



Hers to Keep (Scorching in Sin City #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Every time she turns around, theres another confusingly hot monster in her life.

Ever since Mari inherited her fathers criminal empire, shes been collecting monstrous enemies and lovers in equal number. The latter is great, but the former is beginning to pose a problem.

When a demon she cant remember—from a past she cant forget—arrives, smelling like smoke and sin, she cant recall whether hes friend or foe. She may not be able to figure it out without confronting the memories of the ritual that kindled the power within her shes been avoiding for so long.

Even though her instincts are screaming for her to put her faith in this newcomer, odds are better than good that hes trying to steal her power and take over the city shes been struggling to keep control over—and the odds should never be ignored in Sin City.

In addition to the complication of Maris new visitor, theres yet another terrifying creature after them; this one bent on revenge for his banishment at the hands of her father. He wont stop until Las Vegas is in ruins and he lays claim to the nexus of power beneath it.

Hers to Keep is the scorching third book in a series that explores the intimate lives of the paranormal denizens of Sin City. If you enjoy spicy, fast burns with a side of action, a sassy heroine discovering her power, and partners who love to share, this book is for you.

This is the final installment of the story of Mari and her monster boyfriends taking over the paranormal Vegas underworld, but fear not; stories from this world will continue on.

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Chapter 1

Mariana Reyes stared up into the endless black eyes of the most terrifyingly powerful creature she had ever encountered and saw fear. The Old One. Those were the words Dohal had said that had conjured the icy terror that chilled the room.

No one in the pool house had moved since he had said the name what felt like an age ago. It was eerily quiet, even without any glass in the windows.

Cisco, her stalwart gargoyle, glared from her side, his matte gray wings drawn up as if ready for a fight. Rio, the puma shifter who dealt in quiet words and wicked claws, looked on, his golden eyes narrowed. And sweet, sweet Dante, the unicorn with hair like the spun gold of his heart, looked like he was going to be sick.

Mari inhaled a breath and forced herself to speak. “Who is that?” She couldn’t make herself repeat the name.

“The Old One is who your father and the incubi feared. The genesis of every paranormal that now walks this world.” Dohal’s voice, far from his usual booming bass, was barely a whisper.

Mari clutched Dohal’s coal black arms in a death grip. “He’s the one who killed Argento?”

Dohal nodded. “He’s the one I was chained to keep out. You healed what was broken in me, but those scars were what kept you and this city safe from him.”

Oh no. What had she done?

He must have seen her stricken look, because he reached to touch her face, his claws achingly gentle on her skin. “Make no mistake, I am grateful. It is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

She swallowed roughly. That kindness might have doomed them all. She’d been so, so reckless in her need to save him that she hadn’t even considered there might be a greater danger lurking beyond. “Do we know for sure he’s on his way?”

“He will come. The most powerful nexus on Earth is here, miles under our feet.”

Mari tried to reach for the wards, but her magic was gone. There wasn’t a scrap left, and there wasn’t anything to pull from the men around her either. She couldn’t even feel whether the wards were still in place.

Dohal picked up on her discomfort at once. “I have nothing left to give you, bavi. You took every drop.” He kissed her softly, his breath feathering her lips. “You need rest to recharge. There’s nothing to be done until the morning. We will find a solution.”

She couldn’t tell whether the certainty in his tone was because they were totally and completely fucked, or if he really thought they could somehow fix this. She suddenly felt every single one of the long hours she’d been awake. Her eyelids were so heavy.

He lifted her like she weighed nothing at all and moved her up the bed, tucking her between Dante and Rio, who moved to wrap her in their arms. She hadn’t even realized how cold she had gotten until they both felt so blissfully warm around her.

Cisco pulled the blankets up around the three of them and then rose from the bed. He said something in a low voice to Dohal which prompted a response. She was too tired

to piece together what they were discussing and drifted off in a haze of exhaustion.

Mari woke from the deepest sleep of her life, sore and aching all over. Someone traced a design she didn't quite understand over her back with one gentle finger. Before she summoned the strength to open her eyes, she felt for the magical signatures around her. Three of her men surrounded her, and that eased her roiling anxiety somewhat. But where was the fourth?

She then reached for the wards above her, stretching thin the tiny sliver of magic she still had. They felt intact, though she couldn't tell if they were functioning the way they should, because her own magic was so weak. She decided that problem could wait for when and if her magic rebounded. She definitely didn't want to confront the fact that her power still wasn't back after the discharge the night before and instead looked around.

Rio lay curled on his side facing her, snoring adorably. Behind him lay Cisco, staring over the puma shifter's shoulder at her.

He watched her silently for a moment before he asked, "How are you feeling?"

She took a few beats to assess. "Empty. Tired. Sore." She tried to stretch but regretted it immediately. "Saints, so sore."

He smiled a little, showing his fangs. "Your magic has been unusually quiet. It had me worried."

She didn't like the concern in his voice, so she reassured him as best she could. "It still hasn't recharged all the way." She left out that she had no idea if it would. The magic she had used last night was far more than she'd ever thought she could wield, and the fact that it hadn't returned was troubling. Still, she tucked that worry away.

A hand that she immediately recognized as Dante's smoothed over her hip and came to rest over her pelvis. His skin warmed as he sent healing magic into her.

She sighed with relief as some of the tension left her. "Thanks." She leaned back into him, reveling in the heat of his body.

"Always." He kissed her shoulder and then her neck. "Where did Dohal go?"

"I'm not sure. He's not far." She widened her awareness, and there was the faintest tugging toward something that she thought must be him. "Maybe at the main house?"

"I woke up about three hours ago, and he wasn't here," Cisco said.

Dante ran his finger over her back again. "These look like his wings."

"What—" She didn't get a chance to ask further because Cisco grabbed her shoulder and rose to look at her back.

"Holy fuck."

Rio groaned between them as he was rudely awakened by the movement.

"Someone explain what's going on," Mari grumbled.

"Dohal's wings are marked on your back," Cisco said after a moment. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

Mari was about to answer that she hadn't known, when she realized he was asking Dante.

"I didn't think it was a big deal," Dante said. "They look just like the ones she gave

us.”

Remembering what had happened with her necklace the night before, Mari pushed against Cisco’s chest so she could examine him. A delicate platinum tattoo in the shape of a rose among briars glistened on his skin.

She ran a finger over the curves of the petals and felt her own magic flickering there. Inside her, the goddess was smug. “It’s her mark,” Mari said after a moment.

Cisco placed his hand over hers and squeezed. “It’s yours.”

“I guess it is.” She smiled at him. “I wonder if that means the necklace was something she did, rather than Dohal.”

Cisco frowned, just a bit. “Well, if you manage to find him, you can ask.”

“I’ll go and look for him.” She got out of bed slowly with Dante’s help. While he was looking for his clothes, she went to the bathroom, closing the door behind her when Rio eyed her naked form with interest, before her libido could get any ideas that her body wasn’t up to. Saints, he was always horny in the morning. Usually, she was just as ready to go, but today she needed some time.

As she started up the water, she heard Rio moan, followed quickly by Cisco’s low chuckle. Apparently, Cisco had decided to defuse the situation while she washed up.

By the time she finished her quick shower and had toweled off, Cisco had Rio facedown on the bed, arms held tightly behind his back. He plied Rio with slow, deep strokes that had the puma shifter quivering under him and whispered how much he loved him over and over again in Spanish.

Neither of them noticed as she pulled a robe around herself and slipped out of the

room with a soft smile on her lips.

She took a savory pastry from Giselle with a nod of thanks and waved to Dante, who was eating in the kitchen while on his phone, an exasperated expression on his face. She'd have to ask about whatever that was later. Right now, she was on a mission.

She could feel Dohal above her somewhere, his presence drawing her like a lodestone, and wondered if that had to do with the markings on her back. She'd peeked at them in the bathroom mirror after her shower.

They were delicate lines traced in platinum that were unquestionably his wings, anchored where the gemstones had implanted themselves along her spine. Surprisingly, none of that new hardware hurt at all. In fact, she wouldn't have known they were there if Dante hadn't said so.

Just another mystery to unravel as she munched on her delicious ham and cheese pastry and climbed the stairs to the guest bedrooms. What was he doing up there?

Mari found Dohal on a bench in the upstairs hallway, sitting across from one of the rooms with a sheet wrapped around his waist. He met her eyes as soon as she came into view, his expression softening. She noticed at once how changed he was from when she'd last seen him.

All the scars that had marked him were gone. His skin was a coal black expanse drawn taut over his muscular frame. The only mark on him was at his neck, the impression of her teeth. The fierce pride she felt over that claiming bite was probably unseemly, but she didn't care. His horns were smaller, but still curled forward and up, red at the base and fading to the deepest black at the tips. His wings were entirely absent, and his long legs ended in perfectly normal looking human feet, which seemed a little out of place.

“You look different,” she finally said, as she closed the distance to him.

“The magic that held me in that cell also held me in that demonic visage. I’m free to transform as I like now and have assumed something that might blend in a little more.” He took her in from head to toes with a slow sweep of his eyes. “Do you not like it?” he asked, with a self-conscious shifting of balance.

“I do. But I liked you the other way too. You should look however you want to look.” She sat next to him. “What are you doing up here?”

“When the sun came up, I went outside. I had entirely forgotten how good it feels.” He let out a sigh and nodded to the door across from them. “Then I felt his pain, and it drew me here.”

Mari glanced up and down the hall. She had no idea whose room this was. Nova was at the end, then Greta. Last she knew, this room had been empty. She reached out with her senses and felt the remnants of both her own magic and Greta’s. “Luis,” she said under her breath.

She remembered how they had found him, strapped down to a table for Saints only knew how long, with some kind of machine attached to his head prying his mouth open. His pain had been excruciating.

Dohal murmured, “I’m hoping he’ll let me in to help him, but he’s not ready yet.”

Mari hugged herself around her middle. “Is he still in pain?”

“Not the physical sort. You and the life witch did well healing his body.” His generous mouth turned down in a frown. “What pains him now is his soul.”

“And you can fix that?”

“Not exactly.” Dohal shook his head. “It’s difficult to explain.”

When it was clear he wasn’t going to continue, she asked, “Have you tried to knock?”

One corner of his lips quirked up. “He knows I’m here.”

She offered him the remaining half of her pastry. “Well, if we’re here for the long haul, you might as well eat something.”

He eyed the napkin-wrapped parcel with curiosity but no hunger. “I don’t consume food.”

She shrugged and took a bite, then chewed slowly. “What do you eat then?” she asked once she’d swallowed.

“Magic.”

“Oh, I guess I knew that.” Mari stretched into the wards again. Everything up there felt normal, even if she didn’t. She wondered why it was taking so long for her magic to recharge. “Are you angry with me?” she asked as casually as she could manage.

“Not in the slightest.” He watched her carefully, pausing in consideration before he spoke. “Why would you think that?”

“The whole thing with breaking you out of jail without asking and us being undefended now.”

Dohal shrugged. “I might have been hasty in my assessment last night.” He gestured up. “The wards still stand, and they are still feeding me. While I am somewhat...changed since you healed me, I do not think I am diminished.”

“Well, that’s good. I never intended to harm you. I hope you know that.”

“I do.” His eyes searched her face. “What you did was out of kindness.” One corner of his mouth curled up. “And out of a brashness that I rather adore.”

A blush heated her cheeks. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

He watched her mouth as she took another bite, his gaze drifting downward when she swallowed, a strange expression on his face. When footsteps and voices came from the stairs, he shook himself.

Mari turned to see Pricilla and Willow walking toward them arm in arm. They walked toward Mari and Dohal at a sedate pace, as if out for a stroll.

When they finally came to a halt next to them, Willow paused for a long moment and then gestured with their chin. “He’s a dragon, by the way. A really old dragon.”

Mari stared at Willow, dumbfounded. A fucking dragon?

Beside her, Dohal rumbled with a deep laugh. “Was that a point of contention? You could have just asked.”

Pricilla offered her hand to Dohal, her magic unfurling. “Pris-”

Before Mari knew what she was doing, what little magic she had formed a shield between them that Pricilla ran into with a grunt. A growl rose from Mari’s throat.

Dohal eyed Mari with a satisfied smile. “I would advise that you keep your magic to yourself, witch,” he said to Pricilla with good humor. “My mate seems rather possessive today.”

“Oh, fuck,” Mari gasped, trying unsuccessfully to claw her power back. “I don’t know where that came from.”

Pricilla waved a hand. “No, entirely my fault. I let my curiosity get the better of me, and I should have known better.”

Dohal rested a clawed hand on the back of Mari’s neck, turning her toward him. “There is no one in all the realms that I want but you, bavi.”

She stared into his cosmic eyes and felt the tension inside her relax as the truth of his words took hold. Her magic came to heel in an instant. She drew in a long breath. “Oh.”

“A new bond always feels vulnerable, and I did you a disservice by leaving you this morning before it settled. Come here.” Dohal pulled her against his side and wrapped his arm around her.

She buried her face in the crook of his neck and felt immediately better. Yes, this was what she needed—his warm skin pressed against her. She nuzzled in with a sigh.

Pricilla murmured that they would talk about the wards later and moved off with Willow in tow.

“I’m sorry I bonded you without your permission,” she said softly, after a few minutes passed. “I guess it’s just a thing I do now.”

“No, bavi.” He kissed the top of her head. “The bonding is mine. The instant you freed me from my cage, I felt it snap into place. You are my True Mate, as I’ve said all along.” He curled his fingers into her side and pulled her closer. “The magic trapping me prevented the bond from taking hold.”

The marking on her back suddenly made much more sense. He had claimed her. The goddess purred contentedly. “So, what does that mean for us?” She didn’t know anything about dragons or how they bonded. No one had even seen a dragon in centuries, as far as she knew. She was going to have to do some reading.

“Little has changed in that regard on my end. I will defend you and any offspring you bear to the death.”

That sounded ominous. “Are you going to try to kill the others?”

Dohal chuckled into her hair. “No. Dragons naturally form mating groups around a single center. Having others to defend you is a boon.” He dropped his voice into a lower register that rumbled through her, “And I very much enjoy watching them pleasure you.”

Her heartrate kicked into a higher gear. She became aware of how much of his bare body rested against her. Her magic that had been languid all day surged through her in a blaze of heat.

Dohal hummed. “That’s better.” He tipped back her head so she looked up at him. “I was a bit concerned that fixing me might have broken you.”

She felt more like herself than she had all morning. “I think I just needed some time close to you to recharge.”

“Whatever you need from me, you are more than welcome to it.” He ran a hand over her hair and smiled. “You expended a large amount of magic to free me. How did you manage it?”

“Most of that wasn’t mine. The goddess was keeping it somewhere, and as soon as she knew what it was for, she offered it up.”

His thumb skated over her bottom lip. “She is a clever creature.”

The goddess preened under his praise but stayed silent. “What do we do now, Dohal?”

“The Old One will come. There can be no doubt of that. But we have more tools at our disposal to fight him than I thought.” His eyes drifted to the door across from them again. He lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered, “He is a feathered serpent, perhaps the only creature in all the realms rarer than me.”

Something tickled the back of her mind about feathered serpents, but she couldn’t remember anything specific. “What are we waiting for him to decide?”

Dohal’s expression turned sad. “If he wants to live.”

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Chapter 2

Mari tried to surge to her feet, but Dohal easily held her next to him with a hand on her hip. “Let me go. We can’t just leave him alone if that’s what’s happening right now.”

“It is a decision he must make on his own, bavi.” He lowered his voice. “Enough choices have been taken from him already. This one can only be his.”

That brought her to stillness with a start. Tears welled in her eyes. “It just seems horribly unfair that he’s alone.”

“He knows I am here. And I do not intend to leave until he has made his choice.”

“And if he decides not to live?”

“I will see that his end is painless.” There was a note of such profound sadness in his voice that she clutched him tighter.

She had to try three times before she managed to ask what was on her mind with a shaking voice, “When did you decide to live?”

“The day you called for my help against the incubus.” He drew in a deep breath and sighed. “The first time I saw you in the flesh and knew that you were real and not some fevered hallucination that I had invented in my prison of isolation and anguish.”

With a sob, she pressed her face into him. How close had she come to never knowing

him at all? Her heart ached for him. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“Of course you did not.” A soothing sound something like a purr rumbled through her. “And I would never have told you if not for this, because the knowledge that you hold my life in your hands is not something you should be burdened with.”

“Oh...no...” She lost all semblance of control over herself and ugly cried into his chest, because she understood exactly what he wasn’t saying.

Then he dropped his head and confirmed her fears in a soft murmur that cut her right to her soul, “I will not outlive you for long, little rabbit.”

Her life would be so perilously short compared to his, at best measured in decades rather than eons. He’d only just tasted freedom, and now it would be ripped away from him much too soon because she was the thing that had given him a reason to live. The weight of that unfairness crushed her.

She wailed as her magic wrapped around him, desperate for him to take the words back, even while she knew he would not. There had to be something she could do. There had to be .

The door across from them opened. Luis stood there, emaciated and exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes. He spoke in a language she couldn’t understand, a strange combination of whispers and growls.

Dohal answered in the same tongue, and they stared at each other for a long while.

“You are the angel who came to me in the darkness,” Luis said finally in English.

It took a moment to realize that now he was talking to her, and she raised her head, eyes bleary. “I healed you, yes.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

Mari blinked at him. “You were in pain, and I wanted to help.”

Luis shook his head. “I mean you shouldn’t have been able to. Those wounds were mortal, inflicted by the only thing that could harm me on this realm. That was how they kept me bound.”

Dohal said something in that other language they shared. A light of understanding lit Luis’s face. He crossed the hallway to them slowly and painfully and then dropped to his knees in front of Mari.

The goddess rushed forward, taking over her hands to cup his face. Her magic poured into him, pulled from somewhere Mari couldn’t fathom. He looked better by the second, strength returning to his body and color returning to his skin.

Tears rolled down his cheeks. “I thought you were gone,” Luis whispered reverently. He buried his face in her lap as sobs shook his shoulders.

Distantly, Mari realized she could understand him now, though he wasn’t speaking in English anymore, but in that other language that felt ancient.

“I survived,” the goddess said with her voice, the shape of the words feeling strange on her tongue. She stroked a careful hand over Luis’s head. “Thanks to you. I was passed down through the generations until I was awakened in this one by the ignorance of an incubus and his schemes to outlive his destiny.”

Mari had so many questions. Was it her mother or her father that had sheltered the goddess? Who and what exactly was her father? How had she been awakened? What were her intentions now? But if the goddess could hear her, she wasn’t inclined to answer.

“Have you made your choice, darling?” the goddess murmured to Luis, fingers carding through his black hair.

He looked up at her, his dark eyes alive for the first time. “My life has always been yours to command.”

She tsked gently. “I would not order you to live. I am not as vain as that. The choice must be yours.”

He clutched the fabric of her robe as he gazed up into her face, his expression passing from consideration to decision in a few moments. “The scars I bear are not enough to keep me from your side.”

The goddess smiled. Her hands glowed with golden magic that Mari couldn’t feel at all—something far beyond her. The last of the fatigue and injury seemed to melt away from Luis. She smoothed her thumbs over his sharp cheekbones. “You are as restored as I can make you. The rest is up to him.” She turned her head to regard Dohal.

He smiled with a slow curling of his lips. “Of course.” He stood and pulled Luis to his feet, towering over him, but in a way that spoke of comradery rather than intimidation. “What they stole from you can never be replaced. But the strength it took for you to withstand it, that is yours, and no one can ever take it from you.”

Dohal pulled him into a hug. The marks that had been etched into his skin shone red, glowing from within rather than seared into him. It was haunting and beautiful. His magic churned through the hallway, wrapping both Luis and Mari in warmth. The goddess drifted back to wherever she slept, handing control back to Mari with what felt like satisfaction and understanding.

Mari watched as Dohal and Luis disappeared into Luis’s room a short while later,

talking quietly in that language that Mari once again no longer understood. Dohal smiled at her as he closed the door. Whatever Luis had to share was only for the ears of someone who might understand the pain he had endured. Moments later, the room was wrapped in a soundproof shield that no creature in the house had a prayer of getting through.

She pulled her feet up onto the bench under her and closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the wall. Taking a deep breath, she reached out for the wards with her magic. It was much easier now that her power had been restored closer to its normal levels. She realized that she had been wrong before, the wards were not the same.

The echoes of Dohal's magic spiderwebbed through the structure, shining and distinct. That's what had brought Pricilla here to the hall, no doubt, tracing those lines back to him. The wards had been intended to siphon magic to him, feeding him so that his inherent ability could protect the city and those within it. Freeing him from the cell he'd been imprisoned in had shattered those ties. She had felt them rip away, but he had found a way to forge new ones somehow. She had no idea what that meant.

Someone cleared their throat nearby, and she opened her eyes. Somehow Rio had moved down the hallway without a sound carrying a tray overflowing with food.

"I was going to check in on Tristan. Kima said she put them in the suite at the end of the hall so he would be near Greta, but they haven't come out for any food today."

Hellhounds had voracious appetites, and if they hadn't even come out for food, something might well be wrong. Mari pushed to her feet. "I'll come with."

"You found Dohal?" he asked, as they walked down the hall together. He carried the heavily laden tray with no trouble.

“Yeah, he’s in with Luis. How did you know?”

He offered her an easy smile when she shot him a quizzical look. “I can smell him on you.”

“He’s a dragon, I guess.”

His eyebrows rose. “Wow. I guess that’s why he smells like a campfire.”

“Does he?”

“He does to me.” They arrived at the door at the end of the hall and Mari knocked.

The man that answered the door was tall and broad, his skin a warm mahogany tone. Only one of the twins had a tightly trimmed goatee—Clarion.

“Clar,” Rio said with a nod of greeting. “How is he?”

“He hasn’t woken up yet. We’re taking turns lying with him.” He looked over the tray of food and a ravenous look came over his face, followed quickly by indecision.

“I can check up on him if you like,” Mari offered. “Healing-wise, I mean.”

After a few more seconds of consideration, he stepped back, opening the door. The suite within was lavishly appointed in the blue and gold color scheme her father had so favored, with ornate furnishings and expensive works of art. She tried to block that out as she entered. Rio set the tray down on a low table.

Clarion led her to the bedroom and opened the door silently. Inside, it was very dim. Halcyon laid on the bed facing the other occupant, who Mari had only seen briefly the night before—the phoenix who had been Rio’s best friend, Tristan.

Tristan was blond and lovely even in his repose, with strong features and the physique of a fighter. Halcyon rested with one hand over Tristan's heart and his face tucked into Tristan's shoulder.

Mari crossed the room slowly, while Rio waited at the door. Clarion shadowed her as she approached, clearly not trusting her. She sat lightly on the opposite side of the bed from where Halcyon lay. His eyes glowed menacingly red as he watched her every movement for any threat to his mate.

She knew a little about how mated hellhounds behaved—viciously protective and loyal. But she had to keep in mind that these two had had their mating instincts thwarted for months. Just another facet of the casual cruelty that Vincent had doled out before she had ended him.

She reached for Tristan's hand slowly, pausing when a tickle of a growl emanated from Halcyon, and only continuing when he quieted again. He was warm to the touch, but not in a way that spoke of infection. It was probably just his nature as a phoenix to run a little hot. She let her magic move gently through him, trying not to disturb him.

“He doesn't have any wounds that I can feel, and he's not in any pain.” She didn't think there was anything wrong with him, or that there was any toxin remaining in his body. If she hadn't known any better, she would have said he was just asleep.

“He feels empty,” Halcyon said, his voice rough.

She glanced toward Clarion for an explanation.

“We should be able to feel something from him because of the mating bond, but there's nothing.”

“Well, chances are the bond never had a chance to form properly,” Rio said from the doorway. “You weren’t allowed to touch him, right?”

Clarion nodded. “Vincent kept him locked away from us. He was dangled like a treat. We were only able to even see him when we did something worth rewarding, and we were never allowed to touch him at all.”

Rio frowned in sympathy. Those months had to have been so difficult for the two of them. “So, in addition to whatever the drugging was doing to him, the bond was never properly settled.”

“I think he just needs time,” Mari said, after the silence in the room grew heavy. She looked between the hellhounds, wishing there was something more she could do. The memory of what the goddess had said to Luis lingered. “His body is healed, but his heart isn’t. Only the two of you can do that part.”

“Just keep holding him,” Rio said, as she got up and crossed the room to him. “And eat something. I’ll come back to pick up the tray in a bit.” He placed his hand on the small of her back and walked her out of the suite.

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Chapter 3

Mari went back to her room and got dressed, putting on whatever Rio handed her without looking at it—joggers, a T-shirt, and flipflops. Saints, she was so fucking tired. This day had gone on for a week already. At least her magic was sort of back?

“You’re lucky Cisco didn’t see you walking around half naked,” he murmured, hugging her around the hips and pulling her back against him after she’d changed. “That one might have actually been worth a spanking.”

She leaned into Rio and smiled absently. “Maybe I need some growly discipline to get me out of this funk.” She definitely needed something. How was she going to make it through her training with Pricilla? She could hardly keep her eyes open.

“I’ll make you some coffee and bring it to you,” he said, kissing the side of her neck. “Don’t forget. We’ve got the tasting for the caterer tonight.”

Fuck. The party was in just over a week. She briefly considered canceling but knew that would never fly. They needed to project strength. Everything was business as usual. No ancient paranormal entities were on their way to—well, honestly, she had no idea what the Old One was going to do, but Dohal was afraid, and that was more than enough to keep her up at night.

“Right, I’ll definitely be able to stay awake for that and won’t fall face first into the canapés.”

He wrapped his arms around her middle and hugged tight. “I’ll tickle your knee under

the table to wake you up whenever you nod off. Don't worry."

"What would I do without you?" she asked and meant it, turning to offer her mouth up for a kiss.

He savored her lips with a purr that warmed her, body and soul, then broke away to kiss the tip of her nose. "Come on, you're going to be late." He nudged her toward the door, took her hand and gave her a twirl, and then walked her to her office.

Rio nodded to Pricilla in greeting as he helped Mari into her seat. "Take it easy on her today," he warned. "She was up late last night and is still recovering from the mother of all magic hangovers."

Pricilla chuckled. "I can tell. We're probably just going to talk." When he left to get Mari's coffee, Pricilla sat forward, looking her over. "Seriously, how are you not burned out? That discharge last night was immense."

Mari took a breath and tried to figure out where to start. "Most of it wasn't mine. I was just a conduit, I guess."

"And that giant in the hallway was Dohal, I take it?"

Mari nodded. "Sorry about that, by the way. I was too out of sorts to control my reaction."

"I should have anticipated that you would be protective." Pricilla shrugged. "So, he's just out walking around now? The discharge was how you freed him?"

"Yeah, I healed his scars. They were etched into his skin over the lines of power in his body and tied him to the place they had been keeping him all these years."

Pricilla let out a low whistle. “I don’t know how you survived the unmaking of a spell that could hold a dragon for that long.”

“The goddess,” Mari said after a few seconds. “She’s been hoarding the magic for a while. When I told her I wanted to heal him, she gave it to me.” She didn’t share the goddess’s reason for keeping back the magic—that she had somehow known and been in on Dohal’s plan to take over the world with an army of monsters that Mari would birth—that felt too personal.

“And we don’t think he’s plotting vengeance anymore?”

That struck a little too close to what Mari had just been thinking. She hoped that her face didn’t give anything away. “Now that he’s free, I think he’s a little less interested in retribution.”

“I noticed that he altered the wards,” Pricilla said carefully.

Mari took a breath. “I think he’s trying to make sure the city is still protected, but I have yet to talk to him about it.”

Pricilla showed her a small smile. “There’s a lot going on today.”

Mari nodded and hoped she didn’t look half as tired as she felt. She barely resisted rubbing her forehead. “He’s with Luis now. I’ll try to get answers about the wards as soon as I can.”

There was a soft knock, followed by Dante peeking around the door. “Rio sent me with a coffee delivery.”

Mari beamed at him. “Come on in.”

Dante entered her office balancing a tray in one hand and crossed to the desk. When he got closer, he frowned, then set the tray on the sideboard before crouching beside Mari. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just a little tired.”

“Let me give you a little pick-me-up?”

She laughed. “That’s supposed to be what the coffee is for.”

“I have half a mind to walk right back out of here with that coffee and send you for a nap.”

Saints, she must look exhausted, judging by the concern in his voice. “Let me just finish this up, and I’ll find you and we can nap together. Deal?”

“Okay, but if you’re not knocking on my door by lunch, I’m coming to find you and throwing you over my shoulder.” He reached for the back of her neck and rested his palm against her skin, sending some of his magic into her body in a warm eddy.

Her power came alive at his touch, and she shivered. “Mmm. That’s delightful.” She closed her eyes when he brushed her lips with a sweetly soft kiss.

Much too soon, he broke the contact and returned to the tray. She was still tired, but the edge had been taken off for certain, and the headache that had been threatening had retreated.

He placed coffee mugs in front of both of them, along with two glasses and a pitcher of water. “At least as much water as coffee.” When she didn’t respond, he narrowed his eyes at her. “I mean it.”

“Yes, sir,” she laughed. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

He tucked the now-empty tray under his arm. “It’s a full-time job.”

“Are you angling for a raise?” She grinned.

His face fell as he looked away from her eyes. “No...I...”

She rushed to reassure him. “I was teasing.” Fuck, what had she even said that had upset him? She had no idea. “We’ll talk about it later?”

“Yeah.” He forced a smile and left the room without saying anything else.

Mari tapped her fingers on her desk. “You want to give me advice on whatever that was?”

“Nope,” Pricilla said, shaking her head. “Not getting anywhere near that one.”

“I figured.” Mari sighed. “Okay, what we were talking about?”

“The mysterious timeless dragon who is definitely not going to destroy the city in a fit of anger anymore.”

“Right.” Mari cleared her throat. She took a long sip of coffee, and then guiltily took another one of water. “He’s very invested in protecting me from what he thinks is coming, so I’m fairly certain that whatever he’s done to the wards is with that in mind.”

Pricilla nodded. “If you trust him, then I do too. What is it he thinks is coming?”

“Have you ever heard of something called the Old One?”

The other witch's eyebrows drew down. "I don't think so?"

"He says that's what my father was trying to keep out of Las Vegas all these years."

"Okay." Pricilla took a breath. "I'll do some research. Anything else to go on?"

"He said it was the genesis of all paranormals on Earth."

Pricilla frowned. "Kind of scary to imagine something like that is still walking around."

"Yeah, I know. I'll try to get more details from him. Can we keep this close until we know more about what's going on?"

"Absolutely. You, your gentlemen, and Willow, I assume?"

Mari inclined her head. "Willow might be the best avenue for research on this one. Do you have any idea how old they are?"

"Not a clue. Older than anyone I know, for sure." She shrugged. "Probably not as old as Dohal."

"I honestly have no idea how old he is. He said he was trapped here before humans descended from trees, but I don't know if that was true or just hyperbole. Sometimes it's hard to tell with him." Another question to add to the pile. She was going to have to start a list.

Her head was starting to throb again by the time she left her office and went to find Dante. She knocked lightly on his door, unsure if he would be in.

A few seconds later, he answered with damp hair and a towel wrapped around his

waist. “Right on time. I was about to go looking for you.” He pulled open the door and gestured her in.

She hadn’t been in his room before, so she took a moment to glance around. He was tidy. All of his clothes tucked away rather than spread around the room. On one dresser, there was a tray with neatly wrapped sandwiches she recognized as Giselle’s handiwork.

“I grabbed lunch so we wouldn’t have to sleep on empty stomachs.”

She watched him as he walked toward the bathroom. Saints, he smelled glorious. “That was thoughtful.”

He came back in a few seconds wearing some pajama pants with ducks on them. “I don’t want to work for you anymore.”

The smile wilted on her face, and tears pricked at her eyes. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Oh no. Sweetheart. Come here.” He pulled her into his arms and pressed his face to her temple. “I meant I don’t want you to pay me anymore. I called Esmé this morning and gave her my two weeks’ notice. She told me to fuck off and fired me.”

Mari laughed into his chest. “That sounds like her.” She angled her head to look up at him. “That’s what upset you in my office?”

“Yeah.” He blew out a breath. “The idea that you thought I was only taking care of you because you paid me. It hurt my feelings.”

“I never thought that, Dante. I mean, I was paying you, but only because that’s what we had agreed to. And I wouldn’t be mad about keeping on paying you either. But I

know you care about me, and I'm sorry I made you feel bad."

He kissed her forehead. "Apology accepted." He reached for one of the sandwiches. "Now, eat this."

She chuckled as she unwrapped the sandwich. Her stomach wasn't thrilled with the idea of eating, but that was probably because she'd had too much coffee and not enough food already today, and she knew she should put something in there, especially after the night she'd had. "So, is this what I can expect from now on?"

He watched with narrowed eyes as she took a bite of the egg salad sandwich. "Probably. I know Rio tries to make sure you take care of yourself, but he's got business stuff keeping him busy a lot of the time. I talked to him this morning, and he's fine if I help."

She rolled her eyes when he handed her a glass of water but sipped dutifully all the same. "I'm an adult you know."

"Uh-huh. An adult who pushes herself right to the edge of exhaustion and doesn't think about taking care of herself until after everyone else is taken care of."

"Guilty as charged." She sighed and took another bite. It really was a very good sandwich, with just the right amount of mustard.

He rested a hand on the back of her neck. A line formed between his eyebrows. "Headache is back again? Thought I took care of that last time."

She felt the warm touch of his magic permeating her spine, relaxing her in an instant. "Probably just dehydration. Yesterday was a complete madhouse, and then today I've had too much coffee and not enough water." She offered him a guilty smile. Saints, had their failed date just been yesterday? It felt like a million years ago.

He huffed and kept up the slow trickle of healing magic. “At least you can admit it.” He curled his fingers into her neck a bit to work at the tense muscles. “Finish that up, and then I’m going to get you into bed.”

“You want me to sleep here?” She took another bite, glad that her stomach had settled.

“Yeah, maintenance crew is cleaning up the glass from last night and replacing the windows in the pool house, so it’ll be quieter in here until they’re done. I already told Rio this is where you’d be.”

“So, you’re both mother hens now?” she asked, smiling at the thought.

“Yup, at least until you start taking care of yourself.” He nodded at the glass, prompting her to sip. “You went through a ton of magic yesterday, and today you’re running on empty, and you were just going to keep on pushing through it, even after your magic was slow to rebound this morning.”

She finished chewing the final bite of the sandwich and took another drink of water. Much as she might love to argue his points, she had responsibilities to all the people in this house and under her protection. Letting herself get worn down wasn’t going to help any of them. “You’re right. Thank you for caring, and thank you for looking after me.”

He took the glass and the wrapper from her and set them both on the tray before scooping her up in his arms. “I’m prescribing one orgasm and at least an hour of sleep.” His grin was wicked. “How do you want it?”

“You pick.” Her eyes already felt heavy, and she didn’t want to make any more decisions right now. She trusted him completely.

He put her down in the middle of the bed and pulled off her flipflops before tossing them toward the door. “Mouth it is.” Peeling off her joggers and panties with no fanfare, he made himself comfortable between her thighs and set to work diligently, delivering a toe-curling climax that built up her magic nicely before tucking himself around her. She kept all that magic for herself rather than releasing it into the wards and fell asleep in seconds.

When she woke a while later, Dante wasn’t in the bed with her, but Dohal was, watching her with lidded eyes.

“How is Luis?” she asked, after her brain came the rest of the way online.

“As well as can be expected.” He placed a hand on her hip and sent his magic tickling through her. “You should sleep more.”

“I must really look like shit today,” she grumbled. “Everyone keeps telling me to go back to bed, even when I’m in bed.”

“You look beautiful today and every day.” A wry smile twisted his lips. “But you are also exhausted. You used more magic in a day than some witches do in a year.” He sounded impressed, and a little scared.

“It was close, wasn’t it?” She didn’t say what it was, but they both knew—frying all her magical pathways and burning the magical ability out of her entirely.

“I think so, yes.” He slid his hand up along her body to curl a lock of her hair around his fingers. “You undid a spell it had taken ten incubi to create. It should not have been possible.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, “You should not have attempted it.”

“I wanted to free you, and that was the only way.”

He stared into her eyes. “My freedom was not worth your life.”

“Yes, it was.” She reached out and stroked his horn.

He rumbled pleasantly and leaned into her touch. “Do not rile me, bavi. You are not up to another round with me yet.”

She sighed, bone-weary. “Don’t go anywhere, okay? I’m just going to close my eyes for another minute.”

He leaned in and pressed his lips to her forehead, his magic spreading through her body with a delicate touch.

The next time she woke, Rio’s arm was draped around her, and she felt much restored.

He curled his arm to snuggle into her and purred. “You feel better.”

She smothered a yawn with her hand. “Yeah. Dante and Dohal have basically been pouring healing magic into me all day.”

“Mmhmm.” He inhaled deeply. “That must be why you smell like s’mores.”

She laughed. “Campfire and marshmallows?”

“Yup.” He nuzzled into the back of her neck. “They belong with us. On you, they smell like home.”

She tightened her hand around his, relief flooding her. “I was afraid you might be...upset with having to share me.”

“No,” he said simply, rubbing their joined hands over her belly. “They aren’t mine, like Cisco is. But they are yours. Dante has grown on me, and I’m sure the big lug will too.”

She leaned back into him. “How’s Tristan?”

“The same. Greta checked up on him again while you were sleeping and says he’s stable.”

“Doesn’t he have to eat or something?”

“Phoenixes do this stasis thing sometimes when they are in danger. Greta thinks that’s what he’s doing. He just doesn’t know he’s safe yet, so he’s biding his time.”

She stretched her toes and calves as she considered that. “Maybe you should go tell him.”

“Huh,” he chuckled. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Halcyon said he came back to find you, right? So he remembers you from before. Maybe he’s just waiting for you to tell him it’s okay to wake up.”

“That’s not a bad idea. We can go try that as soon as we finish with the menu tasting.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten all about that. Well, good thing I’m hungry, I guess.”

“I brought you a change of clothes.”

“Oh, thank you. That was thoughtful.” She sat up and stretched her arms and her back. “Are they done in the pool house yet?”

“Close to finishing up, yeah.”

“Good. I didn’t mind napping here, but this bed definitely isn’t big enough for all of us.”

Rio exhaled a laugh. “For sure.” He rolled onto his back and watched her as she padded into the bathroom to freshen up.

When she came back out, she was wearing the cute blue dress he’d brought for her—one of Cisco’s favorites. It was cut low in the back to show off her tanned skin almost down to her hips, and she had to giggle about how obvious Rio was about trying to please him.

With a sly smile, Rio held up the sky-high white espadrilles that Cisco absolutely adored on her.

“Oh, I see, we’re flirting with our gargoyle tonight with my outfit.”

“We’re always flirting with our gargoyle,” he said with a particularly feline grin.

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Chapter 4

Mari tried not to roll her eyes when Rio put seconds of yet another tiny bite on her tasting plate.

Willow took copious notes about every facial expression and sound, based on their furious writing. The caterer, a lovely woman with flame-red hair and a quick smile named Mica, fretted over everything from the plate positions to the consistency of the sauces as she spooned them. She had no reason to be nervous, because the food was absolutely decadent, and Mari attempted to reassure her whenever Rio wasn't stuffing her mouth with some other delicious morsel.

Cisco watched them with a satisfied smile as he took dutiful bites of every dish. He ranked his favorites in neat rows but insisted that whatever Mari decided was gospel.

Mari chose carefully, trying to make sure there was a variety of options for different palates and dietary restrictions. She especially counted the vegetarian dishes and desserts for Dante.

By the time they were done, Mari was pleasantly full and considering the odds that she would be able to sneak away for another nap before anyone noticed.

"Do you want to look at the ballroom tonight?" Willow said, as they jotted a final note.

Mari sat up straight. "It's done?" A flicker of worry snaked through her. What if she couldn't make herself walk into the room? They would surely have to cancel the

party then.

Rio's hand ghosted over her exposed back in a gentle caress, but he didn't say anything. She wondered if he was trying to comfort himself as much as he was her. They both had reason to fear that room.

"Yes, Clovis just inspected everything today and gave his stamp of approval." Willow lifted an eyebrow. "We can do it another day, if you prefer."

"No, let's get it done," Mari said with much more certainty than she felt.

Willow led the way through the hallways toward the ballroom with Rio striding next to them and chatting pleasantly.

Cisco slid a hand to the small of her back and leaned close as they walked. "You look stunning," he murmured.

Mari smiled nervously. "I appreciate you trying to distract me."

He made a careless shrug. "I'm just being honest."

"Well, thank you. I do finally feel better." Mari almost tripped when they made the final turn toward the ballroom, but Cisco caught her arm effortlessly. "Holy shit," she said under her breath.

Even the hallway had been transformed. Gone was the blue and gold motif and the cold marble tile. The floor was highly polished wood, gleaming and alive, and the walls were textured paper, white with delicate burgundy striping.

"Bravo, Willow," Cisco said in an appreciative tone.

This no longer felt like the place where her father had reigned at all. It was warm and welcoming—it was home.

Rio dove in to hug the sphinx. They made a squawk of indignation but then settled into the embrace.

“Thank you,” Rio whispered as he clutched them tight.

“You haven’t even seen the ballroom yet,” they chided.

“Well, go ahead and show it to us,” Mari laughed, her eyes filled with happy tears.

The room beyond the large double doors was just as awe-inspiring, with private alcoves aplenty, along with two dance floors and an expansive bar. The stage was raised slightly on one distant wall, and across the room from that, a dais rose up two stairs, separated from the rest of the open space by an ornate wooden railing. The seating in the dais area echoed the burgundy and white color scheme of the rest of the room and was equipped with one long and comfortable booth that curved in a wide arc.

It was perfect.

“What’s through there?” Cisco indicated the door to the room which had been host to her father’s private parties.

“Ahh, that’s my favorite part. Come.” Willow led the way. With a wave of their hand, the wall fell away, revealing a large conservatory with a pool in the center. “A saltwater pool, spelled and maintained by a water witch friend of mine. Bringing just a little bit of a beach party right here to your home.”

One side of the room had a sand floor, complete with lounges that would blend

seamlessly into any beachside resort, while the other half was equipped with cozy chairs that looked perfect for quiet conversations.

Willow gestured. “There’s sound shielding here between the rooms, just to keep this from getting overrun with the noise of the party. I figured it was a nice touch for the folks who get overwhelmed with loud music and such.”

“Oh, Willow, it’s marvelous.” Mari leaned against Cisco’s shoulder and let the tears of relief fall. She couldn’t believe how precisely every stitch of her father had been stripped away and transformed into something that suited them. She’d been dreading the party for weeks, but now she thought she might actually enjoy it.

Cisco wrapped an arm around her and held her close. “You really earned every penny,” he said to the sphinx.

Willow preened. “I’m glad you think so. I’m very proud of the work we’ve done.” They smiled at Rio. “You deserved a new start, the same as you were giving everyone else.”

Rio smiled through his tears. “Don’t make me hug you again.”

They held up a hand. “Please don’t. One a day is plenty.”

Movement rippled across the surface of the pool before them. Mari was just about to ask what had caused the disturbance when the entire house shook as Dohal screamed.

Mari fell to her knees as the breath was driven from her body by the wave of pain that flooded her. Agony sliced across her skin. A moment later, the sensation eased as Dohal cut her off from it, though she could tell he was still in trouble. Cisco wrapped himself around her, trying to protect her from whatever threatened her.

Before she had a chance to recover, a concussive pressure wave rattled the glass above and around them.

“Out!” Cisco shouted. He scooped Mari into his arms and dashed back into the ballroom with her.

Rio was right behind them, dragging a confused Willow along with him. “What in the fuck was that?”

Astonishingly, the glass in the conservatory remained in place, though waves shimmered across the water of the pool.

Mari finally drew a shuddering breath. “Something happened to Dohal.”

“Do you know where he is?” Cisco asked.

“Outside, I think.” She pointed vaguely in the direction she felt him.

Cisco indicated that Willow should go inside and wait for them and then carried Mari to the door that opened to the front yard and driveway. They waited as Rio peeked through and checked for any threats beyond. When he confirmed it was clear, they passed out into the cool desert night.

Kima and Dasher came around the corner of the house at the same time, their patrols interrupted by whatever had happened. Without a word from Cisco, the two of them flanked the group. Mari pointed again to indicate where she felt Dohal.

They found him collapsed near a decorative pile of rocks, covered in blood. By the smell, she knew immediately that it was his, though it was much too dark to see any wounds on his black skin. Cisco gestured that the guards should scan the area, and then set her delicately on her feet.

“What’s wrong?” Mari asked urgently.

Dohal started as if he hadn’t heard them approach, though they’d taken no pains to keep their passage silent. His eyes were wide and glassy. “He tried to kill me the way he did Argento, I think.”

Gasping, Mari moved closer. She ached to hold him but imagined that whatever was going on with all the blood would only hurt more if she touched him. “Are you okay?”

“He has failed to kill me, so I think the long-term answer is yes, though right now I feel like the Hells.”

“Your luck hasn’t run out yet,” she said with a small smile, hoping to ease him by lightening the mood.

“Not quite yet, bavi,” he huffed, and struggled to get to his feet. “Truthfully, I think it was you who saved me.”

Mari blinked. “What? I didn’t do anything.”

“My connection with you was wide open,” he said, embarrassment heavy in his voice. “While I am sorry to have hurt you, I think sharing the pain with you was the only thing that allowed me to bear it.”

She stepped closer. “Open the link up again.”

He shook his head. “I would not hurt you purposefully. Unintentionally was bad enough.”

“I took the initial burst. Whatever residual is left can’t be as bad.” She stood taller.

“Do it, or I’ll waste my energy clawing my way through.”

Cisco grumbled next to her, “She’ll do it.”

Dohal sighed and a curiously soft expression took over his face. “You’ll make me bend every principle I have to please you, won’t you?”

She didn’t break eye contact with him for a moment. “Probably.”

He reached out and grabbed her arm. She didn’t understand why until he opened the link again, and she almost lost her footing as the agony of a thousand cuts broke over her body in an instant. Why wasn’t he healing? She drew a long, slow breath, channeling her magic into him, and the wounds knit a bit at a time.

Dohal groaned something in his native language, then seemed to remember himself. “You shouldn’t be healing me again. Your magic hasn’t even rebounded fully from last night.”

“Try and stop me,” she said with a lot more bravado than she felt, as her strength waned, and the pain throbbed inside her.

With a growled curse, he caught her when her knees finally gave out and scooped her up in his arms. “Where’s the unicorn?”

She reached out to Dante and knew he was closing the distance between them fast, and he was worried. “He’s on his way. And if it makes you feel better, I think he’s working up to a doozy of a lecture.”

The sound of hooves thumping against the dry desert soil announced him before he arrived. He skidded to a halt a few feet away, a huge equine shape shedding light from every inch of his gleaming white coat and brightening the night. Dante shifted,

and his human form emerged from a flash of sparkling glitter that smelled like candy, already reaching out for her with both hands, one coming to rest on her head and one on her chest. He glowed with magic as he inhaled harshly.

“Saints, you’re beautiful,” she murmured to him.

He let out a frustrated sigh in response to her flirting. “What in the fuck happened?”

“I was attacked by the Old One, and she insisted on healing me, but she didn’t have the resources to do it,” Dohal answered, guilt heavy in his voice.

Dante swept a glance over him. “And now you’re both tapped. Sweetheart, come here.” He held his arms out, and Dohal passed her over.

“I don’t need to be carried everywhere,” she said with an indignation that seemed ridiculous, considering there was no way she was standing right now, not with the way her head was spinning.

“If you didn’t keep doing this to yourself, we wouldn’t have to,” Rio said from beside her with an irritated rumble. “Anything I can do, Dante?”

“Point out the closest place I can sit down with her.”

“Not sure if the pool house is cleared out yet.” Rio glanced toward Cisco, who set off to check with a grunt and flap of his wings. “Let’s go back to the ballroom.”

They moved at shifter speed, which made her even dizzy while they were sprinting, but she felt immediately better once Dante settled into a chair with her sprawled atop him.

He adjusted her dress so that as much of her skin was touching his as possible. She

gasped at the icy rush of magic that filled her.

Dante pressed his lips to her neck. “Sorry, you’re too hurt for me to get turned on right now, so we’re doing it the less fun way.”

She didn’t mention how much she disliked the impersonal feeling of his magic when channeled into her like this, because it would only make the process more difficult, and tried her best not to squirm away from his touch.

As the pain slowly ebbed, she watched Dohal pacing back and forth in front of them, noticing for the first time that he wore a dark green flowing skirt that wrapped around his hips and draped gracefully to the ground.

“When did you get clothes?” she asked in a low voice.

He paused and looked at her, his mouth pinched. “Your house witch made it for me after she said we would never find anything to fit me ‘off the rack,’ whatever that means.”

“I like it.”

He aimed an exasperated smile her way. “I’m glad.”

Rio returned with a blanket that he tucked around her and Dante and then grumpily sat next to them.

Cisco also came back within a few minutes with news that the pool house repairs were done, and everyone was cleared out. He stood staring at her with his arms folded over his chest. He aimed his next words at Dohal, “Okay, so what happened? I know you said the Old One attacked you the same way he did to Argento. So, are we all just unprotected now? Can he just come after any of us the same way? Because we

don't have the resources to keep fighting this kind of battle.”

Dohal closed his eyes briefly before responding, “I haven't been able to completely fortify the protections over the city yet. My own magic has been taxed today, between Mariana's needs and helping Luis. The compound itself is protected. I shielded that first, because this is where the nexus sits.”

An embarrassed look crossed Dohal's handsome features. “What I neglected to protect was myself. He attacked me directly, along with all the other incubi who took part in his banishment. I think you'll find they are all dead now. I survived only because his focus was split, and Mariana grounded me.”

Cisco gave him a long, appraising look. “So, provided we don't leave the grounds, we'll be okay until you can get the protections up again for the whole city?”

“We will be protected from his attacks from afar, but I do not think I can keep him out physically anymore. That is what the prison was made for, and why I was tied to it.”

“And you think he'll come himself?”

“I do, as soon as he realizes that it is an option.”

“And I don't suppose you have any idea how long that will be?”

Dohal shook his head.

“Fantastic,” Cisco said through bared teeth.

“What's to stop him from attacking you again right now?” Mari asked.

“That was a lot of magic to use, even for one such as him. He will need time to replenish, the same way you and I do. By the time he can collect himself for another attack, I will be protected.” He ran a hand down his face. “It was an oversight. I did not think he would target me directly that way.”

“Any idea what we can do to prepare for him coming in person?” Rio asked after a few beats of silence.

“I don’t know many specifics about him or his powers. I suppose what you might do to prepare for any powerful enemy: marshal your forces, prepare your weapons, and be ready to treat the casualties.”

“And we’re sure he’s an enemy?” Mari asked. All four of them looked at her at once with varying degrees of surprise.

“Your father certainly thought so,” Dohal responded. “He worked with nine other incubi he otherwise did not trust very much to banish him from this place.”

“That’s what I mean. Maybe they just wanted power they otherwise didn’t have access to. Maybe he’s not evil.”

Dohal shot an arch look her way. “He did just try to tear me into small bloody chunks with his power.”

“You have a point.” Mari sighed. “I’m just so tired of fighting.”

Dante smoothed one hand up her back. “I think it’s worth considering that there might be another way. Maybe we can negotiate with him?”

Rio ran a hand through his hair. “We should ask Willow what they can find out about him.”

“That’s a good idea,” Cisco said with a fond smile for the puma shifter. “We need as much information as we can get.”

“I wish the goddess had been a little less aggressive about dealing with Vincent. We could have asked him about the threat.”

Dohal hummed. “I think he might have been speaking about something else.”

“Of course, because why should only one powerful entity be trying to kill us this week?” Mari let her head hang back for a moment of unbridled frustration before she collected herself again. “Well, let’s hear it.”

Dohal considered his words before speaking. “The demon who kindled your power.”

In a blink, Cisco was face-to-face with Dohal, his clawed hand reaching up to hold Dohal’s jaw in a fierce grip. “Not. Another. Word.”

“I hate him as much as you do, and for the same reason,” Dohal bit out, but didn’t move to push Cisco away. “But that will not stop him from coming for her.”

The war in Cisco’s expression was excruciating.

“Let him talk,” Mari said softly.

Cisco slid a wounded look her way that sliced her right to the bone. He dropped his hand and moved away a single step.

Dohal looked at her, grinding his teeth for a moment before he began, “Ashdei is a Prince of the Hells. He is who your father brokered a deal with. Basilio traded you away to one of the most powerful demons in the Hells for the power he thought would keep him on this Earth.”

“You mean traded my awakening away,” Mari said very carefully.

Cisco’s growl vibrated the air around her. “Don’t say it.”

Dohal offered Cisco a sympathetic glance, but continued, “No, he traded you, body and soul. You are betrothed to one of the Princes of the Hells.”

Chapter 5

An argument began and continued on around Mari without her input, but she wasn't listening. The name Ashdei meant nothing to her. Cisco had taken her memories of the entire day and never spoken a word about what had happened. She had woken the next morning with a heavy necklace locked around her neck and, apparently, a husband-to-be that she knew nothing about.

This seemed like a very good time for some hysterical laughter, but she sincerely did not have the energy for it right now.

She sat quietly for several minutes contemplating how she felt about the new development, as the men she had claimed as her own continued to yell around her.

Honestly, she didn't much care. She had no intention of marrying the demon she'd been betrothed to against her will, and she didn't think he really had any recourse. Although she was going to ask Willow about demonic marriage contracts as soon as she had a few minutes to herself.

"It doesn't matter," she finally said, loudly, so they would hear her over their continued bickering.

They all quieted at once, looking her way expectantly.

"I'm not marrying him, no matter what he thinks. I hope that's obvious."

Dohal nodded. "I did not mean to imply that you should. But he will show

up—sooner rather than later now that Basilio is gone—looking to take his place as the ruler of Las Vegas. And the easiest way to accomplish that is by claiming you as his rightful bride.”

She headed off the argument that almost began again with a glare. “Okay, we have another powerful enemy that’s coming for us. That’s just another Thursday.” She looked at each one of them in turn. “I don’t want to discuss him anymore if he’s not actively banging down our door trying to kill us. One problem at a time.”

Dohal was the first to incline his head in deference to her wishes, and one at a time, the rest followed suit.

She turned back toward Dante, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Thank you for helping. I feel much better.”

She pressed her mouth to his and felt his magic perk up immediately in response to her. His hands slid around to grip her ass and hold her tighter to him. He was naked under her, having gone into his shifted form in order to run to her, and his cock stirred against her. The only thing separating them was her panties, and that was far too much.

She broke the kiss with a gasp. “I have a thing to do with Rio, but I need this first.”

Rio still sat beside them and raked her body with a slow, heated glance. “Take your time.”

Dohal moved to sit on the other side, his cosmic eyes taking in every detail. “By all means, sate your appetite.”

Cisco moved to stand close behind her and wrapped her hair around his fist, leaning to whisper in her ear, “Do you need permission to take a moment for yourself?”

Because you have it. Reach down between your legs and stroke his cock to feel how much he wants you right now.”

Having all of their attention focused on her at once was a heady thing. Even though she'd been tired and hurt for most of the day, the moment she wrapped her fingers around Dante she felt powerful. He was hot and hard and ready in her hand. She allowed herself the luxury of several long, slow glides over the silky heat of his cock.

The magic came to her slower than usual, a trickle rather than a torrent, but she was glad that it came at all after the day she'd had.

Cisco tugged her head back an inch. “Now pull your panties aside and touch yourself for all of us to watch. Not too fast. I'm not going to let you rush this. Savor it.” His voice was pure seduction.

She did as he ordered, moving the damp fabric out of the way and sliding her fingers over her clit. A shiver slinked up her spine as her arousal curled slow and low in her belly. She locked eyes with Dohal as she swirled her fingers in a gradual circle and a moan fell from her lips. He bit his generous lower lip with the tip of one fang as his eyes drank her in.

Dante splayed his fingers over her thighs, rocking his hips so that his cock nudged against her teasingly. The flirty smile he showed her made her want to eat him up.

Cisco nuzzled the side of her head. “You're so fucking hot. Hold yourself open so he can slide into that luscious pussy.”

Again, she did exactly what he said, spreading her labia so that Dante could slide into her on his next thrust. An explosive moan shook her as he probed her cunt the barest inch before withdrawing again. “Oh, fuck.”

“Mmm,” Cisco murmured in her ear. “Look at Rio. He loves it when you get all turned on and breathy.”

She swiveled her gaze to Rio, who was watching her with the hottest smile ever, his eyes lit with his obvious enjoyment of the show she was putting on.

Cisco shifted his grip so that he held the back of her neck. “Go ahead, Dante.”

Dante rocked his hips again, pushing into her. This time when he started to withdraw, Cisco pressed her down into his lap. She groaned as her body stretched to accommodate the unicorn’s thick cock. His magic flowed into her, wild and sweet.

Dante leaned his head back, surrendering everything to her. “You feel so good every time,” he said in a reverent whisper.

Cisco dug his fingers in a bit, so she felt the faintest prick of his claws. “You’re going to ride him slow and easy. I want you to feel every inch of him parting that slick pussy.”

Mari’s breath stuttered as Cisco began to rock her up and down in an agonizingly slow rhythm. She met Dohal’s blazing eyes again.

His lips were slightly curled as he watched her sliding over Dante’s cock. “Pull up your dress, bavi, so I can see you better.”

She did as he asked, dragging the silky fabric up along her torso to clear his view. His gaze slowly roamed down her body as she moved under Cisco’s command.

Dante’s cock plunged deep with every stroke, dragging inside her with such perfect friction that she thought she would self-combust.

Cisco's grip on her neck tightened again as he drove her faster, so that her tits bounced. She slid her hands up to palm them and panned her eyes toward Rio, who watched her chest with avid appreciation.

Their attention sparked something inside her that was hungry for them. Dante wrapped his hands around her ass as she picked up speed again, groaning into the base of her neck as she rode him hard. The slapping of their skin on every thrust filled the room.

Cisco no longer directed her, just supported her as her movements became more frantic. "Come all over his cock, Mariana."

She cried out as her muscles contracted, squeezing around Dante as she continued to move along his length, enjoying the sensation of his cock pushing through the pressure. His hips jerked as he followed her after a handful of strokes, his magic and his cum pumping into her.

Mari relaxed against Dante as her body continued to shudder around him. "I like the fun way much better," she murmured into his shoulder.

He chuckled and slid his hand up her back. "Me too."

Rio traced his fingers lightly over her arm. "Are you feeling better?"

"Mmhmm. Much," she said with a drowsy smile.

Cisco rubbed her neck. "Good."

Dohal leaned to kiss her shoulder. "I am very glad."

Mari grumbled the whole way up the stairs to the guest rooms, just for fun. Rio had

agreed to let Mari go with him to talk to Tristan only if she let him carry her. And since Mari was feeling quite a bit perkier after her sexy times with Dante in the ballroom, she was quite enjoying the ride, letting her magic rub up against Rio and teasing him into a frenzy.

When they arrived at the door, Rio set her gently on her espadrilles and pushed her into the wall with a searing kiss that made her wrap a leg around him. She squeaked against his mouth when he grabbed a handful of her ass under her dress and pulled her hard against him.

He gave her a scorching look as he pulled away an inch. “You keep making noises like that and I’m going to drop to my knees right here in this hallway.”

She gave his arm an indignant swat and laughed. “Not in this hallway.”

“Is there another hallway that’s better for you?” He dipped his head for another brief kiss. “Because I can just carry you over there.”

“You’re impossible.” She tipped her head back and laughed again, and he peppered her throat with nibbling kisses.

He let out a playful growl and pulled away slightly. “Okay, let’s get this done, because I need under that dress in the worst way.”

Rio knocked on the door, but didn’t step away from where he had her pinned until the last second.

This time Halcyon answered the door. He raised his eyebrows in question without saying anything.

“Mari had an idea about something that might help.”

Still no response, and if anything, Halcyon looked more skeptical.

Mari said, “Greta thinks he’s in stasis, right? Waiting for it to be safe. Well, what if Rio tells him it’s safe?”

Halcyon didn’t say anything but lifted his chin indicating they should come with him.

They followed him into the bedroom once again, where Clarion lay beside Tristan with one arm draped across the phoenix. Clarion’s red eyes came open the second they crossed the threshold. He didn’t growl when Rio came closer, but it looked like a near thing.

Rio sat next to Tristan and picked up his hand. He took a breath before he began, “I’ve missed the hell out of you, Tris.”

He laced his fingers with the phoenix’s and thought for a moment. “I don’t know what happened to you, or where you went. I thought you died, and it killed me.” He took a moment to hold back the tears that roughened his voice. “I’m sorry that when you came back looking for me, you found Vincent.”

“That piece of shit is dead. My partner killed him.” Rio smiled at her. “I’d love to tell you all about her. She’s really great.”

Rio rubbed Tristan’s hand lightly. “These guys seem pretty dedicated to you. I know you don’t know them real well, but they won’t let anything hurt you from now on.” He leaned down and kissed Tristan’s forehead. “You’re safe, Tris. I promise.”

The room was quiet after Rio finished. He sat there for several minutes and then offered Clarion a sympathetic shrug. “It was worth a shot, anyway.” With a final pat for Tristan’s hand, he rose and walked to Mari.

She hugged him tight, until she thought she might crack some ribs, and wished that she could help.

“Is that her?” a hoarse voice asked from behind him.

Rio whipped around at the same time Clarion sat up, reaching for Tris’s face. The hellhound thought better of forcing contact on him and pulled back his hand. Halcyon closed the distance to the bed and stood looking over Tristan, his expression astonished.

Tristan hadn’t moved much, but his eyes were open, and he was looking at Rio.

“Hey,” Rio said, stepping closer cautiously, aware that the hellhounds were on a hair trigger. “I’m so glad you’re awake.”

“I’m not sure I am. I’m pretty confused about where I am.” Tristan looked between the hellhounds who were desperate to touch him but trying to give him space. “And when I am.”

Rio waited until Halcyon gave him a careful nod to sit at the foot of the bed. “Well first, this is Halcyon and Clarion.” He pointed at each of them in turn. “They have mating bonds attached to you, which is probably a scary thing to think about, but it’s important to explain why they’re hovering.”

Clarion said, “It’s not a thing we would ever force on you.”

“But we want to take care of you while you’re recovering,” said Halcyon immediately afterwards.

“Hi.” Tristan shifted his hand to be closer to Clarion’s on the coverlet. “I get it. I knew some hellhounds in L.A. You can help. I’m just going to need some time for

the rest of it.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Halcyon assured him at the same time Clarion nodded.

“And this is Mari,” Rio said as he held out a hand to her.

She came closer and took Rio’s hand. “Hi. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Tristan showed her a weak smile. “She glows like an angel.”

Rio laughed and brought her hand to his mouth for a kiss. “She really does.” He cleared his throat. “You’re in our house. And you’re safe. That’s the most important thing.”

Tristan nodded. “I don’t remember a lot from when I was here before. Mostly what I remember is growing up with you in the foster home with Maddie and Donna.”

Rio swallowed. “Those were good times. If you have to remember anything, those are good memories.”

“Everything since I came back here is really murky.”

Rio nodded. “We can talk about that all later.”

“Are you hungry?” Clarion asked, quite obviously changing the subject. “We can get you some food.”

“Yeah, actually. Starving.”

Halcyon darted out at top speed and there was the noise of some dishes being moved around in the other room.

Rio said, “Greta is our resident life witch, and I’m sure she’d love to take another look at you now that you’re awake. Meanwhile, I’ll let these guys take care of you tonight and then I can come back in the morning, and we can talk?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” Tristan sighed. “It’s good to see you again, Rio.”

“You too. I’m so glad you’re here.” Rio took Mari’s hand and led her out of the suite.

Once they were outside and the door was closed, he fell against the wall. “I have no idea what I’m going to tell him. There’s so much. And a lot of it is real fucking bad.”

Mari leaned against his shoulder. “Just answer his questions and be honest with him. I’m sure more than anything he just wants to figure out why he’s here.”

They walked down the hall to Greta’s door and told her that Tristan was awake. She was bleary-eyed and looked to have been asleep, her bright pink hair sticking up every which way. But she rallied quickly, grabbing her bag and running to the end of the hall.

Rio scooped Mari up into his arms and she made a half-hearted grumpy protest, just for appearances, and then settled against him.

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Chapter 6

The pool house was empty when Rio and Mari got back. He wasted not a single second stripping her of her clothes and bending her over the back of his favorite lounge. Dropping to his knees behind her, he used his hands to spread her thighs and dove directly for her clit, sucking it into his mouth with no preamble.

She squealed as her arousal spiked, fast and tight, and grabbed the cushions for purchase. Her toes barely touched the ground behind her, so she had no leverage to push back against his skilled mouth the way she wanted to and could only accept the slow and dirty kisses he inflicted on her over and over. She was never going to come like this, and that seemed to be exactly what he had in mind.

She was soaking wet and aching with desire by the time Cisco strolled in with an amused smile curling his full lips. “I heard her begging for your cock halfway across the courtyard, mi vida. Are you planning on giving it to her?”

Mari was too far gone to be embarrassed that half the residence could probably hear her. She needed to be fucked right now, and Rio didn’t seem in the mood to cooperate. “Please,” she panted. “I need you.”

Cisco looked around innocently. “Me? Oh, I don’t know. What do you think, Rio?”

He murmured something completely unintelligible against her cunt.

Cisco grinned wickedly. “I don’t know about you, but I can’t understand a thing he says when he’s tongue-deep in your pussy.”

Mari groaned in frustration. Her magic simmered under her skin, hot and desperate. She was so glad it was back she nearly wept after the numbing lack of it all day.

“Oh, I know what he said.” Cisco snapped his fingers. “He was asking if I wanted heads or tails.” He let his eyes drift over her like a caress. “A tough choice, but I think I’ll sit this round out and watch.” He sat at the foot of the bed across from them with a smug smile and started unbuttoning his shirt.

With slow control that Mari admired and hated all at the same time, Rio grabbed her ass with both hands and stood behind her. She was quivering in anticipation by the time he gained his feet, a whine caught in her throat. He speared her with a quick thrust that filled her eager cunt perfectly. Her toes curled as pleasure wracked her body. Her moan echoed through the room like a thousand answered prayers.

Rio slid his hand up her back and gripped her neck. She clenched around him when his fingers dug in and he ground his pelvis against her ass, a hoarse and wordless plea falling from her lips. Desire wound tight in her belly. She didn’t know how much more she could take. He was absolutely ruining her, and he was barely moving.

He leaned over her to press his lips to her spine, the soft kiss searing her like a brand. “I’ve got you, querida. Always.”

He rested like that for a long and beautiful moment, with his weight pushing her down into the lounge, and his cock buried deep inside her. She felt the promise that his body was making all the way to her bones—that he would always be her foundation, no matter what happened around them.

She choked on a sob. All of the emotions of the day came out in that one expression—anguish and elation and pride and worry. She acknowledged them all as she let them go. Rio smothered a soothing noise into her skin.

When she stopped shaking under him, he straightened and started to ply her with slow thrusts, one hand between her shoulder blades to hold her exactly where he wanted her. The pierced head of his cock stroked over her g-spot with an understanding of her body that whispered of his reverence without a single word.

She dug her fingers into the cushions of the lounge, because while the intensity of his lovemaking was absolute bliss, it was also too much. She was going to come apart at the seams, and there was nothing she could do to hold herself together.

“Oh. Gods. Rio. ” She panted between each breath.

“I love how you squeeze me when you’re right on the edge,” he said in a low and dirty voice. “Like you’re so desperate for my cock you can’t bear to be without it.”

The shuddering orgasm started deep inside her and consumed her like a wildfire. Her cries of ecstasy filled the room. Her magic overflowed in waves that echoed the contraction of her muscles around him and rushed out into the wards.

She felt Dohal’s regard turn toward her. His rumble of approval vibrated through her still clenching cunt, sending secondary ripples along her body.

Rio kept moving at the same pace until she stilled. He withdrew slowly as he rubbed his hands over her back, murmuring in answer to her whimpers of protest. Then he gathered her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He settled her against his side, her boneless body cuddled against him as he lay on his back, watching as Cisco stood and disrobed.

Cisco’s warm eyes took in both of them with a soft smile as he crossed to the bed, climbing in on Rio’s other side. With a scorching hot look, he leaned to take Rio into his mouth. He sucked eagerly on the head several times before swallowing him down all the way in a gradual and torturous glide.

Rio spluttered a moan, pulling Mari against him tighter with one arm and nuzzling against her head. She wrapped her body around him.

Cisco built him up slowly, using his talented mouth to full and devastating effect, until Rio was quietly begging in a babbling mix of English and Spanish.

Finally, Cisco relented, pushing up onto his knees to wrap his hand around both his cock and Rio's. He used the lubrication of his saliva to stroke them both together at once, staring down into Rio's eyes.

Rio surrendered everything to him, back arched and throat bared, hoarse moans cascading from his lips.

"Be a good boy and come for me," Cisco murmured to him.

Rio's climax overtook him, swift and unyielding as an avalanche. His throaty cries rose to the ceiling and beyond as his seed lashed out to coat his stomach and chest. Cisco slid his fingers through the remnants with a dirty chuckle, using it to continue working his own cock after Rio was spent. He came with a shout a dozen or so quick strokes later, his cum painting over what Rio had left behind.

Cisco looked over his handiwork with a satisfied grin, tracing lightly over their mingled fluids as Rio shivered under him. After he concluded his inspection, he went to the bathroom to retrieve a washcloth and cleaned Rio off with a reverent touch.

He tucked the blankets around them and wrapped them both up with one arm and one wing. "I love you both more than anything in this world, and I am so fortunate to have you," Cisco said softly as he clutched them tight.

Mari only woke one time during the night, when Dante joined them in bed, curling himself around her back. He exhaled a contented sigh against her neck when she

settled against him, slinging an arm over her hip. She reached out her awareness for Dohal and found his comforting presence right outside their door enjoying the open sky of the desert at night. He seemed relaxed and at ease which, considering the day they'd had, she logged as a triumph. As far as she knew, he didn't sleep, or he did so rarely enough that he hadn't yet.

Sleep, bavi , he whispered into her mind. Nothing will touch you and yours tonight. I swear it.

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Chapter 7

The next few days passed in a whirlwind for Mari.

Tristan slowly grew stronger, until eventually he was attending family dinner with the rest of them. He still didn't remember a lot about his past, or even the last few months, but he quickly became more comfortable with all of them, and specifically with the two devoted hellhounds that followed him around and catered to his every need. Mari thought they were very sweet now that they weren't trying to capture her for a seraph with nefarious intentions.

Luis and Dohal spent a lot of time talking quietly together in their native language. She couldn't tell if it was healing for them or not, but they both seemed stable, and that was the best she could probably ask for given all that they both had been through. She didn't know the specifics of what had happened to either of them, but she trusted Dohal to tell her if there was something she should be concerned about.

Her magic came back to full force within the first few days, and shortly thereafter, Dohal reported that the wards were as robust as he could make them without access to his prison. When she'd questioned him about whether he was similarly protected, he'd smiled and said, "Yes, bavi, you can stop worrying about me." But in her deepest heart, she knew she never would as long as an unknowable ancient entity was trying to kill him.

Dante had fully taken over in his mission to make sure she was always properly rested, fed, hydrated, and pleased. Cisco joked that he was one stopwatch away from scheduling her orgasms for optimal magic cycling. Dante had leveled a

narrowed look in his direction at that but hadn't dismissed the idea out of hand.

While all around everything was going pretty well, the strategy sessions that were now an evening ritual would probably be her eventual undoing. She, Cisco, Rio, Dante, Dohal, Kima, Pricilla, and Willow all shut themselves up in the conference room for hours trying to figure out who their enemies were and what they could do to stop them. They had gotten approximately nowhere.

Willow knew who the Old One was, in as much as Dohal did, but they couldn't help with ways they might defend themselves or fight him. He predated Willow by quite some time.

Mari was currently brooding her way through family dinner, consumed by worries about the party, the Old One, and trying to stabilize the city.

Bren and Rio sat on either side of Willow, animatedly discussing playlists and music selection. Kima and Cisco had their heads together discussing guard details for the party.

Dante was absorbed in conversation with Giselle and Sam about the menu for a company picnic in November that would be a bigger version of family dinner but include everyone from their business endeavors as well. Mari was looking forward to that event at least, as she'd get to see people she hadn't seen in much too long.

"You look like you need a movie night," Tilly said from the other side of the table.

Mari snapped back to the present and nodded with enthusiasm. "I really do." She turned toward Nova, a bit farther down, who had also been pretty quiet throughout the meal. "You want to join us for margaritas and movies tonight?"

The medusa fixed her with stunning amber eyes. "That sounds like exactly what I

need.”

Mari didn’t miss the way Samar smiled as he cleared the dishes. He was doing an admirable job of giving Nova the space she needed to heal after what Vincent had done to her, but the longing looks he aimed in the medusa’s direction told the story of his affection plainly. Mari desperately hoped there was a happy ending for them in the cards, because they both deserved one.

Speaking of possible objects of the handsome snow leopard’s affection, Pricilla had seemed a little distracted during training this morning as well. Her and Samar had seemed to have something going on in recent weeks since the soccer-game-turned-shifter-orgy, but Mari hadn’t had a chance to ask about it directly.

Mari aimed her gaze Pricilla’s way. “You want to join us, Pris? We’ll make it a girls night in.”

The other sex witch beamed a smile her way. “Sure, that sounds like fun.”

“I usually let Tilly pick the movies, which means a lot of car chases and buxom babes. Hope that’s okay for both of you?”

“Nothing wrong with racing engines and bouncing boobs,” Tilly muttered.

Kima slid an interested look the harpy’s way that she pointedly ignored. The prickly lion shifter would absolutely not get an invite to movie night until she mended fences with Tilly about what had happened at the soccer game.

“Fine by me,” Nova said at the same time Pris nodded.

“Great! I’ll get the margaritas, and Tilly usually does the popcorn. Bring along any other snacks you want to share and a blanket. There are some in the media room, but

Matilda usually hogs them all.”

“Hey!” Tilly shrieked, but her grin was a mile wide.

“We usually kick off around nine. Dress code is come-as-you-are. Pajamas and ready-for-bed hair highly encouraged.”

A few hours later, Mari was trying to figure out how to open the door to the media room while her arms were full with a giant jug of margaritas and cups.

Nova approached from behind her and pushed the door open. The copper snakes sprouting from her head wriggled in greeting as Mari walked by.

“Thanks!” Mari said with a smile. “I’m so glad you decided to join us. I never get a chance to talk to you. How are you doing?”

“Good. Willow is keeping me busy with party planning, and when Cisco heard us talking about spreadsheets, he asked if I could help him with some business stuff too.”

“Oh, that’s great. I knew right away that folks would have things for you to do once you said you were good with numbers. Willow has been trying to teach Cisco spreadsheet stuff, but he’s so busy with managing all the different aspects of the business that he hasn’t been able to dedicate himself to figuring it out.”

“Yeah, he thinks there’s quite a bit I can take off his plate once we start getting into it.”

Mari situated herself in the middle of the couch and set about spreading blankets. “I’m so glad. He’s got a lot to handle, and that’s way beyond what I can help him with.”

Tilly burst in and her feathered arms overflowed with tubs of popcorn that seemed in danger of becoming unbalanced at any moment. Pricilla came up behind her, using magic to sweep up the wayward kernels that cascaded from her arms with every step.

“I have the perfect movie picked out,” Tilly announced, as she handed one tub to Mari and another to Nova.

Mari huffed, trying to hide her amusement. “Car crashes again?”

Tilly’s eyes lit up. “Motorcycles.”

Pricilla harrumphed as she sat down. “As long as there are just as many naked men as women.”

They all laughed and looked expectantly at Tilly.

The harpy looked shifty. “I’m not sure I can guarantee that.”

“We demand equal objectification for all,” Nova said in a serious tone.

“I don’t know if that’s a realistic expectation,” Mari said amid her laughter. “After all, I think the vast majority of people who enjoy watching fast vehicles crashing are probably also people who prefer looking at naked women.”

“Everyone doesn’t enjoy boobs?” Tilly said incredulously.

“Everyone in this room does,” Pricilla countered. “But I think that doesn’t necessarily match the entire movie-going public.”

“Well, that seems like a character flaw to me.” Tilly grabbed the remote and pressed a few buttons. “Anyway, there’re definitely boobs. I don’t know if there’s anything

else.”

The rest of them laughed again. Mari started pouring margaritas and passing them around.

When she handed a cup to Pricilla, she asked, “How’s everything with you? I talk to you all the time but never about anything besides work. Anything fun or interesting going on for you?”

Tilly leaned in. “Yeah, Mari isn’t the greatest at sharing juicy stuff, so I need someone else to give me some vicarious sex life details.”

Mari rolled her eyes. “You can ignore her. It doesn’t have to be about sex.”

“I’m really not up to much aside from your training and associated research I’m doing with Willow.”

“Have you thought about whether you’re going to stay in Las Vegas once things settle down?” Mari asked as a follow-up.

“I’m tempted to. Lots of interesting magical stuff going on here just now, and I don’t have anything tying me to New York. I was thinking about a change already when Esmé called, which is one of the reasons I packed up so quickly and came.”

“Okay, that definitely sounds like some yummy ex gossip,” Tilly added immediately.

When Pris paled visibly, Mari knew that was exactly what it was. “Just because you’re wrapped up in ex drama doesn’t mean everyone else is.”

Nova pounced, coming to Mari’s aid with flawless poise. “I think whatever she’s up to now with Samar is much more interesting.”

Pris recovered quickly and waved an idle hand. “Oh, that’s just really casual. Both of us are in a place where we’re partnerless at the moment.”

Nova harrumphed. “You sure? Samar’s idea of casual is not really the steamy looks across the dinner table variety.”

Pris leveled an amused look her way. “Now that sounds like some yummy gossip to me.”

Nova laughed, her snakes shivering with amusement. “He and I have gone a few rounds, yeah. You’re one lucky witch. He really knows what he’s doing, in all the best ways.”

Tilly cocked a curious eyebrow their way. “Never plowed that particular field, but he’s easy enough to look at. Maybe I should give him a shot?”

“Well, he definitely doesn’t have boobs,” Mari countered.

Tilly cackled. “But he is prettier than me, which is my only hard and fast rule.”

“Gods, he’s prettier than all of us,” Nova said, fanning her face with a sigh.

Pris chuckled, eyelids lowered demurely. “I kind of want to argue that point, because you’re gorgeous.”

Nova aimed a simmering smile at the raven-haired witch. Her copper snakes undulated in a slow dance. “Why, thank you.”

Tilly coughed and ruffled her feathers. “No flirting at movie night!”

Nova slid a coy look in the harpy’s direction. “Oh, you didn’t mention that rule. I’m

not sure I would have signed up.”

“It’s a new rule necessitated by the fact that all of a sudden I’m surrounded by hot babes making eyes at each other, and I don’t know how I’m going to keep my cool about it.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“Okay, okay.” Pris smiled. “We’ll flirt on our own time. Any other topics of discussion that desperately need attending to?”

“I wouldn’t mind talking about the new guy in all our lives,” Nova said, turning toward Mari. “I’ve seen him a few times in the hallway to the guest rooms, but I’m never sure if I should stop and say hello or avoid eye contact entirely.”

“He’s not much on small talk, but I don’t think he’d mind if you said hello.” Mari forgot sometimes that Dohal hadn’t been around forever, and many of the people in the compound didn’t know him at all. He seemed like such a fixture in her life already that it was difficult to recall him ever not being around. “I’ll make sure to introduce you next time you’re both in the same room.”

“And did I hear right that he’s a dragon?” Nova’s voice shimmered with curiosity.

“Yup.” Mari gave what was likely a hopelessly besotted smile. “He thinks he’s the last alive.” She had tried to ask him about what had happened to the rest, but he hadn’t been very forthcoming. The books they had were frustratingly quiet on the subject, or she never would have brought it up with him at all. And when she had asked Willow about what had befallen the dragons, the sphinx had shaken their head and refused to answer.

The room was quiet for a minute before Tilly cleared her throat. “Any other last

minute conversational nuggets that won't bum us out before the movie?"

"I suppose it's pointless to ask for a Kima update? I noticed things were pretty frosty between you at dinner," Nova said.

Tilly rubbed her cheek. "Good, we're all done then?" She pushed the button to start the movie.

Nova wrinkled her nose, but didn't protest as the music blared to life.

Mari was in Dohal's lap ahead of the night's meeting—soaking up his magic the only way he had allowed since gaining his freedom—when she asked what had been on her mind for days, "When can I tempt you into my bed again? I need more than this."

She knew that wanting wasn't the problem. Beyond the swell of his immense cock under her ass, his desire for her curled tight and hot inside him. But no matter her teasing, he wouldn't let it out. He touched her constantly and showed her all the affection a woman could ever want, except he never let it go past second base. With a rotation of three other very fulfilling cocks to choose from as often as she wanted them, she thought she should be satisfied, but the longer it went on, the more she craved the only one she couldn't have. She was very nearly to the point of begging.

He chuckled low as he stared into her eyes with his fathomless cosmic gaze. "Soon, little rabbit." He stroked his clawed fingers over the delicate skin of her throat. "You require quite a bit of recovery time from being subject to my passions."

"I'm ready," she said, a little breathless just from the hot way he was looking at her. Saints, she was seconds from crawling face-down on the table and ordering him to fuck her right now, meeting be damned.

"Controlling myself with you is difficult, so I have to exert the control I can to be

sure that I don't damage you."

She lifted her chin. It bothered her someplace deep and spiteful that he hadn't given her all of him. "I'm not that fragile."

His grin was sharp. "No, but I am a creature of dark appetites when it comes to you."

"You seemed in control of yourself the last time." She smiled as she remembered when he had lost himself in the urge to breed her. She needed that intensity again. "At least until the end."

"I thought then that it would be my only time with you. I was very restrained." He tightened his fingers around her throat. "The next time I have you under me, I will not be so gentle."

The bottom dropped out of her stomach, and a whimper fell from her lips before she could stop it. In a flash, he took her mouth in a kiss that shook her to her core. She arched up into him, offering herself to him. Reaching between her legs, he cupped her sex, growling into her mouth when he found her wet and eager for him. His thick fingers slipped past the edge of her panties and dipped into her slick heat.

Mari cried out against his mouth when he fondled her roughly. Every cell in her body screamed that she was his. She wanted every bit of the feral claiming he promised. And she wanted it right fucking now. He pulled back an inch, his fingers still buried inside her. "Tonight then. Come out to me under the stars, and I will service you as you require."

She fought the urge to beg and barely won. "Anything else?" Her voice shook with the question.

He curled his fingers slightly as he considered. "None of the others may have you

before then. I want you desperate and aching for me.” His slow smile and the implication behind it almost undid her.

The feather-light threat of his claws inside her made her clench around him. The lust etched into his face went from banked embers to raging inferno in the space of a heartbeat. He withdrew his fingers with agonizing slowness. “You test my resolve greatly,” he said in a rumble, as he wiped his fingers on the fabric of his skirt. “But I can wait another few hours to have you mewling under me as I breed you.”

She groaned all the way to her soul. It wasn’t fair how he could melt her so thoroughly with nothing but words.

With a tilt of his head, Dohal glanced toward the door. “Your gargoyle is playing guard dog outside, chasing away anyone who might disturb us.” He rested a hand on her bare thigh, sending another pulse of magic into her. “Take all the time you need to collect yourself.”

Collect herself? As if he was completely unaffected by her. She wanted to slap the smug smile off his face. He would pay for that disrespect. The goddess cackled in her head.

She rose and dropped to her knees between his legs.

Looking down at her, he raised an eyebrow. “We don’t have time-”

Mari cut him off by grabbing him through the silken fabric of his skirt. In contrast to his outward demeanor, his cock was hard and eager for her. “We have time if I say we do.”

His hissed intake of breath was extremely satisfying.

She maintained eye contact with him as she slowly pushed his long skirt up over his knees. His tongue darted out to moisten his lips as she exposed him to the air. Looking away from his gaze, she took in the magnificent length of him, heavy and full in her hand. Glittering piercings crossed behind the crown of his immense cock. She dipped her head down for a slow, luscious lick around his broad head.

His choked moan was the sound of delicious retribution.

She explored him with her tongue and lips, lingering over his piercings until he shivered. He gathered her hair behind her head with one hand, but didn't try to direct her.

When she tilted her head to look up at him again, the red glow of his magic filled his eyes, and the arcane markings under his skin shone. His expression was one of rapt attention. She parted her lips to engulf him, stretching wide to take as much of him as she could. He tasted like smoke and electricity, and she wanted to devour him.

Dohal moaned again, lower. "You have made your point, bavi. I shouldn't have teased you."

She pulled back, letting him fall from her mouth with a slurp and smiled. "I don't think you're sorry enough yet." She gave his head another slow and dirty lick, wrapping her fingers around his wide base. Near his body, along the underside of his cock, her fingers encountered what felt like a series of raised bumps. She didn't remember them from the last time they'd been together.

He noticed her attention and used his free hand to move hers, angling his cock so she could see better. "These are my crests." Smooth mounds covered him from where his cock joined his body at the bottom nearly all the way down his length. "This is my true form, but if you are bothered by it, I can assume the other, more demonic, form again when I am to service you."

Something guarded in his expression told her that this was important to him, though he hadn't indicated that with his words. Without saying anything, she lowered her head and traced her tongue lightly over a few of the crests, feeling their texture against her tongue. He groaned and had to steady himself by reaching for the table.

She smiled up at him mischievously. "No, I like them." She kissed one, and then another, and then one more, until he exhaled an explosive breath. "I like them very much, in fact."

He chuckled, low and dark, as he ran his fingers through her hair. "Of all the filthy things I imagined holding you down and doing to you over the years, why is it that none of them compares to the sweet, insistent heat of your mouth moving over me of your own accord?" His voice was a deep bass rumble filled with reverence.

The answer was an easy one. "Because you find my consent intoxicating."

"I do, indeed." He watched her without blinking. "Are you done proving your mastery over me from your knees, or will you continue to torture me with that willful mouth?"

That admission made her feel powerful and sexy. She gave him one more long lick of his entire length along his sensitive crests up to his crown and then pulled herself up into his lap, her knees splayed wide across his thighs. She rose until they were eye-to-eye and grabbed him by the throat. "Tonight, when you take me, you will not hold back. You will give me every inch of that magnificent cock with as much fierceness as you crave until I am shattered."

Staring into her eyes, he inhaled a slow and shaking breath. "I find the way you rule me so easily mortifying."

The goddess preened inside her. To have such a lover as this—so powerful and at the

same time so compliant for her—was a thing worthy of celebration. Mari leaned into him and claimed his mouth in a biting kiss that was an act of war—and this time it was he who surrendered. He let her take everything she wanted with only a hand on her hip to steady her, and when she finally pulled away, he sighed.

She relaxed against him, basking in the scintillating touch of his magic and his desire against her skin. While she wasn't satisfied yet, she was appeased—she had been clear that she would accept nothing less than all of him, and he had relented. Once they had both calmed enough that letting others in wouldn't be awkward, she went to the door and told Cisco they were ready for the meeting.

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Chapter 8

Later that night, exactly as he had promised, Dohal took her hand under the stars and a shimmer of magic passed over him. The more human guise he'd been wearing the last several days morphed into something that was closer to a cross between man and dragon—his towering wings unfurled behind him and his feet curled into thick claws.

“I have been experimenting with different combinations of my forms. What do you think of this one?”

She studied him with a smile, realizing that she'd missed the wings when they'd been gone. “I like it. I think it suits you.”

“Then it will be the one I use from now on,” he said in a pleasant rumble.

She realized he'd enjoyed her opinion on his appearance as he led her away from the pool house along one of the winding paths through the compound.

“Where are we going?” she asked, after a few minutes of walking.

“I have made a haven for you away from the more traveled areas. I had the sense the other day that you might like a space of your own with a little more privacy sometimes.”

She glanced his way, though she couldn't see much of his expression in the darkness. “That was incredibly thoughtful. It does get a little loud for me at the main house sometimes, even at the pool house.”

“Right now, the wards are keyed to allow any of the four of us in along with you, but you could change that if you chose. Above everything else, they will respond to your will.” He paused to scoop her up in his arms and turned off the path.

Mari felt the tingling of Dohal’s magic brushing over her as he stepped through the wards and into a space that looked like a fairy wonderland, lush with greenery that did not belong in this climate and lit with gently glowing orbs. The air smelled faintly of sagebrush after a rain. How exactly he knew it was her favorite scent in the world, she’d never know. He’d certainly never asked.

She had to swallow before she could speak, “It’s lovely.”

“I’m glad you approve.” He moved toward the center of the space, where a very large, raised platform dominated, and set her down on it. The material was soft and plush, though it blended in perfectly with the landscape around it.

“Is this a bed?” She laughed with delight. “It’s as big as a house.”

“You might have noticed that I am rather too large for even the bed in the pool house. This one will hold me even in my shifted form, though in that case there would only be room for you and I.”

She looked around again. The raised bed was easily twenty-five feet across. “You’re that big?”

He grinned, all sharp teeth and pride. “Yes.”

“Wow.” She didn’t bother to keep the awe from her voice.

“It is rather taxing to shift, so I will not show you now because I have other things I’d rather do with my energy.” He let his eyes sweep over her, heat gradually overtaking

his hooded gaze. “If you still would like me to service you, that is.”

“I would very much like that,” she said, as she unbelted her robe and let it slide from her shoulders.

With a slow sweep of his covetous gaze, he looked her over. She let her thighs fall open to give him a better view of her.

“I’m desperate for you and aching with emptiness, just like you wanted,” she said, her voice low. She trailed a hand up her body to toy with one of her nipple rings.

He bit his lower lip with one fang and unwound his skirt before letting it fall. His body was the most glorious work of art, chiseled of obsidian and glowing with power. With a predator’s grace, he prowled onto the platform.

She scooted back on the immense bed, enjoying that her heart beat faster with the sensation of being hunted by him. He reached out to snag her ankle with one huge hand and pulled her toward him effortlessly.

She squealed in surprise, kicking out against him on instinct, but he was much too strong. He brought her closer to him with a powerful tug and then lowered the length of his body over top of her, resting easily with his forearms on either side of her.

Mari was already panting for breath, and he’d hardly touched her. He dropped his head to kiss one collarbone and then the other, his lips scorching against her skin. She needed him so badly that she tried to stifle a whimper and failed.

“Aching, indeed.” He dragged one claw down along the side of her neck, and her hips rocked toward him. “I feel how desperately you want to be filled.” He licked from the hollow of her throat up to her chin. “And do you still want me to use you exactly as I crave?”

“Yes,” she said in a hoarse whisper.

His magic stroked her skin in tempting trails. “What I crave is the taste of you on my tongue, warm and wet for me.”

Mari groaned and arched up into him. “Then taste me.”

Moving down her body slowly, his searing mouth pressed kisses into her chest, pausing to suckle briefly at each nipple until she moaned, and then down to her stomach. He hooked his arms under her knees and spread her wide as he positioned himself between her thighs.

He showed her a steamy smile and then dropped his head to bite her hip. The prick of his teeth was like a spark that moved through her, making her gasp. Holding her breath, she watched as his long, flexible tongue emerged to dance over her skin. It was forked at the tip, like a lizard’s. She had no idea what it would feel like inside her, but she couldn’t wait to find out.

Unfortunately, now that he had her at his mercy, he didn’t seem in a hurry. He kissed across her stomach to her navel and let his tongue out to savor her again.

She exhaled a long, shaking breath. “You’re going to kill me.”

He let his tongue play around the edges of her belly button, his expression pleased. “I’m going to enjoy watching you come apart under me over and over again.” He pressed a warm kiss to her belly. “Then, when you are exhausted and pliant, I’m going to breed you until the sun rises.”

She couldn’t suppress the shiver that overtook her.

He shifted his grip to hold the backs of her thighs as he slid lower, holding her wide

open, then paused to meet her eyes with a fanged smile. “How long should I make you wait for it?” He was so strong that she couldn’t even squirm.

“Please.” The word fell from her lips with shameless ease. “I need your mouth on me.”

“I can deny you nothing, bavi.” He dipped his head and slid back, dragging his tongue over her skin the whole way down. Murmuring with approval, he let his tongue dance over her seam until her thighs quaked. Then, when she was on the point of begging again, he pressed a searing kiss over her clit. She cried out at the perfect heat of it and had no time to recover before he swirled his devilish tongue around the aching nub.

She couldn’t help trying to rock her hips toward him to intensify the sensation, but he held her fast. When he felt her strain under him, he chuckled into her, his breath hot over her exposed, damp skin.

He suckled at her clit until she keened with the rising arousal, her magic racing along her nerves and out into him. His eyes fell closed in bliss. She realized, distantly, that he was feeding from her. He stoked her magic with his clever mouth and then drew it from her as it ignited.

Somehow, the idea that he sustained himself while pleasuring her made being ravaged by him so much hotter. She cried out when her body tensed as an orgasm barreled through her, completely unexpected and beyond her control.

His unrelenting mouth didn’t even pause. He held her open and exposed and drove her right from the tail end of one climax into another without letting her come down for an instant.

The second time she came, she shouted his name to the heavens as she reached over

her head to grip the bed. Still, he didn't slow or give her a moment's reprieve.

The third time, she shrieked as her back arched, her desperately empty cunt contracting around nothing.

The fourth time, she sobbed, utterly undone by him.

Finally, it seemed he might have had his fill. He subsided into long licks over her pulsing clit. Her piercing throbbed with every touch of his tongue. She was so oversensitive that the lightest touch made her shudder, and he was none too gentle as he feasted on her.

Tightening his grip on her thighs, he lifted her hips and delved into her cunt with his long and flexible tongue. Helpless moans tumbled from her as he savored her.

He found her g-spot with the tip of his wicked tongue and flicked over it until she clenched around him, and then withdrew with a satisfied slurp, leaving her aching for more.

"You are the most delicious morsel." He swiped his tongue over his decadent lips. His lascivious gaze moved over her slowly, as if memorizing her every detail. "Now, do you remember what I said was next?"

She did, and she needed it so badly she was shaking.

He manhandled her boneless body, turning her over so that her cheek pressed into the lush greenery of the bed under her.

"Please," she groaned as she lifted her hips, hoping to entice him.

"You offer yourself to me so sweetly." His claws skated over the curves of her ass.

“Tell me what you want.”

Her breath caught, drawing her arousal tight. He knew exactly what she craved, but he would make her ask for it to prove his control over her. “Fuck me with every inch of that incredible cock.”

“As my insatiable mate commands.” Hoisting her backside with careless ease, he notched himself at her entrance. Pressed to her, he was every bit as hot and huge as she remembered. She shivered as she recalled the last time he had taken her, and how it had absolutely ruined her.

Even as drenched as she was, the fit was excruciating as he breached her. She panted for breath as her cunt stretched around him. With gentle patience, he backed out all the way and entered her a few more times, pushing slightly deeper with each stroke. Curling her fingers into the bed, she mumbled incoherently and hoped that he understood that she needed more, even as she shook under him. She was a writhing pile of desire and could do nothing to sate herself.

He paused to massage her clit until she tightened around him and then relaxed. “Oh, my delectable little rabbit, I’ll give you every bit of what you crave until you are overflowing with my seed.”

Gripping the back of her neck with one clawed hand, he slid his knees out, spreading her thighs wide where they rested over his. She was pinned by his huge body and completely at his mercy. There wasn’t a thing she could do to resist him, and that made her nerves tingle with anticipation.

She whimpered when he pressed forward again, overcome by the simultaneous pain and pleasure of the stretch. He fucked her with a few shallow thrusts and then pushed hard, making her splutter and gasp as she dug into the bed with her nails.

“Those are my crests that you enjoyed teasing earlier.” He kissed her back a handful of times as she quaked under him. “They swell and become more sensitive as I get more aroused.”

He pulled back and advanced again so that she could feel the crests moving in and out of her. She groaned at the added sensation against the walls of her already stretched cunt. “Please, Dohal,” she panted. “I need all of you.”

“I will always give you what you need.” He plunged deeper, making her gasp. “Especially when what you desire feels so exquisite.”

Her thighs trembled as he began slow strokes that seemed to go on forever. Her magic built and tumbled free, crashing into him as he drove into her. She moaned into the bed, fingers clenched in the greenery, her nerves singing with pleasure that she couldn’t contain or control.

“Yes, my perfect mate. Let me feel your luscious cunt squeezing me.”

She could no more resist his command than she could hold back the tide. Her body clenched obediently around his cock as another orgasm roared through her. She let out a long, keening wail that echoed in this space he had made just for her. He growled as he pushed into the resistance of her tensing muscles, forcing her to part for him.

“Remember when I told you every inch of your body was mine?” He leaned over her, resting his hands on either side of her head as his hips jerked with more force. “Mine to pleasure. Mine to plunder. Mine to breed.”

The shadowy tendrils of his magic wrapped around her, repositioning her under him as he fucked her, so that her hips opened more and the angle was steeper. When she was arranged to his liking he pushed deep again until the wider area swollen by the

crests at his base teased against her opening.

She moaned when he rocked against her, the stretch causing so much pain and pleasure at the same time that it threatened to short her out.

“Can you take it all, little rabbit, or should we stop here?”

For an answer, she curled her fingers into the bed and lifted her hips a fraction, increasing the pressure. “You promised me everything.”

The shadows tightened around her thighs and held her wide for him as he pressed forward into her. The tension grew until it was too much—far too much—and somehow felt exactly right at the same time. She had been born to take him just like this, hard and relentless as an avalanche. Her vision grew blurry with tears. Then, suddenly, her body relaxed completely, and he surged forward, coming to rest against her with a soul-deep groan. A needy whine fell from her lips.

His chuckle was warm and appreciative as he nuzzled into the back of her neck. “You are astounding.”

He let her calm before he reached one arm around her waist, his hand sliding down between her legs to rub her clit. She couldn’t move at all with his magic holding her in place for him, and when her hips tried to roll with the expert touch of his fingers, she only managed to writhe along his cock in a way that took her breath away.

Dohal murmured into the back of her neck as she milked his cock. “You feel so good. Like home.”

He started to move with gradual strokes that drove every thought from her head but the pursuit of the pleasure he’d awakened in her.

She needed more. She needed everything. She begged him with a wordless cry, hoping he knew what she craved.

“I’ll fill you to bursting,” he panted against her neck as he picked up speed. “Then I’ll do it again. And again. And again. Until you are dripping with me.”

He was every filthy fantasy she’d ever had come true. And she couldn’t take another second of the deliciously agonizing friction of his cock inside her. She came undone around him again, the pleasure sharper now that he was all the way inside her and stretching her to her limit. Her voice broke on a scream that shook the trees around the clearing like a windstorm. The magic surged, crashing into the shadows that held her and rebounding back, electrifying every nerve. Her power kept building, unable to escape.

Murmuring against her neck in his native tongue, he fucked her through her orgasm with long, frantic thrusts. Her muscles shuddered around him as he drove in to the hilt over and over. He lifted his head and roared to the heavens when his climax finally overtook him.

His hips continued to move sluggishly for the next few minutes as he throbbed inside her, pumping her full of his seed. Her body trembled under him, filled to the brim with the magic that sparked through her. She felt every advancing and retreating inch of him, every crest, every vein. He overloaded every one of her senses until all she could feel was him, everywhere.

He leaned down and bit the base of her neck, his fangs sinking deep. The pain lanced through her but eased at once as his healing magic poured into her. The mark tingled, setting into her skin.

The goddess crooned inside her, so pleased that he had claimed her with his cock and then with his teeth. There was only one more thing she needed. One more thing she

craved.

Yes, Mari answered without hesitation. It was the smallest gift she could give him, and she would give it gladly. She gave herself over to him completely, opening herself to him.

He waited until her breathing returned to normal before he withdrew, his cock still hard and heavy. She whimpered in protest until he rolled her onto her back and stared down at her with a look that should have burnt her to cinders. He reached between her legs, gathered the cum that had spilled out, and pushed it back into her with two thick fingers.

Her toes curled as she clenched again. If she hadn't already relented to the goddess's wishes, she would have now. His deepest desire was so obvious, so naked in his gaze, that she would never deny him.

He watched her quietly as she writhed under him. Even after everything, she was still so desperate for him that she burned .

Without a word, he pushed her knees wide and buried himself in her again on a languorous glide that made her back arch. This time he slid in all the way to his thickest crests easily, rumbling with satisfaction when he socketed himself against her and her thighs cradled him.

She mewled as he started to fuck her slowly once again, reaching for him to pull him closer. She had no idea how she would survive the unrelenting pleasure of his passion even once more, never mind for the hours he'd promised, but she needed it nonetheless. He drew the magic from her in long gulps every time he plunged into her, the runes under his skin glowing brighter each time he did until the entire grove was bathed in his reddish light.

“My perfect, insatiable mate,” he purred into her skin as he leaned over her, bracing one hand on either side of her pliant form as his shadows wrapped her body again.

His touch whispered along every inch of her body at once as he loomed over her. “You have no idea how much I adore you.” All she could do was moan in response. “How much I crave you.”

She stared up into his cosmic gaze as he took what he needed from her, offering all of herself up to satisfy his endless desire. Gasping cries fell from her lips as she came unraveled again. He drank her overflowing magic down, growling as he claimed her open mouth.

His cock throbbed inside of her as he emptied into her again but he still didn’t pause, as if the most feral part of him had taken over and wouldn’t give way. His rumbling sounds of pleasure filled the grove along with the wet slapping of the relentless drive of his hips. Hot, viscous fluid leaked from her after he had filled every crevice of her, pooling under her.

She couldn’t move as he possessed her completely, from where his claws delicately pressed into her throat without breaking the skin, to where he pounded into her. Eventually, her voice broke, and she subsided into whimpers that he licked from her mouth with ravenous snarls.

Much later, he came to a rest over her, pressing gentle kisses to her swollen lips. She groaned wordlessly when he finally withdrew his softening cock. She ached everywhere, so deeply she didn’t understand how it was possible. Even though his shadows had retreated, she still couldn’t move. Every drop of her magic was gone, sucked into his endless hunger for her.

Dohal traced his hands over her body as if memorizing every inch of her. His fingers delved between her legs, purring softly to her as he fondled her with the lightest

touch. Though she was sore, her body responded to him, warming again.

Without her magic, she felt raw and exposed as he touched her so intimately, so sweetly. He didn't try to build her up again, just enjoyed his exploration of her body for several minutes as she lay unmoving under him.

She watched his quiet reverence, contentment blooming inside her. He'd given her exactly what she'd asked for, and she'd provided everything he'd craved—knowing she'd satisfied him so well elated her despite her exhaustion. Once he was done with his slow worship of her body, he settled over her, staring into her eyes.

“You have given me more than I ever thought possible in the span of a few weeks. You'll never know how much every moment of this time with you has meant to me. No matter what our future holds, know that you are the most precious thing to me in all the realms.”

His words had the sound of a farewell, and it made her chest ache. She made a noise of protest that emerged from her abused throat in a croak, because while he'd said he'd chosen to live for her, there was a finality to the way he felt in this moment, as if he'd come to a decision.

Mari didn't understand how she knew, only that she did. When the moment came, he would surrender himself if it meant she would live.

“Shh, my little mate,” he crooned as he wrapped himself around her, pulling her against his warm body and enveloping her in his wings. “Be easy.”

Crying silently, she settled against him. His affection for her surrounded her on every side, certain as the cosmos, but no less doomed for that.

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Chapter 9

Mariana would never admit out loud to a single soul what a bad idea this Halloween party had been. How had she let Willow convince her that a night of debauchery and excess was what they needed to convince the paranormals of Las Vegas that she was the person who should be in charge of it all?

She'd been staring into her closet for at least twenty minutes without settling on anything because she was too worried about how the night was going to go.

"The mermaid gown. And pull out the short, red, sequined dress for dancing later," Cisco said softly from behind her.

She turned to look over her shoulder at him. "You really think so?"

He was watching her with his arms crossed, his wings relaxed behind him. He was already dressed in a Victorian-style tailcoat in red and black velvet and looking utterly delicious—making the most of his natural gothic vibe. "Absolutely, you look hot as hell in anything cut to show off your ass." A dirty smile curled his lips. "Plus, when you're dancing with Rio, that short one will ride up all the way to the clouds."

She laughed as she reached for both hangers. "You going to spend the entire night looking up my skirt?"

"Well, hopefully not the entire night," he said with a bit of a seductive rumble in his voice. "I hope to be under your skirt for at least part of it."

When she turned back toward him carrying the dresses in question, he was dangling a red, lacy thong that would cover approximately nothing from one clawed finger.

She met his eyes. “That’s a different choice.”

“The frilly ones are just for me to enjoy. These are for everyone else.”

“How much of my panties do you think everyone else is going to see tonight?”

He shrugged a careless shoulder. “I think Dante and Rio have some kind of bet going, so maybe quite a lot.”

Mari raised an eyebrow. “What’s the bet?”

“I have no idea. I saw them with their heads together and big grins on both their faces in the hallway just now.”

Mari took a breath and let out a big sigh, then reached for the panties. “I’m not going to worry about that.”

“Probably for the best.” He watched with interest as she slipped out of her robe and stepped into the dainty thong.

She turned around and gave him a little shimmy. “Do they meet with your approval?”

He let out a satisfying grumble. “Yes, and if you don’t stop shaking that fine ass at me, you’re not going to finish getting dressed, because I’m going to be bending you over the nearest horizontal surface.”

She grinned at him over her shoulder. “You’re the one who insisted on dressing me for the party.”

“Because if I let one of the others do it, you’d be in here all night and never come out.”

Chuckling, she reached for the mermaid dress. “You’re not wrong. I didn’t think I was going to get out of my office in time to shower, because Dante was giving me the eyes.” She held the dress carefully as she put in one leg at a time and then slid it up her legs. “You know the ones.”

Cisco stepped up behind her and carefully drew the laces of the bodice taut. “The ones that say tie me down and use me until I cry.”

The dress fit her like a glove all the way up, but left her décolletage exposed. “Exactly,” she said. “It was an effort of will to get out of there without using him exactly as hard as he wanted.”

He leaned down to kiss her bare shoulder. “An impressive display of restraint.” His fingers brushed over the curve of the wings etched into her back in platinum and gemstones.

She looked at herself in the full-length mirror in front of her. He was right, this dress did make her look hot. It clung to her and emphasized her curvy shape in exactly the right ways.

He squeezed her hips. “Need help with your shoes?”

“Of course.” She pointed to the strappy sandals that matched both of her dresses—red, sequined, and sharp heeled, with bows that tied around her ankles.

He moved to pick them up and then sat on the lounge in front of her. With a small smile, he motioned her forward.

She daintily raised the hem to give her some room to move and lifted her foot. He cupped her heel gently, placing the sandal delicately on her toes before sliding it home.

With a finesse at odds with his thick, clawed fingers, he tied the ribbon around her ankle four times before making a perfect bow. When his work was complete, he leaned down to kiss the top of her foot in a gesture of such submission that it took her breath away.

Mari thought she would self-combust when he tilted his eyes up to look at her, the appreciation in his gaze obvious. He lowered her foot slowly, an amused expression curling his mouth, and then gestured for the other one.

She struggled to keep her calm when he repeated the same slow ritual with the other foot. Her cheeks were on fire by the time he had finished. Great, she was about to show up to her own party wound up beyond all belief because she could feel his satisfaction.

Ever since her night with Dohal, she'd been able to pick up feelings from all her men, beyond just their arousal. Sometimes it even seemed like she caught stray thoughts when she wasn't paying attention. She hadn't mentioned it to anyone yet because she wasn't sure what it meant. More than anything though, she knew he loved dressing her nearly as much as he loved undressing her.

"Stop flirting, Francisco."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a sexy smirk.

Saints, did he not have any idea how he was testing her right now? The answer was that he knew exactly how much he affected her, and he loved it. "I'm never going to make it through tonight," she muttered.

“You’re the one who said no sex in front of the guests.” Grinning, he stood and walked to her vanity. “You know we’re all game for whatever.” He picked up the glittering platinum crown with inset rubies that would be her only concession to a costume on this night. She wanted everyone to see her for exactly what she was, though the guests were encouraged to dress up for Las Vegas’s favorite holiday if they wished.

She looked into the mirror as he placed the crown on her head and pinned it in place. Her dark hair was drawn up in a messily precise updo that, along with her dramatic makeup, had been magicked in place. Bless Pricilla for teaching her those tricks.

The rubies in her piercings and in her back all hummed when she threaded some magic through the gems in the crown, amplifying her already impressive store. Aside from a quick romp with Rio this morning, she’d denied herself all day, stoking her power in order to impress the masses. “I thought it would be a statement of how unlike my father I am, but now I’m wondering if it was a mistake.”

“Go with your gut.” He trailed one knuckle up the back of her neck. “You know we’ll back whatever play you want to make.”

“My gut wants to lay you out on that lounge and have my way with you right now,” she said with a bit of a growl.

He met her gaze in the mirror again with a twinkle of mischief. “Your wish is my command, mi diosa.”

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s go before I’m late for my own party.”

He laughed and moved to take her arm, grabbing her dancing dress on their way out. “You can’t be late for your own party. It starts when you get there.”

Dante and Rio waited for them outside on the walkway to the main house. She stopped to take them in. Unlike Cisco, they each had a leather collar fastened around their necks with a tag in the shape of a blood-red rose hanging from the rings.

Rio wore a modern burgundy three-piece suit cut to flatter his lean frame. His dark hair was drawn back in a smart queue. His eyes were warm with appreciation for both her and Cisco, and his lips curled in an easy smile.

Dante's blond curls were as haphazard and perfectly sculpted as always. He wore a red vest with silver brocade over a white shirt just a bit undone to show a sliver of chest speckled with his trademark glitter. His smile was more impish, showing off his deep dimples.

When she drew close enough to catch their arousal, she almost lost her footing. Cisco spread a hand over the small of her back and steadied her without missing a beat. The heat of his hand pressing into her through the dress didn't help at all.

She took a deep, cleansing breath. "You're all going to be the death of me."

Rio grinned like a cat who'd gotten caught with a paw where it shouldn't be. "At least you'll die smiling."

He took one arm and Dante took the other, the two of them matching her pace as they escorted her through the main house toward the ballroom.

She was glad they'd taken the time to go see the location a few nights before, because the transformation was less of a shock now, seeing the warm wood and inviting colors. Dohal waited for them at the door to the ballroom. He'd been working on last-minute security details with Pris, making sure that the wards would both acknowledge guests and keep them safe.

A flowing skirt in red so dark it was nearly black wrapped his waist and draped to the ground, and around his neck and shoulders, he wore something that looked a bit like platinum armor patterned with dragon scales. Mari had to snap her jaw shut because seeing him decorated that way really did it for her in ways she hadn't expected at all.

One fang pressed into his bottom lip when he smiled in her direction. "You look delicious, bavi," he said in a low rumble as she approached, bending to kiss her cheek.

She blushed under his attention. "So do you. I like this." She reached up to run a hand over the metal scales, enjoying how they felt warm to the touch from their proximity to his skin.

"I'm glad," he said with appreciation. "Pricilla and I have secured the building. No one should be able to enter who doesn't have an invitation."

"But you don't think that will keep the Old One out if he decides to show up?"

"Likely not." He sounded regretful. "Though that's no different than any other day."

"Okay, another thing I'm not thinking about."

Cisco showed her a smile. "You ready to go in? Willow wanted to announce us."

Mari rolled her shoulders and took a breath. It was going to be a lot, and she had known that when she'd agreed. There was a not small part of her that just wanted to drag the four of them back to the pool house—or better yet the grotto—and just hide from everyone until they all left. But she knew that wasn't possible. This was important. They were doing it for a reason. After taking a moment to collect herself, she nodded.

Her gargoyle nodded and moved toward the entrance. Noise flooded into the quiet hallway the moment he opened one of the double doors a bit. He had a brief conversation with someone beyond and then shut the door again. “Two minutes,” he said. “They want you up front.”

Mariana moved to the front of the group, and the men organized themselves behind her without any discussion. She decided they must have talked about it beforehand without her, which made her smile. She tossed her head and stood up straighter just as the doors opened.

The music within shifted abruptly into a fanfare, and Willow’s magic-amplified voice filled the ballroom. “Please welcome your hostess, Mariana Reyes, and her coterie.”

A roar of applause overwhelmed the music, and Mari put on her best for-company smile. She stepped into the ballroom with every ounce of her confidence pulled around her like armor. Entering the packed ballroom wasn’t as difficult as she’d imagined it would be with all of her men at her back. The environment within was cheerful and excited, with everyone on their feet and most of them clapping. Nothing about the experience reminded her of her father’s parties.

Cisco and Dohal stepped up even with her to make sure the crowd parted as she moved forward, but it was hardly necessary. No one approached, and they all kept a respectful distance.

She led her men slowly along a wide red runner that crossed the room to the dais where the receiving line would be forming. Once they arrived, she took her place at the center of the curved lounge with Dante and Rio on either side of her, and Dohal and Cisco taking up guarding spots to either side. They waited for her to sit first, and then Dante and Rio sat flanking her.

By the time the normal party music came back on, Willow was directing traffic to

form a line that bisected the large room. Many of the faces in the queue were familiar. The guest list had been vast, but they had vetted every name, trying to isolate potential threats before offering them access to their home.

Mica moved in once they were settled, putting food and drink for them along the platform at the back of the booth behind the seating. There was no table between her and the rest of the room, though there was a railing that prevented anyone from approaching her directly.

Rio rested a hand on the nape of her neck, his touch light and reassuring. “Do you want something to eat, bella?”

She showed him a smile that she hoped conveyed how much she appreciated him. “That would be nice.”

He pulled her into a brief and sweet kiss before getting up to make her a plate.

Pricilla approached with a smile for all of them and took up a position at a seating area adjacent to them on the dais where she could keep an eye on the rest of the line while Mari was distracted with talking to whoever was at the front.

Mari nodded to Willow to let them know she was ready.

Chapter 10

The next hour slid by slowly as Mari greeted her guests. Despite her fears, she was having a pleasant enough time. She didn't get the opportunity to get out and be social nearly as much as she'd like. And this event was different enough from her father's parties that the reflexive fear she'd felt when the idea had first been floated had eased substantially.

Almost everyone in attendance was a local, and she knew most of them already as she accepted their well-wishes and praise for the event. A notable exception was currently located two spots back.

She'd noticed Emil álvarez through a break in the line—an imposing figure with long gray hair tied back behind his head and a neatly kept full gray beard. He wore an elegant dark blue suit and expression of near boredom.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mari saw Pris take to her feet. She felt the other witch reach for the wards, drawing power down into herself. While she hadn't noticed anything out of place yet, Mari echoed her readiness, searching the room in front of her for the source of danger as she chatted with one of their vendors.

It had to be álvarez. They didn't know what his intentions had been with his request for an invitation. He ran exclusive casinos in Macau for extremely dangerous people. To this point, he had had no interests in Las Vegas, but that could change at any time. And that could place him at odds with them if he allied with one of the people who was trying to wrest control of the city away from them.

The person at the front of the line moved away from the dais, and Emil stepped forward into the space without missing a beat. He bowed slightly, meeting Mari's eyes as he straightened. "Emil álvarez. I'm here to propose a partnership."

"Mr. álvarez," Mari said in her most pleasant voice. "I wasn't aware that we were in the market for a partner." She slowly released her magic back up into the wards, since he hadn't made himself an obvious threat, and she didn't want anyone around them to notice.

"Aren't you?" The man's smile was sharp and predatory when his gaze cut toward Pris. "Even more reason that you should take my meeting."

Unless Mari missed her guess, he was sensitive to magic, because Pris was still holding onto hers, though the strain it required was evident in the way her hands clutched the railing in front of her until her knuckles went white.

Cisco took a single step forward, his gray wings flaring to make him look larger. "Then let's go book a meeting and let this line keep moving."

Emil broke eye contact with Pris and took in the towering gargoyle with an amused expression. "Sounds like a plan." He nodded to Mari in farewell and then moved off with Cisco.

Once the line died down, Mari went to change into her dancing dress. She had to physically push Rio and Dante out of the privacy alcove when they tried to help, otherwise she would never have gotten out of the room.

Mari danced between Rio and Dante, letting them rub all over her until they were both feral with desire. Rio pulled her close to bump against him, baring his teeth in a wicked grin before releasing her again. Dante repeated the same possessive move, and they traded her back and forth for a while until she was panting to get one or both

of them under her.

The entire time, she felt like they were being watched—which was ridiculous because everyone in the ballroom was watching the steamy show they were putting on. She twirled under Dante's arm, stepping back into him so her ass brushed against him while she pulled Rio toward her by his tie.

I'll admit, a silky-smooth voice spoke into her head, if I had known how delicious you would turn out to be, I would have killed your father the second I laid eyes on you and taken you for my own.

Her head snapped in the direction she knew the voice had originated from, though she had no idea how she knew. A stunning man dressed in a beautiful burgundy pinstripe suit with impossibly long silver hair and eyes that blazed with dark-blue flames sat alone at a table and stared at her.

When she focused on him, an irritating smirk curled his very bitable lips. That's my clever girl.

A shiver tickled up her spine.

Rio looked down at her with concern when she stopped dancing. "You okay?"

She lifted her chin in the direction of the man she was certain had invaded her head. "Do you know who that is? I don't recognize him from the invites."

Rio followed her gaze. "No. Someone's plus-one, maybe?"

Dante's hand slid to wrap protectively around her from behind. "Definitely a demon."

"I'm going to go talk to him."

Oh yes, please do. He leaned back in his chair, his knees splaying out wide as if to welcome her between them.

Rio and Dante were at her back as she walked toward him. Her magic tingled under her skin when she approached. “How did you get in my head?”

He glanced over Rio and Dante and disregarded them immediately, his fiery gaze focusing in on her. “That’s the wrong question, duckling.” His voice was so deep and dark that she thought she heard the echoes of whispers after.

She ignored the condescending pet name for the moment. “What’s the right question?”

“How I’m in this room at all.” His lips quirked up at the corners. “I’m not on your guest list.”

“That’s not possible.”

The fire in his eyes blazed brighter. “And yet, here I sit.”

She decided to play along just a little while longer, because something about this man intrigued her. “Fine. How is that possible?”

“Because your magic let me in.”

Ready to challenge him on that, she reached up into the wards, drew power down into herself, and then stretched it toward him. She meant to restrain him the way she’d done to others, but instead, her magic wrapped around him like a caress.

“Now you’re just flirting,” he said with a cocky smile.

“Okay, we’re done here,” Rio said, stepping forward.

Her magic sprang up into a shield that Rio ran into face-first. He slid her a questioning look, and she could only shrug. She had no idea what was happening, but she couldn’t claw her magic back for anything.

The silver-haired stranger chuckled. “That was unexpected.” You are a delight, he said into her head right after.

Mari felt the shimmering presence of Dohal behind her. His hands slid over her shoulders and pulled her back against him. “Ashdei,” he said in a menacing growl. “You’re not welcome here.”

The instant she heard his name, Mari flinched backward. This was the demon her father had hired to kindle her power—a Prince of the Hells.

The blue fire eyes flicked up to regard Dohal. “I’m welcome anywhere she is.”

“Why?” The question launched from her in a fearful rasp that she hated.

“Because of the contract between us,” he said lightly.

Cisco landed behind Ashdei and lunged to grab him, but once again her magic interceded. “What the fuck?” Cisco snarled, as tendrils of her power snaked around him, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Mortified, she shook her head. “I’m not doing it on purpose.”

“She’s hooked into the wards,” Dohal said in an annoyed tone. “You won’t be able to harm him without bringing down the house around us.”

Ashdei popped a canapé into his mouth. “I’m here to protect you.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” she said, her voice shaking.

“The Forest Lord is coming for him tonight.” Ashdei waved an idle hand toward Dohal. “Want to watch me scare him off?”

Dohal’s hands tightened around her shoulders. “The Old One comes?”

The bottom dropped out of Mari’s stomach. It was official, this party had been the worst idea.

Dusting off his hands, Ashdei stood. “He was never a subtle creature. I think he probably plans to just blow up the entire building, but I can’t let him do that since something so precious to me is here.” He smiled at her. “Let’s go meet him outside. Shall we?” He strolled toward the double doors that led out to the driveway without looking back.

Mari stood completely still, staring after him. “Is what he’s saying true?”

“Nothing he said was a lie,” Rio responded in a soft voice. “Although he is a demon, so who knows.”

She looked up at Dohal. “Should we go see if he’s right?”

“He would not let harm come to you right now, of that I am certain.”

“For the record, I hate everything about this,” Cisco grumbled as he walked by her toward the door.

When they joined him outside, Ashdei stood with his arms folded casually, as if there

hadn't been any doubt they would follow. He glanced up at the sky as if listening for something. A moment later, a distant peal of thunder rolled across the cloudless sky. "Ahh. Right on time."

A line of clouds that looked like a storm front, but was moving improbably fast, tumbled toward them from out of nowhere.

Dark-blue fire, the same color as his eyes, erupted around Ashdei in a halo. He held out his left hand and a huge sword made of the same blue flame materialized in his grip. With a casual sweep of his right hand, a shield more potent with magic than she had ever seen sprang up around her and her group, but didn't encompass him. In a blink, he expanded to his true form, tall and horned and clad in black armor that flickered with blue fire.

Ashdei took two slow steps forward to intercept as the clouds poured from the sky. Mari stepped back into the protection of Dohal's arm that wrapped around her and pulled her in.

"Step aside, demon." A sourceless voice like mountains tumbling down shook the ground under their feet.

Ashdei rested the giant sword over his shoulder and assumed a relaxed stance. "The Lords of Las Vegas are under my protection. So you can toddle off back to wherever you've been hiding for the last couple of centuries." His voice was filled with the same confidence that radiated from him constantly.

A towering form coalesced from the thunderheads, fifteen feet high, with thick horns that sprung from his head like branches. His skin had the texture of gnarled bark, and his face was a featureless mask but for two holes that formed bottomless black eyes. In one immense hand, he held a crude spear that looked to be made out of the same wood as his body. "You aren't supposed to intervene here. This is my realm."

“Except it’s not. You were banished, and that left a vacancy.” Ashdei grinned. “One that I am more than happy to fill when the proper sort of invitation materializes.” He slid a knowing glance toward Mari that made her skin crawl.

Cisco growled and stepped forward until Mari gripped his wrist to hold him next to her. There was no telling what would happen if he left the shield. After a moment of tortured indecision, he relented.

“That creature owes me oceans of blood.” The Forest Lord pointed directly at Dohal without looking his way. “And I intend to collect it. Very slowly.”

Mari barely halted the aggressive reaction of her magic to the threat to someone who was hers. Inside her, she felt the goddess coil herself tightly in readiness to spring. Teeth clenched, she managed to rein in both of them before they did anything rash.

“I said you can’t have him today,” Ashdei said with a growl that shook the windows of the manor behind them. “I’ll let you know if I change my mind and withdraw my protection.” He turned toward them in a clear dismissal of the Forest Lord.

The Old One raised his hand to rake his fingers across his own chest, tearing into bark and flesh all the way down to the bone. Glowing green blood poured from the wounds, and he shrieked with a horrible sound that made Mari cover her ears. With a concussive blast of magic that she felt rock against the shield that covered them, he vanished.

Ashdei rolled his eyes. “Well, that was dramatic.”

“Why are you protecting us? What do you want?” Mari asked as soon as she found her voice again.

“I would have thought that was obvious.” He glanced over her with appreciation.

“You.”

“You can’t have me.” This time it was fury that shook her voice. How dare he do what he had done to her and then return years later to lay claim to her?

He removed the shield around them with a clenching of his fist. “It just proves how little you understand about yourself that you think that.”

Cisco sprang at him, wings flared, and fangs bared.

Mariana seethed when once again her magic moved to intercede between them before she could stop it. Her gargoyle was caught in a trap he couldn’t escape, and she had put him there.

“Motherfucker!” she screamed in frustration. “Why does that keep happening?”

Ashdei aimed an evil smile Cisco’s way. “I suspect that she would consider an attack on one of you an attack on her, so I’ll let your terrible manners go, just this once.” He returned his attention to Mari, all charm again. “You should ask the gorgeous creature that lives inside you that question, duckling. She and I had the most interesting conversation the night we met.”

“We didn’t meet,” Mari spat. “You assaulted me when I was a child.”

Anger sharpened his features. It was the first time he had worn an expression that wasn’t bored amusement. “I consummated a ritual and sealed a contract with a creature older than the land we’re standing on. There was no child present.” He tilted his head, unsettling his perfect hair. “You were locked up tight as a drum somewhere inside.”

She sent a panicked glance Cisco’s way. His face looked bleak. “I put you to sleep

with my magic.”

“You said you took my memories of it.”

“I did. But the time when I put you out is black, as if you were asleep. Because you were.”

Mari sent her awareness inward, seeking to confront the goddess about what had happened that night. It was never a conversation with her, more like an exchange.

When the goddess responded, she was smug. She’d done what she needed to—to protect Mari, and to protect Dohal, who she had known was under Las Vegas all along. But it was clear in the...affection she had for Ashdei that whatever had happened between them had been consensual, even pleasant.

Mari snarled in frustration. “It was my body . Even if she agreed.”

At that, the goddess bristled. The body belonged to both of them. It had since the moment of the first ritual which had brought them into being—together inside one flesh. And the goddess had willingly shared that flesh with the demon in front of them. As far as she was concerned, there had been no transgression.

“I take it from the look on your face right now that she doesn’t agree with that assessment?” Ashdei offered her a flat smile. “It must be confusing for you. I am sorry for that. I thought at the time that your absence was something she had done to assume control. I see now that was not the case.”

“Get out of here,” she growled. Though she was mightily angry, her magic didn’t stir at all. Her power understood at some base level that he was no threat to her.

Ashdei dipped his head. “Just so you’re aware. Our agreement was one of mutual

protection. I protect you and you protect me. It's a soul contract. Unbreakable, unless I act to harm you." His eyes passed over the men around her. "Your sense of you is larger than I anticipated, but still valid nonetheless."

"She said get out," Cisco shouted, straining at the cage of her magic, but it held fast.

"I'll see you soon." Ashdei turned around with a cheeky wave and disappeared in a burst of blue fire.

The instant he was gone, her magic dropped, and Cisco moved toward her. She held up a hand to stop whatever he was going to say and turned toward Dohal. "How did you know about the magic?"

"I didn't know the details. I'm very attuned to your magic and could see how it was reacting to protect him, and I knew you weren't doing it."

"You didn't know about the contract with the goddess?"

He stared straight into her eyes as he answered, "No. I would have told you."

"She implied that she did it to protect you, long before I knew who you were. How did she know?"

"I assume because she could feel the link between us. I had never met her before I met you, if that's what you're asking."

"There's something else there. Something she didn't want me to find out." Saints, how she hated that there were things about herself she still didn't understand.

"I don't know what it could be. I've told you everything I'm aware of."

She pivoted to Cisco and took a cleansing breath. “The memories of that day. There’s nothing of the time when I was asleep?”

He shook his head, looking upset. “I didn’t know when I put you out that there was anyone else inside you. And I told you before that at the time I thought it was just another aspect of you. I didn’t realize that she was someone else, and that she could...” He stopped and ran a hand through his hair. “I fucked up, and I can’t even say that I’m sorry because I’d do it all again, Mari, to spare you that.”

She resisted the urge to pull him into a hug because she needed to finish this conversation first, and she wasn’t sure how she was going to feel about the answers. “You saw the whole thing?” She swallowed. “Their time together.”

He looked like he would rather be anywhere else right now. “Yes.”

“Did I seem like I objected during the ritual? Did I scream? Say no?”

Cisco frowned. “No. You didn’t scream or fight him. I thought they might have drugged you at the time.”

“Why did you think that?” She steeled herself for the answer she guessed was coming.

He looked away, unable to meet her eyes. “Because you made noises like you were enjoying it.”

Mari reached out to take his arm and pulled him into a hug. He didn’t put his arms around her. “It wasn’t your fault, okay?” she said fiercely. “You were a kid too, and you were doing what you thought I needed. I’m not mad about that.”

He nodded against her and finally wrapped his arms around her, holding her to him

delicately. “So what do we do now?”

She looked around at each of them in turn. “Nobody attacks him. I don’t know if the deal-breaking clause goes both ways, but we can’t risk it.”

She waited for them all to agree before she continued, “And when he shows up again, I don’t want anyone taunting him either. As sick to my stomach as it makes me to admit, right now we need his protection more than he needs ours.”

Why had Ashdei made that deal? Was there something he was afraid of? It seemed strange that a creature of his strength might need her protection. He’d scared the Old One away just by standing there.

Rio sighed. “Do we really think that guy had a serious consent conversation with the goddess? In a way that she understood?”

Mari shook her head. “I don’t know, but she’s not mad about what happened. So until such time as she feels like sharing more, or we find a way to unlock her memories of that time, we’re going to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

There were groans and grumbles from the men around her. “I don’t like it either, but it seems like the goddess was a willing participant. I need to talk to Willow about soul contracts. Maybe there’s some loophole in there we can use.”

Dohal placed his hand on the back of her neck, warm and reassuring. “I am sorry that I am the reason you have to tolerate him.”

“I would tolerate a lot more to keep you safe.” She smiled up at him. “He can’t hurt us as long as he wants my protection. Let’s focus on that.”

“What is it we think he needs protection from?” Cisco asked.

“That’s what we have to figure out. Because if we end up on the bad side of that, we might be no better off.”

“There isn’t much that could threaten one such as him,” Dohal said in a low murmur.

“Could you?” Mari asked, voice filled with uncertainty.

He met her eyes. “No, but you might.”

She stepped back, stunned. “What?”

“The amount of magic you used to free me was gigantic, bavi.”

“But that wasn’t me.”

“I’m not so sure anymore.” Dohal’s tone was gentle.

“Your magic protected him, Mari,” Cisco added. “Not the goddess’s.”

She hadn’t considered the implications of that yet. What did it mean that her magic was bound by a contract that the goddess had made? More than that, that her magic actively moved to protect him. “It acted like it does for any of you when I feel like you’re in danger,” she said after a few awkward moments of silence. “Like he was mine.”

Dante’s forehead furrowed with concern. “Did you feel like he was yours?”

“I don’t know. But there was something familiar. I don’t know how to describe it.” She reached up to touch her throat. “When he spoke in my head, I knew exactly where he was, but it was more like I’d known all along. Like I was waiting for him, maybe.” And she had thought, more than once, how attractive he was despite having

every reason to be afraid of him once his name had been revealed.

She didn't have any idea what it all meant. There was so much more going on than she'd realized, and all of it felt dangerous.

Chapter 11

Now that the party was over, things around the compound settled into a more relaxed routine. Mari spent time checking in on all their guests, making sure they felt welcome and helping them try to find their new normal. She understood the struggle they all faced. Their lives had been so difficult for so long—now that things were suddenly changed, it could feel disorienting.

Most of all, she wanted them to feel safe and make sure there was no sense of pressure on them to leave until they were ready. She sat with Tristan in the kitchen, having a formal tea that Giselle had gone all out on. They nibbled scones and cakes and didn't talk much at all.

Finally, he set his cup in the saucer and focused on her like he had something to say. "I don't know what I'm doing here."

Mari looked him over. Physically, he was much improved. But she knew from discussing it with Rio that he still didn't have much in the way of memories. "Maybe there's a reason you don't remember."

"That's what I'm afraid of. It feels like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Clar and Hal are wonderful and very patient, but every time I try to get closer to them, I can't help but think that maybe there's something I should know about them that I don't."

"Have you asked them?"

Tristan sighed. “Yes. They tell me about their family and how they grew up, but nothing about what has been happening here in Las Vegas.”

Mari set down her cup. “My father ran this city for a long time. He was not a nice man. He preyed on children and other vulnerable people to build a life of ease and luxury for himself on their backs. You were one of those children.”

She paused to let that sink in. “I don’t know a lot of the details of what happened to you specifically, but there are reasons that Rio doesn’t want to tell you about them. It’s bad. Very bad. And maybe some of it is better left there and not remembered.”

“When I woke up in L.A., that was the feeling that I had. That there were demons in my past that should be left there and not disturbed. So I let it go. But then I started to remember Rio and the foster home, and I missed him, you know? It felt like I had left something behind that I needed.”

Mari reached to hold his hand. “I know he’s so glad that you’re back, because he missed you too. And maybe that’s enough. That you remember him and how close you were and the good times.” She remembered the conversation she and Rio had had about Cisco and the memories he’d taken from them. “Trust him to hold the rest of that for you. He’ll tell you if there’s something you need to know.”

Tristan looked away. “It’s been months since I came looking for him. And I woke up with missing time again, and now I’m mated to two hellhounds I don’t even know. What if this has happened before? What if there’s some other mate of mine wondering where I am?” He shook his head, tears welling in his eyes.

Mari recognized the downward spiral of his thoughts and squeezed his fingers. He was worried he had left someone important behind the same way he had with Rio, or she had with Dante. “Okay, you know how long it has been since you left California. We can figure out how much time went by before Clar and Hal found you. Then we

can do the same for when you woke up the first time, based on what Rio knows about when you left town.”

He stared at her with a hopeful expression. “Yeah, that sounds good. Then once we have all of that, we can figure out how much unaccounted-for time there is, and if it seems likely I’m forgetting anyone else.”

She pulled out her phone and texted Rio to come find them, and to pick up the hellhounds on the way. Then she poured each of them another cup of tea while they waited. “There was someone that I forgot. I told Cisco to take the memories because I was in a place where I couldn’t feel the things I was feeling safely.”

“Because of your father.” It wasn’t a question.

Mari met his eyes. “Exactly. Later, once it was safe and he told me about it, I had him restore the memories. I had hurt Dante by forgetting him, but it was also something he understood once I explained it to him.”

“He forgave you.”

“He did. If he hadn’t, I’m not sure what I would have done. So I understand your worry, that there might be someone out there who misses you. But I also know that sometimes those memories are gone for a reason.”

Tristan sent her a relieved smile. “Thank you. It helps to know that it worked out for you.”

“Rio and I both have some memories that Cisco still holds for us. Things that are so painful that we asked him to keep them hidden. We trust him to keep us safe and to let us know if there’s something we need to see.”

“It’s hard knowing that it’s out there lurking, waiting to jump out of the shadows at any moment, but it helps that Rio understands what the other side feels like.”

“If he thought it was something you needed to know to stay safe, he would tell you. I know that for certain.”

Rio arrived with the hellhounds in tow a few minutes later, all of them looking concerned. She set them at ease as quickly as possible and then explained the situation. They spent a while ironing out the timeline of Tristan’s disappearances and reappearances without talking too much about what had happened in between, with Mari taking notes.

Once they were fairly sure that there were no unaccounted-for blocks of time that were large enough for him to have forgotten someone else, his shoulders relaxed.

Tristan looked between Clarion and Halcyon. “Where did you guys find me?”

“You came to the club where we all used to work,” Clarion said. “You were looking for Rio. “

Halcyon picked up seamlessly where his twin left off, “Someone told you he worked there when you were asking around.”

Tristan turned to Rio. “But you didn’t anymore.”

“Not since you left the first time.”

“I want to know what happened.” When Rio started to protest, he waved a hand. “Not all the details. I just want to know why, whenever you mention it, you look like someone killed your dog.”

Rio looked up at the ceiling for a moment and gathered some strength. “You died, and I thought it was for good. I couldn’t go back there after that, and I didn’t for a long time. I almost left the city entirely.”

Tristan nodded slowly. “I suspected it might be something like that. Why didn’t you go?”

“Because of Mariana.” Rio smiled in her direction. “We weren’t together at the time, but I still worried about her. I stayed to help keep her safe.”

Tristan’s gaze grew distant. “I think I was calling you. I’m not sure how I know, but it’s something I’ve thought since I woke up the first time. That there was someone missing, and they were supposed to come find me. It’s why I had this nagging feeling the whole time.”

“I don’t know if I would have ended up in L.A., but it’s definitely possible. I wasn’t thinking that many steps ahead.”

“Then when you didn’t come, I started remembering you. It took some time for me to piece it all together and figure out where you were. For a long while, I wasn’t sure if I should actually try to come find you.”

Rio reached to grab his hand. “I’m so glad you did, Tris. And I’m sorry I didn’t come.”

“I get it. You had things keeping you here. Maybe I understood that on some level, which is why I thought I had to come back.” Tristan exhaled a long sigh and then turned to the hellhounds. “Your boss, he was the one that was holding me?”

They nodded in sync. Clarion looked guilty before he spoke up, “Vincent found you before we did. We never would have turned you over to him.”

Tristan looked between them. “Did you know me before?”

“Not well,” Halcyon said, with a sick expression on his face. “We never had a chance to scent you before you left.”

The phoenix sat back in his chair. “I died because of him somehow. I know that much, but the looks on all of your faces say I shouldn’t ask.” He let out a breath. “So I’m going to trust you and not ask. But I want you all to promise that, if something from that time is going to bite me in the ass, you’ll tell me before it happens.”

Rio nodded immediately.

The hellhounds shared a look, and then Halcyon said, “The only reason we don’t want to tell you is that it will hurt you to hear it.”

Clarion leaned closer. “We don’t want to cause you more pain. That’s the last thing we want.”

Tristan put a hand on each of theirs. “I get that. I really do. But can you understand why that makes me worry that something you’re keeping from me might catch up with us eventually?”

Halcyon stared at their joined hands in silence, breath held as if he was afraid to break the moment.

After a long hesitation, Clarion responded, “Absolutely. We promise. If anything from that time comes for you, we will warn you.”

Tristan stood slowly and moved to stand between them, holding one arm out to each of them. They launched at him in unison and tackled him in a hug so fierce Mari was afraid they might break him. With a small noise of surprise, Tristan wrapped an arm

around each of them. Halcyon burrowed into the crook of his neck and Clarion pressed his face to the phoenix's temple.

Mari took Rio's hand, and the two of them slipped out of the kitchen to give the three of them a little privacy.

"Thank you," Rio said as he pulled her into a hug.

She enjoyed the way he held her, embracing her with his entire body all at once. "What for?"

He pulled back to look at her. "For caring enough to help him. I couldn't figure out what he needed, and I was so afraid to share too much and hurt him. What did you say to him?"

"He was afraid that there were more holes in his memory than he knew about, and he had left someone else behind the same way he had you. So I thought we could chart out the time for him and help him see if there was any time missing. Then I told him about what happened with Dante, and how Cisco holds some of our memories."

"My sexy-ass queen is brilliant." He leaned to kiss her briefly. "I never thought of telling him about what Cisco did for us. Of course that helped him feel better. It gave him a frame of reference."

"I'm sure you would have gotten there eventually," Mari said. "You were just focused on trying to make things normal for him, which was perfect, but he also needed to step back and think about what he might have lost."

She had thought more than her fair share about painful memories and how some were worth holding onto and some needed to be let go.

There were lessons in the pain sometimes, things that you could only learn that way. Some pain offered a kind of growth that you couldn't achieve except by allowing yourself to feel it and remember it. But cruelty, especially when committed casually, as her father and Vincent so frequently had, rarely offered anything worth learning.

Thinking of that struggle made her pull Rio into another fierce hug. He chuckled softly as he buried his face in her hair. "What prompted this outburst?"

"Just thinking about everything you've been through." She rubbed his back. "I know there are things you don't want to talk about, but I want you to know that none of that would ever change the way I feel. You are who you are because of everything that's happened, and I love all of who you are."

"Te quiero." He clutched her tighter. "Siempre."

Mari laughed when he scooped her up into his arms. "Where are you taking me this time?"

"There's this beach near here that a friend of mine built that we never got to enjoy properly." He kissed the hollow of her throat, making her hum with pleasure at the soft caress of his lips.

"That sounds delightful." She kicked off her shoes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and put everything but him out of her mind for a while.

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Chapter 12

Mari was tucked into an armchair in the library, trying her best to concentrate on a book that Willow had found about Hellish contracts. Saints, she was so fucking tired. She'd already nearly fallen asleep twice, thanks to how exhausted she was and, she had to admit, a not particularly enthralling subject matter. It seemed like contracts were boring no matter who signed them.

When Ashdei strolled into the room as if he belonged there, she thought it was a dream, and she hoped it was a naughty one, because he looked good enough to eat. He was in his human guise, six-and-a-half feet of muscle and raw menace that she took in with a slow sweep of her eyes.

"A man could get used to you looking at him like that," he said, his voice deep and dark as a chasm. Unless she very much missed her guess, he was actually preening under her attention.

"You're no man," Willow said from their position across the room. They hadn't moved or sounded any sort of alarm, as Mari had explained as much as she knew about the situation when asking for the book. Because of the details of the contract, the sphinx thought Ashdei no threat, at least not at the moment.

He showed them his teeth in a taunting grin. "Figure of speech."

Mari asked the question on her mind with no preamble. "How are you here?"

"Since I don't think you're asking about the metaphysics of cross-realm teleportation,

I'll assume you mean in your home. "

Willow scoffed. "Oh, he's funny."

Mari leveled an unamused look their way. "Don't encourage him." She returned her attention to the demon who had invaded her house. "How are you inside the wards? We put them back after the party. You shouldn't be able to get through."

"I thought we covered this already, but perhaps I need to clarify." He walked closer, almost lazily. "I'm yours, Mariana, and your magic will always allow me entry."

"But how can that be? I never met you before the party, and I don't feel anything toward you."

His lips quirked. "Tell your magic that."

With a start, she realized that her magic had already unfurled to welcome him, the way it did any of her men. She tried to pull it back, but her magic wouldn't cooperate. His smile warmed when she met his eyes again.

"It makes sense," Willow said. "He kindled you. Your magic will always be connected to him."

"There's also the matter of the contracts," Ashdei added into Mari's stunned silence.

"Contracts?" Willow asked, voice tight. "Plural?" They looked toward Mari. "You only mentioned one."

"I also had a contract with her father."

Mari glared at him. "My father apparently bartered me off to be his bride. For what, I

don't know. But it doesn't matter, because I'm not doing it."

"He sought to make himself a Prince of the Earth," Ashdei said casually. "But he neglected to realize that you can't make yourself a monarch." When Mari stared at him, he shrugged. "You didn't ask."

"I figured you wouldn't tell me."

He looked troubled by her accusation. "I won't keep anything from you."

Why did she believe him? None of this made any sense. "Why are you helping me?"

"Two reasons. Denying the Forest Lord his place here benefits me." He paused and grinned wide. "And I'm trying to seduce you."

Mari ignored that second part. "How does a conflict with him benefit you?"

"I'm already a monarch."

She went over what he'd said again. When she put it together, everything he'd done so far made so much more sense. "You can be a Prince of Earth."

Willow's gasp of understanding shuddered through the room.

Ashdei nodded. "With your help."

"Which is why you're trying to seduce me."

He winked. "Well, that's not the only reason."

"I don't think for a single second that you actually want me."

His smile grew sharp. “Then why are you so afraid to touch me with your magic?”

“I’m not afr—” Reaching out to him was as natural as drawing a breath, and the moment she did, his desire filled her, hot and wild. She fought the urge to move closer to him by curling her fingers into the armrests of her chair.

“You were saying?” he teased.

She tried desperately to claw back her magic so she could think more clearly, but it was impossible. It craved him like nothing she’d ever felt. “After all this time, why now?”

One silver eyebrow rose. “I’ll admit I don’t know the answer to that question. I wasn’t particularly interested in pursuing you until recently. And then when I saw you at the party, I knew I couldn’t stay away.”

“I suspect it has to do with you, Mari,” Willow said into the silence that followed his admission. “You’ve only really come into your power the last few weeks.”

He glanced toward the sphinx before returning his attention to Mari. “Six nights ago, something changed. I felt something pulling me here.”

She cast her memory back, trying to think of what might have happened six nights before that altered her magic. As if she’d summoned Dohal with a thought, the shadows in the room darkened and crawled toward her. When they danced over her skin, she shivered, remembering how he’d held her down and wrung every drop of pleasure from her. He’d emptied her only to fill her again, over and over. Her power had changed that day, as if something inside her had been incomplete, waiting for Dohal to give her what she needed.

Ashdei’s blue flame eyes flared. “What. Was. That?”

Dohal's form coalesced out of the shadows, crouching next to her. An arm that was mostly shadow wrapped around her to settle one hand on the back of her neck. His magic seeped into her, easing her fatigue. "That was her remembering a night with me, demon," he growled in his deepest register, making the glasses on the table shake.

Willow rose from their chair. "And that's definitely my cue to give you the room." They looked Mari's way with a question in their expression.

Mari shook her head. She didn't want the other three of her men in here right now—the situation was unstable enough as it was. And there was nothing her magic would allow them to do in any case.

With a nod, the sphinx left, closing the door behind them.

Ashdei's gaze never left Mari. "What happened that night?"

Dohal chuckled, his grin wicked. "Looking for pointers?"

Mari swallowed. So much had happened that night, including things she wasn't ready to discuss yet. The heat of a blush rose in her cheeks. "It was the first time we'd been together since I freed him. I made him promise to not hold back."

"You claimed him as yours." Ashdei looked thoughtful. "And then you called me to you, because I'm the last piece you need to complete the circle."

She didn't understand what was going on in the slightest. She had noticed that something had changed that night—it was when she had started to be able to sense things from all of them—but she'd thought it was just because Dohal had finally given her what she craved, and she'd done the same in return. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ashdei examined her again, more slowly. The wait was interminable before he spoke again, "I'm not the one that's going to become a Prince of Earth. You are."

Next to her, Dohal startled. "Of course," he said in a thoughtful murmur once he recovered.

"That doesn't make any sense. I thought you said that you can't make yourself a monarch. That's why my father couldn't take the spot."

Ashdei smiled, his expression warming. "You're already a monarch."

"Because she was," Dohal added.

The goddess. Before she'd been forced into the body they now grudgingly shared. "Was she banished? The same way the Old One was?"

"No," Dohal said, "Not exactly. It was more like she was slowly forgotten, and her power waned."

Ashdei closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm probably going to regret this." He shook his head, sending his hair flying. "In order to claim your place, you need to close the circle of your magic that was opened with the first ritual."

Mari narrowed her gaze in his direction. "And what precisely does that mean?"

Dohal grumbled. "That you need to bed him again."

Ashdei responded with a nod.

Mari straightened her back. "Convenient that what you now say I need is what you said you were here for."

“It’s not entirely selfless on my account. While I won’t be a Prince because you’ll take the place that’s vacant, I will gain a great deal of power from the exchange.”

“You mean you’ll steal my power.”

Ashdei met her eyes without wavering. “No. Magic like ours isn’t a zero-sum game. We’ll both gain from the act of completion. The two of us will become more powerful than the sum of our parts.”

She looked to Dohal for confirmation, but he only shrugged. “I don’t know enough about the magics involved to say if he’s being honest or not. It’s certainly possible, especially at the levels of power you’re discussing.”

“I will never keep anything from you.” Ashdei repeated the pledge from earlier that Mari still didn’t know if she could afford to believe. “Ask the goddess, if you don’t trust me.”

Mari searched inward, looking for the goddess who had been mysteriously silent throughout the exchange. As a matter of fact, she’d been curiously quiet since the night with Dohal.

The response to her inquiry was as predictable as it was confusing. Everything is as it should be.

Did that include what Ashdei wanted from them? Mari got no answer to her follow-up question.

She sighed. “It used to be much easier to get a straight answer out of her.”

With a wry smile, Dohal leaned to kiss her cheek. “A goddess’s prerogative.”

She wasn't sure if the contact was meant to calm her or him, but she appreciated it, nonetheless. "Annoying, is what it is."

Ashdei stood with his arms crossed. "What did she say?"

"That everything was as it should be."

Ashdei's face broke into a grin. "That sounds like she agrees with my plan."

"Getting under my skirt isn't a plan."

"Are you trying to avoid having sex with me for a particular reason? Based on what I've seen, you don't seem like a prude, so I'm genuinely curious."

"I don't make a habit of sleeping with random strangers."

"Ahh." Ashdei waved his hand, and a chair from across the room moved to take up position across from her.

She eyed him with suspicion as he sat. "What are you doing?"

"Letting you get to know me." He crossed his legs at the knee. "Where would you like to start?"

"That's it? I just ask, and you answer? You don't want to know anything about me?"

The corners of his lips lifted again. "I know everything I need to know, duckling. You're going to be the next Prince of Earth, and I'll be privileged enough to be your consort, if you'll have me. I don't have the hangups you do about sex as a business transaction."

“See, that’s the problem right there. I don’t think it should be a transaction.”

He tilted his head. “Isn’t it? I please you. You please me. Transaction.”

Dohal snorted, but didn’t interject.

“There should be some emotion involved too.”

Ashdei considered what she said for a long moment. “Is desire not an emotion?”

Mari blinked at him. “Well, yes.”

“Good, then I have all that’s required.” He leaned forward, clearly pleased with himself. “Now, what do you need from me?”

She let out an exasperated breath. “This isn’t how I do things. I’m not just going to make boxes for you to check.”

“At the risk of speaking out of turn,” Dohal said, looking to Mari for permission before proceeding. “I do think you’re being a little unfair to him.”

Of all the things she had expected from this interaction, it wasn’t that Dohal would take his side. “How do you mean?”

“What he’s done to get in your good graces is not unlike what I did. I came to your rescue when you needed me, and then when I wanted you, I pursued you.”

She stared for a few seconds before she could respond, “There’s a world of difference, Dohal.”

“I fail to see how.”

“Because you weren’t being manipulative about it.”

“But I was. I invaded your thoughts, your dreams.”

“You said I invited you.”

“You did.” He shook his head. “But the same is true of him. The goddess called him to you.”

Mari looked Ashdei over again. As much as she hated to admit it, he made a lot of sense. “Why do you need my protection?”

“Like any powerful creature, I have enemies. Were I to claim the Prince of Earth title as I intended, they would come for me. The pact was a preventative measure.”

“More dangerous enemies than the Old One?”

“To me, yes.”

“And will they come for me?” She asked the question as casually as she could manage, but her hand tightened around Dohal’s.

“In all likelihood. Though I think the two of us together—especially once the circle is closed—should be more than a match for them.”

“So, this course of transaction with you will put her in additional danger?” Dohal grumbled, his disapproval obvious.

“I’m not sure if additional is the correct word. They will probably come for her anyway once they find out who she is, regardless of whether she claims her place, because of the threat she poses. To the status quo, she is a very dangerous creature.”

She turned to Dohal. “Could that have been what Vincent was talking about?”

“Perhaps.” Dohal focused on Ashdei. “Tell me something that is a lie, demon.”

Ashdei replied without hesitation, “I’m not at all envious of the way her memory of your night together made her magic light up the entire fucking room.”

Dohal smirked. “Far from infallible for one such as him, but I do not think he has told you any lies thus far.”

Ashdei looked straight at Mari. “While it is certainly in my nature to be less than truthful and withhold information for my benefit at every opportunity, it is not in my best interest to do so with you.”

Saints, she believed him, even without Dohal’s barometer as confirmation. Why did she feel so certain? The implications of it made her uneasy. She turned to regard her dragon. “You think I should entertain his plan.”

“I think the decision is yours. I just want you to have all the information when you make it.”

She stared into his cosmic eyes, wanting to know how he really felt about her considering this course, but unwilling to ask such a vulnerable question directly while Ashdei could hear. It was important that she know because of the secret she kept. “You said once that more protection was better. Do you still feel that way?”

Dohal bared his deadly fangs in a grin. “I am not threatened by him. You will always be mine.” He wrapped his large hand around the back of her neck and pulled her into a blistering kiss.

Chapter 13

All of the troubles of the last few days faded away in the wake of Dohal's overwhelming passion for her. Mari leaned her head back to give him better access to her mouth, and he plundered freely with a growl of approval. Her magic finally came to heel, wrapping around him eagerly. He set his thumb under her chin so that she looked up at him as he pulled back and favored her with a sweltering smile.

I would do anything to protect you, bavi, he spoke into her mind. But sharing you is no hardship, because what is between us has been lifetimes in the making, and nothing can break it.

Affection for him swelled in her chest. "I'm yours. Today and always." She reached up to grab his horn. "I want you tonight." She had something she desperately needed to share, and she wanted to do it alone with him first.

An expression of concern softened the severe planes of his face. "It's unwise now that we know the Old One is so close. It will leave you vulnerable."

"I can keep watch until she's recovered," Ashdei said.

Mari turned to look at the demon. She'd all but forgotten he was there in the tumult that was Dohal's regard. His face was an impassive mask, but something simmered under the surface. Without thinking, she reached for him with her magic.

His blue-fire eyes widened, and the strange wildness in him surged in response to her touch. He was out of his chair and had crossed half the distance between them before

he came to his senses, shaking his head to clear it.

Oh yes, the goddess crooned inside her. He's delicious. Rather than moving to protect her and Dohal from his sudden advance, her magic embraced him. He was a force of nature—imposing and ominous as a thunderstorm. His power sparked over her tongue, tasting like sex and sin, and she wanted to devour him.

Next to her, Dohal lowered his face close to her ear to murmur, "Would you like it if he watched?"

"Yes." She drew the word out long as she drank in the sight of him. She loved how obvious it was by his posture that he wanted her as badly as she did him. In this moment, she had a hard time remembering why she'd rejected his proposal.

Ashdei looked between them. "Not what I meant."

"Isn't it?" Dohal dropped a hand to her thigh, his claws light and teasing along her skin as he dragged them up to the hem of her skirt. "Would you deny her if she commanded it?"

The blue-flame eyes dipped to follow the progress of Dohal's fingers. His voice was hoarse when he answered, "No."

She favored the handsome demon with a smile, because she could feel his urge to please her quivering along her magic. "Would you deny me anything?"

Ashdei seemed surprised by her question, but his response came quickly, "I would not."

Mari wondered how far that pledge would stretch. Visions of him bound and forced to watch her as she was ravished by Dohal overwhelmed her, and her magic flared in

response.

Dohal huffed with amusement. Oh, my dark and dangerous love, he purred into her thoughts. How you tease me.

Had she sent that image into his mind?

“I have no objection to his presence, provided he can keep his hands to himself,” Dohal said out loud. “But the choice is always yours.”

“Could the Old One reach us in the grove?”

Dohal hummed. “I do not know for certain. Now that I am free, my power is bounded by the magic of the Earth, Natural magic. The same magic that the Forest Lord has. The cage I was trapped in was forged of Incarnate magic by Basilio and the other incubi.” His eyes drifted toward Ashdei before returning. “With the demon’s help we could secure it more thoroughly.”

Mari focused on Ashdei once more. “You can start to prove yourself by helping him secure the space he made for me. I’ll go talk to Cisco, Rio, and Dante in the meantime and see how they feel about all of this. I’ll come find you both there afterwards. Then we can talk about tonight.”

Ashdei nodded. “Protecting you is why I’m here.”

Dohal kissed her cheek and then her brow before rising. Don’t let them tempt you, he said in her head with a wicked smile on his lips. I want you empty and aching for me.

She sighed but nodded up at him. After they left, she walked slowly to Cisco’s office. She wasn’t sure how this conversation was going to go.

Cisco hated Ashdei. But he'd never tried to stop her from engaging in a relationship with anyone else. Would he draw a line in the sand now? She knew if he objected, she wouldn't pursue it. Cisco had claimed her heart before any of the others. She wouldn't deny him his very reasonable boundaries.

Her gargoyle was on the phone, with Rio sitting in his guest chair. Rio motioned her forward and moved to make room for her in his lap.

He leaned into the curve of her neck to greet her with a nuzzling kiss. "You smell like campfire," he whispered into her skin.

He felt content as he held her against him. She didn't think Rio would object to Ashdei's presence in their lives, but that was because he trusted her completely. He was the one who never doubted, never questioned.

Her thoughts drifted to Dante. Her awareness of him was dim with distance at the moment, but she could tell he was pleased about something. She called him to her, though she made sure not to make it seem urgent. He might get a frown line between his eyebrows when she explained what she was considering, but he would support her decision as well.

Since her night with Dohal, especially when her magic was charged like it was now, she could pick up more feelings from her men, and sometimes what felt like more detailed desires. And now it seemed like she could send thoughts like she'd done accidentally with Dohal earlier, sharing her fantasy about Ashdei watching them.

She kept her magic from getting too unruly at that reminder and turned her attention to Cisco once more. He was annoyed by whatever was happening on the phone but having her and Rio in the same room with him also eased him profoundly. A guardian by nature, when his bonded were within sight, all was right with the world.

Mari thought about how much she loved him, like a warm fire that would never run out of fuel. His eyes turned her way, and he grinned, showing his fangs, and she knew he'd felt the glow of her affection. She was definitely getting better at whatever this was. It helped that none of them seemed concerned by the new development.

Dante arrived just as Cisco sounded like he might be wrapping up, with a tray overflowing with what was obviously lunch intended for them. Her stomach helpfully reminded her that it had been hours since breakfast, and she was starving. He settled the tray on the credenza and set about making plates for all of them.

When Cisco finally hung up, Dante invited them all over to get their food. Each plate had been thoughtfully arranged for the person it was intended for. Rio didn't get pickles and Mari got twice as many as any reasonable person would try to consume. Cisco's sandwich was made with the stinkiest cheese Mari had ever had the misfortune of smelling, and Rio's had more steak than was probably allowed in the entire state of California.

She sighed contentedly as they all settled in for their meal. No wonder Dante had felt pleased with himself. He loved providing for the people he cared about—it made him happier than anything else.

“Thank you, this looks amazing,” she said before biting into one of the pickles from a giant mountain on her plate.

Dante favored her with a breathtaking smile that made her heart race. His own sandwich was overflowing with a colorful array of veggies and what looked like hummus.

“So, how was everyone's morning?” Cisco asked, once they had all made some headway with their meals.

Dante said he'd spent most of the morning with Giselle getting their grocery order organized. He was involved in the meal planning now. When Mari had asked him about it, he'd said that before becoming a submissive-for-hire he'd gone to culinary school. In fact, he'd come to Las Vegas with aspirations of becoming a chef, but he'd been tempted into the more carnal side of the city shortly after.

Rio had spent most of the morning with Clovis, going over various renovation plans, including the start of what would be the master suite. He grinned when they peppered him with questions about it but kept the details to himself. Cisco had given him a blank check and complete autonomy to make the space his own, and he was taking that to heart.

When they turned to look at her expectantly, she put her sandwich down. "Ashdei showed up this morning. Walked right into the library as if he owned the place."

Three pairs of eyes stared at her—blue, brown, and endless black. None of them said anything for a moment that drew out long.

Rio was the first to react after he'd swallowed his food. "So I guess he wasn't exaggerating about being welcome anywhere you are."

"It seems not," she confirmed.

"I wish you'd called me," Cisco said, his voice even despite the turmoil she could sense from him.

"Dohal was there. I promise I wasn't in any danger. I really just wanted to get answers out of him."

"Did he touch you?" Cisco asked, the grumbling discontent finally creeping into his tone.

“No, he was very respectful of my personal space.”

Dante muttered, “I sense a but coming.”

Mari took a breath and nodded. “But he wants to.”

One tick of a growl escaped Cisco before he reined it in. “I’m going to tear his intestines out through his nose if he so much as breathes on you, Mariana.”

“That’s why I didn’t call you.” She sighed. “I appreciate your anger and your desire to protect me. But I needed to talk to him without having to worry you were going to get yourself killed trying to defend my honor or nullify the terms of the contract.”

“That fucking contract,” Cisco spat.

“I need you to listen to me, okay?” She waited for his grudging nod before she continued, “Since I freed Dohal, I’ve been able to sense emotions from all of you, and I can usually tell how far away you are. Sometimes I can even send things. I think you’ve all noticed?”

She glanced around at all of them, waiting for them to agree before she went on, “It’s strongest with Dohal, and when he’s in the room it’s like I’m supercharged with it.”

Rio looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, “It sounds like a side effect, of your mate bond with him. Maybe it’s a power of his that you’re borrowing.”

“That’s what I think too.” Mari smiled. “But here’s the thing, when it was just the three of us in a room, it worked with Ashdei too.”

She could tell that Cisco wanted to grumble about that, but he kept his objection to himself.

“So, he is one of yours,” Rio said.

“I think so.” She put her plate on Cisco’s desk. “I’m not saying I trust him, because I don’t. But my magic does, and so does the goddess.” She took a breath and met Cisco’s eyes. “I think I at least need to keep talking with him until we figure this out.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, wings flaring out in annoyance. “What is it you haven’t told us yet? I know there’s something.”

Mari swallowed. “He said if we completed the circle, whatever that means, I would be the next Prince of Earth.”

The outburst she had expected didn’t happen. The three of them were quiet with their own thoughts for nearly a minute. While she still felt uncertainty from Cisco, the other two were coming around.

Finally, Rio spoke up first, “Did Dohal think he was being honest about that?”

Mari nodded. “I thought so too, with whatever we’re going to call this sense of you all that I have now.”

Dante looked up and shrugged. “I don’t trust the demon, but I trust the goddess.”

Rio tilted his head. “I trust Mari’s vibe checker.” He tossed a wink her way.

All of them turned toward Cisco, waiting for his response.

He clenched his jaw a few times before he spoke, “Dohal is in the room with you whenever you talk to him.”

Mari agreed without hesitation. “That seems wise.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. “I love you. And I trust you. And if this is something you want to pursue, I will support you in whatever way I can.”

“I love you too.” She let out a breath. “I wasn’t going to do it if you said no. I want you to know that.”

“I know.” He smiled briefly. “That’s what made it easy for me to say yes.”

Humming to herself, Mari walked along the path from the main house to the grove. She was looking forward to her night with Dohal, though she hadn’t decided yet if she was going to let Ashdei watch. Part of her craved that more than anything, but she was still unsure if she wanted to be that vulnerable in front of him.

She’d meant what she said to Cisco and Rio and Dante. Ashdei belonged to her. But that didn’t mean she trusted him. He was definitely holding something back from her, and she needed to figure out what that was before going too much farther with him.

She wasn’t paying very much attention to her surroundings, but then a tree moved in her periphery and brought her up short.

No, not a tree.

A towering being with branches for horns and bottomless black holes for eyes that stepped onto the pathway in front of her. Malevolence poured from the Old One in waves and buffeted her.

“You are the one who freed the creature from his cage,” he said in a voice like an avalanche. “I can smell him on you.”

Mari tried very hard not to let the fear shivering through her show. She had no idea if she managed or not. “Yes.”

“Why?” The question rang with condemnation.

There was no reason she could think of not to be honest, and in any case, she was too fucking scared to make up a lie. “He didn’t deserve to be held captive.”

“What he deserves is death.” The anger in the Old One’s voice shook the ground around her until she thought she’d lose her footing.

In that instant of abject fear, all of her men realized she was in danger and charged toward her.

Shadows raced toward her from every side, streaming in from the trees around her.

Dohal took form between them in the blink of an eye. “Your quarrel is with me and not her. She has nothing to do with this.”

Rustling flames. Wings rending air. Hoofbeats on stone. Silent churning paws. Each of them moved at their top speed toward her, but they were already too late.

Because she understood without question what Dohal meant to do, and her heart broke. He would give himself up to save her. She’d always known that. She wanted to fall to her knees and wail, but there was no time.

Ashdei was there next, his hand rising to put up a shield, but the Old One was already in striking distance of his prey.

A huge, clawed hand wrapped around her dragon’s neck. Dohal didn’t struggle against the grip. Instead, he walled Mari off from him so that she didn’t feel the pain

that wracked him the next instant. His body convulsed, but he didn't make a single sound as agony rippled through him.

With every second that passed, Dohal weakened in front of her.

Ashdei's shield sprang up around Mari as she yelled for the life of her dragon. She charged forward without thinking, plunging through the blue fire toward them.

Around her, the rest of her men arrived. They shouted for her to stop. But she couldn't listen to them, because if she did, she might doubt what it was she had to do. She had to save her dragon. There was no other choice. No other possible outcome.

Power spun out from her in a spiral from a well deep within her that she didn't understand. This wasn't arousal or lust or any of the magic that she usually channeled. This was something else, scathing and pure.

Her men all tried to approach to stop her, but only Ashdei could withstand the sparking chaos of her magic at full force. He was nearly within range to grab her when the power exploded from her, sending even him reeling backward.

Mari rose on the currents of energy pouring from her, lighting up the night around her in green and gold. Lightning arced from her and struck the ground around the Old One over and over. Her wrath made manifest.

She understood with a portion of her mind that the power blazing through her would eventually be her undoing. The strands of matter that made her came unspun little by little, because this much energy couldn't be contained by a mortal body.

"YOU CANNOT HAVE HIM!" she screamed with her entire being.

The Old One bellowed in pain, his form vibrating with magic as she continued to

bombard him, until he finally let Dohal go and stepped back from the onslaught.

The driving rhythm of the cosmos moved through her like a heartbeat.

She was the beginning and ending of all things.

She was everything and nothing.

She was the void and all that ached to fill it.

The Old One raised both arms to the sky, and with a concussive boom that she felt rather than heard, he vanished. She wouldn't have been able to best him, she understood that now that she'd been able to feel his power for herself, but she had managed to surprise him. She relished the momentary victory of his retreat.

In the aftermath, Dohal looked up at her, his face a mask of pain and terror. He yelled something that she couldn't hear over the roaring of thunder in her ears.

She smiled down at her dragon, so grateful he was safe, and then she plummeted to the ground—shattered and empty.

Chapter 14

Mari was slow to wake. She felt sluggish and empty, but at least she was warm. So warm.

She reached out with her senses instinctively, searching for the comforting presences of her men. Five. All close. All intact. All hers.

A soft sigh escaped her dry lips.

“I think she’s waking up,” came a voice from far, far away. She knew she should recognize the source, but it took her a while to get her brain online to manage it.

Rio. Tucked in tight against her back. His skin on hers. Warm and beautiful and alive.

She stirred, trying to burrow in closer to him.

A delicate touch on her face. Magic that tasted like candy flowed into her. Comforting. Soft.

Dante. His hands on her, feeling like light and love. “Come on, sweetheart. Open your eyes.”

She wasn’t sure she could. She was so tired. She wanted to sleep for a year.

A clawed hand turned her head. Strength. Resolve. And so much love it hurt her heart.

Cisco. She could face waking up if he was there. He'd never let her fall.

She tried to blink her eyes open, but they felt so heavy.

"You can do it. Come back to us," Cisco's voice rumbled through her, tight with concern. The near-panic he felt soaked into her skin.

That he was so worried brought her the rest of the way awake with a start. She stared up into his eyes, expecting the building around them to be on fire based on his turmoil. But they were in the grove. On Dohal's bed.

"Dohal," she croaked with a voice that was beyond broken.

"I'm here, bavi," her dragon said softly. "Don't move yet."

Cisco inched over so she could see her dragon. Dohal rested one large hand on her hip. His healing magic flowed into her.

The fact that both he and Dante were pushing their power into her at full force and didn't seem to be making a dent in whatever this was should have been concerning, but she couldn't make herself care about that just now. They were alive. They had survived. She didn't remember what exactly, but she knew it had been awful.

The last one. Where was he? She reached out for him with her senses. Her magic felt strange. Ethereal.

There. He was nearby. Not on the bed with her where he belonged, but close. Endless darkness and blue fire. The smell of brimstone. Cold, unrelenting fear. Ashdei.

"I'm here," Ashdei said in his deep voice that reminded her of whispers in dark places. I can't come closer to you right now. I'm still too volatile, he said into her

mind.

Because of what had happened to her. Seeing her fall had broken something in him. She could sense that. He felt fragile. Brittle. She ached to soothe him with her touch, but understood why he kept his distance. He was afraid to hurt her.

He was close enough for what she needed, even if not as close as she craved. The goddess came forward, filling her with the righteous power she needed and didn't understand—golden and burnished. She drew on all of them at once, banishing the lethargy that had consumed her with cleansing fire. Her magic came awake with a peal of thunder that vibrated through the grove.

She stirred on the bed between Rio and Dante, suddenly restless. Dante curled his fingers in her hair. Rio nuzzled into the back of her neck. Cisco bent down to her, claiming her mouth in an achingly sweet kiss.

She rested amongst the three of them as they showered her with gentle affection, her magic gradually regulating until she started to feel normal again. Once she was stable, they all moved aside so Dohal could lift her into his arms.

He cradled her in his lap in the center of the expansive bed of lush greenery. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

She turned her face into the crook of his neck, breathing him in. "You were just going to let him kill you."

"To spare you. Yes. And I would do it again a thousand times."

Her heart broke all over again with his confirmation, though she'd felt his intention clear as day at the time. "You said I was enough for you to live for, but you lied."

He tsked gently. “I told you already, I will defend you with my life. Nothing about that has changed.”

She pulled away to look up at him. “What else?”

“What?” His expression was perplexed as he gazed down at her.

“You would defend me with your life, but there was something else you would protect too.” She’d been waiting for the right time to tell him, but after that close call, she realized that no time would ever be more right. She needed him to understand what they were all fighting for, and why none of them could give up.

He blinked. “Your offspring.”

She took his hand and rested it on her belly. “If you die, who will protect them?”

The probing touch of his magic warmed her abdomen. Closing his eyes, he pressed his forehead to hers.

Oh, bavi, he whispered into her mind. You should have told me.

“When?” He asked out loud.

“The first night you brought me here.” She touched his face. “I said I would choose when, and I did. When I claimed you as mine. I knew I had to give you what you wanted most because you’d given me so much.”

Dante scooted up next to them, pausing to see if Dohal was going to object along the way, but he didn’t. “We’re having dragon babies?”

Mari reached to pull him into a hug. “We are. Though I’m not a hundred percent on

the logistics. There aren't a lot of books on the subject."

When it seemed like Dohal wasn't going to lash out, Rio moved closer too, settling on her other side. "Babies plural? No wonder you've been so tired."

Dohal rumbled, but there was no anger in the sound, only contentment. "You'll carry them for about six months, then birth the clutch. After that I will tend the eggs, another six months. Then they will hatch." His hand moved over her belly in a circle as he listened for something. "Three."

Mari's eyes shot wide. "Three?"

"Not an army perhaps, but an auspicious number." He placed his chin on her head and crooned to her.

If he was going to keep being this adorable, she was going to start crying. She snuggled into him, pulling Dante and Rio closer too.

"So, that means we need to settle this soon." Cisco stood at the foot of the bed, his arms crossed, and his face resigned. "Because my kids aren't coming into a world this fucking dangerous for them. No way. Ideas?"

"We need to close the circle," Ashdei said from his post near the entry.

Cisco growled. "Somehow it's always about you sticking your dick in her, isn't it?"

"He's right, Cisco," Mari said as gently as she could. "I managed to surprise the Old One this time, but I could tell I wasn't a match for him like this. If one of us was more powerful, it might be enough."

The gargoyle's wings flared. "I still think he's trying to trick you into boosting his

power.”

“I honestly don’t care at this point,” she said with a sigh. “If it makes him strong enough to take the Old One out, that’s fine with me.”

“It will make both of us stronger, as I’ve said.” Ashdei glared as though he couldn’t understand why they didn’t trust him.

He was certainly hiding something. She’d known that all along, but she didn’t think whatever it was posed a danger to her. He wanted her safe. That had come through loud and clear when she’d told them the secret she’d been keeping. He was as feral about protecting the dragons she carried as any of them.

“He feels as protective of me as you do right now, Cisco. He would tear this city apart to keep me safe.”

Ashdei bared his teeth. “I’m still considering bringing this entire realm crashing down around us after what happened earlier.” His anger seethed through the grove.

Cisco appraised the demon slowly, his lips turned down in a frown. “That does sound like we’re in agreement.”

Mari touched Rio’s shoulder. “Can you move to the other side for me?”

He nodded and then dipped his head to kiss her softly before moving to the other side of Dante. As if he knew what she was planning, he held his hand out for Cisco. Their gargoyle would refuse him nothing and eased onto the bed to rest on his far side.

Mari met the fiery blue eyes and opened herself up to him so that she could feel his uncertainty. She patted the bed next to her. “Come here.”

Ashdei looked reluctant, but after an internal battle that she waited through in silence, he did as she commanded. He sat at the edge, within reach of her, but carefully not touching her. When she moved to take his hand, he gasped. His magic snapped into to her like a static discharge the instant their skin came into contact.

“I know why you’ve been avoiding touching me,” she said in a low voice. “You feel like you’re unstable.” She pulled him closer and rested his hand on her thigh.

His magic poured into her like liquid fire, filling the void that had taken up residence after the encounter with the Old One. She immediately felt so much better. Ashdei stared at his hand in horror, but she knew he could never burn her. She covered his hand with hers and then slowly slid it up his arm and shoulder until her fingers brushed over his jaw. He leaned into her palm, his eyes falling closed briefly.

“Your magic can’t hurt me.”

She watched him as he considered her words and then came to the decision to trust her. Satisfaction raced through her when he settled into her touch. She enjoyed the heat of his skin against her fingers as she pulled him closer, until his forehead rested on hers.

Every bit of contact that increased between them made her feel better, more whole. And not just in terms of recovery from the discharge. Something deeper in her knew that, in order to be complete, she had to possess him, the same way she had the others.

“What you need to regain control is me, not staying away. Can you feel that now?”

He nodded slowly against her.

Under her, Dohal didn’t move a muscle. His hand covered her belly protectively, but

he hadn't so much as lifted a finger, even though Ashdei was a raging inferno next to her. That trust made her heart race, made her feel powerful and bold.

She lifted her chin to brush Ashdei's lips with a kiss. The heat should have been enough to scorch her, but it rushed through her in a searing blaze, branding every inch of her along the way.

Once she was filled with the blistering fire of his magic and felt like she could burn the world to cinders, he relaxed in her grip.

"See, that's all you needed," she said in a voice that rustled like flame.

The goddess was smug within. She understood now that the circle did indeed have to be closed, and she knew how to do it. "I'll take the day to rest, and we'll finish this tomorrow."

"Of course," Ashdei said, his hand smoothing over her thigh.

"One of us should be there with you," Cisco grumbled.

She turned to look at her gargoyle. "It needs to be just the two of us when I claim him, as it was for all of you." She smiled as gently as she could, because she knew trusting was the hardest for him. "Each of you has a piece of me that none of the others has, and the only way I can figure that out is if we're alone and I can focus on him."

Pain overtook Cisco's handsome face.

Rio touched him softly, on his jaw and then his cheek. "He'd rip out his heart for her. I felt it when she fell. From all of us, but from him especially."

“You trust him?” Cisco sounded incredulous.

“No. I trust Mari. Nothing has happened to make me change my mind about that.”

The conversation had given her an idea of how she could convince the stubborn gargoyle, by letting him feel what she did. “Cisco, come here.”

He hesitated for only a moment before he started moving closer while giving Ashdei a hateful look. She directed him to settle between her knees, though he looked uncomfortable with being so close to the demon.

Mari guided Cisco’s hands to her thighs and held them there. She met Ashdei’s gaze. “Touch me.”

The blue fire in his eyes blazed brighter. Without a word he slid his hand down her body and between her legs, his fingers parting her delicately.

“Kiss me again,” she said breathlessly, as she rolled her hips to entice him.

Ashdei leaned closer to capture her mouth, ignoring Cisco’s warning snarl. She tightened her hands around Cisco’s to hold him in place. Ashdei slipped his fingers up to stroke her clit, making her moan into his mouth as her magic soared.

He smiled against her lips. “Do you want me to stop?”

“You’d better not,” she warned.

Ashdei rumbled with appreciation and eased his hand slowly southward. She arched her back in anticipation and cried out when his fingers breached her. Her magic simmered. Even just that much of him felt so fucking good. She needed more.

Mari lifted her hips to take him deeper. She craved him so badly that she tightened around him.

Ashdei moved in a slow and sensual rhythm, his fingers curling when he plunged into her, making her gasp.

“We’ve got you sweetheart,” Dante whispered in her ear.

Rio reached from the other side of Dante to place a hand on her, caressing her stomach and hip.

Cisco clutched her thighs when they trembled, his hesitance melting away in the heat of her rising pleasure.

Dohal curled his arm around her and nuzzled the top of her head as her power swelled. “Keep the magic for yourself.”

With her desire spiraling so high and all of their hands on her, she felt unbearably sexy. Moaning, she locked eyes with Cisco. He pushed her thighs wide, spreading her open under him and giving the others better access.

“Give her more,” Cisco ordered, his voice low and commanding.

Dohal slipped his thicker fingers inside her alongside Ashdei’s. The decadence of the stretch made her groan. She couldn’t move with the way Cisco held her, and the friction swiftly became overwhelming as they worked her in tandem.

Rio slid his hand down to rub her clit. Exposed and desperate, she gripped Cisco’s hands and whimpered wordlessly.

“More,” Cisco growled.

Dante leaned to take one nipple into his mouth. Sparks of sensation tingled along her nerves, making her clench around the fingers filling her. She cried out in ecstasy when Rio tugged the piercing in her clit.

Every muscle in her body tensed for one perfect moment before the climax roared through her. She held on to her magic by her fingernails when it wanted to burst free. Her voice shook the trees of the grove.

Cisco stroked her thighs gently as the shuddering orgasm drew out. His body language had relaxed significantly, and she knew that though he still might not like the situation, he had finally accepted that Ashdei might be one of them.

Ashdei withdrew first, making her sigh as the last of the aftershocks shivered through her. She still needed him so badly that the sudden lack of him hurt like a wound. She turned toward him before he could back away entirely, her hand slipping into his hair to hold him close.

“You’re all mine tomorrow,” she said before dragging him into a kiss.

He nodded when she released him. “Nothing could keep me from that appointment. Believe me.” He smiled. “Rest now.”

Her eyelids felt so heavy that she couldn’t argue with that order, though she wanted to.

Dohal eased from her and repositioned so that he curled up protectively around her, his arm making a pillow for her and his wing stretched out under her. “You’re all welcome to stay here for the night, but if you disturb her sleep, I’ll kill you.”

He didn’t sound like he was joking, but Mari giggled sleepily anyway.

Ashdei crouched against a tree near the entry, his blue-fire eyes focused on her. Dante arranged himself on the opposite side of her from Dohal, his hand resting on her hip so that his healing magic trickled into her. Even though she'd hoarded all that magic for herself, she still felt drained.

Elsewhere in the grove, she heard Rio and Cisco talking quietly in Spanish, but she couldn't see them from her position and couldn't make out the words.

And then Dohal's large wing spread over top of her, blocking out all light and sound, so that all she could feel was the heat of his body and all she could hear was the steady beat of his heart, and she fell asleep in seconds.

Chapter 15

Mariana stepped into the grotto with Dohal's magic tickling against her skin. They had all decided that, now that Ashdei had reinforced the wards with his Incarnate magic, it would be safer here than anywhere else to do whatever "closing the circle" entailed.

Ashdei waited for her inside, sitting on the edge of the lush green bed wearing nothing but a pair of loose black pants that flowed easily when he stood to welcome her. His eyes moved over her slowly, from her delicate silver sandals up along the red silken robe she wore belted around her. His flame-touched gaze paused to take in her breasts before continuing to her face to meet her eyes. The blue fire roared brighter. "I have never wanted anyone the way I want you."

"Interesting attempt at small talk. Here's my counteroffer." She tugged the belt, let her robe fall away, and slid out of her shoes.

Her magic swelled inside her when heat overtook his face. She leaned closer as his power rubbed against her in response. Mari walked forward slowly, needing to touch him, and her fingers caressed his jaw.

At the contact, a low sound of desire rumbled from his lips. Sparks danced under her skin everywhere she touched him.

"You feel good," she whispered. Her thumb slid to brush over his mouth. "Like mine."

The sudden vulnerability that overtook his expression made her stomach flutter. “In all my years, no one has ever said something like that to me.” His voice was low and rough.

His desire seeped into her through her skin until she felt drunk on it. “Do you want to be mine?”

Eyes widening, he seemed surprised by his answer to the question. “More than anything.”

She pressed her thumb between his lips to glide over his tongue briefly. “What would you give to be mine?”

His breath stuttered as he came to the conclusion she had already sensed. “Everything.”

Her smile was slow and soft. She’d thought he was a terrifying, powerful creature beyond her understanding, but really, he just wanted to be cherished. She moved closer and captured his mouth in a gentle kiss into which she poured all her longing. When she felt him melt against her, she knew exactly what he craved.

“I’m going to give you what you need,” she whispered against his lips. “But you’re going to have to stay very still for me. Can you do that? Can you be a good boy for me?”

“Yes,” he murmured into her kiss. “I’ll be good.”

She reached down between them to feel the swell of his cock where it stretched the fabric of his lounge pants. He moaned into her mouth as she traced over the outline with eager fingers. “Sit down and lean back.”

He pulled away from her reluctantly and backed up until he sat on the bed. He then leaned back on his hands, exposing the long expanse of his muscled torso. “Like this?”

“Exactly like that.” She stroked him through his pants slowly while looking him over. “You’re devastatingly beautiful.”

A delicate blush rose along his neck to paint his cheeks. “No one has ever told me that before.” He was delicious this way, soft and a little shy, such a contrast to the cocky arrogance he wore like armor.

She would strip him of it bit by bit until he was bared to her. “I’m sorry that no one has treasured you as you deserve.” She slid her hand up along his body to enjoy the feeling of him arching up into her touch. “Don’t worry. I’m going to take very good care of you.”

Mari tugged the waist of his pants down until his cock sprang free. He was thick in her hand, with a tapered head that came to a sharp point. She didn’t have any idea what that would feel like inside her, but she was desperate to find out. Studs protruded along the sides and top of his curved shaft in rows, begging to be touched. When she ran her thumb along them to feel their bumpy texture, he groaned.

“So sensitive,” she said in a low, fond voice. She wrapped her fingers around him and squeezed, making him buck in her grip. She tsk ed with her tongue. “I thought you were going to be a good boy?”

“I am,” Ashdei panted. “I’ll be so good.”

She pumped him with her hand lazily a few times, then showed him a dirty smile. “Stay still,” she warned, as she moved back to kneel on the ground between his legs. She rubbed his thighs, enjoying the long lines of his decadent body as she looked up

at him.

He shivered when she gripped him roughly once more but did an admirable job of keeping still.

She leaned to give the head of his cock a slow lick, lingering over the distinct shape of him. He tasted like a good mezcal, smoky and just a bit sweet. She tested the barb at his tip with her thumbnail. His stomach muscles jerked at the sensation, and a moan fell from his lips, but he didn't move.

"Good boy," she purred, and sucked the head of his cock between her lips with an audible slurp.

His hands fisted in the greenery under him, and he let out a choked gasp. She had a glorious view of his rippling muscles as he fought his every instinct in order to stay still. His impressive restraint made her arousal bloom. She squeezed him with her fingers and took him deeper as a reward.

The soft noises of enjoyment he made sent her magic tingling along her nerves. She took her time, exploring every inch of him with careful patience. The fleshy studs along his length were very sensitive, and whenever she raked them gently with the edge of her teeth he quivered. He especially liked it when she took him deep, if his spluttering moans were any indication. His barbed head was sharp, but not enough to break skin, only enough to tease the back of her throat in the most delicious way.

When she eased back after a while to take a break, he let out a frustrated groan. She smoothed her hand up and down slowly, using her saliva as lubrication, admiring his impressive length. Her cunt throbbed as she imagined what he would feel like inside her.

"Sucking you off is making me so wet." She smiled when his hips flexed ever so

slightly. Seeing him clinging to the edge of his control because it would please her was hot enough that she was surprised she hadn't caught fire yet.

She drank him down again, because she couldn't resist the way stretching her mouth around him made her feel, wicked and powerful. She dropped her hand between her legs and stroked her clit with a firm touch until she moaned around his cock.

He stared down at her, his expression dark with desire and hunger. "Please," he whispered. "I want to taste you."

Mari decided she'd denied herself the pleasure of his body long enough. She stood and slid her fingers into his waiting mouth. He groaned with pleasure and sucked on them as she straddled his lap. Staring into his eyes, she teased the head of his cock along her slit, spreading her wetness. "Your hands stay where they are, but your hips are allowed to move. Am I understood?"

He nodded, her fingers still caught between his sinful lips.

"That's my good boy."

He blushed to his silver hair. The reaction was so adorable, it made her want to lavish him with praise constantly. She withdrew from his mouth so she could settle her hands on his shoulders and slid onto his cock with a long, slow glide that had her gasping by the end. The way he filled her was just perfect, and her magic soared.

Mari flexed her body and started to ride him in a hard rhythm. He arched up into her, offering himself for her use in a way that made her savagely possessive of him. She shifted one hand to his throat, squeezing until her nails dug in. "Fuck me with that glorious cock."

His hips began to churn under her with a feral desperation that made her clench

around him. She leaned to capture the sexy sounds that poured from his lips and let him drive up into her with his entire length.

His powerful body surged under her, building her magic with every stroke. She lowered her head to draw the pointed tip of one ear between her lips, smiling to herself when his hips stuttered. She used her teeth on the sensitive arch of his ear, timing the press of her bite to match with his thrusts. The added pain made him snarl with lust. His raging desire rushed into her, hot and urgent.

“That’s so fucking good,” she groaned into his ear. The hand that wasn’t around his throat moved to grip a fistful of his hair to help her hold on as the movement got more intense. She straightened a bit to look in his eyes. “Tell me how badly you want to touch me right now.”

He stared up into her eyes as he slowed his pace, his expression completely unguarded for the first time. “I crave the feeling of your soft skin under my hands.” He swallowed. “The only thing I’ve ever wanted more is the taste of you on my tongue.”

“Mmm.” She leaned to take his mouth again, sucking on his lips. “You want to taste me some more?”

His eyes blazed. “So much.”

“Come inside me, darling boy, and show me that you’re mine. Then you can have your fill.”

He let out a sexy growl. “Can I touch you? Please.”

The longing in his voice almost undid her. “Anywhere you want.”

His hands came up to grip her hips in an instant, a low rumble of satisfaction vibrating through him as he smoothed them over her skin. “You feel so good.” He kneaded her ass with his fingers as he lengthened his strokes and picked up his pace again.

Mari wrapped both arms around his head and threaded her fingers in his hair, bringing his face to her tits, where he nipped hungrily as he continued to thrust into her. Arching her spine, she threw back her head, moaning up into the trees as the absolute bliss of his desire soaked into her.

Their mingled magic tore through her as she cried out when an orgasm crashed through her unexpectedly. Ashdei filled her to bursting with every snap of his hips as she continued to come, driving more power into her at the same time. He curled his fingers into the meat of her ass as the intensity of his fucking increased even more, ramming into her with every stroke.

The sounds of her pleasure melded into a constant drone that rose through the trees. A barrier burst open inside her, flooding her with thoughts and emotions she didn’t understand as his magic roared through her. Memories she had no frame of reference for rushed across her awareness, including some of the man under her. Fragments came together in a jumble, only causing more confusion.

Ashdei bit her exposed throat when his climax overtook him, moaning into her skin while driving deep. His cock throbbed inside her as she continued to tighten around him. His magic still poured into her in a torrent with each snap of his hips, as if she was a vessel to be filled by him. Her body and her magic pulsed in answer to him.

Shuddering, Mari collapsed against him, overwhelmed by all that flowed through her. He wrapped her in his arms, holding her to him in the aftermath with a tenderness that stole her breath. There was too much all at once. His gentleness was the blow that opened the floodgates, and she sobbed into his shoulder.

Mari understood with sudden clarity that what she'd felt breaking within her was the divider between the goddess and herself. They'd never been two people—just one being, restrained by unfathomable magic at the moment of creation so that she could never be whole.

“Did I hurt you?” The question came softly from Ashdei once she'd subsided into sniffing.

How could she even answer that? Yes. And overwhelmingly no. He had healed what was broken by completing the circle. Just as he'd sworn to the goddess he would, all those years ago. “I remember the ritual,” she said, after a few moments.

“Oh.” The word was a sigh filled with heartache. His hand ghosted down her back as if it was the last time he might ever touch her. “Should I go?”

“No.” Though she had every right to be furious with him for keeping the truth from her, she couldn't find it in herself to send him away. She clutched him tighter at even the idea that he would leave. “You shouldn't have kept that from me.”

The two of them had plotted together from the start, hoping for exactly what had just happened all those years ago. She understood now why it hadn't worked, with the benefit of hindsight. It had required more power and more ties to her to unshackle her. More than any one creature could offer, no matter how powerful—it had taken five.

“I didn't think you'd take my word for it, since you couldn't remember.” His touch was gentle as he continued to stroke her back. “I thought we'd failed. That it would never happen at all.”

“It needed the others. Each of you held a piece of the key we needed to turn the lock. She didn't understand the extent of what they'd done to us when she reached out to

you. She thought any powerful creature would do.”

He made a thoughtful sound. “So, it’s done? You’re whole again?”

She let out a laugh without much mirth in it. “I don’t actually know. She’s definitely not there the way she used to be. And as soon as I can unscramble these memories, I think things will be much clearer.”

Ashdei pressed a kiss into her temple. “Is there anything I can do to help with that?”

So many memories tumbled through her, but one in particular bothered her the most. The goddess talking to her mother, ordering her away on a mission to convince Ashdei to go through with the kindling ritual when he’d already declined the latest offer from her father. She almost didn’t want to ask because she was terrified of hearing the answer. “Is my mother alive?”

Serena had clearly convinced him somehow, but he had never mentioned what happened to her mother afterwards. It was as if they had made an agreement between them not to discuss her.

He ran a hand along her spine, seeking to reassure her. “Yes. She wanted to disappear after escaping your father, so I helped her do that. I know where she is, if you’d like to contact her.”

Mari let out a long sigh. She’d been so angry with her mother for abandoning her for so long. All of those unkind things she’d thought about her mother over the years weighed on her. But like so many hard truths in life, the reality was more complicated than a hurt teenage girl could understand. “I’d like to talk to her in person.”

“I can bring her to Las Vegas, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea right now.”

She'd thought that, with Basilio dead, there was no longer any threat to Serena. What wasn't she seeing? "Why would she be unsafe?"

He pulled back to look down at her, his expression serious. "It has to do with who your father is."

Mari jolted in his arms. Nothing in the goddess's memories pointed to who it might be, but Ashdei clearly knew. "Who is it?"

He shook his head and looked unhappy about having to deliver this news. "The Forest Lord. They had to harness a god to create a god, and he was one they already knew how to summon from when they had banished him. I don't know if he'd remember your mother's role in what happened, but we do know he holds a grudge."

She sat still, completely stunned. She was the daughter of the Old One? The origin of all the paranormals on Earth? "He doesn't know about me?"

"I don't think so, or he would have been much more interested in you from the start."

"I'm assuming that wouldn't be for a father-daughter bonding outing?"

Ashdei let out a dry chuckle. "I don't know the specific details, but I imagine the ritual that created you was unpleasant for him."

"Because why should anything about my past have been pleasant, even that."

Ashdei stroked her hair with one hand. "I have firsthand knowledge that a great many things about you are pleasing. I think I need to remind you." He turned with her in his arms until she was on her back and he rested easily over her.

She laughed when he bent to kiss her neck. "Are you trying to distract me?"

“Yes. And I was promised a taste of you that I intend to collect on.” He nipped lightly on her throat, making her shiver.

“We need to finish this conversation.”

“Of course,” he murmured into her skin. “Whatever my beloved wants.”

Prompted by his position over her, memories of the ritual rose in her mind, making her skin heat. He’d taken such care in those fleeting moments between them. He’d been so gentle with her, even though the goddess had craved the violent intensity that was her nature.

“The ritual was not unpleasant.”

He rose slightly, his expression becoming serious. “You sound surprised by that.”

“I’ve been terrified of what the memories of that moment might hold ever since.” She touched his face. “You stood your ground against her when she wanted more.”

“I didn’t know you wouldn’t have access to those memories. I didn’t want you to come back and be scared or think that I’d wronged you.” He looked down at her with such tenderness that she ached.

Mari ran her fingers through his hair. “I want your mouth on me. Right now.”

His lips quirked. “What about our conversation?”

“We’ll finish it later.”

He nodded and then slid slowly down her body until he knelt on the grassy floor of the grove. She resisted when he tried to part her thighs, just to see the plea in his eyes

when he glanced up at her. With an indulgent smile, she knotted her fingers in his luxuriant hair and tugged.

His mouth opened in a wordless gasp. Having this powerful creature on his knees in front of her made her feel untamed and wild. “Show me your true form.”

Blue fire erupted around him, singeing the greenery under her but leaving her completely unharmed. He grew and changed: horns erupted from his head, fiery wings unfurled behind him, and blue markings of his magic glowed in his skin.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said, as she looked him over again in wonder.

His face softened, and the depth of his emotion was so plain on his usually stoic features that she couldn’t deny him an instant longer. She spread her thighs and leaned back.

He lowered his head and bit his way up one thigh until she trembled with the wanting of him. She urged him closer with a wordless moan. He obliged by lapping at her with a long stroke of his tongue.

“You taste like whispers sweetly sinful enough to tempt a saint,” he rumbled and then dipped his head for another slow lick along her seam that curled her toes.

The last thing she had expected from this fierce man between her knees was poetry, but somehow, it was perfect. She ran her fingers through his hair, fondness blooming in her chest. “Make me come with that silver tongue of yours.”

Bending to his task without another word, his hands pressed her thighs wide so she was exposed to him. He slipped his tongue into her, making her back arch as the sensation overflowed and spread through her entire body. Her magic purred for him, the curls of it wrapping around and caressing him in time with his tongue’s decadent

strokes inside her.

She lost herself in the boundless indulgence of his mouth, coming undone under him over and over until she trembled.

Once he was satisfied there was no more pleasure to wring out of her body, he moved so that his chin rested on her mound, and there was an easy smile on his lips as he gazed over her. “I’m yours, Mariana, until one of us dies. And this world better pray that I die before you, because I’m not sure I won’t bring it all crashing down in retribution if we’re parted.” He didn’t say it with malice, but she felt the promise of his words shiver through her.

She pulled him up so that he rested over her, needing to feel the heat of his body against hers in this vulnerable moment. With her fingers curled tight in his hair, she drew his face down to hers. He opened for her kiss without hesitation, baring himself to her and letting her taste herself on his tongue.

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Chapter 16

Mari went to find Cisco the next morning. He was in his office staring daggers at his computer screen.

When he glanced up at her, his forehead wrinkled. “You look different.”

“I feel different.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“We’re not two people anymore. The goddess and me. Completing the circle healed something that was broken.”

“Is that good? You sound like you’re not sure.”

“I think so. I have her memories. All of them.”

Cisco turned in his chair to look at her straight on.

“Ashdei was kind to me the night of the ritual. Gentle even. He told me that it was because he didn’t want me to be scared when I remembered.”

He clenched his jaw, his turmoil obvious. “He still agreed to kindle your magic knowing that you were a child. I can’t forgive that.”

“He refused at first. The goddess sent my mother to convince him by telling him

everything and explaining how they were going to foil my father's plan. That's the only reason he agreed."

He stared at her for a long while, saying nothing. His voice was low and ashamed when he finally spoke. "So, I've been angry with him all this time on your behalf for nothing."

"No, Cisco." She moved closer and rested a hand on his horn. "Not for nothing." She angled his face up to her. "I'm grateful for every moment of that anger. It means you love me, and you were furious that someone would hurt me. But that anger should be aimed at my father and not Ashdei."

He looked up at her but didn't say anything in response.

"I just don't want you to hate him for that, okay? Because, while the situation was fucked up and we all know that, there were worse things that could have happened to me that night. He made sure I was cherished."

"Fine." He sighed. "I'll stop plotting to kill him."

She moved to sit on his thigh. "Were you really doing that?"

"You bet your fine ass I was." He reached for a drawer to pull a thick book out and put it on his desk.

Mari leaned to read the spine. Enemies of the Hells . "What's his entry say in that?"

"Largely considered to be impervious to most forms of damage," Cisco offered in a lecturing tone. "Ephemeral magics thought to be his one weakness, although not confirmed as of this writing."

She caressed the side of his face. “And what did Willow say?”

He showed her a sheepish smile. “They are working on finding a weapon forged by Ephemeral magic for me.”

“I love you.” She reached up to stroke his horn. “And I adore your drive to protect me.” She paused and reconsidered her choice of words. “Us.”

“But you’d like it very much if I didn’t kill him?”

“Please.” She kissed him, holding his mouth to hers longer than was necessary.

“I love you too,” he whispered against her lips. “And I can’t wait to spoil our babies.”

Mari pulled back and smiled. “You’re more excited about that than I thought you’d be.”

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait to see Rio be the bottom of a napping baby dragon pile. Gods, that’s the sweetest thing I can possibly think of.”

She giggled at the image that conjured of tiny dragons climbing all over Rio, tugging at his hair and ears. When she’d made the split-second decision to conceive, she hadn’t known what to expect from her partners—if the ones she hadn’t chosen to go first would be pleased or envious—but none of them seemed anything but elated. Cisco’s only hesitation had been that their lives were still currently in danger, and he wanted that resolved before their children arrived.

“You’re going to be such an amazing dad.”

“I’m going to try my best.” He picked up her hands and kissed each of her palms. “How are you feeling?”

“Good. After last night, I’m fully recovered.”

“I’m glad he treated you right.” He wrapped her arms around his neck. “Have you got anything on your schedule today, or can I enjoy your company for a while?”

“Pricilla is off with Emil today, so I’m free this morning. Dante will be along eventually to feed me something.” She let out an exaggerated sigh. “He has a whole list from Dohal of things I need to eat for optimal dragon production.”

Cisco huffed with amusement. “Are they at least delicious?”

“For the most part.” She honestly had no complaints. The food Dante had started bringing around was rich and satisfying, but she had to keep up appearances of being grumpy about it.

Cisco smiled wide. “It’s pretty adorable how much they both want to take care of you.”

“It is.” She leaned against his shoulder. “Don’t tell, but I’m not even a little annoyed by it.”

Chuckling, he kissed the top of her head. “I’ll take your secret to the grave.”

Reminded of the danger they were all in, her in particular, she shivered against him and clutched him tight. “If something happens to me, you’ll stay for Rio, won’t you?”

“Considering what happened when you fell, I think it’s unlikely.” His voice was low and serious. “I was a heartbeat away from frenzy.”

She rested a hand against his heart for a long while before she could find more words. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I just couldn’t let him sacrifice himself for me.”

“Never apologize for caring, mi tesoro.” He ran a comforting hand down her back before hugging her around her hips. “Your kind heart has always been my favorite thing about you.”

Mari hadn’t allowed herself to voice her doubts with anyone yet. She was too scared of what the implications were to say it out loud, but in this moment alone with Cisco, it felt right. He’d been her anchor for so long. “I don’t feel any different aside from really understanding the goddess now and having her memories. I don’t feel more powerful. I’m not sure what I was supposed to get from completing the circle, aside from the memories, but I don’t think it happened.”

“You’ve got a lot going on right now, both physically and emotionally, that probably makes it difficult to tell what’s happening with your magic.”

“I’m just worried I still can’t beat him. When he comes for Dohal again, I don’t know what to do.”

He pressed his face into the top of her head and exhaled a long breath. “We’ll figure it out.”

They sat together for a long while quietly talking, until Dante showed up around noon with a tray of cloches that had been spelled by Giselle to retain temperature piled high. Somehow, he’d known she wanted breakfast for lunch and set the most perfectly gooey omelet overstuffed with veggies in front of her. She didn’t question whatever his culinary sense was and dove in immediately, because it was exactly what she’d wanted.

Rio wandered in just in time for lunch and made himself at home in the seat next to Mari with an entire mountain of pigs in blankets that he snuck her bites of when Dante’s back was turned.

Dante caught her sucking syrup from Rio's fingers and pretended to be angry, but he couldn't keep a straight face while trying to be stern. Cisco made a joke about pouring syrup over various body parts to enjoy them as much as she clearly was Rio's fingers. And that had Mari considering all sorts of delectable options. Maybe the goddess had been right—for a little while at least, everything seemed exactly the way it should be.

She tried her best to put the danger from her mind and live in the lovely moment, and she almost succeeded. Still, the threat of the Old One stretched over her, casting a long shadow that made her shiver despite the warmth and love surrounding her.

Mari woke to the sensation of Cisco's mouth on her, lapping at her clit like she was an ice cream cone. She knew it was Cisco even before she opened her eyes because of the delicate prick of his claws where he held her thighs—exactly the right pressure to make her hypersensitive, but not enough to cause pain. Nobody knew her body better than him.

Saints, how she'd missed him. She reached to run her fingers through his hair as she exhaled a sigh.

Since the second incident with the Old One, the more intense of her lovers had kept their distance, letting Dante or Rio give her what she needed to keep her magic stocked. While she very much enjoyed her time with them and the sweetness they both favored, something she hungered for had been missing.

She finally opened her eyes and gazed down at him. "I'm going to need you to stop teasing me soon and give me the hard fucking I crave."

He murmured his agreement into the slick heat of her body, but didn't change the leisurely pace at which he tortured her. Her toes curled when he sucked her clit into his mouth with a filthy slurp.

“Francisco,” she warned, feeling her magic tighten within her.

He chose that moment to use his teeth. Her back arched as the sensation raced through her, a moan falling from her lips. Power pulsed along her veins, deep and intoxicating. He dismantled her with his lips and teeth and tongue for the next several minutes, bringing her to the precipice, but never pushing her over.

She was boneless and whimpering by the time he rose from his feast and turned her onto her front. He clasped the back of her neck in one powerful hand and lifted her hips with the other. He held her that way for a long while, her body trembling in his grip, until she begged him for his cock.

Without warning, he plunged deep, parting her with a powerful thrust that had her gasping for breath. He pushed all the way to his last ridge, stretching her.

She moaned into the bed, her body tightening around his hard length. “It’s so fucking good.”

His dirty chuckle vibrated through her. “It is.” He dug his fingers into her neck. “I missed the feeling of you quivering around me when I take you like this.”

When he remained motionless, she groaned. “Please, Cisco.” She flaunted her ass at him the way she knew he liked when he was inside her. “I need you.”

He rumbled in appreciation and smoothed his hand over her ass. “You don’t come until I do.”

She whined, but nodded her head all the same, because she didn’t have it in her to refuse him right now. She’d offer him anything if he would just start moving and ease the delicious ache growing inside her.

With a sexy-as-fuck growl, he pulled back and surged forward again, setting a brutal pace that had her crying out in mindless pleasure in seconds. She balled her hands into fists, gripping the blankets under her for purchase.

She couldn't think as her desire and magic wound tightly, slicing the softest parts of her as she tried desperately to hold on when her body wanted nothing more than to give in. The feral need of his rising lust surged with every stroke as he drove into her.

The rhythmic slapping of their skin with each pump of his powerful hips filled the room. He rammed into her, forcing her wide around his girth until she mewled in ecstasy, her entire body tensed. It was too good. She'd never last.

Finally, just when she was on the verge of giving in, his hips stuttered. He roared as his climax overtook him, and she let her body go. She shattered under him, her orgasm moving through her and scouring her of everything but the blazing pleasure that drove her to the very edge of consciousness. She shuddered around him as he continued to fuck into her, his cock throbbing inside her as he filled her.

She made a tiny noise of pleasure as her body clenched once more when he leaned down to kiss her back, and his fingers flexed around her neck in acknowledgement. He rested against her and let her bask in the afterglow, his warm breath feathering her skin. He waited until she came all the way back to her senses and then slowly withdrew, prompting a groan of protest from her.

When she didn't move, he stroked a hand over her back. "You're getting better at holding onto the magic."

"Baby dragons are greedy," she murmured into the blanket. "I think it's helping me learn control."

"Should I have Dante deliver you breakfast in bed?"

She rubbed her face into the bed and laughed. “He’d love that.”

“Do you want to clean up first?”

She rolled delicately onto her side, pulling the blanket up around her legs. “No.”

He leaned down to nip her shoulder with a little growl. “You’ll smell like me all day. I’m going to get hard every time you walk in the room.”

“That’s the plan.” She aimed a smile back at him. “I’ll wear something short for easy access.”

He moved to rasp in her ear. “I’m going to have you bent over my desk before the afternoon is over. Might even leave the door open so everyone can hear you screaming for me.”

She rocked her hips into him as her arousal spiked again. The way he could rile her just by saying what he wanted to do to her never ceased to surprise her.

He gripped her hair and pulled her head back to bite her neck. “That’s right, keep teasing yourself by rubbing that hot ass all over me.”

She arched her back and groaned, “You really going to leave me like this?”

“Yup, and I’m giving Dante orders not to touch you. Going to make you beg me for it.” With that, he let her go and stalked into the bathroom.

Chapter 17

Mari did her absolute best to tempt Dante into bed with her when he brought breakfast, but Cisco had apparently been true to his word. Despite everything she tried, Dante was all business, making sure she got the nutrition and hydration she needed from him and nothing else.

She had higher hopes about her escort for her morning walk. Ashdei gave her an appreciative glance in her short green dress, his eyes lingering on her bare thighs. She wrapped her arm around his and leaned up, expecting a kiss, but he pressed his lips to her forehead instead and then chuckled.

Mari grumbled. “He told you too?”

“I’m in the group chat.”

She had a hearty laugh about that, but when she regained her breath, he was looking at her like he wasn’t kidding. “Is there really a group chat?”

Ashdei nodded. “Just got invited two days ago. Cisco was outvoted.”

That the others had argued to include him made her smile. “What do you guys talk about?”

He shrugged. “Most of the time it’s about various parts of your anatomy and how sexy you are, but today the gargoyle has been very growly about not touching you.”

“And you’re just going to do what he says?”

“As you know, I’m very good at following directions.” He sent her a simmering smile that dropped the bottom out of her stomach. “So long as it doesn’t impact your safety, I’m happy to let him play his dominance game.”

“Can I see?”

“Nobody said it was top secret or anything.” He dug out his phone and turned the screen for her to see.

The last message was from Dante. It was a picture of her from behind in the dress she was wearing, with just the tiniest bit of her frilly white panties peeking out the bottom with the caption “How is this ass fair?” The responses were various emojis: a tongue, lips, a hand, and an eggplant.

She laughed and scrolled back a couple of screens. The chat was filled with pictures of her, sometimes with lewd commentary and sometimes very sweet, and the occasional update about her eating or sleeping for Dante to note. She sniffled as she read through the messages that were all about caring for and adoring her, her heart full.

After a moment she noticed something that made her frown. “Dohal’s not on there?”

Ashdei shrugged. “Doesn’t have a phone.”

“Ahh.” Should she get him one? Would he even be able to use it? Maybe there was a reason he didn’t have one that she had no idea about. She reached out for him to see where he was because she wanted to ask. The distant glimmer of his presence was miles behind her. “Do you know where he is?”

“The mountains. He needed some time to recharge. I agreed to guard you while he was away. He can be here in an instant should something happen.”

She knew that was the case—he’d certainly crossed longer distances in the blink of an eye when she was in danger. “Does me being desperately horny qualify as an emergency?”

Ashdei bared his teeth in a grin. “You had what sounded like quite a satisfying orgasm barely an hour ago.”

She blushed furiously. “Please tell me you were right outside the door and not at the house.”

His blue-fire eyes danced with mischief. “You were quite vocal in your praise, but perhaps he was not up to your exacting standards? Do I need to have a talk with him about how to properly satisfy you?”

She stared up at him, her mouth hanging open. Saints, how was the idea of that so hot and so mortifying at the same time? Did she really want them discussing how best to please her in front of her?

He rested his thumb gently on her lower lip. “Perhaps I’ll lay you down on his desk and instruct him directly by making you come undone around my cock? Would you enjoy that, duckling?”

Her cunt throbbed distractingly and assured her that she would, very much. She squeezed her thighs together and nodded.

Curling his hand around the back of her neck, he tilted her head, lowering his face to hers. He paused just before their lips touched, and his breath was hot against her skin. “You’re fucking delicious when you’re this needy.” His tongue brushed over her

mouth with a quick sweep before he straightened. “Gargoyle might be onto something after all.”

When he tried to continue toward the walking path, she refused to move. He turned back to her and lifted her into his arms effortlessly.

She huffed with indignation. “Put me down.”

Ashdei ignored her very reasonable request. “Cisco also mentioned that you were worried that nothing had changed with your magic.”

“I just don’t feel any different. If I’m a Prince, shouldn’t I feel something?”

“Yes, but perhaps the answer isn’t that nothing changed so much as when it changed.”

“What do you mean? And where are we going?”

He kept his own counsel until they reached the spot where the Old One had confronted her and he set her on her feet. “I think you forged a connection to the nexus when you stood here and faced down the Forest Lord.”

She looked down at the pavers under her espadrilles, but it just looked like normal ground to her. She had no idea what she was supposed to see or sense. “It didn’t feel like my magic when I channeled to attack him.”

Ashdei nodded, watching her carefully. “What did it feel like?”

Mari shivered as the memories of that moment rose. “Like fury. Like wrath.”

His blue-flame gaze flicked over her. “Because you were angry.”

Her fingers curled into fists. “He was trying to take away what was mine.” That was a very goddess thought, though it didn’t come as a separate voice like it had before—it was just hers.

“Avarice looks good on you.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Feel that again. It’s a different sort of desire than you usually channel.”

She let herself look over the form of the man before her, taking in his muscular frame and his improbable length of silver hair. Her mouth watered as their night together floated through her memories. He too was hers.

I am , he said into her head with a pleased smile. “Reach for the power under your feet.”

She remembered reaching for Dohal that first time, weeks ago. Stretching her senses down into the earth, she searched for anything that felt familiar. Something golden shimmered at the edge of her awareness. The goddess’s power had always felt gilded and shiny to her.

Mari still wasn’t sure what she was looking for. She was about to say as much when golden fire raced through her, burning along her veins.

Ashdei’s smile sharpened. “Good. Open yourself up to it.”

She relaxed little by little, letting her hands fall open and her head drop back. The magic inside her blazed white-hot. Her feet left the ground as she floated up on currents of energy.

“If I had any doubt you were a goddess before, I would be certain now,” Ashdei said, with reverence filling his tone.

“He can’t have what’s mine,” she said, in a voice vibrating with the promise of thunder.

“No one can,” her demon agreed.

The blue-fire halo of his magic sprang up around him as he stepped closer. He reached for her hand. Power arced between them just before they touched, making her gasp. The magic she drew up from the earth was vibrant and shining, but his was something else altogether, like the slick heat of bodies entwined.

She pulled him closer, needing to feel the sizzle of his power against every part of her. Golden sparks shot through blue flame as their bodies collided.

He wrapped his arms around her, tugging her down so that he stared into her eyes. “The magic you draw from the nexus is natural. But the magic you get from your mother is Incarnate, like mine.”

“So I can use both?”

Ashdei nodded. “You’ve been doing it all along without being aware of it. Dohal’s magic is earth magic. When you’ve channeled him in the past, you were using it.”

“What does that mean?”

“We’re about to find out. Draw through me.”

She rested a hand on the side of his neck. The pulsing of his magic was hot under her fingers. She’d never tried to do it on purpose before, so she had a brief moment of doubt when she wasn’t sure what she was meant to do.

And then, as if some barrier between them had been lifted, his power flowed into her

in a torrent. His desire and magic spiraled through her, dancing with the golden light that glowed from somewhere below. Nothing had ever felt so right. Every cell of her body vibrated with power.

She let out a delighted laugh that cut off when she saw the serious expression on his face. “What?”

“You’re tapping my nexus through me.” His voice was soft with foreboding. “It shouldn’t be possible.”

“Why do you sound afraid? Wasn’t this what you’d planned to do?”

“Not exactly. I’d planned on renouncing my claim to the Hells entirely and forging my own connection to your nexus. Holding two at once risks bringing the Heavens down on our heads.”

She let go of the magic slowly, painfully. “So do that now. You break your connection, and nobody is any the wiser.” As she said the words, she mourned the loss of the heat roaring through her. She wanted it. Why should she have to give it up?

“Even without that desolate look on your face I couldn’t withdraw it. It’s yours now. Like everything about me. I am your vassal.”

Now that she was obeying the rules of gravity again, she tried to push him away halfheartedly, but he held on tight. “I didn’t ask you for that.”

“You did not,” he said solemnly. “I gave it willingly.”

“I don’t want it.” The lie tasted like ashes on her tongue. She wanted everything he had given her, even though she didn’t understand what half of it meant yet. He was

hers .

His smile was endlessly patient. “And yet, everything I am is yours until I die.”

They all kept talking about dying, and it was more than she could take. Tears ran down her face. “Don’t say that. Nobody is dying. I’m having babies that will live for thousands of years to keep you all here after my stupid mortal heart gives out despite all of you saying you’ll die without me.”

“Oh, duckling.” He ran a hand over her hair and pulled her against his chest to comfort her. “Is that what all the worrying has been about? While you can certainly be killed, you won’t die a mortal’s death. You’re a goddess.”

She sniffled, fisting her hands in his shirt. “Most days I don’t feel like a goddess.”

“I can assure you that you are.” He started to walk back toward the house with her in his arms. “Have you ever even been sick aside from the times you’ve exhausted yourself magically?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“Any kind of physical ailment at all?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Assuming we can deal with the Forest Lord and avoid drawing the ire of the Heavens, you’ll live a long, long life.” He kissed her temple. “So stop worrying about that.”

The crushing weight of the responsibility for all of their lives lifted considerably, until she parsed the rest of what she said. “Who is it that will be coming after us from

the Heavens?”

“I believe he’s talking about me,” came a rich feminine voice from above and behind them.

Chapter 18

A shdei whipped around with Mari in his arms, as a brilliant, winged form descended slowly until she hovered just above the ground. The angelic figure had wavy, dark hair that billowed around her, honey-brown skin, and was dressed in armor that shone with almost blinding intensity in gold and white. Her expression held unbridled contempt.

Call the dragon , Ashdei said in Mari's head. "Darveyn," he said to the angel in a bored tone. "What brings you to this realm?"

Mari reached out for Dohal but couldn't make contact. She tried not to let panic about what that meant overtake her. "Put me down."

He hesitated for only a moment and set her on her feet. When she turned to face the unwelcome guest, he set his hands on her shoulders. His magic hummed along her skin.

The angel he'd called Darveyn glared. "I'm here because the rules have been broken."

"Always a stickler," Ashdei chided. "Except when you weren't."

Pink stained Darveyn's cheeks. "Our dalliance was a mistake."

"You never thought so when you were swallowing my cock."

“You’re disgusting, as usual,” Darveyn spat.

Anger surged in Mari’s chest. They had been lovers? Golden wrath filled her.

Beautiful , Ashdei purred in her head.

You did that on purpose. She surprised herself when she responded in the same manner.

Yes. His fingers curled into her shoulders, and she could feel his significant pride. She needs to see how strong you are. The only way we’ll survive this is if she’s not sure she can beat us.

I can’t reach Dohal. Mari squared her shoulders and met the multicolored eyes of the angel. “I didn’t know it was against the rules. I didn’t even know what I was doing at the time.”

Darveyn tilted her head. “Not a lie. Interesting.”

“She wasn’t aware that controlling power from two realms wasn’t allowed.”

Darveyn’s gaze pivoted to him. “But you were.”

“Do you need to hear me say that I can deny her nothing? Would it ease your fury to know that?” His voice was steady as a mountain. “I gave her everything you ever wanted from me and more, just to please her.”

Mari’s heart sang in her chest. She reached back to rest her hand on the side of his leg, both in support and in acknowledgement of his words.

Darveyn looked them over with a sneer. “After the centuries of plays for power that I

have witnessed, you expect me to believe that sentiment for this child is what has finally bested you?"

Mari kept her lips pressed so she wouldn't snap back at the angel's dismissal.

"Have I so much as bent the truth?" Resignation edged his tone now. "She holds my leash. Now and forever."

Shock twisted the angel's beautiful face. "Every word true." She exhaled a long breath. "That being the case, we will wait and reserve judgment until some sort of resolution is reached with the Forest Lord."

Mari almost lost her feet when power was ripped from the wards.

Ashdei wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against him when he felt her falter. He transformed around her, his body becoming larger and his wings unfurling to blot out the sun.

"What have you done?" Mari gasped.

Darveyn glanced over her shoulder. "We had to contain the dragon in order to make this assessment."

"You captured him?" Mari shouted. "After he was held prisoner for centuries?" How dare they? If Ashdei hadn't been holding her, she would have charged to close the distance and grabbed that bitch by the throat. Instead, she lashed out with her magic, flattening the angel with one shot.

A roar from above drew Mari's attention to the sky. A dark shape barreled toward them, but Mari felt only joy. The red markings glowing through his scales were immediately recognizable, even if he hadn't been the only dragon left in the world.

Dohal landed with a heavy thud, one huge claw on either side of them. Smoke curled from his massive muzzle as he glared at the prone form of the angel. “Leave, before I decide you deserve to pay for the sins of your ancestors.” His deep voice shook the ground around them.

Darveyn pushed herself up to standing and hastily launched into the sky, her feathered wings beating.

Mari waited until the form of the angel faded into the distance before she turned around in Ashdei’s arms, her eyes searching her dragon. “Are you okay?”

Dohal lowered his head, huffing in a breath to catch her scent. The remains of glowing ropes hung from his forelegs, but he looked unhurt. “Aside from being annoyed, I’m fine. I pulled power from the wards to transform and get free.”

Mari reached up a hand to touch his muzzle. He was magnificent. His scales were warm and smooth, and power filled him to bursting. “You’re so beautiful.”

He dropped his head further to give her better access. “I’m glad you think so. I was concerned I might scare you like this.”

“Never.” She pulled herself up to rub her cheek against his nose and then planted a kiss in the center. “I love you in every form.”

He rumbled with contentment as he gently nuzzled her. Once he had soothed himself enough with her presence, he narrowed his glowing red eyes. “What happened to bring a Prince of the Heavens here?”

“I channeled from the nexus here and Ashdei’s at the same time.”

“Well, that’s a surprise.” He turned toward the demon. “I assume you didn’t intend

that?”

“Of course not.” Ashdei didn’t look the least bit put out by being the object of the dragon’s questioning gaze. “It shouldn’t have been possible, but apparently when she claimed me, I gave her everything, including control of my nexus.”

Dohal chuffed with amusement. “That’s sweet.”

Mari turned in Ashdei’s arms to look at him. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t know until you reached right through me and drew from it.” He touched her face. “But I don’t regret it.”

“And what was the judgment?” Dohal asked.

“They’re waiting to see what happens with the Old One,” Mari responded. “Probably hoping he takes care of the problem for them.”

Ashdei squeezed her. “They can choke on that hope because that problem happens to be very important to me.”

That reminded her of the obnoxious angel in the room. “Are we going to talk about your history with Darveyn?”

“There isn’t anything to tell. She wanted more from me than I was prepared to give anyone before I met you.” He shrugged. “I thought we were having a mutual good time until she made it clear that she wasn’t anymore when she tried to run me through with a Blessed lance.”

Mari searched his face. “You hurt her.”

He met her gaze without shame. “I broke a lot of hearts over the eons, duckling. And I quite enjoyed myself doing it. If you’re going to keep score of that, you will be busy for years.”

“So, there’s a potential ex of yours hiding around every corner who might want to pass on some kind of retribution on to me?”

Ashdei seemed surprised by the question. “Most of them didn’t care enough about me to bother. Darveyn is a notable exception. And I believe she didn’t so much care about me as want to fix me.” His tone was offhanded, but Mari picked up on what he wasn’t saying.

Her heart ached for him. “That’s what you meant the other night. That no one had ever said those things to you.”

“They assumed that, because I was a demon, I couldn’t possibly want that level of intimacy, I suppose.” He sighed. “I’m still not sure they were wrong. I never noticed how much was lacking in my liaisons until you said I felt like yours.”

She tightened her fist in his shirt. “You need to be careful about riling me like you did with her. I wanted blood.”

“No promises.” He grinned sharply. “It was fucking hot.”

Dohal rumbled. “My mate is formidable enough to frighten the angels.”

The arousal pulsing from her dragon was breathtaking. She rubbed her hand over his muzzle, feeling the heat of him soaking into her fingers. Her gaze moved slowly over his massive body. Was there a way she could have him like this? Saints, she was willing to try.

Ashdei chuckled. “Much as I would love to watch you get mounted by a dragon just to see how that works, I’ll remind you of the gargoyle’s request.”

Mari groaned. While she’d played at ignoring Cisco’s orders because it felt naughty, she did want to give him everything he craved from her. “Another time, my beautiful dragon.”

“It would be beyond unwise,” Dohal said, though he sounded amused.

She raked her nails over his scales. “I can’t wait to figure out a way to make it work.”

Dohal bumped her with his nose. “As you will, my insatiable mate. Like him, I can deny you nothing.”

Mari pressed a kiss to his muzzle. “What did you mean when you said you would make her pay for the sins of her ancestors?”

Dohal took a long breath, gathering the strength he needed to answer her question. Across their bond, he felt uncertain, and sad. “The armies of the heavens were the ones who murdered my kin. They claimed we were a threat to this realm, and they might not have been wrong.” His red eyes grew distant. “I escaped only because I’d already been trapped by your father and his allies.”

She smoothed her hand over the scales of his nose, trying to offer whatever comfort she could. He had been through so much, and all of it weighed on him. “When was this?”

“I don’t know how many years ago now.” He shut his eyes as if to block out the memories of what had happened to him since that time. “It felt like hundreds.”

“It was,” Ashdei said. “The people who lived here at the time told stories about it for

generations, but even they have long since been forgotten.”

“The Old One had been driven off, and the most powerful who remained here scrambled to fill the void that had been caused by his departure. The Heavens didn’t step in until war broke out between factions, and they deemed my kind too corrupted by their avarice to be allowed to live.”

“No one knows why they didn’t step in when the Forest Lord was deposed,” Ashdei added. “Since it was what had created the imbalance in the first place. Whenever I asked, I was met with silence.”

“I wondered that too. For a time, I thought for certain they would come and render judgment on Basilio and the others. They should have been first in line to free me. But they never came.” Dohal tilted his head in thought. “My capture and the banishment of the Old One were not something that should have been tolerated under the balance they so often tout as their guiding principle. They must have had an ally who convinced them not to intercede.”

“Vincent, maybe?” Mari offered into the heavy silence that followed their revelations.

Dohal settled back on his haunches. “Perhaps. It could explain why he lingered here so long after your father’s death, even while you were pursuing him. My power would have protected him too.”

Mari rested her forehead against his nose. “I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you. I wish I could take some of that pain.”

“You do, bavi,” he rumbled low. “Every time you touch me. Every time you smile. You mend a little bit of that rend in my soul the same way you did my body. I will never be whole after what they did to me, but I can abide.”

“Okay.” She kissed his muzzle and let the matter rest. It was enough that she helped him however she could. “Do you want a phone so you can join the group chat with the rest of them?”

“I cannot use the same devices you do because of the innate electric current of my magic, but your house witch believes an acquaintance of hers can make adjustments and provide something for me.”

“You and Giselle seem to be getting along rather well,” Mari said with a smile. She was glad members of the household were welcoming the new additions. She’d expected no less, but the confirmation eased her mind.

“She and I spend a lot of time together in the early mornings. I don’t require sleep, and she arrives before the sun to do many of her preparations for the day. And while I don’t eat, I find the process of making baked goods quite pleasant.”

She blinked. “You’re helping her bake?”

“When I saw how much you enjoyed her morning pastries, I wanted to learn. So far, my contribution is mostly limited to mixing and kneading, but I find the idea that you get sustenance from something made with my hands incredibly satisfying.” The pleasure he derived from that was obvious in the warm tone of his voice.

Her dragon was the sweetest. She wrapped her arms around his head and pressed her face to his warm scales. “I love you.”

He started slightly and then nuzzled into her. “You are everything to me, and I look forward to finding every opportunity to prove it.”

“Do you need more time in the mountains today?”

“I am restored. You need not worry.” Magic pulsed through him as he triggered the change back to his other form. His body condensed and shifted until he stood before her in his human guise, gloriously naked.

She jumped up into his waiting arms and claimed his mouth in a fervent kiss.

Behind her, Ashdei snorted. “Show off.”

Dohal broke away from her kiss and leveled an assessing look at the demon. “Thank you for guarding her this morning.”

“Of course. I’m here to protect her above everything else. Our contract still holds.”

Mari glanced back at him. “Is there a reason not to nullify it?”

“Aside from that I don’t want to? With it in place, my allies in the Hells must come to your aid should something happen to me.”

The offhanded way he said it made her heart lurch. “You mean if you die.”

He shrugged one shoulder dismissively. “It’s an extra layer of protection for you in the worst-case scenario.”

She grumbled. “I hate it.”

Moving closer, Ashdei placed a hand on her back. “I have no intention of dying. I’m enjoying my time with you too much.”

Mari reached for him and pulled him into a quick kiss. “You’d better not. I don’t want to have to find you wherever you are and drag you back to me.”

Ashdei chuckled. “If anyone could figure that out, I believe it would be you.”

The way he looked at her warmed her entire body. She let out a long breath. “Okay, I need both of you to stop being so damned tempting before I forget that Cisco wants me to himself today.”

Grunting, Dohal smoothed his hands over her ass and turned with her in his arms to head for the house. She managed to talk him into stopping at the pool house for one of his long skirts before he shocked half the household, but only barely.

Chapter 19

When Dohal set her on Cisco's desk, her gargoyle looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

"We had a run in with the Heavens outside. They got mad when I tapped Ashdei's nexus and the one here at the same time."

Cisco leaned back in his chair, his gaze sweeping over her. Once he had confirmed that she was unharmed, he pinned the demon with an annoyed stare. "That sounds complicated."

"Not particularly," Ashdei drawled. He stood leaning against the wall near the door with his arms crossed. "I gave her everything, the same way the rest of you did. Mine just included access to a nexus in the Hells."

Cisco grumbled. "Which has now put her in more danger."

Mari felt compelled to defend the demon. After all, he'd given her exactly what she'd asked for, and channeling through him had felt so right that she wasn't convinced it was a mistake, rules be damned. "He didn't do it intentionally."

Ashdei waved a hand. "I assume it was a by-product of trying to protect you. I wanted to give you as much power as possible, and my magic interpreted that as opening a conduit for you."

Cisco glanced toward Dohal. "Do you mind giving us the room?"

“Not at all.” Her dragon bent to give Mari a sweetly brief parting kiss. “If they can’t be civil with one another, you know how to call me.”

She smiled up at him, so grateful for his offering of aid without being overbearing about it. “I think it’ll be okay.”

Once the door was closed, Cisco sat back in his chair and aimed an irritable glare Ashdei’s way. “I don’t think it will come as a surprise when I say I’ve hated you for years.”

Ashdei’s face was impassive. “I saw it the night of the ritual, and considering the situation, I don’t hold it against you. Were our positions reversed, I would have felt the same.”

Cisco nodded slowly. “I know now that some of what I understood was incorrect.” He rested a warm hand on her thigh. “And while I’m not ready to embrace you as a brother, since Mariana has claimed you as one of hers, that means you will be a presence in our lives, and I will make an effort to accept you.”

“I appreciate the opportunity to change your mind.” Ashdei’s blue-flame eyes shifted her way. “I’m committed. And I’ll do anything to protect her.”

I’ll be whatever you need , he said into her head with a flash of his fangs. Even contrite.

She sent him a smile to let him know how grateful she was. I’ll figure out a way to make it up to you.

I can think of so many delicious options. The way his expression sharpened made her skin flush.

“While I’m not thrilled about the involvement of the Heavens on top of everything else, I respect the instinct.” Cisco’s all-black gaze took her in with a slow sweep that made her heart thump. “Come here, mami.”

Mari hopped from the desk and slid into her gargoyle’s lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Thank you for understanding.” She pulled him into a kiss, clutching his horns. He plundered her mouth with his tongue until arousal bloomed in her belly.

He pulled the straps of her dress down with impatient fingers until her tits were bared and then palmed them. She broke the kiss on a gasp, her back arching when he tugged her piercings. His lips ghosted down her neck to where his mark was set in her throat and sucked there.

“I’m going to fuck you on this desk just like I promised,” he said into her skin, voice filled with longing. “Would you like to suck his cock while I’m doing that?”

Groaning at the dirty image that conjured, she peeked over her shoulder to take in the form of her demon. Saints, he was so sexy—tall and imperious. He looked like he wanted to eat her up. She met his eyes, her stomach clenching at the simmering heat she saw there. “Yes.”

Cisco nipped her throat with his sharp fangs and rumbled with approval. “Ask him nicely.”

“Can I suck your cock while Cisco fucks me?” A blush burned her cheeks. “Please.”

His sultry smile made her magic churn. “Of course, duckling.” He shoved off the wall and started to cross the distance between them.

Cisco pushed to his feet and laid her on the cool surface of his desk. He covered her at once, his mouth searching out one hard and sensitive nipple and sucking it between

his lips. She bent her legs to cradle him between them. He toyed with her nipple piercing with his tongue as Ashdei finally reached them.

The demon touched the side of her face gently and turned her toward him. His thumb brushed over her lower lip and pulled her mouth open. He pushed two fingers between her lips as Cisco switched sides. She sucked Ashdei's long fingers deep into her mouth and moaned around them when Cisco bit down.

Cisco dropped one hand between her legs and pulled her frilly white panties aside to slide his fingers into her, spreading her wide to get her ready for his cock. Ashdei pressed on her tongue and held her mouth open at the same time.

She felt exposed and desperate under them as her back arched. Her gargoyle sucked on her nipple with enthusiasm, making her magic swell within her until she ached. She mewled in pleasure as he curled his fingers inside her.

Cisco lifted up, taking in her aroused state with a steamy glance. "Give it to her," he growled. He reached to grab her jaw, holding her still as Ashdei unzipped in a hurry. She stared into Cisco's endless black eyes as he pulled her mouth open. "I want to hear you moaning around his cock when I make you come all over my hand."

Saints, he knew exactly what to say to make her burn for him. Her only response was the whimper of need that shivered through her.

Ashdei pushed the barbed head of his cock between her lips. He tasted smoky and decadent on her tongue. She inclined her head to take him deeper, murmuring when her lips stretched around him.

Pride glowed within her when her demon groaned, and she felt his desire spike.

"You're so fucking beautiful like this." Cisco rocked his hand to stroke over her g-

spot, making her moan long and low. “So needy.”

Ashdei’s hand threaded through her hair and pulled her further onto his cock. He stared down at her and exhaled a harsh breath. “Fuck, your mouth is so good.”

Cisco let out a dirty chuckle. “Yeah, it is.” He eased his thumb over her clit in a gradual circle intended to tease her and nothing more. “Take him all the way, and I’ll make you come.”

She tilted her head back, relaxing her jaw and accepting everything Ashdei had to give her when he pushed into her throat. She felt every inch of him all the way down. Groaning, he held her still with a hand at the back of her head as he set to work with long thrusts.

Cisco flicked his thumb and matched the motion of his fingers inside her to Ashdei’s slow pace. She spluttered around the cock in her mouth as the magic tingled under her skin, setting her afire from the inside out.

She concentrated on her breathing, because that was the only thing about the experience that she could control as they held her and plied her body from both ends. Her rising desire was almost too much.

The sensations built and peaked. She couldn’t hold back the orgasm as it cascaded through her, relentless as a river overflowing its banks. She keened around Ashdei’s cock helplessly, tears running down her face. He backed off to let her breathe easier, his fingers caressing her cheek, but didn’t withdraw all the way.

A muffled whine rose from her, a plea for more, even as her body was still overrun by pleasure.

Cisco moved while she was still shuddering from her climax, pushing into her

throbbing cunt with a groan. “Gods, that’s the best feeling in the world,” he said with relish, as he watched her writhing under him.

Her gargoyle began to fuck her with long, hard strokes before she’d even come down all the way, clutching her thighs with his claws to angle her hips to his liking. Dipping his head down, he spent a long while suckling her nipples while thrusting into her.

Ashdei placed a hand on her throat, his fingers stroking over her heated and sensitive skin as he fed his cock to her again. His scorching magic poured into her with each pump of his hips.

Between the two of them, she couldn’t move at all as they alternated fucking into her. She felt exposed, unable to do anything to speed her perilously close orgasm held on edge by the constant sensation and their rising desire for her.

Ashdei growled, his grip tightening as his hips churned faster. Sensing the urgency, Cisco reached between her legs to rub one knuckle over her clit. That small amount of additional stimulation was all Mari needed, and she shattered again, her entire body tensing at once. She barely held onto her magic as it flexed and swelled, making her skin feel tight as the pleasure raced through her.

Her cries were muffled when Ashdei plunged as deep as he could go, his cock swelling against her tongue as he poured into her. She did her best to swallow, but he was huge and the angle awkward, and some of his cum leaked from her lips. He pressed her cheeks to force more from her, sending it all over her and the desk with a throaty chuckle.

Moaning, Cisco drove in all the way and pinned her hips under him as he emptied into her still quivering body. He kept moving to extend her orgasm as he leaned over her, panting for breath. When she was motionless under him, he collapsed over her,

his face nuzzling into her skin anywhere he could reach.

Ashdei recovered first, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping her face gently as he withdrew.

Cisco watched him for a few seconds, then shook his head. “Fine, I’m willing to say he’s a suitable partner. But it was right on the line before that ridiculously chivalrous bullshit.”

Mari bit her lower lip to stifle her laughter. “You’ve pulled exactly that move after you made a mess of me.”

Cisco smiled, showing his fangs. “Shh, he doesn’t know that.” He wrapped her up in his arms and lifted her from the desk. After a moment of indecision, he grumbled and glanced toward Ashdei. “I’m running late for a meeting. Can I trust you to escort her to the bathroom down the hall?”

Ashdei glared. “I’m insulted that you would even have to ask.”

Cisco picked up his suit coat and draped it around her shoulders before leveling a flat stare at the demon. “Nobody gets to see her this undone but us. It’s important to her, so it’s rule number one if you’re going to be part of this family.”

Ashdei looked surprised by the invitation into the inner circle but recovered quickly. “I understand.”

Mari blinked up at her gargoyle. That was something she’d never said out loud—hadn’t even consciously decided for that matter—and somehow he had known what was unspoken. She touched the side of his face, her heart full to bursting. “I love you.”

“Love you too.” Lowering his mouth to hers, he favored her with a soft and sweet kiss. “What you need comes first, always.” He waited for her to nod in acknowledgement and then handed her over to Ashdei.

Her demon was quiet as he carried her down the hall with a solemn expression.

“You okay?” she asked, after he placed her gently on the vanity.

He set a hand on either side of her and met her gaze. “I’ve never been in a position where I am responsible for someone’s well-being before, and the idea that I might let you down or hurt you somehow without knowing terrifies me.”

Mari wrapped her arms around his neck. “Well, lucky for you, I have four other boyfriends who are all very good at taking care of the soft parts of me.” She buried her hands in his hair, enjoying the texture of it flowing through her fingers. “You don’t have to take responsibility for my heart. Why don’t you let me take care of yours?”

His fiery blue eyes widened. “What?”

“I have so many people looking after me.” She pressed a gentle kiss to his jaw. “You don’t have anyone. You never have.”

His expression eased. “Every time I think I understand what’s happening between us, you say something like that and make me question everything.”

Mari smoothed her hands down through his silver hair and smiled. How was it always so soft and never tangled? She suspected some sort of devilry at the heart of it. “I understand. You’ve never let yourself be vulnerable in a relationship before, but you can with me.”

Ashdei looked away, obviously uncomfortable talking about his feelings. She let him go as he busied himself finding a washcloth and letting the water run to warm it. When he came back to her, she sat quietly while he wiped her face and neck, content to let him avoid the conversation in the caring of her, if that's what made him feel safe.

He had trouble meeting her eyes again, but finally managed after he'd finished cleaning her and helped straighten her clothes. "I want you to know how much I appreciate you taking this chance on me, even though I didn't give you much reason to trust me at first."

She took his hand, interlacing her fingers with his. "I don't think of it as taking a chance. I'm just waiting for you to realize that I've got you. No matter what."

A long sigh escaped him, but he looked easier than he had before. "Trusting someone else is going to take some getting used to."

Mari lifted his hand to her mouth. "I can wait as long as it takes."

Chapter 20

When Ashdei strolled into family dinner for the first time a few days later, Mari almost fell out of her seat. Like Dohal, he mostly preferred to keep to himself. He tolerated the other men because he knew it was required to spend time with her, but with the exception of the party, he'd never seemed much for gatherings of any kind.

Several of the people around the table watched him warily, but no one said anything as he came up behind her chair and leaned to kiss the top of her head. I missed you, he whispered into her mind. She felt how much the simple touch soothed him and smiled.

Ashdei rested his hand on her shoulder and looked over the room. His eyes stopped when he came to Luis. "Well, it's certainly a surprise to find you here. Do they know where you are?"

Mari sat up straighter. Who exactly were they? And why were they looking for Luis? Was this yet another enemy who would come for them? She didn't ask any of the questions on the tip of her tongue because Luis looked pained by the reminder.

"No, and I'd like to keep it that way." He frowned, his shoulders drawing up. "Do I need to offer you something to keep my confidence?"

Ashdei closed his eyes briefly and seemed to come to a decision. "No. Call it a favor for my beloved. No one will hear of you from me."

Luis tilted his head. "A demon who doesn't want anything in exchange for a secret

kept? That's novel."

Ashdei flashed his fangs. "I have other things to occupy my attention."

Willow, who sat next to Luis, watched the exchange between them first with trepidation and then with curiosity. Did the sphinx know something Mari didn't about what was going on?

"Ahh, yes. I had heard that you had taken up with our hostess." Luis slid a glance her way before returning to Ashdei. "She seems a bit too wholesome to be your type, but I suppose your tastes might have changed over the centuries."

Mari choked on her drink.

Shall I tell him how wholesome you were on the desk when you were moaning around my cock? Ashdei purred into her head.

Her face heated with a blush, and she put down the glass in a hurry so she wouldn't drop it.

Ashdei's grin was sinful. "I don't think my tastes have changed so much as I've now realized what's important."

Luis nodded. "That makes sense. Sometimes it takes us a while to realize that the patterns we're caught in are bad for us. In any case, I'm thankful for your keeping of my secret and glad that you've found a person who makes you want to be better."

Ashdei started. "I hadn't thought about it that way, but that's exactly what she is." He crouched next to her and wrapped his arms around her. "Someone who makes me want to be better. Do better." He rested his head on her shoulder and hugged her.

It was the showiest display of affection he'd ever made in a room that wasn't just her and her men, and it made Mari want to push him down onto the table and do the most wicked things to him.

You sent that one loud and clear , he chuckled into her head. Shall I carry you out of here on my shoulder so they think I'm to blame because you're so wholesome?

Don't you dare , she sent back.

He straightened with an exaggerated sigh and his blue-flame eyes met hers. I can wait as long as it takes.

The same words she'd said to him about gaining his trust. What is it you're asking me?

One corner of his mouth ticked up. You. Me. The dragon. We were interrupted the other night.

Every nerve ending in her body seemed to catch fire at once. Saints, she was going to self-combust if he didn't stop saying dirty things in her head while looking at her like that.

I'm surprised you didn't make the lights flicker with that one. His smirk was infuriating and too fucking hot.

Pris eyed them across the table with a knowing grin but didn't say anything. She had clearly picked up on the vibes of their internal dialog from the unruly swell of Mari's magic, but there was nothing Mari could do to stifle her reaction to him.

You look like you want to slap me , he teased.

Those cheekbones were made to take a handprint , she tossed back, surprising herself with her vicious tone.

His expression sharpened into something predatory. Promises, promises.

She stared up into his fiery blue eyes. You'll regret taunting me.

Not even a little. There was no provocation in his voice now, only longing.

When they arrived at the grotto after dinner was done, it was lit with what seemed like a thousand tiny fireflies. Dohal lounged easily on the bed with a long green skirt the same color as the foliage. His eyes glowed red with his power as they raked over her.

She wore a short yellow dress with a ruffle at mid-thigh, but with him appraising her like that, she felt like she was wearing much less. Ashdei came up behind her, silent as a shadow.

His hands skated over her hips as he leaned to whisper in her ear, "He told me what you said you wanted to do to me that first night—tie me up and make me watch him take you."

She shivered as arousal bloomed in her belly. "Would you like that?"

Her demon chuckled. "I don't think it matters, because you obviously would."

Mari looked back over her shoulder. "You know that's now how I operate."

"Let me clarify then." Ashdei showed her a slow smile. "What I would very much like is for you to use me—in whatever way you desire most." He licked the shell of her ear. "The more depraved the better."

She searched his face for a moment that drew out long. “How much pain do you like?”

“Much more than you’re willing to give out, I assure you.”

“We’ll see.” She walked toward the bed at a leisurely pace, letting her hips sway with each step.

Dohal watched her approach with a bemused smile on his generous lips. Are you finally ready to embrace that dark part of you that you have been so afraid of?

Is there a possibility that I could really harm him?

He took her in with a slow glance. With the power you wield now? Certainly. But I would not let you.

You promise?

I would never let you hurt yourself that way. His voice in her head was solemn and earnest.

She turned to sit in front of Dohal facing Ashdei, her legs dangling over the edge of the bed. “Kneel before me.”

Ashdei rushed to comply, falling to his knees but not touching her. The blue tendrils of her power unfurled, moving to caress his body through his clothes. He watched them with amusement, chuckling when she fondled him through his pants.

Mari swallowed and gave that dark part of her, the one that Dohal was always urging her to touch, a little more control. The smoky blue magic wrapped Ashdei’s wrists in a flicker of motion too fast to track. He struggled against their pull, but after a

moment his eyes widened in surprised when he realized he couldn't actually resist them.

Saints, he was delicious.

Dohal's hand rested lightly on her shoulder. "Did you taste that flicker of fear? Like something exquisite on your tongue?"

"Yes." Her mouth watered for another morsel just like that one.

The black curls of Dohal's magic engulfed her and moved beyond to rip every stitch of clothing from Ashdei in an instant.

The demon gasped but did an admirable job of staying still, even though another flash of fear shimmered through him. Already, his cock was hard and heavy. She could feel the way he longed for her, and she wanted to bask in it forever.

"Take your true form," Mari said in a voice that was nearer the goddess's than hers, harsh and demanding.

Ashdei obeyed at once, as if he couldn't resist doing what she commanded—his body growing and thickening, his horns and wings sprouting. Her magic snaked up around his powerful arms and circled his neck, tightening until she was certain he would have to struggle for breath.

The demon bared his fangs at her and snarled. She felt him tug against her magic again, straining to get free. The longer he fought, the more fearful he became—but there was more. Under the mounting alarm, she could sense the wild current of his desire. He enjoyed the battle. He lived for it.

Each time she bested him, his lust soared. She drank it down in gluttonous gulps until

she felt drunk on him.

“Luscious,” Dohal drawled. “He’s even better than I thought he’d be.” His magic rubbed over hers, touching the demon where she did, his touch lighter, almost delicate. Wrapping his arms around her, he spread her thighs and hiked her dress up to her waist. “What else do you want?”

No answer came immediately to mind, but something inside her knew, nonetheless. The curls of her magic sharpened at the edges, enough to draw blood everywhere they touched him. Ashdei bellowed in pain. His terror perfumed the air around them. At the same time, his adoration swelled until she thought her heart would burst with it.

“He craves taming,” Dohal rumbled in her ear. “Give it to him.” He slid his thick fingers into her around the edge of her panties.

Her magic coiled around Ashdei’s horns and tugged his head back, bowing his spine. Another offshoot of her power slithered around his cock, winding tight until he gasped.

“Perfect,” Dohal praised. His magic once again mimicked hers, only softer, caressing. He stroked his fingers in and out of her in a slow rhythm that had her hips rising to meet him and her mouth falling open.

Her magic copied the sensual motion of Dohal’s hands, pumping Ashdei’s cock as he spluttered for breath. Blue-fire tears ran down his face, spawning wisps of smoke where they landed on the plush greenery around him.

“He burns for you.” Dohal drove his fingers deep, making her body arch. “As do I.”

Mari turned her head to accept his ardent kiss. His tongue pressed into her mouth to

taste her. She opened to him without hesitation, welcoming him into her body as she always did and always would. His hunger soared with her surrender until it was so overwhelming she couldn't even think.

Dohal withdrew his fingers, ripping off her panties in the process. He manhandled her onto her back under him in an instant and plunged his cock into her, all restraint forgotten. He was huge, and she cried out at the abrupt penetration but clutched his back at the same time, pulling him to her. She'd never needed anything as badly as this. He took her in a feral and vicious claiming that left her sore and throbbing in the best way, utterly undone. Ashdei was forced to watch them the entire time, his desire growing until it loomed over them all.

When he was done, Dohal moved to stretch out next to her, still breathing hard. She moved to the edge of the bed. With a light, teasing touch, she played with herself where Ashdei could see while Dohal's seed dripped from her cunt. Ashdei groaned with need.

"The only way you taste me tonight is if you clean up the mess he left," she said as she released him. The sting of humiliation at not being able to pleasure her properly hit him just right by the way his entire body coiled with tension.

Ashdei ached with wanting her as he crawled forward on his knees and buried his face between her legs. With an eager murmur, he lapped at her swollen cunt. She stroked her magic over his cock lazily. When she tired of the slow build, she applied more friction, and he moaned into her.

Using her magic to grip his horns and angle his mouth away from her, she increased the pace of her fondling. The dark part of her wasn't done with him yet. "You're not doing a very good job," she crooned to him, feeling wicked. "I may never let you make me come." When his desire surged again, she chuckled.

The humiliation and arousal battled inside him, sharpening each other and making both keener. After the long teasing he'd endured, the stimulation was too much, and his climax rushed through him in moments, his seed spilling over, wasted. She ran a toe along his thigh through the mess he'd left and felt him react with another surge of arousal.

She let him return to his task when he was done shaking. He sucked her clit between his lips and flicked his tongue over her. His desire to please her thrummed through his body, but when she teetered on the edge a while later, she pulled him away once more.

He growled with frustration.

Mari laughed and patted his cheek. Her magic wound around him, thorny and wild, slicing him whenever he struggled. She squeezed his balls until he yelped and redoubled her efforts tugging on his gorgeous cock.

“How many times do you think I can do this to you before you pass out?” she asked, low and dirty.

Ashdei whimpered when she made him come again, his hips jerking. Shame and overwhelming lust filled him in equal measure.

Next to her, Dohal smirked. “Are you torturing him or yourself?”

She arched her back when she let Ashdei resume his loving worship of her cunt. “A little bit of both.”

With a disapproving click of his tongue, Dohal grabbed her wrists and pushed them over her head. “You will not deprive yourself while you carry my young.” She squealed in protest, but he was much too strong to resist.

“Impress with me with how hard you make her come or next time I’m letting her toy with you as long as she wants,” Dohal growled to the demon.

Saints, she loved it when he got bossy. It made everything inside her flutter. She struggled against his hold just to feel his grip tighten around her wrists and released her power.

Ashdei pushed her thighs wide and set to work with a zeal that had her on edge in short order. His lips and tongue should come with a godsdamned warning label as deadly weapons, because holy fuck, did he know how to use them. She tried to resist him as long as she could, writhing under him and trying to squirm away until he dug in with his fingers to hold her still. The kiss of pain was delicious.

With a growl of feral need, he bit down on her clit, and she detonated, her thighs and belly clenching with the force of the release. She cried out loudly enough to make the trees above them shake.

He didn’t pause for a moment, even when she was shuddering under him in the throes of her climax, and pressed his fingers into her trembling body as he suckled on her throbbing clit. Still burning with his desire to please her, he built her up to another toe-curling orgasm right on the heels of the first.

Dohal claimed her mouth when she was whimpering helplessly with pleasure, scouring every inch with his tongue, as if he craved the taste of her more than air. He held her jaw and stared into her eyes when he pulled back. “That was lovely. How do you feel?”

Mari paused to consider. She glanced down at where Ashdei had collapsed over her, once again in his human form, with his head on her abdomen. He radiated contentment in a way she’d never felt from him. She ran her fingers through his hair. “Good. Sated.”

“How about you?” Dohal rested a hand on Ashdei’s head in a gesture that was distinctly tender.

“Perfect,” the demon murmured. “But I hope we’re sleeping just like this, because I’m not moving.”

Dohal snorted. “She sleeps however she is comfortable, and you’ll make do.”

Ashdei huffed, much more pleased than annoyed. “Fine.”

“We can stay like this for a while,” Mari said, curling her fingers in her demon’s hair. She was way too comfortable to consider moving at the moment anyway.

Dohal wrapped his arms around her and snuggled closer, his breath warm on her skin.

Chapter 21

The sun cast warm golden light over Mari as it brushed the peaks of the mountains to the west. People from all over the city filled the compound for the first ever Reyes Employee Thanksgiving Picnic. Giselle and Dante had been planning for weeks and had set out an impressive spread that so far had been a big hit.

Basilio would never have considered an event like this in all his long days. And Mari thought that maybe that's where all his problems had started. He had never considered anyone else or their needs in his calculations. The only occasions that mattered were those that honored and paid homage to him.

When people came up to thank her for something, she carefully redirected them toward Cisco or Rio or Dante, who deserved their praise much more than she did. Yes, she kept the magical lights on, but she was more figurehead than actual manager of anything. She wouldn't know which way was up on a business ledger and couldn't have told you a thing about any of their properties beyond the ones she had personally visited.

A small boy with shaggy, dark hair bounded up to her with a handful of haphazard flowers clutched in his hand. He stammered for a few seconds before saying, "Nana said I should bring these to someone after she helped me pick them, and you look the nicest."

Mari leaned down and reached out a hand for the bundle. "Who's your Nana?"

The boy turned to point at Giselle with a sheepish smile.

“Oh, you must be Nate. She talks about you all the time.”

He blushed and looked at his toes.

“Well, I think you’re the nicest person here, Nate. Because you picked these and brought them over here and made me smile.” She held them to her chest and beamed at him.

He made a joyful exclamation and ran off at full speed never looking back, likely to find one of his parents.

Dohal’s hand skated up her back when she straightened. She hadn’t even heard him approach. A few of the nearby people cast curious glances his way, but after the first few minutes they had stopped being filled with tension and worry.

“You felt so pleased that I needed to come over here and see the reason.”

“It’s a beautiful day, and a very handsome gentleman just brought me these.” She flourished the flowers his way.

“If you decide to adopt any more strays, we might need to add a new wing onto the main house.”

She grinned up at him. “That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

Rio came over and slung an arm around her. “What is it we’re plotting?”

“Expanding the house so Mariana can keep offering homes to anyone who looks the slightest bit melancholy,” Dohal said with amusement.

Rio chuckled and leaned to kiss her cheek. “That sounds like the best plan I’ve heard

all week. I'll start talking it over with Clovis. He's around here somewhere."

"Don't you dare." Mari elbowed him in the ribs. "No work talk today."

"Fine, it can wait until—"

A tremor shook the ground under their feet, starting as the slightest shiver and then quickly intensifying until cups started falling from tables and chairs tipped.

Someone screamed, but Mari couldn't figure out who it was or if they were hurt because Dohal had wrapped her and Rio up in his arms. His wings formed a dome over them to block out anything that might fall from above.

Ashdei materialized in front of them in a gout of blue flame. "He's coming."

"Get her out of here," Dohal barked. He moved to hand her across to the demon, and she was about to protest at being handed off like a burden of laundry when she realized it was too late.

Behind Ashdei, the Old One rose from the ground, dirt and rock falling from him in clumps. People ran away in every direction as he towered above them, taller and broader than Mari had ever seen him. "This ends today," the giant intoned. "I will wipe all of you from this realm like the vermin you are."

The monster reached out a clawed hand, the green glow of his magic launching from his fingers to engulf all of them. Ashdei's shield sprang up into place between them, absorbing what would surely have been a killing blow, but the shield cracked under the force, driving Ashdei to his knees.

"I can't hold this for long," Ashdei said between clenched teeth.

Panic grabbed Mari by the throat. The moment of truth had arrived, and she still had no idea what to do to defeat the creature that was determined to destroy them. All she knew was that she couldn't do nothing.

With no idea what caused the instinct, she said, "Put me down, Dohal. I need to touch the ground."

He hesitated only for an instant, bless him, and then he complied with her orders, dropping her to her feet. She slipped out of her sandals, her toes digging into the soil under them. She pulled from the nexus as hard as she could, absorbing the magic until she was full to bursting.

Dohal rested one hand on her shoulder, and Ashdei grabbed her wrist. Both of them poured all of their magic into her in a torrent that made her want to sing with the beauty of the righteous perfection that coursed through her. She reached for Ashdei's nexus through him as well, willing the magic of the Hells to do her bidding and protect them. No resistance barred her path. It was as if she'd always been meant for this.

The shield winked out of existence when Ashdei channeled his power away from it, but her own burgeoning magic turned away the beam that was still aimed at them, driving it back toward the monster that wanted to kill them all.

The Old One screamed in pain as it struck him, howling his agony into the sky. The beam of searing magic fizzled out. A burn as thick around as his arm marred his chest, his gnarled bark skin scorched.

"How can that be?" the Forest Lord asked. He was as big as a house and more powerful than anything that had ever been, and somehow, he seemed uncertain as he gazed at her.

“I’m your child,” Mariana said, not unkindly. “The spark of a deity to make a deity.”

The Old One tilted his head down to regard her. “Yes. I see it now.” He paused for the space of a long breath. “They tricked me.”

“I know, but I tricked them too.” Her lips turned up at the corners. “I already had the spark.”

He leaned to examine her more closely. His laugh was a joyful sound that reverberated around them. “My daughter is a clever, vicious thing. Though I have every reason to hate you, I find myself charmed.” He shook his many-branched head slowly. “Such arrogance. They never could have controlled you for long.”

Mari smiled, thinking of when Dohal had said similar words to her. She knew what he meant now. She was more than Basilio and the other incubi could have ever dreamed—a twice invested deity. Something that had never been in all the eons. All because her mother had been host to the shard that was all that remained of a goddess long forgotten. “So I’ve been told.”

“It is fitting that we have come to this, then.” He passed his gaze over her men who were arrayed around her as if he could see into them and then over the others who peered fearfully from behind cover all around them. “You offer shelter and succor to those who need it.” He seemed surprised by his own conclusion.

“I try to, yes.” She drew a breath. “The man who raised me was cruel, and I’ve sought ways to make amends for that my whole life. That’s one of the ways.”

The Forest Lord stepped closer, his heavy tread shaking the ground. When Ashdei tried to intercede, she pulled him back. Mari moved to stand in front of the towering figure without a stitch of fear. Since the first volley, he hadn’t made any move to attack them. He seemed almost fond.

The Old One stooped over her, his clawed hands passing over her head before settling to touch her. After a moment, he murmured with understanding. “You are more deserving of this realm than I ever was.”

His power poured into her, filled with the energy of things that grow and change. She cried out, not because it hurt, but because she knew at once what he meant to do. In a panic, she tried to dislodge his grip.

She sobbed as his resolve filled her chest. “No, stay. Please.”

“I have been consumed by vengeance much too long. There is nothing else for me, now that I cannot have it.” He looked briefly at Dohal. “And I refuse to take him from you. I will not become another monster in your life as my final act.”

“You never intended to survive this,” Mari said, the certainty of it a heavy weight in her stomach.

“I no longer belong to this world. It has continued on without me.” His voice was tired, but not sad. “But you do.”

Warmth tickled through her, starting at the crown of her head where his hands rested and filtering down through her body to the soles of her feet, spreading into the ground.

Suddenly the earth under her churned with life—deep roots and wriggling bodies and a distant deep heartbeat, all coming together to form another kind of magic. And now she could feel that too, leaching up into her from the most ancient of places.

Mari gasped as it overwhelmed her, but only for a moment, because just when she thought she would drown in the sensation, she understood how to temper it so that it was no longer a flood, but only a trickle. At least until she needed it.

The Old One let his hands trail down to her shoulders. “It is all I can do for you, so I hope it will be enough,” he said, his voice soft. “They will come for you not long after I am gone. But do not forget that this place is not theirs.” He cupped her cheek in one huge, rough hand. “What I am can never end, only be passed to another, and it is yours now. Guard it well, daughter.”

She braced herself for some kind of discharge or explosion, but instead, his body faded slowly into countless motes of green light that danced around her for a moment before settling into her skin. After they were absorbed, she shone with that same light, and as she looked over the men that she had claimed to see them bathed in that green glow, she smiled.

Dohal looked her over with a critical gaze, making sure she was unharmed. He seemed about to ask her as much, when noise unlike anything Mari had ever heard surrounded her. On every side, people fell to the ground, covering their ears and wailing. Dohal was among the last to fall to his knees, reaching for Mari as she crumpled next to him.

She looked up into the sky and saw dozens of angels descending toward them.

Chapter 22

Mari struggled to stay conscious as the noise continued pummeling her until the last of the angels touched down. When the sound level returned to normal, the silence felt oppressive, as if something huge was crushing her.

Ashdei recovered before anyone else, pushing to his knees and helping her to stand as he rose. “That was needlessly dramatic, even for you.”

Darveyn watched them with an impassive stare, not offering any sort of explanation as the people around them slowly managed to regain their feet amid groans and sobs.

“Guess you were serious about that timeline after all,” Mari said, tired of waiting for them to say something. “He left of his own accord. It was nothing I did.”

“We’re aware of what transpired,” Darveyn said in a voice that somehow harmonized with itself. “We are here to render judgment.”

“You can’t be serious, she’s done nothing wrong,” Ashdei said.

“Quite the contrary,” Dohal added. “She’s only done good.”

“Your defense of her is admirable, but a few selfless acts don’t excuse the greed that is in evidence,” Darveyn proclaimed. Several of the angels standing in judgment turned Mari’s way with dark expressions. “The glut of power she has acquired in so short a time is unprecedented and seems to be without limit. Considering her rearing, there are valid concerns that she will misuse it.”

They were going to judge her before she'd even done anything wrong just because of what she could do. Mari considered speaking up for herself to say she would never hoard power and use it to hurt people the way her father had, but it seemed unlikely they would take her word for anything right now.

They're not going to listen to you , she said to all her men. She felt them lining up behind her, ready to jump to her defense if it was necessary, but there was no way any of them could stand against a host of angels. She might be able to, but that would just give them an excuse to proclaim her evil and obliterate them all. The idea that any of the people around her might suffer whatever judgment the angels planned for her made her cold to her bones. Please don't give them a reason to hurt you or anyone else here.

She felt them all settle slightly, though none of them moved away. She could feel all of them behind her, each one an individual that she loved for a different reason and didn't want to consider living without. There had to be some way out of this.

Behind her, a commotion started, but she didn't turn around to see what it might be. She couldn't. If she looked away, she might miss her one chance to do something, even if she had no idea what that might be at this point. Aggression didn't seem like it stood a chance of working, but neither did reason.

"I will speak to her character." Willow's normally soft-spoken voice cut through the murmuring of the crowd. They stepped up to draw even with Mari. "At every turn, Mariana has sought to make up for the cruelty of her father. No one would have blamed her for just leaving once she got free of him, but she stayed and has improved the lives of everyone in her orbit—hundreds of people."

"We respect your wisdom, honored chronicler," Darveyn said with a bow of her head. "But we have concerns that your judgment may have been impaired by your extended time in this realm."

Willow crossed their arms. “That stubborn refusal to consider anyone who disagrees with you as an equal has always been your weakness.”

Darveyn looked at her companions before nodding. “Nothing you have said has convinced us that the danger posed by the abomination should be risked.”

Dohal growled loud enough to make those closest to them cringe away. “Call my mate that again, and I will rip your head from your neck, decorum be damned.”

Mari reached for his arm.

The disdain the angel felt was clear in her expression as she regarded the dragon in front of her. “And to think, some among us wondered if we’d done the right thing when we purged your kind from this realm.”

Shining golden light blazed through the night around them as Willow transformed. People moved away as they took on their natural guise: the body of a winged giant lion, twelve feet at the haunches, with a familiar human head towering above. They shook the ground when they roared.

“The obliteration of the dragons was a crime,” their voice echoed through the night like undistilled wrath. “And the fact that you still won’t admit that you were led by the nose by a handful of incubi shames every one of you and all of your ancestors.”

A few of the angels gasped, but none of them broke formation behind Darveyn. “None of this is germane to the judgment that stands before us,” Darveyn said haughtily.

“No? You are naive to think so. Perhaps there is someone here who can convince you?” Willow looked over their shoulder and bowed with their front paws, face lowering nearly to the ground. “My liege, I beg you to come forward and enlighten

your wayward flock.”

Mari looked around, confused who Willow might mean. A murmur passed through the surrounding crowd, and then a path opened up to Mari’s left.

Luis came forward through the space, his gait slow and his expression shuttered. Several of the angels exclaimed at the sight of him, though it was impossible to tell if they were surprised or terrified. “I had not intended to ever reveal myself to you, but since you are determined to make monsters of yourselves once again, it has become necessary.”

Luis spread his arms. Scintillating silver light glowed from every inch of skin. His sorrow and regret propagated through the crowd like waves. When it crashed into the angels assembled before them, several of them burst into tears. Darveyn clenched her jaw, but even she seemed moved.

Mari embraced the emotions, letting them fill her until she ached with the sadness that Luis felt.

“You allowed yourselves to be manipulated into destroying the dragons without ever questioning why the Forest Lord had been removed from his place,” Luis began after a long pause. “Not a single one of you ever asked where I had gone or why.”

He looked over them, his disappointment plain. “I was trapped here by the same ritual that expelled him. Bound to this realm and this place by treachery for hundreds of years, and none of you ever came to look for me. Instead, you claimed my power as your own, murdered an entire species in my name, and called it judgment. I am beyond disgusted.”

Mari stared. Luis was a leader among them? And Willow had known the entire time? She glanced at Dohal, who nodded briefly. That’s what he had meant when he had

talked about Luis being a powerful ally to their cause.

“How were we to know, my liege?” Darveyn asked, her voice shaking. All the angels had begun to look uncertain as to who they should defer to.

“Vincent entered into a bargain with them to yoke me, then kept it a secret for all this time.” Luis shook his head slowly. “This woman, who you wish to punish for the sin of acquiring power you disapprove of, freed me by destroying him. She healed me when it shouldn’t have been possible. She lent me her strength when I despaired.” He let out a long and pained sigh. “She showed more compassion for me than any of you. And you would judge her .”

The silver light intensified until it was nearly blinding, and Luis took his true and magnificent form, a coiled silver snake dozens of feet long with feathered wings in blue and green. The chorus of angels cowered from him in all his glory.

“Fear not, my vassals. My judgement will not be as careless as yours. I will not rend your bodies and shed your blood. I am not the monsters you are. You are cast out.” Luis glared at them as they shrieked and wailed. “You are never to come to this realm or attempt to pursue justice here, or anywhere, again.”

The light of his power flared, and the angels cried out as it swept over them, banishing first their shadows and then their bodies.

Silence settled over the assembled crowd as they stared in shock.

Luis lowered his head so that his immense eyes were even with hers. “Sweet goddess, I cannot make the wrongs of the past right, no one can, but I can safeguard your future and the future of those you carry. You have my solemn promise that none from the other realms will trouble you and yours while I live. This is your place and yours alone.”

“Thank you.” Mari reached to touch his scaly cheek. “Will you go back to the Heavens?”

“There is nothing for me among them now. The bonds I have here mean more to me than any there.” He paused to consider her with a lingering glance. “Unless you object, I would like to remain here with you.”

Mari hugged as much of his head as she could get her arms around. “I would enjoy that very much.”

Dohal stepped up beside her. “As would I.” He lifted a hand and placed it next to Mari’s. “I look forward to flying through the mountains at your side. And thank you, for providing what justice could be served for my people.”

Luis bobbed his head. “It was the very least that I could do, my friend. I hope you know what they did in my name was not my will.”

“I do. You and I have suffered together, and there should be no animosity between us. We both deserve a chance to heal.”

“I still have a question, if you don’t mind?” Mari asked.

“Of course.”

“If you’re some kind of big shot in the Heavens, how come, when you met the goddess, you made it seem like she was your goddess? I have her memories from while we shared this body, but nothing before that. I don’t understand how you were connected.”

“Ahh. She and I were mates in her last incarnation.”

“Oh,” Mari gasped, mortified that she’d opened that wound without knowing any better. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“There was no way you could know.” He tilted his head. “Her disillusionment was a long, slow process that allowed me to make contingency plans. The shard of her that became you was one that I shepherded before giving it to a human woman for safekeeping. When I saw it in you, I recognized her immediately.”

“I...I don’t know what to say. I feel awful.”

“You should not. We had a long and glorious life together. She made a choice not unlike the Old One made, to move on after many, many eons. The shard I kept of her was for selfish reasons, but the act of caring for it was what I needed at the time.” He smiled. “I’m glad she found such a worthy home. It is fitting that it was you who rescued me.”

“Okay.” She rested her forehead against his scaly skin. “Thank you. For safeguarding our future.”

Luis huffed with satisfaction. “You are most welcome.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

Mariana fussed with the alignment of the tablecloth for what might have been the tenth time or the fiftieth, she couldn't even count anymore.

Tilly watched her silently for several seconds and then reached out to cover her hand. "It's just as straight as it has been the whole time."

The table in the sitting room was set for high tea for four. She'd moved every cup and saucer and spoon around a dozen times already. Willow sat in one chair reading the book in their lap.

When Tilly spoke, the sphinx looked up. "Perhaps we should call Pris after all? She would be a much better choice for this particular task."

Mari shook her head. "Absolutely not. It's her day off. She deserves to enjoy her time with Emil without being bothered by my insecurities."

"And the last time we called for something while she was there, he gave us an earful of exactly how much she enjoys that time." Tilly ruffled her blue feathers. "Not in a hurry to hear that again. Made me regret my life choices. Why can't I find a mermaid who will make me squeal like that?"

Mari cleared her throat. "What she means is that you're a fine choice. All that's really needed here is someone to carry the conversation if it seems like I'm flailing."

"Do we need a safe word?" Willow asked without any hint of a smile. They wore an elegant shift dress in green with a gold ankh necklace encrusted with emeralds.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. I’m more concerned that I won’t be able to come up with anything to talk about that isn’t accusations of abandoning me when I needed her most.” While Mari understood that there was more to the situation than she’d known, that pain was still there, waiting to detonate inside her at the slightest provocation.

“Ahh,” Willow murmured. “I’m familiar with the difficulties of maternal relationships, though of course I have no mother in the traditional sense.”

“Can I ask more about that, or is it considered rude?”

“Not rude. A new sphinx can only be born when one of us dies. Each newborn is given into the care of a seraphim to raise. Phoenixes are much the same, only sometimes they come right back.”

Willow was so calm when they offered the information that it took Mari a few moments to understand what they weren’t saying. “Vincent.”

The sphinx nodded with mouth pinched tight. “He was my parent, if I can be said to have had one.”

Mari’s heart broke. She understood exactly what it meant to have been raised by a man like that. “Oh, Willow. I’m so sorry.”

The revelation also brought a whole new world of hatred for the angel she’d killed, knowing that he had been entrusted with Willow’s life—and he’d offered no comfort and only torment.

Willow shook their head, pausing to wipe at one eye. “I only wish I could have done more to impede his agenda.”

“It wasn’t your responsibility to stop him. I’ve had to come to terms with the same

thing.” She straightened her back and offered what she hoped was a supportive smile. “All you can do now is try to help the people he hurt find a way to navigate the fallout.”

“You’re right. The regret doesn’t serve anyone, least of all those he hurt.”

“Which includes you.”

Willow stared at her, dumbstruck, as tears gathered in their dark eyes. They bowed their head, quiet for a long moment before they continued, “It’s easy to forget that, isn’t it?”

“All too easy.” Mari sighed. “But you’re one of his victims too, so the grace and aid you would offer them extends to you too.”

“Can I hug you?” Willow said after a pause.

Mari smiled. “Always.” She waited for the sphinx to make the first move with her arms open and clutched her friend tight once they closed the distance.

Tilly sniffled loudly. “Listen, we can’t all be crying our eyes out when she gets here. What’s she going to think?”

Mari tilted a glance the harpy’s way while still hugging Willow. “That we all have a lot of mourning to catch up on, which I’m sure she’ll understand.”

It was Tilly’s turn to unnecessarily straighten the tablecloth. “Fine, point taken. When are they getting here, anyway?”

Willow stepped away, moving back to their seat. “Supposed to have been five minutes ago,” they said without checking the time anywhere.

“I’m sure there’s a good reason they’re late,” Mari said, hoping that it wasn’t that her mother had no desire to see her. She caught the whiff of brimstone just before the gout of blue flame announced Ashdei’s teleportation.

The wards flexed around Mari as they detected someone new, and she reached up to adjust them automatically before the klaxons started. She was busy with that task for a moment, so she didn’t notice them standing in front of her until her mother nearly lost her footing.

Ashdei grabbed Serena’s elbow to steady her. “Easy, it can be a little disorienting.”

Her mother looked very much the same as her memory—a beautiful woman with warm brown skin and dark hair drawn back into a bun behind her head. The only difference was that her hair was just starting to be touched with gray at the hairline.

Serena let out a cough but managed to hold on to the contents of her stomach. “That’s an understatement. I’m taking a plane home.” She caught sight of Mari as she scanned the room. “My God, you’re beautiful.”

Mari didn’t have any kind of response for that, so she just said, “Hi Mama.”

Serena took a few steps toward her and then stopped. “Your partner didn’t offer many details beyond that Las Vegas was now safe, and given that he helped me escape in the first place, I decided to trust him. How did all of this happen?”

Mari took a deep breath and gestured to the table. “It’s a really long story, so why don’t we sit down.”

“Of course,” Serena said, and moved to take the seat opposite Mari’s.

Ashdei moved in a flash to push in Mari’s seat for her. “Do you need me to stay?”

She smiled up at him. “I don’t think so. We’re just going to have some tea and talk. Nothing dangerous.”

He set a hand on the back of her neck and showed his fangs. “Everything about you is dangerous, beloved.” He leaned to kiss her.

Mari laughed as he straightened. “Really, we’ll be fine. Go ahead and tell the others that she’s here.”

I’m only a thought away if you need me , he said into her head.

I know.

He used the door as he exited for once, and when the room was eerily quiet around her, Mari thought that maybe she should have had him stay.

“Who killed Basilio?” her mother asked, getting right to the point.

Willow exhaled a breath and stood, reaching for the teapot.

Mari watched the sphinx pour the tea for a moment. “Cisco. I never asked for the details.”

“That makes sense. He was always the one Basilio trusted most.” She nodded her thanks to Willow, who was now serving sandwiches to all of them.

“The Old One is also dead.”

Serena looked at her. “I assumed as much when Ashdei said it was safe.” She lifted her cup to take a sip. “And how much do you remember?”

“The goddess and I are reconciled, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Her mother nodded slowly. “So, you remember everything she said to me?”

“She knew you were never coming back when she sent you away, though she never told me that. I had no idea what had happened to you until a few weeks ago.”

Serena frowned. “I’m sorry for the pain that must have caused you. I can’t imagine how difficult it was for you to deal with all of that.”

“I thought you had abandoned me when I needed you most.” Well, she’d managed to run headfirst right into the conversation she most didn’t want to have. She supposed there was nothing for it. “I get it now, but I lived with that truth for a long time.”

Tilly sent a lopsided smile her way and sipped her tea without offering any rescue.

“I understand.” Serena sat very still, considering what to say next. “I honestly wasn’t in any state to be the mother you needed at that moment.”

Mari had lost her appetite, but she made a show of nibbling on a sandwich because Willow was looking over her with a disapproving frown. “None of us could have done anything at the time. We were just talking about how we all need to remember that and give ourselves a little grace.”

Serena searched her face for a moment that drew out long. “You got very wise somewhere along the way.” Her mother sighed. “I counted on the goddess being right about what would happen at the ritual, but when Ashdei never came back for me, I knew that it hadn’t. And then I didn’t know what to do.”

“The goddess didn’t understand the extent of the magic separating us. It took freeing the dragon to make it possible.”

Serena set down her cup with a clatter. “He’s free? And you’re all still alive?” She glanced around as if she suddenly thought Las Vegas was the most dangerous place

she could possibly be, and there was a time when she would have been right.

Mari chuckled into her tea. “He only threatened to wipe the city off the face of the Earth a few times. He’s settled down since then.”

Tilly snorted. “She’s not taking enough credit. She tamed him. Same as she did with the demon.”

Serena’s eyes went wide. “He’s one of your partners?”

Mari nodded. “Along with Cisco and Rio and the hottest unicorn in the world, Dante. I assume they’ll all be along in a minute. They’re probably right down the hall trying to figure out how much time to give us, now that Ashdei has told them you’re here.”

Serena paused to dab at her lips with her napkin. “Five? Dios mío, you’re full of surprises.”

Mari settled back in her chair, deciding to give the mountain of news about Las Vegas a few minutes of rest. “Where are you living now?”

“I’ve been in New Orleans for a while. There’s a group of sex witches there living in a coven-slash-polycule. It’s a quiet life, but I like it.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear.” Mari smiled. “I’m glad you haven’t had things too hard since gaining your freedom.”

“Now that Las Vegas is safe, I’d like to spend more time here, if that’s okay with you. Maybe start the process of mending what’s broken between us.”

“I’d like that.” She wasn’t quite ready to drop the “you’re going to be an abuelita” bomb just yet, but she had a while to work up to it before the situation got dire. “I don’t run the day-to-day business stuff, so I should have time to spend getting to

know you again.”

Willow laughed. “Especially now that we’ve run out of unfathomable ancient beings who hate us.”

“Beings? Plural?” her mother asked, clearly on the edge of panic.

Mari waved a hand. “It was too much for the quick summary. The important thing is we’re safe now. Only the most mundane of enemies in our future—mob bosses and real estate moguls, maybe the occasional vampire. The guards can definitely handle it.”

Willow offered a comforting nod. “We’re under the protection of the feathered serpent, so threats from the other realms should cease.”

Serena looked around the table in shock. “He’s back too? What has been happening here?”

“So much, Mama.” Mari said with a sigh. “I promise we’ll get to it, but right now I can feel them all hovering outside the door, and if I don’t tell them they can come in soon they are probably going to bring the house down around us.”

“Five monsters...waiting right outside the door.” Her mother raised a hand to her throat.

“Yes, but they’re my monsters,” Mari said with pride shining in her voice. She let them know it was safe to come in and prepared for the whirlwind they were no doubt about to cause.

Rio came first, because they had known that a familiar face would help ease things. He wrapped Serena up in a warm hug the likes of which only he could deliver. She laughed and mentioned how handsome he’d grown.

The puma shifter stepped aside and made room for Cisco, who bowed his head in greeting and looked embarrassed when Serena thanked him profusely for ending Basilio.

Dante came next, charming and lovely as always. He politely dipped his head and then asked if she was a hugger before engulfing her in his sweet-smelling embrace that lingered until she sighed. She giggled whenever she looked at him after that, because that was the effect he had on everyone.

Serena gave Dohal a long appraising look when he moved up to stand before her. Fear tightened her expression, but there was something else as well. “You’re the dragon,” she said in a low voice, and waited for his nod of confirmation. “I’m sorry for what they did to you. I wished so many times that I could help you.”

Dohal surprised everyone in the room, but Mari most of all, when he lowered his head to plant a kiss on Serena’s cheek. “You did help me.” He smiled, his eyes drifting to Mari. “She set me free and gave me a reason to live, and none of that would have been possible without you.”

Ashdei ambled up last and leaned to kiss her forehead. “I’m glad I could reunite you two, since I was the one who separated you. I know it was for the best, but the idea that I caused Mari that much pain haunts me even now.”

Mari gestured him toward her and pulled him into a hug. “She’s alive. You did that too.” Saints, she was going to start bawling any second if she didn’t change the subject. “Did you guys bring Luis too, like I asked?”

They made way for Luis to come to the front, though by his face he didn’t understand what he was doing at this occasion.

Mari took his hand and squeezed it. “Mama, this is Luis. He’s the one who salvaged the shard of the goddess that moved from mother to daughter through the centuries

and ended up sheltered by you. He was her mate, and he's the reason all of this was possible."

Luis blushed and shook his head. "It is the women of your line who made this possible. Your fortitude. None of it would have come to anything if you hadn't survived. I chose the first vessel, that much is true, but all of you kept her safe."

Serena wrapped her arms around both of them and hugged them close. "Thank you for giving us the strength we needed when we needed it most," she whispered through her tears. "And thank you, Mari, for being that strength."

Mariana clutched her mother tight and finally let the tears she'd been holding onto fall.

This story, of Mariana and her monster boyfriends taking over the paranormal underworld of the city of Las Vegas, is over. That doesn't mean this world is coming to an end. There will be LOTS more from Sin City in the coming months. I have so many yummy things planned. Up first is the story of Emil and Pris, called Taste of the Briny Deep , available in October 2025.