of torturing his enemies? I prayed the latter was true.

As I watched, the woman's charred skin slowly healed thanks to the dragon's magic within her. The only thing remaining unhealed was her tattoo. The skin there remained raw and red.

"This is beyond sick," Keiko's voice chimed in my ear, horror evident in her hushed tone.

"What is?" Rin asked.

Aaron's strained voice came through the comms. "You seeing dragons too?"

"Yes. How many doors are in your hallway?" I asked.

"Twelve," Keiko said.

"Fourteen," Aaron said.

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"Twelve here too. Thirty-eight in this building alone. Confirm if all rooms are in use."

"What's happening, guys?" Rin asked. "Don't leave me hanging like this."

As we moved down our respective hallways, Keiko briefly explained to Rin what we saw. A fire dragon and its humanhost—men and women alike—occupied each room, creating pyrocrystals through the bonding ritual before breaking it and starting again via the liquid being pumped into their veins.

Not a single person had an intact tattoo controlling the dragons. Whatever was in that blue liquid somehow forced the beasts to obey, which meant the dragons were being tortured as well. Given their freedom, then having it ripped from them over and over.

How long had such madness been going on?

How had Ichiro even come up with a sick and twisted idea like this?

"Fuck me. How's that even possible?" Rin asked the question we all must have wondered.

I didn't answer because I didn't know. All I knew was that it had to stop.

And yet, I couldn't free them. Not yet. Not without blowing our cover or alerting the guards, or worse, Ichiro himself. Rage clawed at the inside of my chest, but I shoved it down, forced myself to move. Every second we waited felt like a betrayal, but charging in half-cocked would get us all killed and leave these prisoners to rot.

As I passed each door, I took photos with my phone. When the machine activated a dragon, I captured the event on video. Their screams would haunt me for the rest of my life. I memorized every face and made silent promises.

Because if the Council didn't act after seeing this, then I would. And I wouldn't stop until the walls bled. When the time came, I would burn this place to ash. Not just for justice, but for vengeance. For them.

This entire operation would cease to exist. One way or another.

By the time I reached the end of the hall, only one room was unoccupied, though the scorch marks on the wall spoke of a violent history. Most of the room's occupants were going through the same torture as the brunette woman. A few were in a restful state but still strapped down.

I guessed Ichiro had to let his captives rest every once in a while before they died altogether when their bodies gave out. Small mercies. Although death might have been preferable.

In two rooms, the occupants lay on their backs and stared blankly at the ceiling. I thought they were dead at first, except they blinked every so often. I tapped on the glass window but received no response. They just kept staring and blinking. I couldn't tell if anybody was home upstairs anymore. It didn't seem like it.

Before I could point out the difference to the others, Rin's voice crackled in my ear. "We've got two incoming, boss. Just came out of an unmonitored room and heading your way. Wearing lab coats."

Shit.

A man and a woman stepped around the corner. The grey-haired man was looking

down at a clipboard and didn't see me, but the woman's eyes widened behind her black-framed glasses.

"What do you think you're doing here?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

I had removed my mask inside because we'd looped the security cameras. Our presence here wouldn't be recorded. However, I was more than prepared for surprises like these. I would have to talk my way out using the one thing that still worked in Ichiro's empire—my name.

I straightened my spine, putting on the Dominic Sato façade everybody expected.

"What do you mean 'who am I?'" I barked out.

The man and woman exchanged a glance of confusion.

I sighed as if their ignorance frustrated me. To be honest, it did frustrate me. I had worked hard to build up my reputation. "I own this building."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Ichiro Sato owns this building."

I leveled my gaze at him. "And I am Dominic Sato."

Both of their eyebrows shot toward their hairlines, and they shared another glance. Only this glance spoke volumes about what my grandfather must have told them about me.

The woman cleared her throat. "Oh, Mr. Sato, forgive me. Did you schedule a visit tonight? Your grandfather rarely comes in this late."

Her statement confirmed the worst, not that there had been much lingering doubt. But

for some unknown reason, I had held out a sliver of hope that my grandfather wouldn't be capable of something this terrible, this inhumane. I knew better.

No, it turned out my grandfather was worse than I'd ever imagined.

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"I'm aware. However, as his heir, I will take over all Sato holdings once Ichiro retires. I'm here to see how things run when my grandfather's not around and people aren't on their best behavior. I want to see how you operate in his absence."

Their nods showed understanding. Except a cunning look flashed across the man's expression before he stifled it.

"Do you have any questions for us, sir?" the woman asked.

"No."

They were both older than me, maybe in their 40s or 50s if I had to take a guess. Non-Gifteds, which boiled my blood, knowing that they were involved in such a horrific activity against Gifteds. Against dragonkind—mykind.

I shouldn't have expected anything less of Ichiro. There was no way he'd let other Gifted types in here to learn about what he was doing. Non-Gifted humans were much easier to manage and control.

After all, they were much more aware of their mortality.

"If you think of anything, we'll just be down the hallway in the primary lab. You can find us there once you've finished examining our work." The woman's thin-lipped smile held no warmth. "We'd welcome any feedback you can provide."

I nodded curtly and turned to study the last room, dismissing them. They walked past me, and out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the man reaching for a red button on

the wall. I might not know its exact purpose here, but I had a hunch. The last thing I needed was a panic button flipped.

One of several last things I needed.

I moved quickly, grabbed the back of their necks, and knocked their heads together. Humans were easy to manipulate and oh so fragile.

"What's going on, boss?" Rin asked through the earpiece.

Quickly, I explained what they had confirmed.

"I mean, you have to kill them, Nic," Keiko's voice chimed in my ear. "You know that, right?"

"I don't have to kill them." Even though Jou writhed in my mind, hoping to do just that. After seeing this place, he thirsted for vengeance. Forblood.

"Well, I guess you don't have to. I'd be more than happy to drain them dry."

"We don't have to kill anybody," I said again firmly.

"Yes, we do," she said with exasperation. "They know who you are. It's not as if they're gonna wake up and forget unless you gave them a severe enough concussion or something."

I glanced down at the bodies at my feet. They were still breathing. I didn't think I had bashed their heads hard enough to cause a concussion. Then again, I hadn't been just a non-Gifted human in over a decade. I had forgotten how fragile their brains could be.

But Keiko was right. They knew who I was. Even though I planned to take Ichiro down as soon as possible, I couldn't risk giving him even a moment's notice that I was coming for him, not now that I knew for sure he was producing pyrocrystals this way.

Good thing we had a backup plan.

"We still don't need to kill them. We just need to get them out of here long enough that they can't alert Ichiro. Once we're finished here, be sure to leave behind Plan B."

"Already on it, boss." Rin didn't even try to hide the glee in his voice.

Plan B was simple. We would leave just enough evidence to make it appear like the wolf shifters were behind an attack on one of Ichiro's facilities—a second attack. I didn't feel sorry for the Nightstalkers. They had gone after pyrocrystals for their own benefit rather than to protect the Gifted communities.

The wolves weren't trying to stop the production of crystals because they didn't want to lose the drugs from which they benefited. But they also didn't want Ichiro to have any more power than they did, nor did they want him to take power away from them. Actions came with consequences.

My empathy for the wolves only went so far.

"You know, it'd be a lot easier to move them if they were drained of their blood," Keiko's voice chirped. "A lot lighter. Just sayin'."

"Babe, are you hungry?" Rin asked.

"I'm always kind of hungry, but I ate before this. I'm just trying to be helpful."

I lifted both limp humans and tossed them over my shoulders with little difficulty.
"They're easy enough to carry with all their blood intact. We should have what we need to face the Council. Let's go."

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"Shouldn't we do something now, though?" Aaron asked. "Are we just going to leave them all here like this?"

He was referring to the tortured dragons and their doomed hosts. Like us, Aaron understood the intimate bond between animal spirit and human.

I grimaced. As much as I wanted to do more, I couldn't risk spooking Ichiro before we could bring him down completely. For now, we would have to leave them, and I prayed to any god listening that by doing so, we wouldn't be guaranteeing their deaths.

Unfortunately, I wasn't convinced any god was listening.

CHAPTER 14

Bree

The days blurred together as I lived with and worked for the sea witch. Had I been here for a week? Two? More?

No matter the number, the longer I was here, the more I realized just how cruel and deranged the serpent woman was. I wasn't sure if she'd always been this way, or only after her failed attempt at overthrowing my father's throne all those years ago.

But one thing was certain—she was downright evil.

A coral's sharp edge dug into my arm, and I winced as blood blossomed from the cut.

For the past few days, Calypso had me collecting a specific type of kelp growing near her home for one of her many spells. I'd learned early on to stop asking about the ingredients or what the spells did, or about anything. Asking through my confused facial expressions, of course, since I had no voice.

It was like trying to talk during a hurricane and expecting someone to hear me. I'd gotten used to being ignored, or at least, I'd forced myself to. The first days after losing my voice had felt like drowning in silence—constantly misunderstood, fighting to be seen without the most basic tool of communication.

Now, the silence was second nature. But even when I knew how to make the shapes with my face, the weight of my loss never fully left. No matter how much I adapted, the ache was always there, a reminder of how much she had taken from me and how much I'd taken for granted.

Her punishments for even minor infractions were swift and severe, and I had a multitude of bruised bones to prove it. After years of training to fight and a month in the human ring, I could take a beating, but Calypso thrived on making me suffer. And without my magic, healing took forever. Being a non-Gifted human must really stink.

Reaching into the small bag I carried, I pulled out a strip of kelp and tied it around the cut to stop the blood flow. Attracting sharks—other than the witch's ever-present sand sharks, that is—wasn't on my to-do list.

I glanced at them warily, wishing she'd give them something else to do than guppysit me. It's not like I could go far with our contract intact. Not without swift and painful consequences.

The sharks had done nothing to warrant my dislike, but their unnatural stillness gave me the creeps. Most sharks had to move to survive. Not these guys, which made them the perfect spies for an evil sea witch.

With a sigh, I returned to my task. Although time had lost all meaning in the oppressive darkness of Calypso's lair, I was pretty sure it had been just over a week since I'd arrived. One week down, the rest of my life to go.

I often wondered whether I had made the right decision, or if I should have included Marissa in it, let her be a part of the choice. But what good came from wondering? I'd already sacrificed too much, beyond the point of return. I could mourn the life I'd lost, but nothing would bring it back.

So I pushed forward, day after day. I had no other choice.

Besides, I knew what Marissa would have said. Despite all her selfish tendencies, my little sister wouldn't have wanted this for me. She wouldn't have agreed to return home to our father either, not after living with freedom for so long.

But then what would we do? We had nowhere else to go.

Our talismans would have failed, and we would have had to start over—this time, back in the ocean. I might have learned quite a bit about surviving since our first foray into a new world, but that didn't mean I wanted to repeat the process in an unfamiliar underwater kingdom, constantly looking over our shoulders even more than we did already.

A slight disturbance in the water caught my attention. I looked up from my work and froze.

Three male sirens were headed my way, and they had definitely seen me. I might have welcomed their approach, hoping for a rescue, except one face was all too familiar, even from this distance.

It was Sidon, the siren Marissa and I had fled from when he showed up the night I

fought Dominic. He was the right-hand siren of King Ateleíotes, who had once been my father's worst enemy. He was also a brutal killer.

Before my heart reacted to the thought of Dominic, I spun around to dive into the relative safety of Calypso's lair, which was protected by a labyrinth of tunnels. Except I swam straight into the witch herself.

Her upper lip pulled into a snarl, revealing her fangs. Her gaze dipped to the kelp I'd wrapped around the cut on my arm. "So clumsy for a princess."

With wide eyes, I shook my head and pointed at the approaching sirens. Then I gestured at her and me and mimed swimming away. I waved at her to follow me into her lair.

Why I was trying to help her, I had no idea. Call it a bad habit. I only knew we were running out of time before Sidon arrived, and I didn't want to risk breaking our contract by fleeing without her. The magic binding me to her would work even if she wasn't present, and the consequences of going too far would be fatal.

But instead of following me to safety, Calypso gripped my arm and held me in place. Her claws dug into my skin until I winced. "We greet our guests with respect, child. Especially such esteemed guests as these."

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A bubble escaped my open mouth. I stared at her, hoping for more of an explanation, but her focus was solely on the approaching sirens.

I gulped down a wave of fear. If Calypso wasn't afraid, then maybe she was more than capable of protecting us against three trained warriors. I had already underestimated her at least twice.

Unless she only planned on protecting herself, of course. Which was entirely plausible. Without my magic, I was nearly incapable of defending myself. Fists and fins could only do so much damage against trained guards.

The three males swam up to us. They wore whale-bone armor that marked their allegiance to King Ateleíotes, and all three had long, nearly white hair that was a common characteristic in their kingdom. Their tails and scales ranged in shades of orange and yellow.

While the two unfamiliar sirens shared a light blue eye color, Sidon's were more of a light yellow like his tail and the scales running up his arms. A striking contrast to his darker bronze skin color.

Calypso spread her arms in a greeting that was as false as her generosity. "Ah, Sidon, how wonderful to see you again."

He nodded brusquely and glanced at me. "I see you've retrieved the princess. Well done." Despite the praise, his tone was flat and bored.

I drew my eyebrows together in confusion. What was he talking about, retrieving me?

I came to the witch for help. It wasn't like she had sent for me.

He gestured to one of the others, who carried a seaweed bag slung over his shoulder. The siren removed the bag and handed it to Calypso.

"As promised," Sidon said.

The witch peeked inside the bag. A wide grin crossed her face. "Perfect. Give Ateleíotes my regards. She's all yours."

Wait, what?

Stunned, I did little more than float there as the two guards surged forward with a flip of their tails and grabbed my arms. Before I could process what was happening, they'd secured my wrists with thick sailing ropes.

I shook my head in disbelief and looked at Calypso for answers. I hadn't thought she would get rid of me. She'd made it seem like I was too valuable.

Nothing but dark cruelty stared back at me as the witch smirked. "You truly think a talisman created by a witch as powerful as me would fail of its own accord? What a fool he raised. You should have listened to your father when he warned you away from me."

Oh...

Oh no.

Tears formed in my eyes as I realized how right she was. I was only valuable to her as a commodity, a trade for whatever they'd given her in that bag. I'd been such a fool and now I was paying a worse price than I'd ever thought possible.

It all made sense now. Calypso had retrieved me, just as Sidon said. It wasn't my careless mistake. She had caused the talismans to fail somehow. Her magic was more powerful than I realized—far more powerful.

What an idiot I'd been. A stubborn, naïve idiot who never asked for help before things took a turn for the worse. One who never seemed to learn. My shoulders slumped in defeat, mirroring the empty feeling in my chest.

Sidon's gaze remained on Calypso.

The witch looked him up and down with disdain. "Well? What are you waiting for? Be gone."

"The shell."

She laughed, though it was a forced sound. "Ah, of course. How silly of me to forget." She untied the shell containing my magic from her waist and handed it to Sidon, effectively transferring my ownership from one nightmare to another. "As long as the shell remains intact, she's yours to control. Break it, and I can promise you'll regret it."

As Sidon turned away from her, Calypso caught my eye over his shoulder and winked. It took a moment for my brain to catch up with her words.

Had the witch just given me a clue to escape?

My gaze snapped to the shell. If that broke, I would get my magic back, and I would be free. I hadn't signed any contract with King Ateleíotes. Maybe I could even take care of this problem before making it to the Thalasses kingdom.

Sidon nodded to his guards, who prodded me with their spears.

I struggled to free my arms, but they were bound tight within the ropes. Shame filled every fiber of my body, and I resigned myself to my fate. At least for now. I swam forward, following Sidon.

There was no point in trying to get away without breaking that shell. And without the use of my arms, I had no chance of getting my hands on it.

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I glanced back at the witch. It was one thing to be a prisoner to Calypso—a psychotic sea serpent who had saved my sister and possibly even me—and quite another to end up captive to Ateleíotes, whose narcissistic and terrifying reputation was well known across the ocean kingdoms.

A decade ago, my father had promised my hand in marriage to Ateleíotes's oldest son to solidify an alliance and end decades of hatred. My disappearance had probably made things worse between the two kingdoms, but at least I hadn't been subjected to a life of torture at the hands of the cruel prince.

But fate had turned out to be an even crueler mistress. I had known freedom for ten years, known and grown to appreciate what it meant to work hard for what you got. I had even known love, no matter how fleeting.

Swallowing down the thick lump in my throat, I held my head high. I was determined not to wallow in my misery. I had saved my sister and given her a life to do with as she pleased. If I couldn't free myself, then that would have to be enough. Knowing she was safe and free would get me through the darkest of days.

I would hold on to that thought until the day I died, even if that day came far sooner than I ever expected.

CHAPTER 15

Dominic

"We can't release the prisoners until after we confront Ichiro at the Council meeting."

My voice was tight with anger. Leaving these people and their dragons in the lab was a grim decision, but necessary. It was risky enough taking the two scientists out of here. "He'll disappear if he figures out we've learned the truth. Plan B will only buy us so much time."

"But how's he even doing this?" Keiko asked through the comms just before she slipped around the corner and joined me.

Aaron was only a moment behind her from the other direction. "Your grandfather keeps meticulous records," he said. "There's a good chance we'll find the answers in the records room here on location rather than digitally. Paper's less easy to trace these days."

I nodded, visualizing the lab's blueprints in my mind. "There's a room he must use as an office when he visits. Keiko and I can go through any paper files. Think you can hack into a hard drive if we find one?"

The cat shifter blinked his eyes slowly, as though I'd asked him if he could tie his own shoes. If he'd been in feline form, his tail would have flicked in annoyance.

"Let's go then." Still carrying the unconscious scientists, I led the way down the hall and through a door that opened into an area with a few cubicles. Thankfully, we didn't encounter anyone else.

Keiko picked the office door's lock, and we slipped inside. I dropped the two humans and surveyed the simple setup. A desk and computer sat in the middle while a half dozen filing cabinets lined the walls. No cameras in sight.

Luck was still on our side. My grandfather must have thought the lab's location was too nondescript to draw attention, and his security team would deter any would-be opportunist thieves. I had no problem taking advantage of his ego and lack of

foresight. This was the problem when people became power hungry—their attention split too many ways and things started to slip.

Aaron got to work hacking into the computer while I directed Keiko to a column of filing cabinets. "I'll take the other side."

She nodded and slid open the bottom drawer, rifling through the folders.

I did the same, hoping, but not holding my breath, to find something, anything, that would explain how Ichiro had learned to manufacture pyrocrystals this way. We needed to bring more to the Council besides some photos that were damning but not sufficient evidence, two humans who were likely paid to lie on pain of death, and our word.

At least the scientists' loyalty, and their lives, could be bought.

Only a few moments into our search, Rin's voice crackled through my earpiece, "We may have a problem, boss."

"What problem?"

"Two SUVs just rolled up... Wait, make that three, and... Yep, it's Ichiro."

Fuck me. Our luck had run out. My grandfather's appearance couldn't possibly be a coincidence. First the diner, now the lab? There was no way he had planned a visit the same night we broke in unless someone had tipped him off.

We had spent years watching and waiting, biding our time until we had what we needed. Killing Ichiro without proof of his wrongdoings would make us no better than him, and it wouldn't be nearly satisfying enough for the crimes he'd committed. For the pain and suffering he'd put us all through.

A memory of my father's face flashed through my mind. His hand had ruffled my hair, and he'd smiled. "I'm proud of you, Nic," he'd said before leaving for work, as he'd always done.

Only that time, he never came home.

Instead, Ichiro had stood by my side at the funeral, his stern, disapproving gaze tracking the casket as it lowered into the ground.

"Stop sniveling," he'd hissed at me. "You're one of us now. A Sato. Adragon. Act like it."

"We'll have to get one of them to talk." Aaron's voice brought me back to the present, and he gestured to the unconscious scientists.

Keiko grinned. "You know I can be very persuasive."

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"Time's up for me," Rin said. "I gotta bounce before they walk in. The rest of Plan B's all set."

The guards would be fired—or, more likely, killed—for their participation in tonight's fiasco, no matter how unwilling their participation was. It was unfair, but this was war. They had to know what atrocities occurred on their watch, and they didn't stop it or alert anyone. In our world, death was the natural consequence of their inaction.

"We'll meet you back at Nic's place," Keiko reminded Rin.

"Copy that. You guys have less than a minute before they're inside."

My adrenaline spiked, setting my pulse racing. We had come so far and were so close to getting the answers we needed to bring the bastard down once and for all. I couldn't give up. Not yet.

I rifled through the folders faster, unwilling to leave without something condemning Ichiro to Hell. There had to be something we could use.

"Seriously, Nic, we need to go," Keiko's worried voice barely filtered through my manic searching. "What we have now will have to be enough."

Aaron moved to the door, cracking it open just enough to peek through. "If we surprise Ichiro tomorrow, the Council will get here for further proof before he can remove anything. Let's go."

"You two go. I can't leave without..." My voice trailed off as I stopped flipping and yanked a folder free. Inside, handwritten pages outlined an experiment—the one that led to the pyrocrystal trade. There was no mistaking the blue liquid and its purpose.

Motherfucker.

This was it.

A blaring alarm echoed down the hallways, and red lights flashed through the room. Ichiro had discovered the guards.

I couldn't risk taking the folder with me, but I couldn't leave without this information. I met Keiko's gaze, and she knew what I was asking. She nodded.

Moving fast, she helped me spread out the folder's papers across the desk. I took photos with my phone, praying to any god listening that they would be clear enough later on. Then we stuffed them back into the folder and the drawer. We'd gotten what we needed.

We'd finally fucking done it.

Now that Ichiro's men were in the building, the cameras would return to their live feeds. This was far from our first rodeo, so we were more than prepared for that possibility.

Aaron and I slipped on black ski masks while Keiko chanted a spell, calling on her lunar magic. Black shadows wrapped around our forms and rendered us invisible.

Although she'd wrapped me in shadows plenty of times before, I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to the feeling. I wasn't sure I'd ever want to. The shadows seemed to seep the life out of you, draining your very essence.

Keiko claimed they didn't actually do that, but it was enough that it felt that way. Being virtually invisible even to myself was also highly disconcerting.

Aaron and I each slung one of the unconscious humans over our shoulders, and their bodies disappeared into the shadows. The three of us slipped back into the main hallway in silence. We knew from studying the blueprints which way would lead us out.

As we neared the exit door, voices echoed down the linoleum-floored hall.

I pressed myself against the wall, hoping the others did the same. The human over my shoulder stirred. I tensed, ready to silence him forever if necessary.

"I don't care if you think they already left," Ichiro's sharp voice snapped out as he stepped into view. Kenzo hurried beside him, his gold chains rattling together. "If you value your life, you'll do as I say."

"The wolves must not've been here long before we showed up." My cousin tugged at his track pants, which were in danger of falling off because of their quick pace and his annoying habit of wearing them too loosely. "Nothing's out of place or stolen."

My grandfather's eyes narrowed as he stalked toward us, though there was no chance he could see us within Keiko's spelled shadows.

"I want to know how they found this place," Ichiro said. "How did?—"

His words cut off as quickly as his steps and my cousin almost ran into him. Grumbling, Kenzo adjusted his tracksuit jacket while Ichiro's eyes scanned the area.

My pulse quickened, and I felt Jou writhing in my mind. If the old man found us, we would have no choice but to fight him. I wasn't altogether against the idea, but I

wanted to do it on my terms. Fully prepared.

Jou was as fierce as Ichiro's ancient beast, perhaps even stronger. I didn't doubt my dragon's abilities or my fighting skills, but I'd learned long ago not to underestimate the old man who'd pseudo-raised me.

If I had to face him tonight, then so be it.

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Ichiro's gaze swept over us twice before he finally moved on. He headed for the office we'd just left.

That was too fucking close. As much as I wanted to fight the old man, I needed to do it right. I wanted him to see everything he'd built come crumbling down before I ended his pathetic life.

As the two men disappeared, a quiet click came from the door leading out. It cracked open, revealing the night sky, and we slipped out.

CHAPTER 16

Dominic

Keiko sank into one of my office chairs and threw her legs over the side. Her ski mask dropped from her limp hand to the floor. "Shit. That was close."

We'd made it back to my penthouse's building without trouble, but kept discussions to other matters in case Ichiro had bugged the car. Aaron's tech expertise kept any GPS tracking to preapproved fake locations, but I allowed audio surveillance to throw the old man off. As far as my grandfather would know, my car hadn't gone beyond a two-mile radius.

I'd secured the two scientists in a closet, and they would remain there until after the Council meeting. The penthouse's walls and floors were thick enough that no one would hear them yell or scream, but I'd also gagged them both.

Just because no one else could hear them didn't mean I wanted to.

Aaron stretched his arms overhead. His muscles popped loudly. "Too close. He knew this was planned."

I agreed and appreciated him not rubbing his warning in my face. I sat at my desk and flipped the computer on. "Where's Rin?"

Keiko whipped out her phone and typed. A moment later, it dinged. She snorted out a laugh. "He had to hide until Ichiro left."

"He's out now?"

"Not yet."

"What's stopping him?" I knew he could handle himself, but the whole situation tonight had me on edge.

She turned her phone to show me a picture of a vending machine. "Snacks."

My shoulders dipped with relief. If Rin was focused on food, then he wasn't in imminent danger.

I synced my phone photos to my computer and opened the images I'd taken of the lab, prisoners, and files. I printed two copies for Keiko and Aaron, and we reviewed the data in silence.

Thankfully, only one page from the records room was too blurry to decipher. From what little we could make out, it didn't seem to hold any information that could help us. The other papers provided more than enough damning evidence.

After dozens of failed attempts, Ichiro had procured a mysterious new chemical that achieved the desired effects. When combined with his other ingredients and injected intravenously, the successful mixture acted as a spirit bond controller.

Keiko's nose crinkled in disgust as she lowered her stack of papers. "Ugh, I just can't get over this power play. He already owns half the city. What does he want, all of it?"

Aaron flipped to another page calmly. "He wants the Council."

"Right, but that still makes no sense to me. He's already more powerful than the Council. Why would he even care what those stuffy old dragons think?"

Although she wasn't born a dragon, Keiko had been invited to a handful of the High Draconic Council meetings while growing up. Ichiro wanted his best assassin to have firsthand knowledge of our kind, just in case any needed dispatching.

Of course, no one ever knew she was present.

I had to hand it to the old man, though. He rarely had a dragon killed, even if they deserved it. Like Kenzo did.

"Ichiro won't stop until he's at the top," I said. "And in his eyes, that means a seat on the Council."

Keiko shook her head. "Makes absolutely no sense. Zero."

While I felt the same way, I also understood my grandfather far more than she did. He came from a generation and culture that prized loyalty and titles above almost all else. He believed in the old saying that if you're not first, you're last. Believed it and lived it.

To someone like Ichiro, he would rather die than be last. When I had my way, he would experience both—last place and death.

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But his desire to be on the Council, to be first, wasn't just a generational defect. Ichiro had emigrated with his family from Japan over fifty years ago. They arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs and remained poor throughout his childhood.

A bitterly cold winter robbed him of his youngest sister, who never recovered from a bout of pneumonia. She'd only been six when she died.

While losing a sibling must have been devastating to my grandfather, it was the Council's lack of support for his family that corrupted him. He'd convinced himself that his sister would have survived if the Council had approved his family's request for emergency help.

I wasn't as convinced. To this day, pneumonia killed thousands of people each year. Fifty years ago, the odds of death were even greater, and she hadn't been Gifted with a dragon yet.

Ichiro's lifelong devastation over the loss also explained his reaction to my mother's, his daughter's, death. He likely saw the similarities and blamed anyone he could—including a defenseless baby—for what he considered an unnecessary death.

I wasn't completely heartless; I felt a shred of sympathy for the old man, even after years of enduring his abuse. But most people didn't turn into monsters when they lost their loved ones.

"Did you see the date in picture five?" Aaron asked.

I flipped to that image and clenched my jaw. How the hell had this experiment been going on for almost two years? Without me ever having a clue or hearing about missing dragonkind? Ichiro had only found success in the past few months, but too many test subjects had lost their sanity or even their lives.

Rage simmered inside me, and Jou roared in defiance. He wanted to kill my grandfather as much as I did. Maybe more. The severing was hurting his brethren or possibly even destroying their spirits if the cycle of torture went on for too long.

What none of these notes answered was how Ichiro had come up with this ridiculous concept of manufacturing crystals in the first place. How had he produced these final successful results? What was in the mysterious blue liquid he received from an unnamed source that made it all possible?

We didn't have enough. Sure, there might be enough here to knock Ichiro down from his pedestal. Perhaps enough to convict?—

My blood chilled.

No...

I flipped through the photos again, then brought up the computer file containing the lab's holding within the business ledger, confirming my suspicion.

Not a single document named Ichiro as the perpetrator. Not even as the owner of the lab. Everything was listed under Sato Enterprises, which sounded like a done deal, but Ichiro was cunning. He could easily spin this to fall on someone else, and I knew just who he would blame.

Me.

"Fuck!" I slammed my fist down on my desk. The wood groaned and split beneath the force. Everything on the desk slid into the gap between the two halves and crashed to the floor.

Double fuck.

Keiko blinked at me over the debris. "Temper tantrum or muscle spasm?"

"We can't use any of this."

"What? Why not?"

Aaron grimaced as he connected the dots. "Ichiro's name isn't listed anywhere. It's all Sato Enterprises."

I rubbed a hand over my face, suddenly exhausted. We had made actual progress tonight, gotten further than most of the past month's attempts combined. Now, all the extra hours and sleepless nights might have been for nothing.

"So what if his name isn't listed?" Keiko frowned. "He owns Sato Enterprises."

"He'll simply pass the blame on someone like me," I said.

"The Council isn't that dumb. They'll see through that. It's a flimsy excuse." Keiko waved a hand dismissively. "Even if it was true, he should know what his employees are up to, right?"

"For anyone else, maybe, but Ichiro's too well connected. The Council won't risk it unless our evidence is ironclad. We need more." I ground my teeth together. "I have to go back in there before the meeting."

"Then I'm going with you," Keiko said.

"No."

"There's no way you can get in and out without being seen," she argued.

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"You may be good, the best—" I added when she shot me a withering glare "—but there are only so many shadows you can use or create during the day."

My phone buzzed, and I glanced at the message. So much for that idea. My shoulders slumped in defeat. Any hope I had of getting back there tomorrow dissipated. "No use arguing. Ichiro put the lab on lockdown and called a search for the wolf shifters. Rin's part of the search team."

Keiko made a face. "Great. He's going to smell abso-fucking awful when he gets home. Like a wet dog."

My gaze dropped to the photos scattered across the remains of my desk. It would have to be enough.

We were so close. So close to finally putting an end to Ichiro Sato. All I had to do was attend tomorrow's High Draconic Council meeting and convince enough members that Ichiro was the mastermind behind the pyrocrystals.

Piece of cake.

CHAPTER 17

Bree

The day-long journey to the Thalasses kingdom was uneventful, all things considered. The three sirens fed me, kept me safe from the few predators we encountered, and allowed me a small amount of privacy when I needed to relieve

myself.

The concept of how we sirens relieved ourselves or even had sex always fascinated humans. It was like they thought there was some magical element to it rather than the more simple explanation—our scales covered our private bits until we needed to use them. Easy peasy.

Then again, their fascination wasn't too surprising, considering most humans thought we were little more than mythological creatures. Pure fantasy.

These were the thoughts that kept me occupied since none of the guards bothered speaking to me beyond basic commands. Just a handful of "stops" and "hurry-ups."

I learned only a bit about them besides their names. Sidon, I knew, of course. Then there was Danel, the chatty one, and Baltasar, who wondered more than once what he had done to anger Oceanus, the god of the oceans, to get stuck with Danel on this mission. I also heard about their general disgust of the sea witch, though they revealed nothing more about her or their king's connection to her.

Other than those tidbits, their conversations were downright boring to listen to. I mean, who in their right mind thought discussing the various types of coral we saw would be interesting?

Only Danel which Baltasar reminded him of more than once. Not that he was any more interesting.

But when we arrived at the outskirts of their capital city, everything changed. Word about my arrival spread faster than a tidal wave, and pods of sirens came out to gawk as I swam past homes and shops toward the palace.

Sirens of all ages booed and yelled curses as I swam by, some even using their

powerful tails to lob sticky balls of kelp at me. The stench of octopus ink—which kept the globs together and stuck to my skin and scales—made my stomach churn with nausea.

There was no doubt these sirens knew who I was, but I had no idea what had transpired over the past decade to cause such hatred. Unless it had always been like this between our kingdoms. Or maybe they hated me because I had run away, leaving their young prince jilted. I knew so little about anything going on here anymore.

Regardless, my face burned fiery hot with humiliation and fury by the time we reached the palace. It rose majestically from the ocean floor, its coral sides glistening with iridescent hues that shimmered like gemstones in the filtered light from above. Delicate, branching coral formations spiraled upward, creating spires that stretched toward the surface, their edges softened by the current.

We passed through the arched entrance, and the guards flanked me like I was something dangerous. They had no ideahow right they were. Even without my magic, I might be able to bring them to their knees. Well, tails.

Similar to the Naftes palace, clusters of vibrant coral blooms formed the interior walls. Their colors shifted from soft pinks and lavenders to fiery oranges and deep reds, as if the palace itself breathed with the rhythm of the sea.

As we entered the great hall, the weight of the ocean seemed to shift around me. It was beautiful in the same way deep-sea creatures were—glowing, otherworldly, and often deadly if you got too close. The throne itself rose from jagged black coral, adorned with shells so white they looked like bleached bone.

Lounging atop it was King Ateleíotes.

I'd like to say that he was a small, weak man with a bulbous nose and skin blemishes

galore. Unfortunately, he was the opposite of all that.

The king cut a formidable figure on his throne. His posture was relaxed, but the stillness in him was unnerving. Predatory. Like an eel in hiding, waiting for the right moment to strike. Most of his tail was a deep orange with hints of shimmering yellows and golds, and his long white beard had been woven into three braids to stay out of his face.

When his gaze fixed on mine, his light blue irises held a deep chill that struck like frostbite. His eyes didn't just look at me—they read me. Took me apart in layers. No trace of warmth, no hint of compassion or even tolerance.

Despite his cruel and calculating demeanor, Ateleíotes was classically handsome. But he was far from attractive to me.

No, I loathed everything about him. While I didn't regret running away and joining the circus that was the human world, my decision had been in large part because of this male's reputation and that of his son.

Granted, I hadn't wanted to be bartered or traded like tuna, either, but would I have made a different choice with a better suitor?

I had no idea. In all honesty, probably not. But this male was the physical embodiment of what I'd left behind, and I had been bartered away anyway.

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A fresh wave of anger and shame churned through me, but I met the king's gaze straight on. I refused to cower before him.

"So," Ateleíotes said, his voice low and even, "you've returned."

I glared at him, but without my voice, there was only so much I could convey.

As the silence stretched on, his eyes narrowed a fraction. "Witch got your tongue?"

And I was back to wanting to punch babies. Not literally, of course—just the metaphorical, boiling kind of rage that made me want to swing at something that deserved it. Like a shark. Or a dragon.

Something with teeth and a death wish.

I'd proven I could kick a dragon's butt; taking down this soon-to-be shark snack couldn't be any harder.

Honestly, in hand-to-hand combat without magic involved, I'd probably wipe the floor with the king's smug face. The only problem was his guards. Well, the guards, the army, and the entire city that hated me. Minor inconveniences.

I still didn't know why the city's sirens had reacted the way they did, but I was sure I'd have plenty of time to figure it out. Whatever lie they had been told, they believed it.

"You should know, there were those who wanted to execute you the moment you

crossed into my territory. I was not one of them.” He paused as if expecting gratitude. “I prefer obedience over waste.”

My jaw tightened.

“Your silence is convenient,” he continued. “Though it will not save you from consequence.”

I didn’t flinch or lower my gaze. He saw silence, but inside, I was already screaming rebellion.

He moved from his throne then—not quickly, but with the calm grace of a predator until he floated just before me. The king didn’t speak for a long moment. Just studied me, his gaze flicking from the rope marks on my wrists to my bare throat.

He beckoned Sidon closer, and the guard handed the king the glowing pink shell containing my magic.

My eyes narrowed. I would get my magic back. Even if it was the last thing I did, I would die with my complete self intact.

The king saw me eyeing the shell and his voice lowered, colder now. "You were promised to my son, but your insolent, selfish choices have bred instability in our kingdom. We do not tolerate instability."

He waved a hand, dismissing me and the guards. "We will dine tonight. You will be presented to my court properly. And then we will see how obedient you can be."

As Sidon led me from the room by my arm, I glanced back one more time, silently vowing to reclaim what was mine.

It turned out I was more than just a captive. I was betrothed once again to Prince Zephyrion. He had gotten married at some point over the past ten years, but his young bride died tragically in pupbirth, losing the pup as well. He hadn't remarried since.

I learned all this while two siren females scrubbed my entire body with sea sponges until my skin was red and my scales practically glittered. Then they slathered me with some sort of sand that made my skin tingle and shimmer.

The shimmer was pretty enough, but the weird tingling sensation was driving me crazy. Every time I scratched at it, the sirens would slap my hands away and glare at me. I could only guess what ingredients were used in the sand to cause such a reaction, and none of my guesses were pleasant. I was probably better off not knowing.

While one of them combed through the tangles in my hair in not-so-gentle tugs, the other used various colors made from crushed shells and corals to accentuate the features of my face and body. Once they were satisfied with their work, they draped a few pearl strands around my waist and neck and secured a beautiful pearl-lined shell top around my breasts.

The design was stunning and reminded me of home. As a princess, I often wore tops like these to various parties and events, but I'd hated playing dress-up back then, hated the attention it drew. I winced as a shell's edge dug into my skin. Not much had changed since then.

Other than a tiny hole in the ceiling allowing a hint of natural light through, the room was windowless and primarily lit by bioluminescent algae. Which was a damn shame, since a window would have made my escape far easier. Sadly, Ateleíotes must have had the same thought.

At least he hadn't thrown me in the dungeons. Although, from what I'd heard about

the prince, I might end up preferring a cell. Who knew, I might end up in one before long, anyway.

In a corner of the room, a large nest made from kelp would serve as my bed until after the wedding, but there were no other furnishings or ways to occupy my time. Just me, myself, and my thoughts.

Well, and the two female servants who were with me for now, but they didn't really count. Knowing I couldn't speak, they didn't bother asking me questions or speaking to me at all. If they hadn't been grooming me, I would've thought I was invisible. Or maybe I was like a statue that they were polishing as one of their routine chores.

Nothing to see here, folks. Just a little scrub and shine.

My silence must have given them a false sense of security, though. I gleaned quite a bit from their loose lips that I stored in my memories for later. It was mostly court gossip, but one never knew what information could be useful, especially in a situation like this.

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When the natural light began to fade and the bioluminescent algae's glow grew brighter, a guard led me to a dining hall. Translucent kelp strands draped from the ceiling like chandeliers, swaying with the currents. Coral sconces cradled glowing pearl orbs and cast a soft light that danced in watery patterns.

Ateleíotes and Zephyrion already waited, lounging within large clam shells stuffed with kelp padding. The size of the shells provided ample room for sirens to fully recline if they desired.

Over a decade had passed since I'd last seen the prince. Not since his coming-of-age ball, a few months before I'd run away. It was that night and meeting Zephyrion that had solidified my decision to leave.

Hosting such events was standard practice for royal families when formally announcing lines of succession. I would have had my own ball when I turned seventeen had I not left. Then I would have been married off faster than a sailfish could catch its dinner.

Although most Gifted species didn't live much longer than non-Gifted humans, we benefited from a slower aging process with our appearance. So it wasn't a surprise that the prince hadn't changed one bit.

Well, that wasn't quite right. He had changed, just not in his physical attributes. His ego had definitely inflated, and that self-satisfied smirk I loathed had only deepened.

He still had the same pale blond hair that was so common in this part of the ocean, and he wore it long and loose so it floated around his head like a white aura. He was

all smiles, polished edges, and the kind of easy grace that made weaker courtiers swoon. Too bad his insides didn't match the handsome outside.

Because his eyes...

They were hungry. And not for food.

The king and his son watched me approach with an undeniably predatory look, and I wasn't sure who disgusted me more—father or son. They were equally horrible males.

Ateleíotes gestured to the empty clamshell on his other side. "Join us, Princess, and tell us tales of the barbaric human world."

The human world was no more barbaric than our own. As a perfect example, I couldn't even explain that fact to him since a slimy sea serpent had stolen my voice. Keeping my head high, I swam to the seat he indicated. I would eat if only to keep my energy up.

"Ah, yes. Your silence is a gift. You should cherish it while you still can. The palace has many rooms—some for sleeping, some for punishment." His smile didn't reach his eyes. "Let's hope you never confuse the two."

My nostrils flared in anger.

A servant approached the king and presented a delicate spiral shell, still wriggling with whatever was inside. Ateleíotes cracked it open and popped the contents into his mouth with slow deliberation.

"The Naftes princess," he mused aloud. "She returns without her tongue and without her kingdom. A proper bride, at last."

I rolled my eyes and gave him the middle finger. It was a human gesture and lost on the sirens, but it made me feel better to see their stupidly quizzical expressions.

Zephyrion chuckled. "It's almost poetic. All the fire she once had, locked away behind her lips. Tell me, Father, do you think she still dreams of freedom?"

"Let her. Dreams are the most delicious thing to crush."

The air grew heavier around me, the weight of their cruelty more suffocating than the ocean itself. But after that thrilling reintroduction, they continued their discussion as if I'd never joined them. I would have wondered why they even bothered to have me join them, except I knew the answer to that. They both loved having the power and control to do so.

Silently, I chewed the food brought out, each bite turning to ash in my mouth.

"When Calypso has seized control of the Naftes kingdom, we'll?"

The king cut off his son's words with a sharp look. "Do not speak of such things in her presence."

I struggled to maintain a disinterested expression. What did he mean when Calypso seized control? My father ruled the Naftes kingdom. There was no way my people would accept a sea serpent as their queen, especially nother.

What in the deep abyss had I missed over the past ten years?

CHAPTER 18

Bree

"Why shouldn't I mention her father's crumbling kingdom in front of her?" Zephyrion's tone was smooth, almost teasing, like we were sharing a private joke. His smirk barely masked the malice in his eyes as they swept over me. "It's not like she can say anything against it."

King Ateleíotes didn't sigh. He didn't flinch. He simply turned his head toward his son with glacial precision, the movement alone enough to chill the water between them. "Must you always sound so desperate for attention?"

The prince's jaw twitched. A flush bloomed high on his cheekbones. "You forget yourself," he said tightly. "I'm the heir. The next king."

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At least my dinner came with some free entertainment. All I needed was the popcorn and an emergency exit.

"And I remain the current one," Ateleíotes replied. He rose slowly from his seat, not in anger but in icy finality. His gaze cut across the space between him and his son like a drawn blade. "Do not confuse succession with authority. Not in my presence."

As Zephyrion balked, the king grabbed me by the arm and hauled me away from my seat. His grip on my arm was sure to leave bruises. He dragged me back to the room he'd given me. Guards floated just outside, and they bowed as their king approached.

Shoving me through the seaweed curtain, Ateleíotes followed me in. He swam right up into my face until my back pressed against a wall. "You never should have embarrassed me by running away. I'll make sure you and your father—your entire kingdom—pay for your blatant disrespect."

I clenched my fists and glared back at him, wishing I could give him a piece of my mind and a taste of my fury.

He let his gaze drop, eyeing my cleavage, then trailed a hand across my chest until I slapped his hand away.

He didn't lunge or shout. He simply placed a hand at my throat and pressed—slowly, deliberately—until the jagged coral wall dug into my back.

I didn't gasp or flinch. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"Careful, princess," he murmured, as if offering a fatherly warning. "The only reason I've allowed this union to proceed is because I take great pleasure in imagining your father's face when he learns what my son has done to his precious daughter."

His grip tightened by a breath. "And the many ways in which he's done it."

A shiver rolled up my spine. I didn't doubt for a second that Zephyrion was as despicable as he suggested. Like father, like son, after all. I fought the urge to recoil, to flinch, to claw his hand away. I stayed still and silent. I wouldn't give him the reaction he wanted.

But my pulse betrayed me, hammering wildly against his palm.

He smiled. Not kind. Not cruel—just satisfied.

"Soon," he said, releasing me with the calm detachment of the tide receding after a storm, leaving only the wreckage behind, "your father will submit to my rule. And you?"

His eyes flicked over me like I was already conquered. "You will remember this moment and understand that submission was never a choice."

I rubbed my throat as he left, promising myself that I would figure out a way to stop him. I was sure I wasn't the first female he'd hurt and threatened, but I would make sure I was his last.

No matter the species, males like him always believed themselves to be invincible, like they were the gods' gift to the world. While they were often formidable opponents because of their wealth or strength, they weren't gods. Every mortal creature had at least one weakness. I would find his, of that I was sure.

The ocean didn't submit.

And neither did I.

The king announced my wedding to the prince the very next day, and it would take place in two days. Which meant I only had two days to figure out a way out of this mess before I was legally bound to a sadistic monster. Before I lost my freedom completely.

The legality of our marriage might have been in question; what he would do to me was not.

The siren females assigned to care for my needs gossiped plenty. During their visits, I heard multiple stories of the prince's disgusting behavior. I would have chalked it up to them making up stories to scare me, but I'd heard plenty of similar rumors a decade ago, before I'd left home. I was confident his depravity had only worsened since then.

I still didn't understand why my father would promise me to someone that vile, but I was determined to ask him directly.

Oh, yes, after this ordeal was over, there would be no more hiding out in fear of my father's wrath. I was done with that. I would face my father and tell him exactly what I thought of him and how little I would heed his command going forward.

Did that also mean I had accepted the fact that I would never return to the human world? That I would never see Marissa or Frankie again?

Or Nic?

I rubbed my chest, wishing I had the magic to heal my aching heart.

Oh, who was I kidding? Would I actually face my father on purpose? Probably not, but pretending like I would and imagining all the things I'd say to him felt fantastic. Motivating even.

I held onto those thoughts as the hours continued to pass, and I got no closer to figuring out a way to break the witch's shell and regain my magic.

The night before the wedding would take place, full-blown panic mode had kicked in. The king had forbidden Zephyrion from touching me before the wedding, which was a small mercy, but I was terrified of what would happen once his father let him off his leash.

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No matter what happened after tomorrow, I wouldn't let him break me.

That evening, as I rested on the giant clamshell serving as my chair in the dining hall, I stared at my food, unable to eat. Unable to do much of anything but think through everything I'd seen and heard, trying to find a connection, something that would give me a way out.

But try as I might, I kept coming up empty.

"...and make sure she gets the pufferfish poison for the dragons," Ateleíotes said.

Whoa...what? Did he just say dragons?

I tuned back into their conversation. My hand, which had been pushing small bits of octopus around my plate, stilled.

"How long will this trade continue?" Zephyrion's lip curled into a sneer. "It's beneath us to do business with a serpent, especially a witch."

They had to be talking about Calypso. There might have been other sea serpent witches, but these sirens had an established connection to Calypso. But how had she and dragons ended up in the same conversation tonight? I mentally smacked myself for not paying attention sooner.

The king took a bite and chewed before answering. "It will continue as long as I wish. The dragons pay her well for their little crystal potion, and she pays us for the poison. It's a symbiotic relationship."

My breath caught in my throat, remembering what Dominic had said about pyrocrystals right before our match:

"Ichiro has figured out a way to create them en masse and is selling them to Gifted people. They're a very powerful and addictive drug to anyone not bonded to a dragon. He's using them to force submission and seize control. Soon, he'll be more unstoppable than he already is."

If Ichiro was behind the pyrocrystal problem in D.C., did that mean Ichiro was working with Calypso too?

Holy coconuts, Catwoman.

Did Dominic know about their arrangement? It seemed unlikely, but we hadn't exactly had the chance to discuss the details. The only times I'd heard about the crystals were that time with Dominic and once with Frankie. I'd found a crystal in the gym, not knowing what it was. Of course the fae woman knew.

Thoughts of the dragon made my heart clench painfully, as they always did. There was so much I regretted over the last few weeks, but hurting him had to be among the worst. That and trusting the sea witch, of course.

I'd hurt Frankie too, I was sure, but I knew she would understand in time, if not immediately. I'd failed them both.

Trusting the witch was just stupidity on my part. I had purposefully hurt Nic. Yes, I'd done it to save him, but I'd still done it.

Maybe I could win his forgiveness by telling him about Ichiro and Calypso. Or at least maybe it would be a step in the right direction, even if he'd moved on already.

If I ever got back to land, that is.

That prospect was dwindling with every passing moment.

CHAPTER 19

Dominic

Dragon kings of old had established the High Draconic Council centuries ago, back when the first humans bonded with dragons, enabling their spirits to live on inside human hosts. In the early days, we hadn't learned to control the bloodthirsty beasts with tattoos yet, tethering their spirits to ours, and too many hosts died beneath their claws and magic.

Although those of us hosting dragon spirits prided ourselves on our innate ferocity and need for dominance, discovering the link between tattoos infused with the dragon's magic and control over said beasts had been pure coincidence. Once we had control over our dragons, we established the Council to better manage the affairs of dragonkind.

The Gifted Interests Government had existed for far longer than our Council, but after a few disagreements led to massive losses—on their side—they agreed to let us handle ourselves.

Yes, we were above the law everyone else had to obey. Our laws were simpler and more primitive, and our justice system quick and heavy-handed. In response, every Sato's life was governed primarily by the family motto: Kill or be killed.

I stepped out of the limo and adjusted my black suit jacket. While I had attended plenty of Council meetings in the past, this would be my first as the Sato empire's official heir. Judgment would be even harsher today, which meant every detail

mattered. Jou's heat radiated outward, ensuring not a single wrinkle marred my expensive suit and soothing my tensed muscles.

A small gathering of non-Gifted humans watched as the impeccably dressed dragons descended on the Council building in the heart of D.C. They would wonder who we were, but their internet searches would provide nothing more than gossip, naming most of us as mob families. To be fair, that much was true.

Their gossip was fine by me. The more the non-Gifted feared us, the easier it was to keep them at a safe distance.

Normally as we entered the building, Rin would be by my side as my unofficial right-hand man. I didn't need a bodyguard, per se, but among this crowd, having someone to watch your six was always a wise idea.

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Unfortunately, Ichiro had dragged him into the lab break-in investigation last night and he still hadn't returned. Knowing my friend, he was likely leading them on a wild goose chase. Or wolf chase, in this case. Playing the big dumb jock made everyone underestimate him, especially my grandfather.

A smile tugged at my lips. Yes, for all his cunning, the old man could be such a fool.

As I entered the foyer, a hush fell over the mingling crowd. This reaction wasn't uncommon when I appeared, especially over the past month. I'd outed myself as the infamous Red Dragon, after all.

Tightness filled my chest as an image of her face swam through my memories. Godsdamn heart. It just had to fall for a fucking siren. Had I known Bree was going to be the mysteryfighter, had she trusted me enough to truly let me in, I never would have accepted my grandfather's deal. I would have forced his hand another way.

But she hadn't trusted me, and I still didn't know how I felt about that. I needed to know whether her lack of trust was due to her own secrets or because of who I was and the terrible things I'd done. I needed to find her, which meant I needed this pyrocrystal situation handled.

I clenched my jaw and strode past the crowd, nodding to clients and those I hoped to gain as clients. Not all the Sato dealings were illegal, by Gifted laws or otherwise, although those were certainly the most lucrative.

There were at least a few among this crowd that I knew were benefiting from the pyrocrystal trade. Benefiting from their brethren's suffering and deaths. After I took

Ichiro down, they would be next.

I entered the circular chamber where we held Council meetings. Grecian-style columns encircled the room and drew the eye upward, where a painted mural sprawled across the ceiling. The mural depicted the times during which the first humans and dragons had bonded. Blood flowed in rivers as scenes portrayed the voracious beasts feasting on enemy humans or their hosts.

The images were a bloody reminder and warning of the dragons' true nature. Wild beasts could never wholly be tamed.

The five Council leaders sat on a slightly raised dais at the back of the room, while rows of seats rose to the right and left of the central aisle for the rest of us. The rising height of the seating allowed onlookers a decent view no matter where they sat.

Dragons of every element were present. Not the spirits of the beasts, of course. That would be complete chaos. Just the humans hosting the vicious creatures.

Like most witches, elements separated dragon magic—water, air, earth, and fire. The last of which was mostly made up of the Sato lineage. It was impossible to tell just by looking at someone which elemental dragon they'd bonded with, but every once in a while, the dragon's essence would spark within their pupils.

Flashes of blue, green, yellow, and red appeared around the room as I took my place beside Ichiro in one of the prime front-row locations.

My grandfather didn't bother to acknowledge my presence, which was nothing new. However, I couldn't afford him the same disrespect. Not yet.

I bowed formally to Ichiro and waited with a bent waist.

Long seconds passed before he finally deigned to grunt in my direction. In the past, I might have grown angry at the delay, but not today. No, not this day when I would bring Ichiro to his knees once and for all. I had to restrain my smile.

"You're late," he said so quietly I almost didn't catch it as I took my seat. "As heir, you should always arrive by my side."

I was only late by his standards. "My apologies, sir."

Little did he know, this would be the last time he attended a meeting.

A trumpet blasted a single note, effectively silencing the crowd, followed by the bright yellow light of an air dragon rising above our heads. The dragon's vicious visage hovered over the room like a ghost, then carried the musical note around the room, ensuring every attendee obeyed the call to order.

Once the dragon completed its duty, it dove to rejoin James, the Council herald.

James might have been young, but he always took his job seriously. His voice boomed like thunder as he announced the five Council leaders—Takemaru Hayashi, Sloane Vega, Avery Callahan, Robert Ward, and Mateo Serrano. Each entered as they were called and took their place on the dais.

The leaders represented each element, plus a respected elder who would cast a vote in the event of any ties. Our current elder, Robert Ward, was a water dragon. The human's body was frail and stooped, his skin wrinkled and spotted. He wouldn't last much longer.

Once the elder died, one of the other four would take his place, generally the next eldest. In doing so, a spot on the Council would open up to the rest of the members, and it was that seat Ichiro hoped to replace.

"The High Draconic Council has come to order," James declared. "The first order of business is a recent violation of our non-disclosure pact with the non-Gifted population."

As the meeting droned on, I only half-listened. The other half of my brain reviewed what I would present to the Council to prove Ichiro's guilt, confident in what we had after sleeping on it. I would bring in the scientists as additional proof once I'd made my claim. They had wisely chosen to value their lives more than their loyalty to my grandfather.

The promise of a large deposit into their bank accounts had encouraged their cooperation.

At last, the elder held up his wizened hand, calling for silence. "It is now time to bring forth any matters we have not yet discussed."

I stood and buttoned my jacket before moving to the steps leading down. Whispers circulated as I approached the dais.

On the last step, my phone chimed. Everyone I knew was here or knew I was here and not to be disturbed unless it was an emergency. Before reaching the dais, I withdrew my phone and looked at the screen. My blood ran cold, and I froze mid-step.

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An image of Rin secured to a metal table appeared on the screen. A machine stood beside him, holding a bag of familiar blue liquid that dripped into a needle in his arm. His face was contorted in agony as steam drifted off his skin.

Oh, fuck.

He knew.

CHAPTER 20

Bree

Ifloated numbly in the center of the coral palace's grand hall, my tail heavy with resignation. The ceremony—this sham of a wedding to a prince I despised—was mere moments from completion. The end of my life as I'd known it, the end of my freedom, was nigh. I could taste the salt of defeat on the back of my tongue, and the edges of my vision blurred.

Murmurs from the assembled courtiers pressed against me like a wall of sound I couldn't answer. The sea witch had stolen my voice, and with it, the defiance I'd once carried like armor.

How had I let it come to this? How had I let her win?

A tremor ran through me, though I couldn't tell if it was from rage or the cold bite of fear. Probably both. It didn't matter. Despite my best efforts to find a way to stop this madness, I'd failed. Again.

Across the hall, a pedestal stood beside the king's throne. It was a gaudy monument of coral and gold. The shell that held my stolen magic rested on top, glowing faintly with an inner pink light. Not just my magic—my voice.

A barrier of golden energy surrounded and shielded the shell, flickering as if alive. It was a constant reminder of the power the king wielded over me and the freedom I had lost.

I had stared at the shell countless times during my captivity, the knowledge that it was so close and yet unreachable gnawing at my resolve. Without my magic, I felt powerless.

Hopeless.

I was still finding it hard to believe that this was it. This would be my life now. For the umpteenth time, I wondered how in the dark abyss I had gotten myself into this mess.

I blinked back tears as I pictured my mother's face. Easier to do now that Marissa was older. They looked so much alike. Every time I saw my sister, I heard my mother's dying plea to take care of Marissa for her.

Straightening my spine, I pulled my shoulders back and held my head high. As terrible as this life would be, I was raised a princess. I could do this. I would not break.

Besides, I had no other choice.

Prince Zephyrion sneered at me as he extended a hand, his dark yellow scales glinting faintly in the bioluminescent light. "Take it," he hissed. "Seal your fate. Or should I command you like the little prawn you are?"

I forced my fingers to uncurl; the muscles aching from the tension I'd been holding. I couldn't speak, couldn't even scream. All I could do was glare.

I'd trained harder than half the royal guard and could have dropped most of them without breaking a sweat—on land. But that didn't matter here. Not when every move had to be calculated, not when the king still had my magic.

As my hand trembled toward the prince, a shadow moved in the periphery of my vision. Then another. And another.

The first impact came with no other warning.

At first, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A pod of blue whales burst through the palace's coral walls, their powerful tails sending chunks of vibrant pink and green spiraling in all directions. The sheer force of the water knocked several courtiers aside. Their arms and fins flailed as they darted for safety.

Screams erupted. Schools of fish surged in panic, their shimmering bodies swirling like underwater storms. Dolphins darted through the chaos, and their sharp clicks echoed across the collapsing chamber. The once-regal hall had descended into complete pandemonium.

I had no idea what was happening, why these whales had crashed into the palace. Were they sick? Had they gone mad? The world around me felt like it was spinning out of control, the sounds of crashing and splintering echoing in every direction.

My heartbeat thumped wildly as the commotion thickened, and suddenly, it occurred to me—this was my chance.

While Zephyrion whipped his head around, shouting orders to the guards, I surged forward. I shot past the throne, where the king sat bellowing in rage, his tail pinned

beneath a fallen coral column, and toward the pedestal where the shell was displayed.

That barrier of golden light still surrounded it. I reached for it, my fingers brushing the edge of the barrier, and recoiled as pain shot through my arm.

"Guards! Stop her!" Ateleíotes's voice boomed over the chaos.

I glanced back, my heart hammering in my chest. The prince was swimming this way, his teeth bared, hatred in his eyes. Five guards weren't far behind him. Even with the falling debris creating a moving obstacle course, I had seconds at most.

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Good thing everyone underestimated me. I focused all my remaining strength on the shell. If I didn't have magic to break the barrier, then my determination would have to do. With a deep breath, I slammed my fist against the golden light, feeling it sear my skin. I gritted my teeth against the pain, pushing harder, and cracks formed in the barrier.

"Stop her!" the king shouted again, his voice a desperate roar.

Zephyrion lunged, his hands aimed at my throat.

At that exact moment, a tiny creature barreled into his face and knocked him sideways. My heart leaped into my throat as I recognized the creature as an axolotl. And not just any axolotl.

Finley! What in the seven seas was he doing here?

Even as tiny as the axolotl was, I knew Zephyrion was no match against his magic. Not for catching him, anyway. Luminara were prized and rare for a reason.

His appearance wasn't much—a small, wriggling distraction—but it was enough. The prince swiped blindly at Finley, giving me the precious seconds I needed.

With a final push, the barrier guarding the shell shattered, popping like a bubble. My hands shook as I grabbed the shell, my chest tightening with a mix of desperation and defiance. I raised the shell above my head, then smashed it against the pedestal.

The force of the impact rattled through my arms. Shards went flying, and the sound

of the shell breaking reverberated through the water.

The moment the magic surged into me, I gasped. Power flooded through every part of me, filling the hollow spaces I hadn't realized were so empty until now. The ache of loss, the vulnerability, the quiet helplessness I'd been drowning in—it all evaporated in an instant.

My tail shimmered, vibrant and alive once again, and my scales glowed with a refreshed purple hue. Energy crackled under my skin, and my body thrummed with the familiar hum of magic. Tears burned in my eyes, but I didn't bother to stop them. I was whole again. Me again.

And I would let no one take this from me ever again.

I turned to face Zephyrion, who froze as a strong current coalesced around him, swirling. I extended my hand, and the vortex surrounding him thickened, squeezing him like an invisible vice.

"Enough." My voice was clear and resonant for the first time in weeks, and the prince's eyes widened in shock. "I wasn't born to be silenced. I was born to make waves."

The palace shook again as another wave of whales collided with the structure. Entire columns of coral floated through the murky water and cast shadows across trembling onlookers who hadn't yet fled.

My gaze flicked to the axolotl flitting through the chaos, weaving between panicked courtiers and fallen debris.

Finley's wide, gilled face split into a grin as he darted toward me. The axolotl swam a quick circle around my body, then nudged my arm. Time to go.

I didn't need further encouragement. My magic surged outward as a forceful wave, pushing back Zephyrion and the guards who tried to block my path. The prince shouted something behind me, but I didn't look back.

With a burst of speed, I scooped Finley into my hands and shot through the collapsing palace, zigzagging through the chaos until we met the open ocean. The water felt colder, yet somehow lighter against my skin. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, I was free.

I grinned at the axolotl, his small body shimmering faintly in the beams of light. "You're incredible," I murmured, and he chirped happily in response.

The relief was short-lived.

Shouts rang out behind us as a squadron of guards swarmed from within the crumbling palace. Out in the open ocean, they spotted me quickly.

Determination—along with a hefty dose of fear—settled in my core. There was no way I could win against so many, even with my magic back. But that wouldn't stop me from trying.

As a princess, my magic was far stronger than that of the guards. It was a power carefully cultivated through generations of selective breeding and arranged marriages like the one forced on me.

But my father's decision to promise me to Zephyrion hadn't been about preserving or enhancing our magical bloodline. The prince's magic was too weak for that. No, my betrothal had been purely a political move.

Regardless, I was, as Dominic might say, fuc?—

A shadow loomed over my head. My breath caught as I looked up, coming face-to-face with a blue whale. Its enormous eye fixed on me, and for a second, the world seemed to shrink around us. The whale blinked once, slow and deliberate, then opened its massive mouth, revealing a cavernous maw that seemed to stretch on forever.

Hop in! Finley darted inside without hesitation.

Panic surged through me as I glanced back. The guards were closing in fast, their shouts muffled by the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears. Every instinct screamed at me to flee in the opposite direction. But there was no time to think, no time to question.

So I didn't.

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I followed Finley into the whale's mouth. A chill ran down my spine as the whale's jaws closed behind me with an echoingthunk, plunging us into pitch black.

CHAPTER 21

Dominic

My jaw cracked audibly under the pressure of clenching it. I looked up at my grandfather. His face was utterly impassive save for the minor glint of victory in his eyes.

This was a test. He'd wanted to see what I would do. He wouldn't have waited for the Council meeting if he'd been certain I was involved in the lab break-in. I gripped my phone in my fist, though I no longer felt or saw it. My vision had gone red.

Unwittingly, I had played into his trap perfectly. Worse, he was using our own family against me. Rin was one of my distant cousins and a Sato as well, no matter how low on the totem pole. Ichiro was torturing his own flesh and blood.

How had he known? Not just that I was responsible, but that Rin was involved. Maybe he didn't know about Rin and was simply using him to get to me. What else did he know?

Regardless, our plan had failed. I had failed to protect my best friend.

The urge to lash out was so strong that I could feel the skin on my palms burning with the need to strike, fueled by a rage I could barely contain. Wisps of smoke drifted

from my body while Jou's roars echoed within my mind.

The whispers around me grew. I had to get out of here before I lost control.

"Dominic Sato," Robert's voice called out, "did you have something to address with the Council?"

I had a choice to make. My grandfather might be many things, but he had never killed one of his own before. He wasn't a kin slayer, but he might become one today if I pushed him too far.

I couldn't take that risk with Rin.

Facing the elders, I bowed in respect, hiding the emotions I struggled to keep contained. "Not at this time. My apologies. I must go."

With a last glance at my grandfather, the man I loathed down to the marrow within my bones, I strode from the room.

My phone chimed again as I pushed my way out the exit door, inhaling the fresh air to calm my racing pulse.

Subliminal in one hour, read Ichiro's message.

This time, I gripped my phone so tight it groaned beneath the pressure. I only had an hour to come up with a plan to outsmart the old man.

It was truly life or death.

Forty minutes later, Aaron's rumbling growl permeated the air as he paced the length of my penthouse office. I sat behind my desk, my thoughts murderous. My

grandfather had Rin out there somewhere. He would use my closest friend against me, torture him without a second thought, knowing it would control me.

Jou writhed and churned inside me, his fury only stoking my own. I wanted nothing more than to charge back into that Council meeting and unleash our combined wrath upon Ichiro. I doubted anyone could stop us. Not with the level of hate boiling our blood.

Except, ripping Ichiro apart in front of the entire High Draconic Council would come with a new set of complications. So instead of letting my thirst for revenge take the reins, I settled for waiting and planning. I clenched and unclenched my jaw and my fists. Hell—my entire body.

Despite our best efforts to keep our search hidden and our identities anonymous, my grandfather had known. The only question of importance now was where he held Rin. Every other answer would have to come later.

Aaron and I had reluctantly come to the conclusion that there wasn't much we could do without knowing where Rin was or what Ichiro planned for him or me. Until then, I would need a strategy for every possibility.

Knowing my sadistic as fuck grandfather, he would stretch this out. Make me suffer mentally and emotionally before inflicting never-ending physical pain. He would want me to beg for death.

"How did he find out?" Aaron growled.

It was the third time he'd asked since meeting me here, and I knew it was rhetorical. Much to our mutual frustration, neither of us knew the answer.

"The most obvious explanation is that Rin let something slip or did something that

caught Ichiro's attention during the wolf search," Aaron continued as he ceased pacing and returned to his laptop. "We won't know until we get him back."

And we would get him back. Of that, I was certain. I would burn Ichiro's world to the ground to save my friend—any of them.

It was unlikely that Ichiro held him in the same lab as before. Not only was the old man aware we knew about the lab, making it too obvious a location, but he would be paranoid that I wouldn't keep my mouth shut with the Council. He wouldn't risk them finding out about his little operation, even if he planned to place the blame on me. It was too profitable to lose.

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The most likely scenario was that the lab was now empty. Everything moved to a new, more secure location. All traces of his involvement erased.

"You know, he may just be egotistical enough to have him at the same lab," Aaron said as if reading my mind. He wasn't telepathic—it was just one perk of working with your closest friends. His gaze tracked something on his laptop screen. "Surveillance footage shows nothing that would indicate a total breakdown and transfer. But look, there's a truck that backed up to the loading dock last night."

"What did they unload or load?" I moved behind his chair to peer over his shoulder.

"Unknown. The view's blocked."

Doubt trickled through me. Maybe we were wrong. The old man had proven cunning enough to stay one step ahead of us. Perhaps he expected us not to bother with the lab for all the reasons I'd considered.

"Only one way to find out." I checked my watch. "But I'm out of time. It'll take me at least ten minutes to get to Subliminal."

"And then what?"

"Then I find out what he wants from me."

"You're willing to just give in to his demands?" he asked.

"I didn't say that, but I'm not willing to risk Rin's life by not going."

Aaron nodded, his eyes narrowed as he considered the situation. "Did you tell Keiko?"

"No, not until I know more." Whereas I would burn Ichiro's world down to save Rin, Keiko would obliterate the actual world. There would be no talking sense into her, and there would be no stopping her. Nothing and no one would stand a chance.

I had no issue with Keiko killing Ichiro if it came down to it, but there would be no keeping her secrets safe after that. No, she didn't need to know. Not yet.

"You go," Aaron said, turning his attention back to the computer. "I'm going to look into some things, see if I can find out where that truck came from before you agree to anything."

"If he knows I'm involved, then he likely knows you are, too."

His smile was feral. "Yes, but I'm harder to catch."

He wasn't wrong. The Sato family coveted his cat shifter abilities, his stealth unmatched by anyone other than Keiko. I knew he would be okay if they came for him.

"I'll keep you updated." I gripped his forearm in a brief farewell.

My grandfather had gained the upper hand, which didn't bode well for my future. But I still had a few bargaining chips left to play.

He squeezed my arm once before letting go. "Whatever comes next, I'll be ready."

CHAPTER 22

Bree

The darkness inside the whale's mouth was nearly absolute, broken only by faint streaks of sunlight filtering through the baleen like beams through stained glass windows. As the whale's powerful body surged through the ocean depths, water sloshed rhythmically against the rubbery walls. The motion was both soothing and disorienting, and I clung to the ridged flesh of his tongue.

For the first time in weeks, I felt like I could breathe. Which was an interesting thought, considering where I was. But here, within this cavernous mouth, I wasn't just hiding—I was part of something greater, something untouchable.

The whale loosened his jaws to filter-feed, the rush of water filling the chamber and flooding my senses. Sunlight and plankton danced in the currents. Outside, the open ocean called, endless and wild, and the ache in my chest sharpened.

Cradled inside this massive creature, I had never felt so insignificant, so weightless, and yet...

...so alive.

As the whale closed his mouth again, a soft blue glow illuminated the inside.

Pretty cool, huh? Finley spun around me, showing off the arcane symbols scattered across his skin.

I knew he didn't mean the glow, since that was nothing new. The symbols were unique to luminara axolotls and were the key to their magic, appearing shortly after birth. His glow had been a welcome nightlight for Marissa and me while growing up.

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The pretty cool thing he referred to was the whale. As in hitching a ride to freedom inside the literal belly of a whale—well, mouth. And yes, it was pretty cool.

"Where's he taking us?" I asked as I swept a hand across the baleen plates. They needed a good scrubbing.

Finley let out a contented sigh and settled on my shoulder. Home.

Relief didn't even cover it. The crushing weight of shame and dread that had been dragging me down, tethered to me like a stone to a drowning sailor, was finally gone. "How did you find me?"

You've been around humans for too long. His frills fluttered with amusement. Sea creatures notice many things, even siren things. Their gossip came in handy.

Well, that explained the dolphins showing up with the whales. Dolphins were notorious for being the gossip queens of the underwater world.

"As much as I wish you'd listened to me and stayed with Rissa, I'm more glad you didn't. Thank you." Gently, I brushed Finley's cheek with my own.

I'd known that luminara axolotls could speak with most sea creatures, whereas sirens were mostly limited to our own kind. But I had no idea this little guy could amass a small army of dolphins and whales and convince them to attack a siren palace like battering rams. My unexpected and timely escape had been a planned rescue by the teensiest of heroes.

I owed him my life, as well as the giant one carrying us across the ocean. How could I ever repay them? Finley, the whale, all the creatures that had risked themselves for me. I wasn't used to needing a rescue.

The darkness and rocking movement of the water soon lulled me into a doze, which wasn't that hard considering the day I'd had. I curled up on the whale's tongue and closed my eyes.

What felt like only a few moments later, Finley nudged me awake. We're here.

I frowned, groggy. That was impossible. The Thalasses kingdom was farther east than the Naftes kingdom. Even with a whale's speed, it should have taken us several hours, at least.

The whale opened his mouth to let us out, and I had to squint against the bright light streaming down from the ocean's surface. Sure enough, we were close to the Delaware shore. I had slept much longer than I thought.

After thanking and saying goodbye to the whale, I turned my gaze toward the distant horizon where my father's kingdom lay. The sea witch might be on her way there already. To do what, I didn't know exactly, but I couldn't escape my duty much longer.

Although there wasn't a siren alive who could have kept up with a whale, I didn't stop swimming until I reached the safety of the shore, convinced Ateleíotes' sirens would catch me at any moment.

We arrived in the morning, a few hours before the attempted wedding thanks to crossing time zones, and before crowds of people would line the Delaware beach. After bobbing at the surface for a few minutes to ensure no one would see me, I hauled myself, tail and all, across the sand to where I'd stored my bag, hoping it was

still there.

I wasn't even sure how long it had been since I'd tucked it away. Two weeks? Maybe three? Anyone could have found and stolen it, or a storm could have buried it or washed it away.

My heart thumped wildly as I felt through the tall grasses, glancing up and down the beach every few seconds. I had no idea what I would do if my bag was gone. There was no way I could ask for help while scales and a flopping tail gave me away, and Finley would need help to get back to Marissa.

At last, I felt the fabric bag under a pile of sand. I tugged it toward me and grabbed my phone out of the plastic bag I'd stored it in. Fumbling it in trembling hands, I managed to turn it on and breathed a sigh of relief that a smidge of battery remained. I ignored the hundreds of missed calls and messages and immediately called Marissa.

Her groggy voice answered on the third ring. "Who the fuck is this?"

I gasped. "Marissa! Language!"

A clatter sounded through the phone, followed by a shriek. "Bree? Is that you? For real?"

"Yes, but I need you to listen closely and follow my directions exactly. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Well, that was a first. My absence must have really scared her. Or maybe it was my tone that made her agree so easily. Either way, I couldn't worry about comforting her just yet.

"Bring your talisman to the location I send you as soon as possible." I dropped her a pin of my location. "I'll explain everything when you get here, but my phone's nearly out of battery."

"Okay, but Bree?"

"Yes?"

She sniffled. "I love you so freaking much, but I will kill you if you ever pull a stunt like this again."

I choked back a sob and laughed. "I love you too. Now come get me."

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Only two hours later—as speed which suggested my little sister had not obeyed any driving laws—Marissa ran onto the sand. Her frantic gaze darted around the area.

I waved from my place in the water, where I'd had to retreat once a few beachgoers had shown up. Getting caught with my tail on full display was not on my to-do list today, even if I could try to play it off like I was one of those professional mermaids just testing out a new tail.

No, best to play it safe. There would be too many questions. Besides, I wasn't sure how convincing I'd be without a photographer capturing my every move for social media.

Marissa dropped the duffel bag she carried and ran straight into the water. With no regard for her clothes getting wet, she tackled me.

I grabbed her around the waist and kept her afloat while laughing. The water barely came up to my middle, but it was enough to soak her from head to foot while the waves rocked us gently. That, and Finley's excited jumps splashed water everywhere.

"I thought I'd lost you forever." Her voice was a whisper against my ear, her arms still wrapped tight around my neck.

"Never," I murmured, stroking her hair. Marissa might have been a full-grown woman these days, but she would always be my baby sister. More than a sister—I'd practically raised her as my own after our mother died.

For years, it had been just my sister and me, our father too busy dealing with his grief and ruling a kingdom. Yes, we'd had Demetrius and Finley too, and while we loved both like family, there was no replacing our mother.

Grief was an everlasting consequence of losing someone you loved. Eighteen years had passed, and the grief still ebbed and flowed like a restless tide inside me. It didn't drown me anymore, not the way it had those first few years when every thought of her felt like sinking into a stormy abyss.

Still, it lingered, settling deep into the cracks of my soul. Some days, it was just a whisper, a shadow I could almost ignore. But other days, the grief hit like a sucker punch, a memory so vivid I couldn't breathe. On those days, more often than not, guilt accompanied the grief.

Time softened the waters, maybe, but it never stopped the ache of missing her.

If I had only listened to my father's warnings to avoid the human shipwrecks that littered the ocean floor. If I hadn't run away that day after a fight with my father and swam to my favorite hiding place within a sunken ship, then my mother wouldn't have followed me.

And after what happened next when the shark had appeared...

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I owed my mother my life. She was the bravest, most selfless siren I knew, and I was determined to make her proud, even from the afterlife.

As I stroked Marissa's hair, I wondered what my sister would think of me if she knew the truth. That I was responsible for our mother's death, and I'd robbed Rissa of the chance to know her. That my selfish actions led to all the years of pain and grief and poverty.

Would she ever forgive me?

CHAPTER 23

Bree

When Marissa finally extracted herself from my arms, she gave me a sharp look that was only slightly ruined by the soaking-wet curls stuck to her face. "Not cool. Not cool at all."

"It's the Atlantic Ocean," I explained. "The currents keep it pretty warm, even this far north."

"No, you turd. This whole deal you made with that witch."

Oh. That made more sense than commenting on the water's temperature. "I had to, Rissa. If Mom can't be here to protect you, then I'm honored to do it for her. It's what she wanted."

She groaned. "No, she didn't. I know for a fact Mom would not have asked you to throw your life away or even to take her place. You've protected me for long enough. It's time to let me make my own mistakes."

I stared at my little sister, not sure when she had grown up on me. Was it because I'd disappeared and she'd had to worry about me for a change instead of the other way around? Or had I just not noticed her maturing like this before?

She must have misunderstood the look on my face because she smirked. "I mean, yeah. We all know I already make mistakes. Plenty of them. I meant let me deal with the consequences. You know, on my own."

I couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of my mouth, and I pulled her in for another tight squeeze. I was so unbelievably proud of her.

This time when I let Marissa go, she removed the talisman from around her neck. My breath caught in my throat, but her legs didn't join into a tail and no scales appeared on her skin. The potion had worked, thank the goddess.

"Once I found your note, I forced Cal to drive me to the nearest beach," Marissa said.

"You probably could have tested it out in the bathtub."

"Ugh, no, you dope. I was going to come after you."

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I opened my mouth to argue against that idea, despite it being in the past, but she clamped her hand over my mouth.

"I know what you're going to say. You said it in your letter. I didn't care then, and I don't care now. I wasn't going to let you throw your life away like that. Not for me. Not for anyone."

She pulled her hand away, but it hadn't been necessary to begin with. I was at a complete loss for words.

She scooped up Finley and nuzzled him. "But this little guy wouldn't let me. He told me about the siren patrols and the risk I'd be taking. He also told me about the contract you signed."

My shocked gaze turned to Finley. "How did you know about that?"

I followed you, of course, his tiny voice chimed in my mind. I couldn't let Rissa get trapped, too.

Marissa stroked his head. "So instead of heroically storming into the witch's cave and demanding she let you go, which would have felt really fu—um, freaking good, I told Cal everything."

"Everything? Or just enough?"

"Everything. And he and I've been trying to figure a way for you to get out of the deal. A magical loophole or something. But good thing you got out on your own

because things weren't looking good on our end." She paused and eyed me with suspicion. "Wait, you got out of it, right?"

I nodded slowly, still stunned. Good thing indeed. I could only imagine the even bigger mess we'd be in if Finley hadn't stopped Marissa from following me.

Don't get me wrong. I loved her for even trying. But her headstrong nature and impulsivity would have had catastrophic consequences.

Or maybe she would have saved me after all. We'd never know, and that was definitely a good thing. All that mattered now was that my contract with the witch had ended when she sold me to King Ateleíotes, and I'd gotten my magic back. Win-win.

Marissa held up the talisman. "You ready?"

That was a good question. I took a last glance behind me, gazing across the ocean until it met the horizon. Even now, the vastness of the underwater world called to me, singing of endless possibilities. Full of mysteries and dangers unknown.

Was I ready? I'd wanted to return to land ever since I'd gotten myself into this mess. But after everything I'd learned over the past few weeks, I wasn't as sure anymore.

Something had happened to the Naftes kingdom. Someone had happened—Calypso. In theory, my father should have been more than powerful enough to stop anything she'd attempted.

So, why did I feel this uneasy?

Likely because I'd learned firsthand just how slippery that snake of a witch could be. My father's magic was powerful, but hers was stronger than the last time she'd tried

to take over. I had no idea what she'd gotten from Ateleíotes in exchange for me.

There was only one way to find out, but I wasn't sure I was ready for that return either. I was trapped in the jaws of thetide and I didn't know which way to go first. I had to find out what evil plan Calypso devised for our father, but I also needed to make things right on land. I had a list of people I needed to apologize to.

The more I considered it, the more I realized I would need backup to stop Calypso. Not to mention moral support just to face my father.

Knowing I would return to the ocean soon, I nodded to answer my sister's question. I was ready. As ready as I could be.

Marissa draped the talisman over my head. A tingle spread through my body before sizzling heat tore my tail in two. I bit back a cry and clenched my eyes shut, holding onto my sister for dear life.

Good gravy, this was such a painful experience. I had no idea how other shifters got used to the pain, if they ever did.

When the pain finally subsided, I was human again. Mostly. A few scales glittered along my forearms, reminding me that my time on land was limited no matter what I wanted. At least we only had one talisman failing to worry about.

Unless Calypso had lied about a potion yet again and Marissa's tail made an unexpected appearance. But that would have to be a future-us problem. I had enough to worry about in the here and now. First, I needed to tell Dominic what I'd learned about the pyrocrystals.

I hated knowing I was going to disrupt his life once again, but he had to know what I'd found out.

Except, what if he already knew? Maybe he'd already handled that whole crystal situation. Me showing up with old news might just rip open wounds that were healed. For him, anyway. My heart was still a fractured mess.

What if?—

"Wanna see something cool?"

Marissa's question startled me out of my thoughts. "Always."

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She held up her hand, fingers splayed, and I watched as webbing formed between them. They grew into thin purple membranes that would help propel her through the water. Just as quickly, they receded and disappeared back into her skin. No trace left behind.

"I have total control over the entire change, and you wanna know the best part? It doesn't hurt. At all." She beamed with excitement.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous. I was only a mere mortal, after all. But my happiness for her overrode any other emotions. I grinned back. "Oh good. That means I'll never have to listen to you whine about it ever again."

As I laughed at her annoyed expression, a wave nearly knocked me over. I spat out a mouthful of salt water. I was far less balanced without my tail.

Her annoyance melted into laughter, and she waded back to where she'd left her bag. She came back with a pair of swim bottoms. "Here, put these on before you get out, so no one thinks you mistook this for a nude beach."

I slipped on the swimsuit beneath the water. I still wore the pearl-rimmed bra, which she now eyed with a raised eyebrow.

"I'll tell you the story on the way to D.C.," I said.

Back where she dropped her bag, I pulled on a dry top, then held up a towel as a curtain for Marissa to change behind since she'd soaked her clothes. Calvin wouldn't let us use his car again if we didn't take care of it. Actually, I wasn't sure how she'd

arrived.

"You drove Cal's car, right?" I asked.

"How else would I have gotten here so fast?"

"Speaking of which, how many laws did you break?" I shot her a look. "It should have taken another hour. At least."

She waved a hand dismissively. "Who's even counting?"

I held out my hand. "Keys, please. I don't trust your driving skills. Or lack thereof."

She rolled her eyes. "There's no way Cal would let me drive this far. He's waiting for us."

Oh, thank the tides. That was a relief. While I was sure he broke more than a few laws driving here at record speed, at least he knew what he was doing behind the wheel. He probably cast some sort of spell to keep off any police radar.

Back at the parking lot, the wizard leaned against his Honda, staring off into space and lost in his thoughts. A common occurrence for Calvin. When we approached, his face lit up, and he immediately swept me up into a tight hug.

"And here I thought your sister was the dramatic one." After setting me down, he pushed his glasses back up his nose and frowned. "Wait, am I supposed to address you as 'Your Highness' and bow?"

"Ugh, no. And Rissa still wins the drama award." I dodged the elbow she aimed at my ribs and laughed. "See?"

"Ha ha, you're hilarious." She planted her hands on her hips. "I'll have you know I've been an absolute wreck."

I winced. "I know, I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you?"

"For starters, I want the story. Every juicy detail, especially where you got that gorgeous shell top from. Oh my goddess, did you go home? Did Dad see you?"

Calvin opened the car's back door and gestured us inside. "Your chariot awaits."

While he drove, I told them everything that had happened, including what I'd learned about Ichiro and Calypso. When I told them how I escaped, Marissa pressed her lips into a thin line.

Her knuckles were white as she gripped the door handle tight. "I wish you would've killed them. Or that I could."

My eyes widened as I looked at her, proud of her protectiveness. But I also knew she had no idea what she was saying. Taking a life was never easy, no matter how well-deserved.

"It wouldn't feel as good as you'd think."

Marissa shrugged. "Hashtag worthit."

I snort-laughed but didn't disagree. Knowing King Ateleíotes could never hurt another female was worth any guilt I might have carried.

Calvin had been unusually quiet throughout my story. I glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror, noting he'd drawn his eyebrows together. "What's up?"

He tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel. "Just putting some pieces together. We've heard about the dragons' pyrocrystal trade at the GIG."

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"Why the hell haven't they shut it down yet?" Marissa asked.

"Lang—"

"You're not my mom anymore!"

I chuckled but threw my hands up, relenting.

"The GIG lost that battle against the dragons ages ago," Calvin explained. "Dragons oversee dragonkind, and the GIG only steps in when anything involves non-dragonkind."

"So why do they care about it now?" I asked.

"Because it's now affecting non-dragons. They're creating addicts. Very dangerous addicts."

"Yikes. What are they planning to do about it? Is there some sort of protocol?"

"Well, that's the puzzle I think I've finally put together, and if I'm right, then it's not good."

A sinking sensation gripped me. I knew that whatever he was about to say would affect me somehow. There were too many connections for this to be a coincidence.

"What is it?" Marissa asked.

"I think the GIG's going to use this to shut down Subliminal. For good."

"What!" Marissa's shriek could puncture an eardrum. "Why? How? When?"

Despite the dire situation, I almost laughed at her response. I felt exactly the same way. But this was far from a laughing matter. I couldn't let that happen to Subliminal, the gym members, and most of all, not to Frankie.

"You know they've wanted to take the gym down for years," he said. "Now they have their chance, even if their intel's not fully accurate."

I frowned. "I don't understand. Surely they would need ironclad proof."

"They've got evidence of trades happening at Subliminal. I believe they're going to use the gym as a scapegoat, saying that all, or at least most, of the deals happen there."

"But that's just crazy," Marissa protested with a harrumph. "It's not true. It'll be easy to dispute."

"Sadly, it doesn't have to be true." Calvin sighed. "The dragons will be more than willing to make that deal to redirect the blame and avoid any serious repercussions. The GIG's a lot more powerful now than the last time they butted heads."

He was right. The GIG had been after Subliminal for the illegal fights Frankie hosted, long before I'd shown up. And everything I'd learned about the ferocious dragons said they would protect their own above all else.

This was the GIG's chance. Two birds, one stone—not to be confused with girls and a cup, a rather unfortunate fact I'd learned the hard way.

They would shut down Subliminal, one of the few Gifted safe havens in D.C., and they'd lock Frankie up for sure. Someone at the GIG must be after a big promotion to not care enough to go after the real culprits—the dragons.

Or more specifically, one dragon.

Ichiro Sato.

Now I had no choice. I had to give Dominic the information I'd learned. He had to help me stop Ichiro and the GIG. If he refused, then the gym was in major trouble.

A very big pickle.

CHAPTER 24

Dominic

Opting for speed, I rode my motorcycle, weaving in and out of traffic seamlessly. Even a minute late could mean an immediate death sentence for Rin. I parked the bike outside the gym on the sidewalk, not caring about tickets or if I offended anyone.

As I faced the place where I last saw Bree, I gritted my teeth. Even now, her voice curled around the edges of my memory. Her scent clung to the cracks and crevices of the building, teasing me. I'd hoped to never return here, not without her.

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The crazy fae woman who ran the gym had put the triskelion sign back up over the door. Frankie had taken it down after losing the gym to Ichiro. I still couldn't quite believe my grandfather had granted my request for ownership of the place, and I had every intention of fully returning it to Frankie once I handled Ichiro and found Bree. One problem at a time.

I steeled myself and opened the door.

As usual, the gym was dark inside, courtesy of the black paint covering the front windows and doors. Although Frankie's fae magic kept the place hidden from non-Gifted eyes, the paint ensured no snooping humans would see anything they shouldn't if the spell failed, as unlikely as that scenario was.

I let my eyes adjust to the darker interior and used my other senses to stay on high alert. It was afternoon, which meant only a few gym members were there lifting weights or using punching bags. A younger, high-school-aged kid with headphones on mopped an unused section of the floor, oblivious to the dragon who'd just entered.

My breath caught in my throat as the vivid memory of Bree mopping and singing crashed through my mind like a breaking wave. In little more than an old pair of gym shorts and sports bra, her hair captured in a sweaty ponytail and skin flushed pink from the work, she had been radiant. Breathtaking.

That hadn't been her magic clouding my mind and judgment.

That washer.

Everything I'd felt had been real, and I knew she felt the same.

A familiar older woman with curly brown and white hair and wearing bright pink glasses stepped out of the gym's office. Her lips dipped into a scowl when she saw me. "What're you doin' here, dragon?"

Frankie Delgado had every reason to despise me. I might have agreed to sign the gym back over to her after I acquired it from Ichiro, but I had signed it over conditionally.

Help me track down Bree, and it was all hers.

Except the cranky old fae woman had had no luck finding the two sirens either, and Frankie hated owing favors, especially to a dragon.

"Meeting Ichiro," I said, my gaze quickly assessing the gym again. "Is he here yet?"

Frankie's scowl deepened, making the lines around her eyes and mouth appear even more prominent. "That dragon ain't allowed to step one measly claw in here, and he knows it. Not after the shit he pulled."

Ichiro was the whole reason for the fight that resulted in Bree running away and disappearing. Had my grandfather not threatened to take the gym as payment for an outstanding loan, Frankie never would have let Bree fight that night.

No, that wasn't entirely true. She wanted Bree to fight, but not for that reason. And she never would have pitted us against each other unless we wanted to. I'd lost Bree because of my grandfather's heartless business dealings. She wouldn't have felt the need to fight without his meddling.

"You'll need to make an exception." I held up my hands when Frankie opened her mouth to retort. "Just this once. It's a matter of life and death."

She snapped her mouth shut and leveled a glare at me. "Once. But twice means war, ya hear?"

The front door opened behind me. I turned around, not wanting to get ambushed from behind, but effectively blinded myself by looking into the bright light streaming in from outside.

I squinted as the door swung shut, cursing myself for the mistake. With the door shut, I could see again. Unfortunately, it wasn't Ichiro stalking toward me.

The person headed my way was far more deadly.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Keiko demanded, anger rolling off her tiny frame in menacing waves. Shadowy wisps curled around her legs. "Where is he?"

Beside me, Frankie let out a derisive snort. "Hey kid, he's kinda in the middle of somethin' right now."

Keiko's gaze landed on the fae woman, and I was amazed that Frankie didn't back down or wither away completely. Little did she know, she looked Death in the eyes. Instead of doing either, however, the crazy woman pushed her glasses on top of herhead, which immediately tangled in the frizzy mess she called hair, and raised an eyebrow.

Darkness pooled around Keiko's feet—a dangerous sign. "Unless you have a death wish, old woman, I suggest you mind your own business."

I stepped between the two women before either could dismember the other. A fight between these two powerhouses would be catastrophic for everyone. "This is Frankie, the owner of Subliminal."

"I don't care who she is. You owe me an explanation." The black shadows stopped gathering, but they hadn't dissipated altogether.

"I only involve you if it's necessary," I said.

"Consider it necessary."

"I need to know Ichiro's terms first, which doesn't require your help."

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The slightest wobble of Keiko's chin betrayed her underlying emotions. She was barely staying in control, and I didn't blame her. Rin was her best friend and soulmate. Not only that, but Ichiro had raised her too, treated her better than most.

However, he also saw her as more of a prized pet than a beloved daughter, and her loyalty was to me and Rin above all others. I could only imagine what horrors she'd inflict upon Ichiro if he hurt Rin any more than he already had.

She glared up at me. "If anything happens, I will tear off his limbs, slit his fucking throat, and bathe in his blood while his corpse rots."

I guess I didn't have to imagine.

Frankie's eyes lit up, and she cackled. "I may end up likin' you after all."

Pulling her lips back to expose her extended canines, Keiko hissed.

Frankie elbowed me. "This your new girlfriend or somethin'? I see you lowered your standards, dragon."

I grabbed Keiko around the waist as she leaped at the fae woman—who clearly had a death wish—and held her tight. Marissa and Keiko had more in common than I thought. "This is the equivalent of my little sister. Impulsivity seems to be a common theme among younger siblings."

I set Keiko down away from Frankie, holding her back by the shoulders. "Keiko, stop. I will handle this. Trust me."

Tears filled her big, dark eyes as she looked up at me. The sight of her pain broke my heart. Her voice came out in a whisper, "I can't lose him, Nic. I just can't."

"I won't let that happen," I promised.

I didn't know if I could keep that promise, but I knew I would give my life to save his.

She nodded and swiped at her eyes. "But if...if anything does happen, promise that you won't get in my way."

That was one I knew I could keep. "I promise."

As I turned back to Frankie, the front windows exploded inward with a deafening boom. Glass and wood shards flew across the gym as an inferno erupted, engulfing everything in flames.

CHAPTER 25

Dominic

Instinctively, I threw myself in front of Keiko, but the force of the blast knocked me off my feet. I shielded my face and landed hard on my shoulder before rolling backward. Years of training helped me avoid any further injuries. Dust and debris rained down all around me.

When the explosion finally settled, I coughed and waved the dust away from my face. The ringing in my ears hadn't died down yet, but the lack of flying debris meant the worst was over. Unless the entire building collapsed. Fuck. We needed to get out of here.

Of all the potential setups, I never expected Ichiro to bomb a building. Just like the poison at The Morning Grind, this hands-off method wasn't his style, even if there was no doubt he was trying to kill me. While the fire itself wouldn't do much to harm me, a well-placed, well-timed bomb would have ended me for sure. I ground my teeth together. He'd have to try harder.

The dust was so thick, I couldn't see more than a couple of feet around me. "Keiko, Frankie, are you both okay?" I called out.

The fae woman groaned somewhere to my left. "I'm alive. Unfortunately."

More groans and grunts came from the other side of the gym, but none of the voices were Keiko's.

I scrambled to my feet. We had been standing close together, so she couldn't have ended up far from me. "Keiko, answer me."

I squinted through the dust, my pulse thumping erratically. Keiko was the toughest badass I knew, with magic and abilities no one else in the world had. She could survive anything.

So why wasn't she answering me?

The dust was slowly settling, allowing me to see farther. Beams from the ceiling had fallen across the gym and created a maze just to get to the street. The rest of the gym was a crumbling, burning mess.

"Nic." The rasp in Keiko's voice whipped me around fast. She lay on the ground taking ragged breaths. A piece of splintered wood longer than my arm speared through her chest.

Oh, gods.

I fell to my knees beside her and grabbed the end of the wood, ready to pull it free. Frankie's hand stopped me. When I met her gaze, she shook her head. "Won't matter. Wood to the heart's lethal to her kind, like an allergy. Removin' it will just speed it up."

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I stared at the fae woman, stunned. Her knowing the truth about Keiko's nature wasn't altogether surprising given her connections and fae senses, but what she said meant Keiko was dying.

"Nic..." her rattling breath snagged my attention. Blood dripped from the corner of her mouth and down her cheek to the floor. "Stop him... Save Rin."

Cold steel wrapped around my heart. If she died, then I was going to lose the closest thing I had to family. She was my family, the little sister I'd always wanted. There was no way I could let that sadistic asshole take her or Rin away from me.

As soon as Keiko had entered my life, I knew I would do anything to protect her. Through every scraped knee, every hurt feeling, I had been there to dry her tears and pick her back up again. We had even dealt with an injury involving wood before. We'd both been so young then. So young and so foolish.

I drew my eyebrows together as the memory strengthened. Taking risks I shuddered to think about now, I'd accidentally shot her in the leg with an arrow during a training session. It had gone clean through her thigh and thunked into the wall behind her.

Yes, I'd been aiming at her, but her reflexes were faster than lightning. The arrow should have missed her completely, but she'd been distracted.

While the hit to her leg wouldn't have been fatal like a strike to her heart was, I'll never forget the look on Keiko's face as she crumbled to the ground. Her screams of agony still haunted my nightmares.

But it was what came next that widened my eyes now.

I'd inspected the injury, which should have healed by then. Instead, it was inflamed, streaks of red spreading outward from the wound like a severe infection. I'd never seen anything like it, but I knew she needed more help than I knew how to give.

I'd slipped an arm under her legs to pick her up, but she'd panicked in pain-induced delirium and bit me—hard. She'd realized her mistake and let go, licking my blood from her lips. We'd both stared in confusion, then awe as the angry red streaks faded away and the hole stitched itself back together before disappearing completely.

Kenzo and his idiotic friends had burst into the training room then and in the usual brawl that followed, I'd completely forgotten about the incident until now.

From the little research I had on vampires, I knew that blood could heal most of their wounds, just not from wood. As Frankie had said, it was like an allergy to their kind, the way iron was to fae or silver to shifters.

For whatever reason, my blood had worked against wood then.

I prayed it would be enough now.

The other gym members caught in the blast had already made their way outside or were focused on getting there. We were alone in the back with plenty of debris to hide what I was about to do.

My fangs elongated as I brought my wrist to my mouth. I punctured through to the artery, then held my wrist to her mouth, encouraging her to drink.

As soon as the first drop of blood hit her tongue, her eyes flew open. She gripped my arm tight as she sucked fervently from my wrist.

With my other arm, I pulled the wood free from her chest. She grunted against my wrist but made no other sound to express pain. She was a tough little thing. Ichiro had made sure of that.

My jaw clicked as I clenched it. If the old man thought he could take my chosen family away from me, he was sorely mistaken. The gaping wound on Keiko's stomach stitched itself together as she drank. It worked.

"Well, I'll be damned," Frankie's gravelly voice came out half-whispered.

When the wound was fully closed, I tried to pull my arm away. "That's enough, K."

She growled and glared up at me, her irises tinged red.

Fuck.

The bloodlust had kicked in. She would not let go without a fight, which meant one or both of us ending up in severe pain. Most likely me.

"Keiko, let go," I said more forcefully, tugging at my arm.

Her nails dug into my arm as she held tight.

Jou roared in my mind, rising to the surface and ready to fight her off. I knew she could see him flashing in my eyes, yet she still held tight, growling against my wrist. She was lost to instinct.

A purple spark streaked from Frankie's fingertip to Keiko, whose whole body seized for a moment.

As soon as the jolt subsided, Keiko let my arm go, and I fell backward. Her eyes,

dark once again, widened as she wiped at the blood around her lips. "Shit. Sorry, Nic."

Frankie blew across her fingertip like it was a smoking gun. "Still got it."

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"Thank you," I said to the fae woman. "Can I trust you to keep this between us?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You're askin' me, of all people? I can keep a secret. You have my word. This stays between us."

I nodded, relieved. A fae's word was absolute.

"But like you said earlier, we need to get outta here in case another bomb goes off."

After helping Keiko to her feet and making sure she wouldn't immediately collapse, we climbed through the wreckage and out the remains of the front door, now a mere memory. Across the street, a familiar face caught my attention—Kenzo. He was speaking into his phone and flipped me off as soon as he noticed me watching him. Then he disappeared around a corner.

Frowning, I considered his presence. There was no way he could pull off something of this magnitude. Not without fucking it up somehow. Although some might consider the fact I was walking out alive as a pretty big fuck up.

My phone dinged and I pulled it from my pocket.

He's in the same lab, read Aaron's text message. Meet me there ASAP.

I stilled, a deadly calm washing over me. Nearly killing Keiko to get to me was the last straw. Once we freed Rin, I would accept the old man's challenge and destroy him.

No more waiting.

CHAPTER 26

Dominic

After getting Keiko back to her place for a shower and, with any luck, some rest, I drove to the lab. I didn't tell her I was leaving; she would only try to follow me.

Unlike the night before, I gave zero fucks if anyone saw me at the lab now. I would make everyone present pay for what they'd done. Not just to Rin, but to all the dragons involved. At the very least, they'd allowed these atrocities to continue.

Ignoring the guard post and barrier gate, I threaded my motorcycle through the gate arm gap and sped toward the lab's front door. My tires screeched in protest as I slid to a halt. I removed my helmet and stalked toward the door.

Alarms had blared the moment I'd first ridden past the gate, and several pairs of boots thudded toward me. I ignored it all, focused solely on my task—Rin.

Before I could rip the front door from its hinges, three security guards with a death wish closed in, surrounding me.

"Stop!" the man facing me barked out. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

I met his gaze and relished the resulting look of fear as he met his end. He raised his gun to shoot, but it was too late.

As their bullets raced toward me, Jou ripped from the tattoo on my back in a blaze of fury. The bullets slammed into my dragon-hardened skin and clattered to the ground. My dragon roared and dove at the guard confronting me.

I paid the others no heed as I entered the building. Behind me, the bullets and screams faded.

Because it was still normal business hours, more people would be inside that I would have to face. Good for my sake and my need for revenge, but a shame for them. I would kill any who confronted me for their role in this nightmare.

Heat and rumbling against my back announced Jou had taken care of the guards. He was eager for more bloodshed. The three outside had only scratched the surface of his desire for vengeance.

A man in a lab coat emerged from a room just ahead of me. His eyes widened as he took in the two raging beasts thundering toward him.

Before he fled, or tried to at any rate, I had him pinned to the wall by the throat. "Where is Rin Sato?" I growled, my voice low and raw as my fangs elongated. His fear was like nectar—each terrified gasp fanned the bloodlust surging through my veins, a primal call that tempted me to take a taste.

For a moment, I let that familiar hunger rise within, urging me to let go completely, to let the beast inside take over. But I didn't give in. Even as the violent craving throbbed with every beat of my heart, I fought it back. I clung to the cold, calculated part of me that had learned to control this monstrous power that came with the dragonbond.

The man gurgled and tugged at my hand in vain. I loosened my grip only slightly, just enough to allow him to speak.

"Number four," he gasped out.

With a jerk of my wrist, I broke his neck. His body slumped to the ground, a last

testament to my resolve. I stared down at him as the feeling of satisfaction intermingled with a subtle sorrow. It was a better death than he deserved.

I approached the fourth door and looked through the small window. My breath caught in my throat as the scene inside unfolded like a nightmare.

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There, strapped to a cold metal table, lay Rin. Tubes snaked into his body, and I knew from the notes we'd found that they would force the blue liquid into his veins. His chest rose and fell in an uneven rhythm, while vast swaths of his skin were charred black as if seared by an unrelenting inferno.

He wasn't healing.

"Found you."

I whirled to face Keiko, my heart hammering as I angled my body to block the view inside the room. I couldn't let her see what Ichiro had done. "What are you doing here? I told you to rest."

Suspicion crept into her expression, and her gaze darted from me to the window. "I knew you were going somewhere as soon as you got that text at Subliminal. Is he in there?" Her tone was both accusatory and desperate, a blend that made my stomach twist.

I hesitated. I hadn't planned on answering her. Not honestly, anyway. But Keiko knew me better than anyone. To her eyes, every flicker of guilt, every hidden dread, was etched on my face like scars. It was as if she could read the tumult inside me as clearly as words in a book.

Her eyes narrowed. "Nic, move out of my way."

There was no point in trying to hide him now. I didn't know how long we had until that monstrous machine roared back to life. The thought made my pulse spike, my

mind screaming for immediate action. We needed to get him out. I moved away from the window and steeled myself for her reaction.

Standing on her tiptoes to see through, she stared with wide eyes as her brain processed the sight. Without another glance at me, she yanked at the door handle. It was locked.

"Rin!" She pounded on the glass. "Baby, hold on!"

Multiple clicks echoed down the hallway as all the doors unlocked simultaneously. Either the gods were finally getting involved or Aaron had arrived. My money was on the feline.

When Keiko pulled at the handle this time, the door swung open. She raced to Rin's side and clasped his face between her hands. His eyes remained closed, his body limp. "Baby! Wake up, babe. It's me."

Belatedly, I noticed the machine was whirring with activity again, forcing that mystery liquid into my best friend's body. I tore the needle from his arm, but the blue liquid that had already entered his veins pulsed beneath his skin.

Rin's dragon, Hayairyu, ripped from his body with a thunderous roar and climbed into the air, a trail of smoke in his wake. Across Rin's right pec, only a raw red mark existed where the tattoo had been.

Oh fuck.

His dragon was untethered.

Without that connection, Rin wouldn't be able to control Hayai. No one could. The tattoo that had bound the dragon's soul to Rin's led to the beast's instinctual need for

self-preservation. Killing the host meant death for the dragon too, which was why Ichiro rarely killed one of our own.

Now, nothing would keep the beast from killing his host if he so desired.

The untethered dragon dove toward us, unable to tell friend from foe in his fractured state of mind. I threw myself in front of Keiko and Rin. My dragon-hardened skin could take the brunt of the assault, but it would hurt like a motherfucker.

Jou crashed into him before flames licked my skin, sending both dragons hurtling toward the ground in a shower of sparks and searing flames. Their semi-translucent forms appeared to ripple through the fierce heat of the fire dancing across their scales.

Although Hayai was a massive beast, bigger than Jou, my dragon was still deadlier. His razor-sharp claws found purchase in Hayai's side, and the bigger dragon crumbled beneath the onslaught, barely lifting his head in defiance. Whatever he'd endured here had weakened him significantly.

Keiko tore at Rin's restraints with frantic, clawed fingers, trying to shred through steel like it was paper. Blood smeared her hands. With a frustrated hiss, she stopped tearing, only to slap him. Hard.

"Wake. The. Fuck. Up," she snarled through her tears. Slaps punctuated each word, every crack of her palm against his face echoing in the cold, lifeless room.

For a second, I thought she'd done it. His eyelids fluttered open, and his dilated gaze drifted to Keiko's. His lips curled into a ghost of a smile before his eyelids slipped shut again.

He released an exhale. Shaky. Rattling...

Final.

This time, he didn't inhale.

My heart stuttered to a stop.

"No, no, no," Keiko choked out, gripping his face between her shaking hands. "Don't you dare leave me." Her voice cracked on the last word. "Rin. Please."

A cold, crushing weight settled in my chest. Rin—the man I'd called a brother, the one who had fought at my side, laughed with me, bled for me—was...

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A ragged gasp tore through the silence.

My muscles went rigid, every nerve on high alert. Keiko's breath hitched beside me, but I didn't look at her. I was locked onto Rin, holding my breath as I analyzed every shallow rise of his chest, every flicker of movement. He continued to breathe.

Oh, thank fuck. He was alive—for now.

But my relief was short-lived. From the way his body barely moved and the deathly pallor of his skin, I knew he wasn't out of the woods yet.

How much time did we have before things took a turn for the worse?

Jou let out a whine behind me, a raw, keening sound that sent a chill down my spine.

I turned just in time to see Hayai convulse, the flames along his serpentine body flickering like dying embers. His brilliant scales dulled, and the fire within him snuffed out. As his body crumbled into ash, his presence vanished from the air as if he'd never been here at all.

A knot formed in my stomach.

Hayai was gone.

Dragons weren't supposed to die. Their spirits were nearly eternal, bound to us through blood and ink in ways no one fully understood and preserved in between bondings once the host passed away. But Rin had been pushed too far—his body

breaking, his spirit fading—and Hayai had paid the ultimate price.

Jou pressed his snout to the dragon-shaped ashes and let out a soft, mournful rumble that vibrated through my ribs.

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to breathe, to focus, even as something dark and vicious inside me twisted at the sight. The grief was nothing compared to the rage that curled hot and hungry in my gut.

Ichiro didn't just torture Rin. He destroyed a dragon. He took something ancient and sacred and beautiful and snuffed it out like it meant nothing. And losing one's dragon was like losing a piece of one's soul. I couldn't imagine the pain Rin would feel when he woke up.

But as unfair as it might be, this was not the time to grieve and rage. I couldn't afford to lose my head, not just yet. Not while Rin still needed me. But the moment I had that soulless son of a bitch in front of me, I'd make sure he understood what it felt like to be powerless. To lose everything.

Because I wasn't just going to kill my grandfather.

I was going to make him fear me.

Aaron slid to a halt just outside the door, panting, sweat beading across his forehead. His eyes quickly took in the scene before his lips pressed together in a tight line. "I've opened all the captives' doors and helped out those I could, but we've got incoming. A dozen, at least, and heavily armed."

And that development was exactly why we preferred well-thought-out plans to today's impulsive yet necessary action. Our time was up.

"We need to move." My voice was steady, though colder than I meant it to be. But emotion wouldn't save Rin—action would.

Keiko picked herself off Rin's chest, wiping her tears away. For a moment, I saw the vulnerable, broken version of her. The part of her that wanted to shatter into grief. The part that rarely—if ever—surfaced.

Then years of training kicked in. Her face hardened, her shoulders rolled back. When she met my gaze, there was nothing but the inevitable.

Death had arrived.

"I will drain them all."

I nodded. "Go."

I broke the steel restraints and lifted Rin's limp—but thankfully still breathing—form and slung him over my shoulder, the fading heat of Hayai's ashes scattering beneath my feet. He deserved better.

Dark shadows swirled around Keiko's ankles, then she slipped out the door, silent as a wraith. Aaron was right behind her.

Shouts of surprise and pain followed only a moment later.

Jou let out a final, grief-filled roar at the other dragon's ashes before launching himself in front of me. A shield of fiery fury protecting me and Rin.

With a heavy heart and step, I followed the trail of blood and screams.

CHAPTER 27

Bree

I had never been one for long showers, but I hadn't spent so much time in the ocean since we'd first arrived on land, either. For once, I'd even used warm water to soothe my aching muscles.

Sure, I'd gotten a ride across the ocean in a whale's mouth, but the stress of my near marriage to Zephyrion had left my muscles stiff. Not to mention all the time with and beatings from the sea witch.

Feeling like a new woman—albeit with random patches of purple scales shimmering along my arms—I rejoined Calvin and Marissa in the living room. They sat side by side on the small couch that also moonlighted as my bed.

Finley had passed out almost immediately in his tank when we'd gotten home. The poor little guy might have been a magical powerhouse, but he was also young and tiny. His body needed some time to recover after his heroic rescue.

I needed to get him something super special as a thank you. Maybe some fresh crab meat instead of canned.

First things first.

"I think it's about time I made things right with Frankie," I announced.

Marissa continued typing something on her phone. "I don't know. She's probably going to say she never wants to see you again."

My heart dropped like a stone into the pit of my stomach. "Really?"

Not that I would blame her. I had lied to her, made her think I was saving the gym and her home, only to do the complete opposite and then ghost her. Never wanting to see me again was the best I could hope for.

"No, you dork." Marissa glanced up from her phone with an amused smirk. "She's going to smack you over the head for ever thinking that."

"But I?—"

"No buts, Bree." She set her phone down. This was getting serious. "You have this weird black-and-white thinking with this stuff. Frankie may be hurt, but she's like family. She's probably long since forgiven you, if she was even mad to begin with."

"She's right," Calvin added. "Although, I wouldn't put it past Frankie to make you do extra jobs for her for a while."

"Oh, for sure." Marissa nodded, sending her red curls bouncing. "And don't even think of asking me to help."

The wizard elbowed her in the side.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Okay fine. I'll help. But only between classes."

Relief crashed into me so hard it left me momentarily lightheaded. I had prepared myself for rejection, for the cold finality of a burned bridge. Instead, I got this. A teasing, almost exasperated certainty from two people I knew I could trust.

I could point out that Marissa also ghosted Frankie and should share any extra tasks by default, but it had been at my behest. I couldn't risk anyone finding out where

Marissa and I had gone. Opening up a line of communication with the fae woman when we left would have made it far too easy for her, or anyone else, to track us down.

We had gone into full incognito mode.

"Okay, so where can I find Frankie these days?" I asked.

"Her usual haunt," Calvin said.

I frowned. "Subliminal? She still visits even though the Satos took it?"

"Oh, I forgot you don't know. Frankie manages the place still. As far as I know, though, the Satos still own it."

"I told you we should have let Cal keep us up-to-date." Marissa shot me a pointed look. "Information is power."

Maybe so, but the temptation to return had been too great for me. I had to cut all ties to stay away. I'd given the wizard strict orders not to mention anything about the Gifted world, and also not to give into any of Marissa's bribes upon pain of death.

Just kidding. Unlike with my little sister, I knew I didn't have to threaten him.

But my brain was stuck on what Calvin had said. Frankie working for Ichiro Sato was as likely as the tide refusing to rise. She hated that man with a fiery passion that could dry up the oceans.

There was only one way to find out what in the cursed currents was going on.

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"To Subliminal it is then," I said with more confidence than I felt. Despite my trust in their words about Frankie, I was nervous to see her again. I hated not knowing for sure how she felt. "I need to warn her about the GIG."

Calvin nodded and stood. "I'll head into the office to see if I can dig up anything else about what they're planning. Your intel has given me a few ideas about what to look for."

"Thanks, Cal." I grabbed my bag from the hook by the door and turned to say goodbye to Marissa, only to find her right behind me. I jumped and nearly dropped my bag. "Seriously, Rissa? I thought you'd stopped trying to scare me after we left Subliminal."

She snickered. "Consider the hiatus over."

"You headed to class?" I slung my bag over my shoulder so I wouldn't risk dropping it again.

"I'm coming with you."

I glanced at my phone's clock. "I thought you had class soon."

She shrugged. "I probably do."

I gave her a hard look. "You need to?—"

"There is a zero percent chance you're talking me out of not seeing Frankie again."

Today. Now." She crossed her arms and gave me a look that nearly made me cower. Impressive. "I can miss one day of class."

While I was sure she had missed more than one day this month alone—maybe even this week—I also knew there was no swaying my sister when she put her foot down like this. Plus, she'd told me to let her deal with her own mistakes and consequences.

I sighed. "Fine. Off to the gym we go."

Calvin's phone buzzed as we all left the house. "Oh, shit..." His voice dropped, eyes widening as he looked up at us.

Something about his expression sent a spike of unease through me. "What?"

"The GIG just sent out an emergency alert. Someone attacked Subliminal. Bombed it."

I barely registered the words before he held up his phone. The screen glowed with a single image—a ruined building, swallowed beneath smoke and debris.

My heart slammed into my ribs.No.

Even with the destruction obscuring the view, I knew that place like the scales on my arms. It had been my home. Mysanctuary. The place I had spent nearly every waking moment in for over a decade and it was just... gone. Obliterated.

It couldn't be.

"What in the deep abyss..." My shaking voice barely sounded like my own.

I forced myself to swallow, to breathe, even as the questions battered my skull. Why

would anyone bomb a gym? Was the GIG behind this?

And more terrifyingly—who had been inside?

Dread shot through me, turning my veins to ice, but my brain refused to fully process what I was seeing.

Frankie.

If something had happened to her—if she was in that wreckage—I would never forgive myself. I should have never run away. At the very least, I should have faced her. Tried to make things right long before now.

Oh, goddess, was I too late?

By the time the three of us reached Subliminal—what was left of it—the police had blocked off the street, only allowing emergency personnel through. A crowd gathered around the barricades and mostly blocked the gym from view, but smoke and dust still drifted from the ruins.

"I can get us closer," Marissa said. "Follow me."

With a little help from her sharp elbows and winning smile, she led Calvin and me to the front of the crowd.

I gripped the barrier, my eyes searching through the rubble for anything that might tell me what happened to Frankie. If she was in there, hurt, or worse...

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I swallowed hard. No, I couldn't think like that. She was a fighter. A survivor. If anyone could walk away from a bomb, it would be Frankie.

"Do you think I should ask one of them where she is?" Marissa tilted her head toward the police officers who were guarding the street. Normally, I would have assumed she wanted to flirt with the handsome men, but genuine concern marked her expression.

Before I could answer, a gruff voice behind me asked, "You guys looking for Frankie?"

"Hey Vince, good to see you in one piece, man," Calvin said to the older man and shook his hand.

Vincent was one of the gym's longest-standing regulars and a wolf shifter. As glad as I was to see him alive and well, despite the layer of dust and soot covering his tanned skin and clothes, I needed to know if Frankie was alive. "Is she okay?"

His smile fell and my stomach along with it. "I told her it was a bad idea to go there. But you know her. Never listens to the likes of me."

Marissa gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes glistening. "She's dead?"

Sound faded away as the world all but collapsed around me. A hollow, aching numbness spread through my chest, leaving me weightless and sinking all at once. I might not have set the bomb, but I felt like my selfish actions had led to this. Had gotten one of my closest friends killed.

More than a friend. I'd lost a sister.

If only I'd confided in her fully, treated her as an actual friend, we might have devised a way out of the mess that was my life. Now, I'd never have the opportunity to make things right.

I'd never hear her cackle at something that only she found funny. Never laugh as she howled over some trashy reality show. Never have another late-night conversation about nothing and everything.

My eyes and nose tingled, my throat locking up as grief curled around me, suffocating, crushing, all-consuming.

"Oh Luna, no. I'm not sure anything can kill that woman." Vincent chuckled, shaking dust from his hair like he hadn't just shattered my world again in the span of a heartbeat.

A moment passed, my mind sluggish, refusing to catch up.

"She's at The Tippy Cauldron."

His words slammed into me. The suffocating weight vanished. My lungs jerked in a ragged inhale, my heart stuttering painfully against my ribs.

Frankie was alive.

Alive!

A sound wrenched from my throat—half-laugh, half-sob. I didn't know whether to slap Vincent for making me think she was dead or hug him until his ribs cracked.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Vince!" Marissa gave him a small shove. "You just scared the absolute shit out of me."

I blinked. Not at the cursing—I was over that—but at the sheer force behind her words. The raw panic in her voice made my stomach drop all over again. I was on one heck of an emotional rollercoaster.

Marissa caught my look while brushing tears from her cheeks. "Oh, don't even. You were as scared as I was. I just voiced it."

Vincent rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry 'bout that. I just meant she doesn't handle her booze well, and after this, she's going to drink the place dry."

"With that heart attack out of the way," Calvin shot a pointed look at Vincent who grimaced, "I'm going to head into the office. I'll let you know if I find anything on...that other topic."

As the wizard slipped back through the crowd, Vincent edged away from us.

"Oh, no, you don't." Marissa caught his arm and dragged him closer. "You owe us a drink after that. Lead the way."

CHAPTER 28

Bree

The Tipsy Cauldron wasn't anything special besides being a semi-safe place for Gifted people. The main floor was for anyone, but the second floor was only for us Gifteds. As with most places within which the GIG allowed commingling—even if separated by a floor and unbeknownst to humans—magic was prohibited. Just in case the random non-Gifted human snuck upstairs.

I'd only been inside once before when I'd first turned twenty-one, but nothing had changed. The bouncer barring the staircase at the back looked us over then waved us up, recognizing us as Gifted.

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Upstairs was nearly identical to below—a long mahogany bar top stretched along the right side, and a smattering of tables provided more than enough seating even during peak hours. The wooden floor was sticky and made gross sounds as we walked. I guess keeping it that way was a simple deterrent for any sneakery.

The lack of patrons made it easy to locate Frankie. That and the fact that she was the only one covered in dirt and soot and swearing up a storm.

"An' then, then they raised their fists," she said, raising her drink in the air like a demonstration. "You get that, Saul?"

The bartender at the opposite end of the bar was busy drying a glass with his towel. "As I told you a million times already, Frankie, I ain't listening."

"Bah, don't matter." The fae woman waved a hand like she was shooing him away and almost lost her balance on the stool. She righted herself and drained her glass in one gulp.

Marissa and I exchanged a worried look. Drunk Frankie wasn't someone super enjoyable to be around. She could be downright mean in this state, as I'd learned the hard way after being on the receiving end many years ago. Thankfully, it was a rare experience.

"Maybe we should wait until she's sobered up," Marissa whispered, clearly having the same thought as me.

Unfortunately, Frankie must have heard her. She turned her head just enough to see

us over her shoulder. "Hey, you guys, c'mere. I gotta story for ya."

Her gaze swiveled back to her empty glass. She blinked at it once, glanced down at the ground, then checked her pockets. "Saul! Someone drank my fuckin' drink!" she hollered down the bar.

"It was you, Frankie. You drank your own godsdamn drink, and that's the last one you're getting." Saul sighed and met us as we approached. "Please tell me you're friends with her and getting her outta here before I gotta throw her out."

"Uh, yep," I said with a grimace. "We'll take it from here."

"I ain't goin' no place, Saul." Frankie let out a loud belch. "I'm gonna live right here on this shit-stained stool from now on. Comfier than it looks." She patted the side of the stool affectionately.

I really hoped she didn't mean what she said literally. Any part of it.

"Frankie." I rested my hand on her shoulder and felt her stiffen. "It's me."

"This a knock-knock joke? Me who?"

"Bree."

She turned to look at me. Squint at me was a more accurate statement. Her eyes were bloodshot, and soot smeared across her weathered face and settled in her wrinkles. A frizzy mess of brown and white curls was barely restrained with a few plastic straws acting like hair sticks.

She was a disaster.

Her gaze drifted down to my feet, then back up to my face, slow and deliberate, like she was taking me apart piece by piece. "Saul, we gotta problem."

Saul grunted. "You've got a problem. I've got work to do."

Frankie didn't even acknowledge him. Her eyes stayed locked on me—not angry, not relieved. Just unreadable.

I swallowed, my throat tight. "I'm hoping to fix the problem."

Frankie's expression didn't change, but her next word landed like a punch to the gut.

"No."

I blinked at her matter-of-fact tone. A single syllable, cutting through the air like a blade. That was it? She wasn't even going to let me explain? No chance to apologize? She must have been beyond mad.

"No?" I repeated, feeling foolish for coming here. For even thinking she'd forgive me.

"You can't fix my problem."

The finality in her tone hit harder than I expected, cracking something in my chest. Marissa and Calvin were wrong. I had spent weeks agonizing over what to say, but none of it mattered. Not to Frankie. Not anymore.

"Why not?" Marissa asked.

Frankie yelled and stumbled off her stool. She tripped over her foot and would have crashed to the floor if my reflexes hadn't kicked in. I grabbed her by the arm and kept

her upright.

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"There's two of you!" Frankie shook my hand off, then groaned and clutched her head. "What'd ya put in that last glass, Saul?"

"I shoulda put in water," Saul muttered under his breath. "Or arsenic."

"Frankie, it's us. Bree and Marissa." I was determined to say what I needed to say, even if she didn't want to hear it. "We're back."

"Surprise!" Marissa grinned. "Vince tagged along to buy us a drink. Isn't that so nice of him?"

Still looking sheepish, Vincent gave Frankie a quick wave before heading to the other end of the bar, where the bartender had retreated.

She squinted again and moved in closer, peering at my and Marissa's faces. "Man, I gotta hand it t'ya, Saul. Whatever you put in there is makin' these hallucinations look really real."

"Can hallucinations do this?" Marissa leaned forward and tapped her on the nose. "Boop."

After uncrossing her eyes, Frankie looked thoughtful. "Come ta think of it, I dunno."

"They're real, Frankie," Saul called out helpfully.

The fae woman narrowed her eyes, looking at Marissa and me in earnest. Seconds passed, and just when it started to get awkward, she closed her eyes. "Oh, for the love

of the Other."

She snapped her fingers, and a bright purple spark of magic crackled to life. It zipped around her body from head to toe, leaving a faint but dazzling shimmer in its wake. When she opened her eyes again, her irises flashed violet before dimming back to brown. All signs of intoxication were gone.

Fae magic could be so handy.

"Godsdamnit, Frankie!" Saul slapped his towel on the bar before leaning over it. "You know the rules. No magic. None. Zip. Zilch."

"I musta forgot."

"That's the third time today!"

"Yeah? Well, take it up with the dragons. They're the whole reason I'm here." She cackled as he muttered under his breath and returned to cleaning. "Knew that would shut the ol' goat up."

"Frankie."

This time when she met my gaze, her tough exterior cracked. Tears glistened in her eyes. "Damn you for makin' me worry like that, Bree." Her voice was rough, unsteady in a way I had never heard before.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but before I could get a single word out, she caught me in a fierce, bone-crushing hug. Of all the reactions I'd expected, this was not one of them.

Marissa had predicted she'd smack me over the head. And honestly? I had braced for

a good smack. That would have made sense. Hugs did not fit the no-nonsense, sharp-as-nails fae woman I knew.

Yet here she was, clinging to me like she'd thought she'd lost me forever.

I hesitated for only a second before wrapping my arms around her, breathing in the familiar scent of something electric that always clung to her, like the air before a storm. Only now it was tinged with smoke and ash. A lump formed in my throat.

Then another pair of slender arms slipped around us both, and I knew without looking that Marissa had joined in.

I smiled, squeezing them tighter.

For the first time in a long, long while, things felt right again.

Until a fourth pair of arms joined the hug, much larger and hairier than the others.

"Damnit, Vince," Frankie mumble-yelled against my shoulder. "This hug ain't for you. Bugger off."

The big arms lifted, and Vincent's grumbles followed him back to his stool.

Poor guy.

When we disentangled ourselves, all a bit more sniffly than before, Frankie shook her finger at Marissa and me. "Don't you ever run off like that again. Either of you. Ya hear me?"

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I nodded. "I'm so sorry for not explaining before we left."

She scoffed and waved a hand. "I don't care what you think you did that would warrant leavin'. We're adults. You'll tell me what you did and we'll fight it out and forget about it. Got it?"

I laughed. "Got it."

"Me too," Marissa chimed in. She scoffed when we both turned to stare at her. "Obviously not the fighting part." Her eyes widened. "But now we need to know—what the hell happened to the gym?"

Frankie groaned and motioned us toward a table. "I swear, those damned dragons are gonna be the death of me."

I gawked at her as we sat. "They tried tokillyou?"

"Me? Bah, no. They know better than to try somethin' that silly." She turned toward Saul and yelled, "Three beers on me."

"Not a chance."

Frankie waved a hand dismissively. "Fine. Water then."

"I don't—" I rubbed my temples, my thoughts tangling like seaweed in a storm. "That doesn't make sense. Who blew up the gym?"

"Oh, that was the dragons."

"But not to kill you?" Marissa asked, her eyebrows pulled together. At least I wasn't the only one not following. "They own the gym. Why destroy it?"

"They were tryin' to get that red dragon of yours," the fae woman said while eyeing me.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Not from embarrassment—well, maybe a little. I wished he were my red dragon. "He's not my—" My brain slammed into a wall of realization. "Wait, what? They tried to kill Nic?"

"You bet yer arse they did." Frankie leaned back in her chair, observing me. "I told you that granddaddy of his is nothin' but bad news."

"But I thought everything was settled after he won the fight?" I asked, though even as I said it, I knew how naïve that sounded. Based on what Dominic had told me, Ichiro would never let things go that easily.

Frankie's expression softened, and that scared me almost more than anything. "A lot's happened since then, kiddo."

My pulse roared in my ears. It was bad enough coming home to find Subliminal reduced to rubble, the place I'd thought was untouchable now nothing but dust. But Dominic's life was in danger again?

By the same man, no less.

I gripped the edge of the table, my nails biting into the wood. How had everything spiraled so fast?

I asked the question I was almost too afraid to ask, "Did he get hurt?"

"Nah. I don't think the old man expected him to either. It was a challenge."

A challenge? That bloodsucking barnacle.

If Ichiro had challenged Dominic, then he must have gotten desperate. They would fight for dominance, and not just over the Sato empire. No, they'd fight for the right to live. Only the winner would walk away still breathing.

I had to get to him. I didn't care what the challenge rules were, if there even were any. Rules didn't matter. Not when Dominic's life was on the line.

I had not fought this hard, lost this much, only to let him die now.

Certainly not before I could tell him how I truly felt about him.

My vision tunneled, the edges of the room blurring as I shoved back my chair. The thought of him bleeding out somewhere, alone, sent a slicing panic through my chest.

"Where are they?" I asked, pushing to my feet so fast I nearly knocked the chair over.

Frankie raised her hands like she was trying to settle a wild animal. Which, honestly, wasn't far off. "Now, hold your fins, kiddo. I know you wanna barge in and help, but these're dragons we're talkin' about. Two ancient, bloodthirsty beasts. They'll rip you apart."

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I barely heard her. The roaring in my ears drowned out everything but my rising panic. I wasn't stupid—I knew what dragons were capable of. I'd seen and felt it firsthand. But that didn't change anything. I'd rather die trying than sit here waiting for the news that Dominic was already gone.

"Where, Frankie?" My words came out hoarse, dangerously close to pleading.

She sighed and rubbed at a smudge on the table, avoiding my eyes. She was stalling. "I'll tell you on one condition."

I clenched my fists, barely suppressing the urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake the answer out of her. "Fine. What?"

"I'm goin' with you." She raised her hand to stop me as I tried to argue. "That's the only way I'm tellin' you."

"Me too." Steel edged Marissa's voice, her arms crossed like she was daring me to fight her on it.

No. No, no, no.

There was no way I could let them come. Not if this was as dangerous as Frankie had just said. It was one thing to throw myself headfirst into danger, but dragging them with me? Letting more people I loved bleed for my mistakes?

But I didn't know where to find Dominic. I was wasting time, and time was the one thing I didn't have right now.

I was sure most of the Gifted community was still caught up in the bomb chaos, which meant finding someone else who could tell me where he was would take too long. This infuriating woman was my only shot at getting there before it was too late.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Fine. Deal."

Frankie studied me for a second, her sharp gaze slicing through me as though she could see right into the gears turning in my head. Good thing she couldn't. She nodded. "They'll be at the Sato estate downtown, the one near?—"

I didn't bother to listen to the rest. A map of D.C. flashed in my mind, pinpointing the location instantly. Ten minutes if I ran. Less if I pushed myself.

"Thanks, Frankie."

"Don't thank me yet, kiddo," she said as she moved to stand. "It'll take?—"

"Sleep."

Magic surged from me like a crashing wave, weighty and absolute.

Frankie's eyes fluttered once before her body slumped forward onto the table. Marissa went just as fast, her arms slack, her breath deepening. A moment later, Vincent, Saul, and the other patron followed suit.

The silence that followed felt wrong. Heavy and suffocating.

I hated this.

Using my magic against people I loved felt worse than swallowing glass. Like ripping another piece of myself apart. I knew I was doing exactly what I'd just promised I

wouldn't do—pushing them away and running.

But I had no choice. I was already drowning in guilt; I didn't need to add their blood to the weight of it. I couldn't let them risk themselves this way.

My stomach twisted, and I clenched my jaw. There was no time. I had to move.

"I'm so sorry," I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper. "Really, I am."

I grimaced, turned, and ran.

I was down the stairs and out the door before my brain had fully caught up with my body. The sunlight hit me like a slap, but I didn't let it slow me down. I sprinted onto the street, my heart hammering in my chest.

Minutes. That was all I had before they woke up and were hot on my heels. And if I didn't make those minutes count, I could lose more than just time...

I could lose them, too.

CHAPTER 29

Dominic

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I left Rin in the capable hands of a Gifted doctor I could trust. As much as I could trust anyone outside of my close circle of friends. After Aaron ensured all the captives had escaped and gotten medical care, he and Keiko would take turns staying with Rin. Although I doubted she would leave his side.

I knew they would do whatever was necessary to keep him safe, just as I would.

Then, with fire and fury coursing through my veins, I headed to the Sato estate. My steps echoed down the long hallway, each tap a hangman's drum beat as they counted down my grandfather's last breaths.

If he thought he could stop me now, he was in for a rude fucking awakening.

A man in an all-too-familiar blue tracksuit stepped out of a room up ahead—Kenzo. His upper lip curled into a sneer when he saw me approach. “Well, if it isn't the bastard. Come to lap at Ichiro's?—”

I didn't give him a chance to finish. My hand shot out and gripped his windpipe, my claws extending deep into his skin. With a fast wrench of my wrist, I tore out his throat.

His eyes opened wide as he grabbed at the wound and slumped to the ground. Within moments, a pool of blood had soaked into the bottom of the nearby curtains, and his eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling. A wisp of smoke exited his open mouth and drifted away.

Fucking finally.

Once bonded with a dragon, our throats became our most vulnerable area, which was why we always went straight for it during a fight to the death. While I wished his dragon didn't have to suffer the same fate, it was for the best. Osupipemi was one of the weakest among the fire dragon spirits.

The doors to the training room were closed, but that didn't slow me down. I shoved them open hard enough for them to bang against the walls and strode inside. Normally, I would have taken more precautions and been wary of an ambush. But today, my blood boiled for a fight, and I welcomed any such attempts.

Alas, only one man stood in this room. With his hands clasped casually behind him, he turned to face me. Ichiro, the man who had made my life a living hell simply for existing, stood waiting. His cold eyes locked onto mine with disdain I had known since I was born.

The weight of a thousand unspoken words hung heavy in the blood-tinged air, and charred walls served as memories of training battles going back decades. Nothing could compare to what was about to happen here today.

I'd spent nearly every day since my father's death training in this room, honing my and Jou's skills, pushing past our breaking points again and again under my grandfather's command and my desire to be the best.

Now, he was about to find out just what kind of monster he created.

My voice, calm and low, cut through the silence, "Ichiro Sato, I challenge you to a Trial by Fire."

The High Draconic Council had established the Trials as a last resort measure, a duel to the death, and weren't to be invoked lightly. Every dragon element had a Trial, and some even set its own rules. As usual, the fire dragons followed a simple rule—there

were none.

Should anyone question the legitimacy of a duel after the fact, the Council would call for a legal trial at the next Council meeting. It was a backward process perhaps, but Trials were few and rarely questioned.

“I always knew you’d end up here, challenging me,” he said. “You’re a Sato. It’s in your blood.”

His words were dramatic, referring to his own patricide. He was the only Sato who’d done such a thing.

I didn’t fault Ichiro necessarily. From the stories I’d heard, his father had been more vile than Ichiro. If anything was in our blood, it was the need to stop a tyrant or become one ourselves.

“Why did you do it?” I asked. “Why the pyrocrystals?”

“Why do you think? Power. Control. This world thrives on both, and I will never let anyone break apart or weaken my family again. We will be in control. We will have the power.” His lips curled into a sinister smile. “Well, I will.”

I clenched my fists and relished the sharp prick of my claws, still bloodied from Kenzo’s demise. My dragon prowled within me like a fiery pulse that quickened with my heartbeat. "This ends today, old man. No more games. No more torture. Your death ends it all."

“You’re not ready to face me, boy.”

In a blaze of crimson light, Ichiro’s body ignited as his dragon roared to life. The formidable spirit of Pomï burst from his back in a torrent of flame. An ancient serpent

of fire, he coiled in the air, eyes glowing with a feral hunger. His semi-translucent scales alternated between molten copper and deep ruby.

Every movement was graceful and lethal, a dance that promised nothing less than annihilation. The heat was intense, scorching even against my hardened skin. It felt as if the surrounding air vibrated with the dragon's primordial wrath.

My dragon rose from the depths of my soul to challenge him. Tearing through the surface of my skin, Jou bellowed his defiance as flames burst from his hazy form. I could feel his power, a part of me yet distinctly separate. Ready to fight.

Ready to kill.

The two dragons circled each other in the air, and their battle cries echoed off the walls.

My eyes never left Ichiro's. This wasn't just a fight. This was for my best friend, tortured at the hands of this monster. For my mother, who had died bringing me into a world ruled by this corrupt tyrant. For me, for all the years I had suffered under his shadow. And for Bree, who had sacrificed her home and livelihood to save my life.

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This was the final stand.

Ichiro moved first, a blur of motion as he closed the distance between us. His fist came at me with the force of a battering ram.

But I was ready. I dodged to the side, my body flowing with the enhanced agility of my dragon's spirit. Ichiro's fist grazed my shoulder. I felt the searing heat of his touch, but I didn't let it slow me down.

I countered with a strike aimed at his midsection. He blocked with a forearm, his skin hardened like mine. Sparks flew as our claws met. The impact battered through my bones. I launched a barrage of punches and kicks, each one fueled by years of pent-up rage.

This man had stolen my childhood and beaten me senseless too many times to count. He turned me into a killer—a monster just like him.

Eager to please my grandfather while growing up, I'd committed crimes too heinous to speak. Atrocities against Gifted and non-Gifted alike. I'd sold my soul to the Devil long ago for a chance to take Ichiro down, and now I would collect what was mine.

Only one of us would walk out of here alive, or neither of us. If I were bound for Hell today, I'd make sure he was at my side.

Ichiro's experience showed in every fluid move as he matched me blow for blow. He was a master of martial arts. His style a brutal, efficient blend of strikes designed to cripple and kill. But I was younger, faster, and driven by something more than skill. I

was driven by the need to protect those I loved.

Above us, the dragons clashed, their fiery bodies colliding in a spectacular display of power. Each time they struck, the air crackled with energy and a burst of flames, and the floor beneath us trembled. Jou's thoughts mirrored my own, his eagerness to tear Ichiro's dragon apart as fierce as my desire to end the man before me.

Ichiro fainted left and spun low. His leg swept towards mine.

I jumped, but he expected it. Pain exploded in my side as his fist connected with my ribs. I staggered back, gasping for breath.

He was on me in an instant, his fist connecting with my chest.

The force of the blow sent me crashing against a wall, and the impact knocked the wind out of me. I staggered sideways, vision swimming. I heard my dragon roar in pain as Pomï clamped his jaws around Jou's neck, the flames intensifying.

I struggled to my feet. Blood dripped from various wounds. Every breath was a sharp, agonizing reminder of my limits.

But I wouldn't stop. I couldn't. Not until Ichiro was on the ground, beaten and broken. As lifeless as Kenzo.

I ignored the pain and surged forward, channeling every ounce of my strength into a single, devastating punch aimed at his head.

Ichiro caught my wrist. His grip was like iron. As his eyes burned into mine, I saw the anger and resentment that had been brewing in him for years, chipping away at his soul.

"You're weak, Dominic," he hissed, twisting my arm with a force that made my bones creak in protest. "You'll always be weaker than me, thanks to your father. You can thank him when you join him in Hell."

I wrenched my arm free and threw a wild, desperate punch. It connected with his jaw, and he stepped back.

He recovered quickly, his eyes narrowing as he wiped the blood from his mouth. "Pathetic," he spat, then he was on me again, faster and more vicious than before. He slammed me into the ground and pinned me. His claws dug into my throat, cutting off my air.

"Rin was most helpful confirming my suspicions about you." Ichiro grinned as my expression betrayed my disbelief. There was no way Rin would have talked. "Oh, he tried to resist, which was quite enjoyable to witness and made for a remarkable photograph. But I learned long ago to keep a witch capable of mind control close and paid well."

His dragon loomed above us, his jaws wide and ready to strike. Jou was trapped in his hold like I was. His flames flickered weakly as he struggled in vain against the crushing force of Ichiro's will.

My grandfather leaned in close, his breath hot against my face. "This is where it ends, Dominic. You die here beneath my hands, just like your father did."

Just like my father...?

His words sent a jolt of shock through me. My father had died in a robbery gone wrong. That was what Ichiro had told me when I was just a kid and attending the funeral. I'd never questioned it. I'd never had a reason to. A man rotted in prison for the crime, having pled guilty. My father had just been unlucky that day.

That's what I'd believed for over twenty years.

Only now, once Ichiro had the upper hand, now he came clean?

The fucking coward.

Ichiro grinned as he saw the understanding on my face. "That's right, boy. Your father's death was no accident. I only wish I'd killed him before he ruined my Fumiko with his weak seed."

"Why?" I choked out.

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“As much as it pains me to say, Fumiko—” his breath caught on her name and he cleared his throat. “Fumiko’s blood—my blood runs through you. But your father was turning you against me. I couldn’t let him take what was mine.”

Something inside me...

Snapped. Broke. Ripped apart.

Ichiro tightened his grip on my throat, preparing to rip it out as I had done to Kenzo.

His dragon reared back to deliver the final blow to Jou.

Molten lava enveloped my insides before blasting outward. Steam rose from my skin, and Ichiro snarled in surprised pain. His grip loosened. It wasn’t much, but it was enough.

I twisted in my grandfather’s grip and used the momentum to break free. I drove my elbow into his face, the crack audible. He staggered back, blood spurting from his broken nose. I leaped to my feet and pressed the attack.

Writhing and thrashing, my dragon responded in kind. Flames erupted from his mouth as he broke free from Pomï’s grasp.

I tackled Ichiro against the wall and pinned him there with my claws at his throat. The tables had turned. Checkmate.

"Do it." Ichiro glared at me, defiant to the end. Blood flowed from his nose and

dripped off his chin. "Finish it."

I hesitated. Crimson drops seeped between my claws from the deep gouges in his throat.

I wanted to kill him. I needed to end his reign of terror and take control of the empire he had built on the backs of innocents. But as I stared into his eyes, emptiness stared back. The hollow shell of a man who had lost everything—his daughter, his humanity, his soul.

He wanted this, longed to die. He had nothing left to live for.

Dozens of dragons and their hosts had suffered because of his drug. Because of his greed. My closest friend had been tortured, his dragon gone forever.

No one should have to suffer from Ichiro's selfish, inhumane desires ever again. He deserved to die. I gripped his throat tighter, ready to end him once and for all.

But then I heard her voice, a shout that cut through the chaos, filled with desperation and fear.

"Stop!"

CHAPTER 30

Bree

My command whipped out with the force of a hurricane. As soon as the word left my lips, both men and their dragons froze. Dominic's claws remained embedded within Ichiro's throat, and a trail of blood slipped down the old man's neck.

Merciful tsunami, that was close.

I'd arrived just as Ichiro had pinned Dominic and dropped the bomb. Well, technically, his second bomb of the day, but this one was metaphorical.

He'd killed Dominic's father. What a terrible thing to do to his own son-in-law and his grandson, leaving him without either parent. He was a disgusting human being.

But as much as I despised Ichiro for everything he'd done to Dominic, Frankie, and everyone else he'd hurt—which I was sure was a long list—death wasn't the right way to go. Not by Dominic's hand at least.

I ran beneath the two dragons, locked in a similar frozen brawl as the men, and pulled Dominic's hand away from Ichiro. My touch released the hold my magic had on him, and he stepped back. His eyes widened as he took me in, as if in disbelief that I actually stood before him.

I wasn't sure how to read the underlying emotion beneath that. Whether he was happy to see me or wanted to punch me in the face. I wouldn't have blamed him if he did punch me, but I hoped he'd give me the chance to explain first.

Just not yet.

"I know how it feels to lose someone you love," I said and stepped closer. "And I know you want revenge. But killing him is exactly what he wants you to do to prove that you're just like him."

I rested my hand against his chest, over his heart. "But Nic, you're not like him, and he doesn't deserve your guilt."

The corners of his lips quirked up. "You think I'll feel guilty?"

Goddess, he was impossible.

"You're a good man, Nic, but you've been forced to make hard decisions to survive. You may not feel it for some time, but yes, you will feel guilty for killing your own blood. You're too damn loyal not to."

His hand closed over mine, but the lines of his jaw moved as he clenched his teeth. "I am the monster he made me to be."

I knew exactly what he meant. I'd believed I'd become a monster to save Dominic—betraying him and Frankie in the process. But the truth was simpler: I did what had to be done to protect the people I loved. His life had come before mine. I understood what he felt, down to my core. But he was wrong.

Dominic was nothing like his grandfather.

"You are your father's son, not his."

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose. I knew he was struggling. "Besides, he only wants you to kill him because it's the coward's way out," I added.

His deep chuckle sent shivers through me, and warmth pooled deep in my core. He was so stupidly sexy. Everything about this man crumbled my defenses and urged me to obey his every command. Which was saying a lot considering I'd swum away from home to avoid following commands.

"Maybe so, but it's been a long time coming. I can't let him hurt anyone else."

"That's exactly why you're not the monster here." I smiled and squeezed his hand. "What if there's a better way?"

His whiskey-hued eyes met mine again and the world fell away. What I wouldn't give to have that gaze on me forever, to claim this man as mine. I wasn't sure he'd ever forgive me enough to give me a chance, and to be honest, I didn't know if I deserved one. Not after the way I left him and ran. Talk about a coward.

His gaze dipped to my mouth, and I resisted the urge to lick my lips. "What other way?"

As difficult as it was to do, I let go of Dominic's hand and stepped back. I looked at Ichiro, still frozen beneath the force of my magic. He stared back at me with something like pure hatred—it went both ways, pal—then I looked at the beast behind him.

I wasn't entirely sure what I had planned when I mentioned another way. I just knew death was too good for Ichiro. The moment our eyes locked, grief struck like a tidal wave—sharp, sudden, and suffocating. A grief that was most definitely not mine.

A small gasp escaped my lips. The dragon was sharing his feelings with me. It was a grief and loss so profound, so deep and eternal, that tears sprang to my eyes. This dragon had lived centuries as a puppet for his human masters. Watched dozens of his brethren tortured and murdered by Ichiro in the name of greed.

Suddenly, I knew what to do.

I looked at Ichiro and spoke, but my words, infused with my siren magic, were for his dragon. "You're no longer bound to Ichiro Sato. No one, human or otherwise, can ever bind you against your will again. You're free."

Freed from Ichiro and my magical hold, the dragon opened its mouth and released a deafening roar, shaking the estate's foundation. I stumbled backward a step, both from the trembling ground and the sheer power emanating from the ferocious beast. My hold on Ichiro and Jou wobbled and released.

Immediately, Dominic's dragon darted between us and the other dragon. He stood in a defensive stance, his back arched like a cat's. The heat radiating from his body made my eyes water.

Ichiro sank to his knees, eyes wide. "No...this cannot be. What have you done?"

As we all watched in some mixture of awe and shock—and probably no small amount of fear on Ichiro's part—the dragon's wispy form solidified. Four clawed paws landed on the ground with a boom, and where I could once see through the dragon to the far wall behind him, now I only saw glistening crimson and copper scales.

He shook his head like a dog shakes his coat, as if relishing a feeling once lost. He bared his razor-sharp teeth in a fierce growl, and molten lava dripped from his lips, sizzling as drops hit the floor. The scent of a struck match filled the air.

I gulped. Dragons were terrifying in their spirit form, but seeing one in the literal flesh? I didn't know how to describe the feeling. And when he turned his gaze on me, my insides went squishy.

Because instead of eyes, flames filled the beast's eye sockets. Even without them, I knew he'd fixed his gaze on me.

There would be no shame in finding out I might have peed my pants a little bit. It would be understandable, althoughsuper embarrassing. Unless I was incinerated right now. Then it wouldn't matter if I had peed.

I really, really hoped I hadn't just made a huge mistake.

Then those twin flames locked on Ichiro and narrowed.

The old man knew he was doomed. Without regard to the dragon protecting Dominic and me, he lurched to his feet and lunged for me, his claws out and ready to shred through my skin like paper.

Before I could even raise an arm to protect myself, the other dragon leaped forward and swallowed Ichiro whole. One crunch—one unusually satisfying crunch—and the man was gone for good.

Frankie was going to be so freaking happy. I grimaced as I remembered how I left her back at the bar. She was also going to be furious at having missed Ichiro's demise. And for using magic against her.

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The dragon's forked tongue flicked out to lick his lips, and those flaming eyes focused on me again.

Uh oh.

Maybe I should have let Frankie come after all, as backup. I hoped Dominic, Jou, and I were strong enough together to stop a rampaging dragon on the loose. We had to be.

Right?

Just when I thought I would follow in Ichiro's crunchy footsteps, I watched this massive beast bow his head before me. My eyebrows shot toward my hairline.

Thank you, a deep and very loud voice rumbled through my skull.

Surprised, I clutched at my head as though that would somehow help.

"What's wrong? What's he doing to you?" Dominic stepped toward me, equal parts worry and anger on his face.

I waved him away. "Nothing bad. He's just loud."

Dominic's eyebrows shot up. "He's talking to you?"

My apologies, she who smells of the ocean, the dragon said, much quieter this time. His forked tongue flicked out as if tasting the air. Centuries have passed since I last uttered a word to another. I am called Pomï.

"No apologies needed, Pomï," I said out loud for Dominic's benefit. "I'm sorry you've been silenced for so long. I'm Bree."

The depths of my gratitude for what you have done today cannot be expressed in any tongue, Bree, the dragon said. I had resigned myself to a lifetime of never truly feeling alive again.

My heart ached for this magnificent creature. I'd experienced exactly what he described but for a fraction of the time as a captive. I wouldn't wish that life on anyone. It was so lonely. I wondered how many of the dragons felt the same way.

As if reading my mind, the dragon said, Very few as old as I remain, those of us who remember the days before humans. Not even this fierce warrior. His fiery gaze fixed on Jou, who responded by crouching low in deference.

As much as I yearned for a chance to stretch my solid bones in the sky one last time, there is a great comfort in being attached to a human. Just not Ichiro Sato. Pomï's lips pulled back into a vicious snarl, sparks flashing between his teeth. Already, he gives me heartburn.

I couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of me. Although Dominic's tensed muscles finally relaxed a smidge, he looked between me and the dragon with a raised eyebrow.

"Ichiro's not the best meal," I explained. "Too acidic."

He grinned, and my stomach did a little flip-flop. "That's not surprising."

I recognize you from your duel against the mighty Red Dragon, Pomï said. You fought well. He will be a good match for you in life.

Heat flushed across my cheeks, but it wasn't from embarrassment. I hoped I would get the chance to find out if his words were true, and my body really liked the idea of finding out. With any luck, soon.

I must go, little fish, the dragon said, saving me from having to reply. I have a great urge to feel the wind and sky against my scales.

"He has to go," I told Dominic.

Dominic bowed to the dragon. "Thank you for not letting my grandfather harm this woman." His eyes widened, and I assumed the dragon must have spoken to him as well.

A series of expressions flashed across his face, too quickly for me to identify or process. When his gaze met mine with smoldering intensity, I had a feeling Pomï had suggested something similar about me to Dominic.

The dragon shifted his weight onto his hind legs.

"Wait, where will you go?" I asked.

Home.

With that, Pomï launched into the air. His sinuous body spiraled upward, and right before he would have crashed into the ceiling, he dissipated into a cloud of embers and sparks.

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Bree

Well, that wasn't something I ever thought I'd experience. Not just seeing a dragon turn solid—a thing I didn't even know was possible—but also hearing his voice in my head. I actually talked to a dragon. Calvin was going to be so jealous.

Heat spread across my back, and I knew Dominic stood behind me. It was time to pay for my sins. I took a deep breath and turned to face him.

My heart thudded erratically against my ribs. Great goddess below. He was so gorgeous. There was no other way to describe him. Sweat glistened along his bronze neck, and I had the sudden urge to lick a trail down his body.

I gave myself a little shake. We weren't here for that. I had an apology to give and hoped he would forgive me.

Then maybe there could be some licking.

Good gravy, Bree! Get it together.

I forced my gaze to meet his. Those deep amber eyes stared back at me with an intensity that sent a shiver straight down to my core, where it tingled and distracted me again. This was going to be tougher than I'd thought.

I cleared my throat. "Nic, I'm so sorry. I?—"

"So, this is why she left us high and dry," Frankie's gravelly voice cut my words off.

“Did we miss the fight?”

The fae woman strolled casually toward us while Marissa expressed her feelings with actual stomps and a death glare. Good thing looks couldn't actually kill.

Dominic stepped between us, his back to me. “Respectfully, get the fuck out. Now.”

Whatever they saw on his face stopped them up short. I expected to see fear or worry in their expressions, assuming he was about to lay into me for what I'd done. Instead, the two women shared a knowing grin and started backing away.

Frankie even winked at me. “We'll make sure you two have some privacy.”

I stared after them as they retreated out the door and shut it behind them. I couldn't be completely sure, but I thought I heard a lock click into place.

The Red Dragon faced me once again, his expression unreadable, and I gulped. No one was coming to rescue me. They'd left me alone with an actual dragon who was probably furious he didn't get to rip Ichiro's throat out and still thirsted for blood.

Super. I was dead.

At least Jou had disappeared. One angry dragon would be tough enough to fight off.

“How could you do that to me?” he asked as he stepped closer. So close I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

I wasn't entirely sure what ‘that’ he referred to. My disappearance? Not letting him kill his grandfather? I decided he meant the former.

“I know. I'm sorry. I made a gross error in judgment. Hiding my identity has been

second nature for the past ten years, but I should have been honest with you about the fight and what was happening at the very least, even if I couldn't tell you everything about who I am. Regardless, I should have put more trust in you."

Uncertainty flickered in my mind as he simply stared at me. I wasn't sure what else he wanted me to say, or apologize for.

"We both kept things from each other," I added.

His eyes narrowed a fraction, and I continued in a hurry, "But I mean, how well could I trust you, you know? We only knew each other for a few short weeks, and yes, I really liked you. I still do, as a matter of fact." Heat flushed up my neck and cheeks. Goddess above, this was getting embarrassing. "I'm trying to say that I feel like you're trustworthy, but I'm also worried that I'm being naïve or gullible. You've got quite the reputation as a ladies' man, you know."

He raised his eyebrows, effectively ending my rambling.

"Are you denying your reputation?" I asked.

"Not at all. I'm just surprised."

"About what?"

"That's the most I've ever heard you speak in one go," he said.

Not only was he angry with me, but now he was making fun of me. This was not going how I'd planned. At all. Time to abort the mission.

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“Okay, well, I’ve said what I needed to say.” I turned to leave.

His hand caught my arm and spun me back around, pulling me close. His other hand gripped the back of my neck, holding me in place. He stared into my eyes, and my knees wobbled a little bit.

Okay, a lot a bit. I was a jellyfish in his powerful hands.

“Bree.” My name on his lips was like the most delicious ocean breeze. “Don’t you dare try to get away from me again. Do you still not get it? You’re it for me. You have me utterly captivated, heart and soul.”

I stared up at him, breathless. Whoa. I was hoping for forgiveness, but this? This was next level.

“You challenge me, motivate me, infuriate me. But you see me in a way no one else ever has, and for the first time in my life, I want to be a better man—for you.”

My heartbeat thundered in my ears. “You’re not angry with me?” I blurted out. Of all the things to say right now.

He chuckled and his gaze dipped to my lips. He traced the curve with his thumb. “Oh, I’m angry. You deprived me for over a month of the thing I want most in the world.”

“Which is what?”

“You, Bree. Just you.”

I hardly dared to breathe in case I shattered what had to be an illusion. He couldn't possibly be saying what I'd hoped he would say. Did he actually feel the same things I did?

Or had I passed out or died somewhere along the way?

Maybe I was being digested in Pomī's stomach acid. I'd heard that acid could be quite the trip.

"I want every mouthwatering inch of you." He picked me up and wrapped my legs around his waist. Heat flooded through my core, and all my thoughts melted away. "We're not leaving until I have your scent covering every part of me."

His lips crashed against mine, and I forgot everything else except him. He tasted like perfection, like everything I'd ever wanted yet never knew I needed. Salty and sweet, fierce and soft.

I wasn't even aware we'd moved until I felt a firm mat beneath my back. My breaths came out fast as he pulled away and stood to remove his clothes.

I was finally going to see the Red Dragon in all his glorious glory. My brain ceased functioning when his pants hit the floor and his hard length jutted toward me.

Oh my...

I chewed on my bottom lip, suddenly nervous as the reality of what was happening set in. I might not have been a virgin, but I wasn't that experienced, either. Not like he was. What if I messed up? What if I was terrible at sex and just never knew?

Forget the dragon's stomach acid—I might die of embarrassment.

His gaze met mine as he moved toward the stack of mats he'd set me on, all toned muscle and sleek lines that I desperately wanted to touch and most definitely wanted to lick. But as he came closer, I scooted backward on the mat.

My retreat didn't faze him. He knelt on the padding and crawled on hands and knees toward me in the most sinfully erotic move I'd ever encountered.

"Nic, listen, I want this, I want you, truly I do, but I was not, uh, prepared for this happening. Like, right now, I mean."

He continued to move toward me as I shifted backward.

"And I'm not exactly, um, as experienced as you are, and?—"

He grabbed my ankles as I made to move back again and dragged me toward him. "I don't give a fuck about any of that." His gaze seared into mine as he placed his hands beside my head, his knees outside my hips, boxing me in. "I'll stop if you want me to, but don't for a second think anything else will keep me from being deep inside you right here, right now."

As if to prove his point, his hardened length bobbed slightly.

Oh, sweet Tethys, how I wanted this man. These insecurities were just that. It was time to take what was mine.

Every delicious inch.

His lips twitched upward, seeing the change come over my face. "Say it."

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I met his gaze and summoned all the sexy confidence I could muster. “I want you. Inside of me. Here. Now. Please?”

His growl rumbled through me, and I nearly moaned as the vibrations did amazing things to my insides. Then his hands slid up my sides, pulling my shirt up and over my head. He sat back and tugged my leggings down, his hands and eyes following every inch of exposed skin.

He pushed my legs open and a flash of desire sparked through his eyes. His nostrils flared and his grip tightened on my thighs. “You’re already so wet for me, Bree.”

A flush of heat rose along my neck. My soaked underwear was showing just how right he was. As I opened my mouth to explain, he shook his head. “Don’t even think about it. You have no idea how hard I’m restraining myself right now. Knowing you want me, seeing the proof, is such a huge fucking turn-on.”

I pursed my lips to hold back a grin. Who knew this could be so fun?

He dipped his head between my legs, running his nose up my center. The sheer intimacy of it sent a shiver down my spine. Knowing there was hardly any fabric in between us, between me and what would surely be heaven, sent goosebumps rising.

“I’ve missed your scent.”

His warm breath against my clit nearly did me in right then and there. The ache between my thighs intensified, a need so fierce it left me breathless. He sat back and ripped my underwear from my body, pulling a gasp from my lungs as the cool air met

my feverish skin.

Gripping his length in one hand, he leaned over me and slid the tip up my slit. “I’m going to make you come, many times, but I need to be inside you right now.”

The hunger in his voice was intoxicating, and my body responded instantly. I wrapped my legs around his waist, tugging him closer, letting him know I was ready. More than ready—desperate for him.

His lips descended on mine as he pushed inside me, and I moaned against his mouth as he filled and stretched me. It was overwhelming—the heat, the pressure, the delicious friction that sent sparks racing through every nerve in my body.

Colors exploded behind my eyelids as pleasure completely enveloped me.

“Oh, dear gods,” he breathed against my lips, his voice wrecked, filled with reverence. “You feel fucking incredible.”

I let out a laugh, pure joy bubbling up alongside the pleasure, before kissing him back with a passion and excitement I had never felt before. This was more than just sex—it was the kind of connection that stripped you bare, that left no room for doubt or distance.

He moved his hips slowly, pulling out before thrusting in again. Measured. Deep. Exquisite. Every thrust ignited something inside me, a tension coiling tight and desperate for release.

He ran a hand down my stomach and between us, finding and circling my clit. My already stimulated nerves ignited like wildfire, and I gripped his shoulders tight. “You’re going to make me come already.”

His deep chuckle did me in. “Good.”

That word. That voice. That certainty.

With his next thrust, I fell over the edge. Pleasure hit me like a tidal wave, stealing my breath, my thoughts, my very existence. I clung to him as my body trembled, as if he were the only solid thing in a world that had just unraveled.

His hand moved from between my legs to my back, sliding until he found my bra clasp. He quickly unhooked it and slid it off my arms, which were little more than jelly.

I could feel him throb inside me as he dragged his gaze over me, raw and hungry. Breathless, I stared up at this magnificent man, and I understood why people spoke of ruin in the same breath as desire.

Because he was ruining me for anyone else.

And I craved it.

As he dipped his head to suck in one of my nipples, his hips moved rhythmically, thrusting into me again. Moans escaped my lips, and I arched my back more, encouraging every suck and thrust.

He leaned back on his heels and pulled me up until I was sitting across his lap. With one hand gripped in my hair and the other wrapped around my waist, he began to thrust in earnest. The angle provided the perfect friction against me, swollen and ready to climax again.

“Oh, goddess, Nic...”

“Fuck, yes, Bree, say my name.” He slammed me down on his lap almost angrily, but all I felt was absolute pleasure as I came apart again.

“Dominic!” I cried out.

His growl rumbled through my chest, raw and guttural, as he drove himself deep inside me and pinned my hips down. Pleasure shattered him.

Warmth spread through my insides, and I collapsed against him, panting. Drained, yet utterly complete. That was the best sex I had ever had or ever imagined, by far.

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After another moment, his muscles relaxed and he laid us down against the mat. He kissed my forehead, cheeks, nose, lips. Gentle now, as if worshiping every part of me. His thumb traced my cheekbones and jawline, and his gaze followed.

“Everything I imagined and more,” he murmured. “I will never get enough of you.”

I could honestly say I felt the exact same.

And for once, I wasn't afraid.

CHAPTER 32

Dominic

The woman sitting next to me on my living room couch was the most unbelievably incredible woman I'd ever had the pleasure of laying my eyes on. And not just my eyes—less than two hours ago, I was driving my cock deep into her warmth, hearing her scream my name in pleasure. My cock twitched with the memory.

What the fuck had I done—or perhaps more accurately, not done—to deserve someone like her? Karma must have looked the other way.

As much as I wanted to continue getting to know every inch of Bree's body and life intimately, we had work to do. Bree had started telling me what had happened to her over the past month, so I made the excruciating decision for us to get dressed and return to my penthouse.

We'd run into Marissa and Frankie in the Sato estate's foyer on the way out. Other than tangling her fingers with mine, Bree had all but ignored their jokes and attempts for details. Her ability to rise above was commendable, especially with a sister like Marissa.

I brought all three women back to my place to discuss the situation. Ichiro's pyrocrystal legacy lived on despite his death, and Bree's information might be the key to ending it once and for all.

It had been difficult to control the rage that wanted to consume me as she described her time with the venomous sea witch and the soon-to-be-dead King Ateleíotes. What I wouldn't give to face them both right now and rip their limbs from their still-breathing bodies. Jou rumbled his agreement.

I gripped the arm of the couch to expel some of the rising anger. Beside me in his chair, Aaron glanced down at my hand, then shot me an understanding look. I'd called him as soon as we'd left the estate, asking him to meet us here. Keiko remained at Rin's side.

"I wish we could've met under different circumstances," Bree said to Aaron with a sigh. "I'm so sorry to hear about your friend Rin. From what I remember, he seemed very likable, despite being complicit in my kidnapping." She arched an eyebrow in my direction.

He had been following my orders. The man was innocent. I swallowed hard, knowing she'd have the opportunity to get to know Rin, but not Hayai.

Aaron's smile was sad. "He'll survive. That's what's most important. You'll have plenty of time to get back at him."

"There's one more thing I need to tell you all, and it's kind of big." Bree wrung her

hands in her lap and looked at her sister, who nodded her encouragement. “We, uh, well, we’re kind of important back home. Our father, you see, he’s?—”

“We’re princesses,” Marissa blurted out. She sat on the other side of her sister. “Our father is the king of the Naftes Kingdom.”

While I hadn’t known that detail, the news wasn’t all that surprising. Being princesses explained quite a bit about the sisters’ desire for secrecy.

Bree cast a nervous glance around the room. “Why isn’t anyone acting surprised?”

Still staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows with her back to us, Frankie shrugged. “I’ve known since the day I met you two.”

“What? How?”

The fae woman chuckled and turned to face the sisters. “It’s not so obvious now, but back then, both of you stood out like sore thumbs. Y’all came from upper class, that much was clear.”

Marissa arched an eyebrow. “Upper class isn’t the same as royalty, though.”

“Maybe not, but add in the comments I heard over the years, and I put two and two together.”

Bree grimaced. “I hope no one else at the gym overheard anything.”

My shoulders tensed. If that ended up being the case, I might need to do some damage control to protect her. Not that she couldn’t protect herself, but what was the point of having all the Sato wealth if I didn’t put it to good use?

“Nah, I love a good eavesdroppin’,” Frankie said, leaning her hip against a chair. “I only overheard stuff when no one else was around. You two were close-lipped otherwise.”

I relaxed. One problem solved.

“Why didn’t you tell us you knew?” Marissa asked.

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know, in case you had questions? Or so we didn’t have to keep it a secret from you?”

Frankie made a pfft sound. “I didn’t care. Still don’t. Doesn’t change who you are. But also, you coulda told me at any time.”

As the two continued to bicker, Bree turned her gorgeous ocean-hued gaze on me. “You don’t seem surprised either. Did you know?”

I took her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist, enjoying the slight pink that tinted her cheeks. “No, but your secrecy makes sense in hindsight.”

“You’re not weirded out that my dad is a king?” she asked.

“Not in the least, darlin’.” I winked. “The Sato family is a bit like royalty in the Gifted community, and every bit as wealthy.”

Marissa heaved a sigh, drawing our attention back to her and the fae woman. “That reveal was so much more anti-climactic than I’d expected.”

“You mean more than you wanted,” Bree said.

“Same difference.” Marissa brushed her hair off her shoulder, then frowned. “But wait, why did your command work on me?”

“What do you mean?”

“At the bar, you used your siren song to make me sleep. But I’ve tried my entire freaking life to use it on you and it’s never worked.”

Bree smiled, but her eyebrows drew together slightly. “I don’t know. I guess my panic amplified my magic or something.”

She was brushing off the comment, but something about her sister’s question lingered in the back of my mind. There was more to that moment than either of them realized—something I’d file away for later, when we weren’t trying to unravel a black-market conspiracy.

“We know Ateleíotes provides the pufferfish poison to Calypso,” Aaron leaned forward in his chair, steering the conversation back to the problem at hand, “who then provides a mixture to Ichiro—well, provided. That must be the blue liquid we couldn’t identify.”

“Right,” I said, shifting back into mission mode. “But how did Ichiro discover this pufferfish connection to begin with? How did he and Calypso meet?”

“These two ain’t the only fish to walk on land,” Frankie said, tilting her head toward the sisters. “Sirens and the like come and go like anyone else, most’re just more sneaky about it. Usually traders, but I’ve heard mention of a sea witch before. Thought nothin’ of it.”

Marissa pursed her lips. “That had to be Calypso.”

“Probably.” Frankie sat on the arm of an empty chair. “But we don’t know enough to be sure. Maybe she’s workin’ with other witches, landlubbers or otherwise.”

Bree's frown deepened, forming a cute crease between her eyebrows. "No one ever visited while I was with her, besides Sidon."

Ah, yes. One of the other sirens I would soon kill.

"No communications with anyone from what I could tell, which sadly doesn't mean much. I didn't see most of what she did." Bree's expression took on a look of realization. "She must have been checking in on us over the years and somehow connected with Ichiro. That would explain the talismans failing, too."

Aaron rubbed his chin. "What does she get out of the deal? From what you've described, money doesn't seem like enough."

"Years ago, before I was born, she attempted a coup and our father banished her," Bree explained.

"You think she's out for revenge?"

"Oh, I know she is. Ateleíotes and Zephyrion talked about it. Whatever she's gotten from Ichiro and now Ateleíotes has made her confident enough to return to Naftes."

"By herself?" I asked.

"That's where my knowledge ends and where I could use some help."

It clicked. "You want to go home."

"Want? No, and definitely not for good." She squeezed my hand. "I need to find out what she's up to and put a stop to it before it's too late. Besides, my talisman won't work much longer. I need to find a solution."

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I looked at Frankie. “Anything you can do about that?”

“‘Fraid not. Shapeshiftin’ magic’s outside the fae wheelhouse.”

There had to be a solution to at least that problem. The sea witch couldn’t be the only one capable of such magic. I’d have Aaron and Rin?—

My lungs seized. Fuck, it was going to be difficult not including Rin for some time. Although it might be a good distraction for him, help him feel useful in a new way. He was a valuable asset, regardless of his magical abilities or lack thereof.

Internally, I sighed. As much as I enjoyed the benefits of being a wealthy man, I didn’t crave the power that came with it. I didn’t need it the way Ichiro had. Some men built empires. I preferred to dismantle them, brick by bloody brick.

But men like Ichiro never stopped.

Power wasn’t just a throne they sat on. It was an addiction. A sickness. A god they served until it devoured them.

And in this world, the ones who fell hardest were never the monsters themselves. It was everyone standing in their blast radius. I thought of Bree and the time we’d lost. The future we might still lose.

History has always been shaped by men who thought the rules didn’t apply to them. Kings like Ateleíotes. Dictators. CEOs. Mob bosses.

Presidents.

They always wanted more—more land, more loyalty, more blood.

And the worst part?

They usually got it.

Until someone, finally, lit a match.

Only this time?

I would be the match, and I would burn it all down.

THE END