



# Mochas and Minotaurs

## (Possessive Monsters #8)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Grab the Bull by the Horns

My recent one-night-stand was perfect in every way, so I ghosted him to save my heart. Only to find out he's my new neighbor!

Now Marcus and I must team up to stop greedy land developers from destroying our homes. Along the way, I discover that he's not just a monster under the sheets but sweet, considerate, and super protective to boot. My heart is definitely toast.

But the musclebound minotaur is hiding a dangerous secret. And if his past catches up to him, it will threaten much more than our homes. It may cost him his freedom, and me my heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

“For the last time, I’m not interested. Now get out before I throw you out.”

I telekinetically lifted the chair next to the unwelcomed real estate agent to show her that I did indeed have magic, and she backed away.

I didn’t usually flaunt my magic—preferring to keep my abilities hidden—but Kyla and the people she worked for had already scared away all my customers, and I’d had enough.

“You can’t do that,” she sputtered.

“Try me. This is private property, and I told you to leave. You’re not leaving, and that’s trespassing. Now get out!”

I released the chair and picked her up instead. I hid the strain such a feat was having on my magic reserves, hoping she didn’t call my bluff.

Her eyes went wide, and she shrieked, her arms flailing. “I’m leaving, I’m leaving!”

“Good.” I let her down.

She huffed indignantly and smoothed her hand down her skirt. “I should sue you for that.”

“Go ahead and try.” I flipped the bitch both birds and waved them in the air. I was

done being nice yesterday.

Next to me, Nick, my employee, waved his phone in the air. “I have it all on video. She was using reasonable force. And Gigi asked you to leave nicely multiple times. I also have you threatening to make life difficult if she didn’t sign your papers. That doesn’t sound very legal to me.”

“No,” I agreed. “I wonder who would win in court. I doubt Arcane Development will stand up to bat for you.”

We’d been dealing with Kyla for long enough that I’d gone and done my homework. She represented Arcane Development Company, a land development company known for churning out cookie-cutter condos. They’d throw their real estate agent under the bus in a heartbeat. Kyla must know that. But she seemed the type who’d do anything if the pay was good enough, so I’d installed cameras last week to bolster my magical wards.

Realizing that she wasn’t getting anywhere with me, she turned and stomped out of my coffee shop, muttering, “Crazy witch,” not so subtly under her breath.

The chilly winter air blew in as she opened the door and I magically forced the door closed with a resounding bang, locking it behind her. “And stay out, Fuckface!”

Nick gawked at me. “Wow, Gigi! You’re scary when mad. I can’t believe you actually lifted her off the ground.”

“Me neither,” I said. Lifting a whole-ass person was hard work, with or without magic. I was a decent witch despite the sign on the coffee shop wall stating otherwise, but I wasn’t super strong either.

“Well, the attitude fits the new hair,” Nick said.

I'd gone from my signature red hair to raven black a few days ago, a color I hadn't had since I was much younger. "Is that your thinly veiled way of calling me a bitch?"

Nick laughed. "I'd never dream of it! If I wanted to call you a bitch, I'd say it to your face, bitch."

I grinned. I loved the easy camaraderie I had with my employees. It was how I liked it.

But my niceness didn't extend to condo developers trying to buy my place from under me, especially when they'd offered such an insultingly low price. This wasn't just my place of business; I lived right above the coffee shop as well. I loved my home. It wasn't very big, but it was mine.

It had all started with that impromptu magical fight that had broken out in my parking lot. The story had been plastered on the front page of every Darlington news site.

The incident had started because my friend Penny drunkenly cast a love spell to find the perfect man. However, instead of the perfect man, the spell had sent every possible suitor at her, including an incubus and even a troll from another dimension.

The incubus had ended up being her mate, and they were now living happily together. So for what it was worth, the spell had done its job. It had also gotten my little coffee shop a hell of a lot of attention since all of her unsuitable suitors had rallied in front of it, eager to fight for her hand.

The suitors were gone, but that was when the real estate agents and land brokers sent by Arcane Development started coming around, who thought our little row of shops and homes would make excellent high-rise condos. It had gotten even worse when the young witch next door who owned Ever After Books found the love of her life and moved in with him. At the same time, the elderly couple who owned the antique shop

next to her retired and bought a place with fewer stairs.

That had put two out of the three units up for grabs. But because Kyla had come on so strong and snooty, offending everyone here, both former neighbors had gotten together and agreed to sell to anyone but Arcane Development.

“I kind of feel bad for the guy who bought the units next door,” Nick said. “I saw him trying to move his gym equipment in after lunch, and Kyla was harassing him.”

“Is he moving in already? That’s fast.” I hadn’t met him yet.

“He is. And he’s hot too. Totally the type to own a gym. Heard he’s a minotaur. But I don’t think he swings my way, or I’d go try to convince him not to sell.”

That had me grinning. “I don’t think we need to worry, considering the god-awful offer they gave me at first. Plus, Kyla isn’t exactly endearing.”

“You can say that again. She’s a bitch.” Nick was never one to mince words.

Aside from Kyla, there was now a panhandler parked just outside of my property. He started showing up around the same time Kyla had, and I was pretty sure Arcane had sent him as well. I’d followed him one day, and he’d gotten into a new Lexus a few blocks over.

Faux Hobo harassed anyone who tried to come in. I’d already started to notice fewer customers. It sucked, but if Arcane was trying to starve me out then the joke was on them, because my grandmother had already paid off this place. All I had to do was make enough to pay property taxes and feed myself. And I had a rainy-day fund set up so I could play this game for years.

“Why don’t you take off early today?” I suggested, eyeing the empty shop. “Doesn’t

look like anyone else is coming.”

“I did want to check out that new exhibit at the museum.”

“That sounds fun. You go check it out. I’ll close up.”

He helped me clean up, and I packed a few of the leftover baked goods for him to take home—baked goods that usually completely sold out by this time of day if it weren’t for the assholes Arcane had sent.

Then, deciding it was time to suss out the new neighbor, I packed the rest of the goodies in a paper bag, folded the top, and stuck a Witch’s Brew sticker on it before marching out and around to the entrance. The sign that had once read Ever After Books was now one for Bullseye Fitness . The logo showed a red and white target with bull horns sticking out the sides. I tried the door, and to my surprise found it unlocked.

I poked my head in. “Hello?”

“Back here,” yelled a masculine voice that sounded awfully familiar. Where had I heard that voice before? “And you better not have any papers for me to sign, or else I’m tossing you out.”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” I said hurriedly. “You must have met Kyla. I’m not sent by the condo developers. I’m your neighbor from the Witch’s Brew. I come bearing goodies. Cookies and scones.”

There was a movement, and a curtain hiding the back room lifted.

I froze, because right in front of me was the super sexy one-night-stand from two weekends ago. The one who’d rocked my world so hard that I’d worried I’d see the

disappointment on his face when he woke, so I snuck out of his bed without saying goodbye.

Marcus.

How could I ever forget that name? I'd screamed it at the top of my lungs for hours.

I could never forget that chiseled face or perfect body either. Dark hair fell in pieces around light brown eyes that were almost inhumanly amber. That must be his glamor spell working, hiding him behind a human guise.

Didn't Nick say he was a minotaur? Marcus had been in glamor that night as well, but I should have guessed it. I could see the bovine cast of his nose now, even though he still wore the illusion spell. The septum ring too should have given it away, but I'd been kept too distracted with pleasure that night to realize it.

Marcus's eyes went to the bag of goodies in my hands, then to my face, and I knew the moment recognition dawned.

What I didn't expect was the bitter tone in his voice when he said, "It's you!"

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

It was her.

Her hair was a rich, dark black, instead of the vibrant red it had been two weeks ago, but it was her.

The woman who'd come in like a bulldozer, destroying my perfectly curated bachelor life and making me fall madly in love with her in one single night, was standing in my gym. And she was every bit as mind-numbingly beautiful as I remembered. The last time I saw her, she'd been curled up in my arms, exhausted after we'd both spent hours exploring each other.

It had been the most magical night I'd ever experienced. I'd gone to bed a changed man holding the woman of my dreams in my arms, sure that I'd found the one.

I woke up the next morning, reaching for my little spoon, only to find that side of my bed cold and empty. How she'd managed to sneak out of my arms, bed, and home without waking my extremely sensitive minotaur senses, I didn't know.

I'd told myself it was for the best. It wasn't like I was allowed to have a happily ever after like everyone else. Her leaving only meant that she was protecting both of us from guaranteed heartbreak.

For a fraction of a second, I wondered if this was fate bringing us together again, but then I remembered I wasn't destined for love. Not to mention she'd been the one who left. I recalled the disappointment and hurt realizing she'd left in the middle of the



night, and my heart sank.

I did not have the bandwidth to deal with this, not today, not after spending the bulk of the afternoon dealing with the stuck-up realtor some land developer had sent to stop me from setting up my new gym. I'd known about Arcane Development before buying the property. The original owners had warned me about them; I just hadn't been prepared to deal with—What was her name? Kylie? Kyla?—right away.

One of the reasons why I'd gotten such a great deal was because I promised not to sell for at least five years. I didn't plan on selling at all. I wasn't here to flip the property; I was here because I wanted a permanent location for my gym.

My old location was great, but it had been a rental, and I wanted something more permanent. This place was mine.

And apparently, it was also next to her. Did Gigi even remember me? Or was I just some warm body she'd already forgotten about? She'd left awful fast.

Nope. Judging by the look on her face, she remembered me, and she was less than thrilled to find me here. She held a paper bag in her hand, and the smile that had been genuine just a moment earlier looked pasted on her gorgeous face. Dark hair framed alabaster skin and a set of enchanting kohl-lined green eyes had me remembering our wondrous night.

I squared my features, hoping that the hurt didn't show. It wasn't like she was mine. It was all of one night—one memorable night that my minotaur had latched onto and would not forget. The human part of me hadn't forgotten her either, but the core sentiment was a little different.

My monster wanted to steal her away and keep her in his arms forever. The man? Well, getting ghosted sucked, and I was a little irritated to see her again. But I was

also scared that her being here meant we were somehow tied by fate. That would be worse than a little rejection, especially when my past caught up with me.

“Small world,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck with her free hand. “Marcus, right?”

“Yeah. Small world, Gigi.”

“You remembered.”

How could I have forgotten? She’d remembered my name too. Was that a good thing?

“I guess we’re neighbors now,” she said, and handed me the paper bag. “Welcome to the neighborhood.”

Awkwardness hung in the air between us so thick you could cut it with a knife.

“Guess so. Thank you for the...” I opened the paper bag and peeked inside. The aroma of sugar and butter wafted up, reminding me that I technically hadn’t eaten all day. That was a rarity since I had to consume a lot of calories and protein to keep my physique. “...cookies. But if you don’t mind, I need to get to work. I’m already behind schedule.”

Right. Set my boundaries now.

Being behind had been my fault since I’d let the pretty real estate agent in before I knew what I was getting into, and she’d ended up being a bitch who wouldn’t leave. At this point, I just wanted to be alone. I’d had enough interruptions and unwanted encounters for one day. The demo team was arriving bright and early tomorrow morning to tear down the wall between the two units, and I needed everything moved

to one side so they could work.

“Wait. Before you kick me out,” Gigi said, her voice suddenly serious. “I need to talk to you about the condo developers.”

That I could handle. “All right. Speak.”

“This coffee shop.” She gestured to our connecting wall. “This place is my home. I’m not interested in selling to them, ever. Kyla and Arcane Development know that.”

“Neither were any of your old neighbors. That’s why I got this place for such a steal,” I said. “I am not interested in selling either. Especially not after that real estate agent came in here earlier today basically asking if I knew what the hell I was doing. Did you know she tried to imply that I wouldn’t be able to run a successful business, so it would be better just to take the deal? What a bitch.”

“Yeah. She tried that with me, too.” Gigi’s posture relaxed. “I reminded her that I’ve been here for years now and have had no problem keeping the place running. She acted really nice at first, and I felt bad for her because Arcane offered a ridiculously low price. But when they sold the place to you, Kyla started showing her true colors. She can go eat a bag of dicks.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. I hope she chokes on them.”

She giggled. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Our eyes met and suddenly things were awkward again.

“I’ll let you get back to work,” she said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Holler if you need anything. I’m just next door.” And then she was gone.

I got all of three seconds to myself before my phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket to see Declan's ugly mug staring back at me. The photo was from last Halloween when he'd decided to dress up as a giant eggplant.

Declan was my best friend and the gym's manager. He had a work-from-home "day job" that had strange hours and he spent so much time at Bullseye Fitness that he would've been there anyway, even if I didn't pay him. He also functioned phenomenally under pressure and kept me from losing my head most of the time. I picked up the call.

"How's day one going? Everything ready for tomorrow's teardown?"

I sighed. "No. Everything's still at the front door. I've had one interruption after another."

"Damn. Do you want me to come over and give you a hand? I'm done with work, and I ain't got nothing to do. Honestly man, without the gym, I've got no life."

I chuckled. "Yeah, come by. I could use some help. But you're not going to believe who my neighbor is."

"Who?"

"Remember the cute little witch I took home two weekends ago?"

"No way! The redhead?"

"She dyed her hair black." And it looks fucking hot on her. "But yeah, her."

"Damn. No wonder you're distracted. But that's a good thing, right? You liked her."

I didn't reply. I liked her, yes. But that was before she disappeared on me the next morning. And even if she hadn't, it wasn't like I was in the position for anything serious. It wouldn't be fair to either of us if I tried.

The sound of Declan's motorcycle starting up came through the speakers. "I'll see you in ten."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

“So you’re saying that the hottie from the bar is on the other side of that wall?” Lily asked with wide eyes from the screen on my dining table.

I didn’t worry that she was practically screaming her question because I knew Marcus wouldn’t be able to hear her. I had my place locked up tight with magic wards and barriers. None of the words from our three-way video call between Penny, Lily, and I would make it to the other side.

“Yep,” I said, taking another sip of my Sauvignon Blanc. “But I’d like you to remember that I totally ghosted him in the morning without saying bye or exchanging numbers, and I think he’s a little bit pissed.” Okay, maybe more than a little pissed. He couldn’t wait to get me out of his space.

“I still don’t know why you did that,” she said. “He is a complete package. I mean, look at him. He’s clearly a ten, and he’s a business owner to boot.” Then her eyes went wide. “Wait... don’t tell me he was shitty in bed.”

“No,” Penny gasped. “It can’t be.”

I shook my head, rolling my eyes. “I’m not going to go into details, but he was great in that department, too.”

“Then why?” Lily lamented.

“Whhhhyy!” Triscuit, my African grey parrot, shouted from his perch.

“Whhhhhhyyyyyy!”

Triscuit eyed my laptop and then started making his way over to it, his eyes on the keys.

“Hey, none of that,” I said, shoving him away.

My two best friends knew I was talking to my pet bird; he’d been around since we were all in college. Triscuit, too, knew I was talking to him. As long as I had my eyes on him, he wouldn’t actually rip all the keys from my laptop, but if I dared look away, anything was fair game.

“I already told you,” I said, directing my attention back to my friends. “I didn’t want to deal with the morning after, so I panicked and left.” Ugh! Saying it out loud didn’t make it sound any better. I was such a chicken when it came to romance.

Did I regret it right now? Yes, yes, I did. If I hadn’t been such a coward, I wouldn’t be in this predicament now.

“And besides,” I continued. “We both went into it knowing it would be casual. I didn’t want to end up being the clingy one. I just didn’t realize I’d end up offending him.” I hadn’t meant to.

Since my offering of buttery goodness the other day, his friend and gym manager, Declan, had shown up several times to order drinks to go. At first I thought that Declan was fully human, but now I wasn’t so sure. I had a feeling he was a shifter of some sort, though I couldn’t put my finger on what. Nothing he did gave it away, either.

I hated to admit it, but I had their order memorized already. One Americano and one café mocha with extra whip. I didn’t know which one of them drank what, though.

I could only guess that he sent his friend over to avoid talking to me.

“Maybe the universe put the two of you together for a reason,” Penny said.

Of course Penny would think that. She’d gotten ultra lucky considering her spell fucked up, and she still managed to hook the world’s hottest, funniest, and peculiarly devoted incubus as her mate. But we didn’t all have her magical good luck.

“At least we’re both on the same page about not selling the place. And that fake homeless guy the land developers sent stays a little farther away now with all the people going in and out.”

“I thought the gym wasn’t opened yet,” Lily said.

“It isn’t. The grand opening isn’t for at least a few weeks.” The day after my visit, contractors came early in the morning to start renovations. All the built-in bookshelves of Ever After Books had come out, as did the walls between the old bookstore and Grandma Evy’s Attic.

According to the chitchat I heard while the contractors lined up for their cuppa joe, they’d only been hired to do the groundwork. Marcus and his friend wanted to do the majority of it themselves, and it would take a while on account of the size of the space.

“Forget about him,” I said. “Are we still up for Saturday?”

Since Penny moved here to join us, our little coven of three made an effort to see each other every weekend. It was a ritual now. The Witch’s Brew closed early on the weekends, 3 p.m. to be exact. We met at six or seven, either here at my place or at the new luxury condo Penny shared with her incubus mate, before deciding what to do for the rest of the evening. Sometimes we visited Delirium, the nightclub owned by



Prax's friend, also an incubus, and sometimes we headed to the Howling Wolf. Other times we just stayed in and played with magic.

"Sure are," Penny said. "There's this new spell going around the Let's Talk About Hex forum, and I—"

Lily and I both groaned.

"The last time you tried an online spell, you summoned a troll from another dimension," I reminded her.

"And a half-crazed wolf shifter," Lily said.

"And an evil wizard with goblin henchmen," I added.

There was the sound of throat clearing before Prax showed up on screen. "And me. Don't forget me. She summoned me. I make it all worthwhile."

"You sure do!" Penny pulled Prax in for a kiss and the screen practically shimmered with magic.

"We'll figure it out on Saturday. We always do," Lily said. "Your place this time?"

"Yup," I agreed.

The rattling from my kitchen revealed Triscuit repeatedly trying to open the child-locked cabinets.

"I gotta go," I said. "The birb baby is hungry, and if I don't feed him now he's liable to tear down my home."

“I still say Triscuit is too big to be a birb with two B’s,” Penny said. “Birbs are supposed to be small, round, and cute.”

“He’s small enough! And birbs don’t need to be round. And cute is subjective. Triscuit is cute enough in my books.”

Having recognized the word and his name and fully knowing we were talking about him, Triscuit shouted, “Triscuit wanna biscuit!” at the top of his little lungs.

“Cute and hungry,” I clarified.

I hung up and made a quick dinner for my feathered friend, which was mostly pelleted food supplemented with vegetables, sprouted seeds, fruits, and a few nuts as treats. Triscuit proceeded to dig into his meal, making a big mess as he always did.

I sighed at the sounds of many little pellets hitting the floor. Bird mom problems. That was what handheld vacuums were for. I’d gone through so many of them that I was tempted to start a review channel just for vacuums. I totally should.

With that out of the way, I sat at the table and microwaved some leftover pasta for myself. Many people, upon finding out that I owned a coffee shop, erroneously concluded that I was also a good cook. I didn’t know why they related the two, but it wasn’t true. Yes, I could cook. And I could bake, too, but it didn’t mean I enjoyed it or was good at it. I specialized in beans only. And even then, only the drinkable kind.

People coming into the Witch’s Brew usually assumed the pastries were made in-house, even though it was written right there on the sign that they came from For Goodness Bakes, a witch-owned and operated bakery on the other side of town.

Which reminded me... I picked up my phone and called the number to For Goodness Bakes. Nina picked up after four rings.

“Hey, Griselda, how can I help you?”

“I’m going to need to change up the order for the next little while,” I said. “Business has been slow lately.”

I felt bad springing this on her, but as another business owner, she understood. By the end of the call, we’d worked out a new agreement for the next few weeks. I finished my food and then quickly cleaned up after Triscuit before putting him to bed, tossing his favorite blanket over his cage.

Then I grabbed the basket with my latest crochet project and my purse, threw on my super warm, polar fleece bat wing robe, slipped into my fuzzy slippers, and stepped out into the stairway. Instead of going to the coffee shop, I headed up to the rooftop patio.

It was winter, but I had two of those umbrella patio heaters up there, something I’d originally bought for the coffee shop but never used. I turned them on, basking in the radiant warmth for a moment before putting my basket down and settling into my wicker love seat after wiping off the newly fallen snow.

I placed my purse on the side table and opened it. It was spelled to open into one of my cabinets, where I’d preemptively put a hot cup of mint tea. I reached in, took it out, took a sip, then placed the tea back into my cupboard. It’d stay warm in there a lot longer than out here.

Then I started on my project, which was yet another hexagon cardigan because why not? I had the pattern memorized by this point and could make one in my sleep. At night, the hustle and bustle of downtown Darlington died down, and there was nothing like crocheting at the end of the day in my little bubble of warmth surrounded by the peace of the snow-covered terrace with the stars twinkling overhead.

My peaceful stitching was rudely interrupted by the sound of a door swinging open several feet away from where I sat. The metal door slammed loudly into the brick wall next to it.

“What the fu—” I jumped to my feet, armed with my crochet hook and ready to protect myself.

In front of me stood Marcus in all his minotaur glory, completely free of the glamor spell he’d had on earlier. His eyes were a glowing amber, and horns sprouted from his head. He wore nothing but a pair of slightly too-tight gym shorts that barely covered his powerful legs and hooves. His chest was bare and covered in sweat. The metal of his nipple piercings was highlighted against his tanned skin.

I stood there, slack-jawed. How could I have forgotten that he’d have a key to the rooftop as well? In my defense, my old neighbors rarely came up here, and I was used to having the place to myself.

“Oops, I didn’t—” he began.

My robe decided that now was a good time to fall open, showing my red, low-cut, barely-there satin nightie.

Marcus’s tiny shorts struggled to hide his reaction.

Do not stare. Do not stare. My eyes betrayed me, and I stared.

One moment he was there, and the next the door was slamming shut again. Then he was gone.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

Griselda had a surprised look on her face when I walked into the Witch's Brew the next day instead of Declan. I couldn't stay away, not after seeing her up on the roof last night.

I'd worked up a sweat from lifting all the heavy equipment and thought the rooftop patio would be a great place to cool off. I hadn't expected anyone to be up there considering it was the dead of winter, most definitely not a cute little witch wielding a metal crafting tool. The fuzzy slippers and robe had been adorable, but it was the sexy satin piece underneath that had completely destroyed any sanity I had.

I'd thought of her all night and barely got any sleep.

To be honest, last night was just the straw that broke the camel's back. My minotaur had been ornery since that first day when she showed up with those cookies. I'd caught myself watching her through my apartment blinds every time she stepped outside, like when she received the morning shipment of baked goods.

My beast was enamored with her, which was ridiculous because he knew that we would never be able to settle down. But there I was, watching Gigi load every single box up on her arm so she didn't need to take more than one trip. It had been everything I could do not to run down there and offer to help.

"Incoming heatwave," whispered the man behind the counter, who probably had no idea I could hear him. I had excellent hearing; most minotaurs did.

I scanned the coffee shop, taking it all in. The decor was kitschy and eclectic, giving it a modern witch vibe, which wasn't surprising considering the name. A photo depicting the shop's exterior a decade ago, complete with a large tarot reading sign, was hung on the wall. Below was the explanation that Griselda had failed at witchcraft but brewed a mean coffee.

The sexy witch herself stood behind the counter, her eyes on me.

The man gave her a tiny shove before loudly exclaiming. "Oh look, we're almost out of milk. Let me go grab some from the back."

Something told me they had a fridge at the back but weren't actually running low on milk at all.

"Morning, neighbor," she said.

"Morning," I said back.

Damn, it was awkward. I hadn't thought past coming and had no idea what to say. If it were up to my minotaur, he'd just pick her up and carry her home. But kidnapping was a felony. It had been so much easier the first time when we met. I saw her, she saw me, we liked what we saw, and I took her home. Easy. Why the fuck was it so much harder now?

Luckily, she knew what to say. "Are you the Americano? Or the café mocha?" she asked.

"The mocha," I said.

"Really? I'd totally pinned you for the Americano type. But I've been wrong before."

“With extra whip,” I added.

“Can’t forget the whip. Just for you today?”

“Yeah, Declan actually had to go into work today.”

She reached for a to-go cup.

“For here today, please.”

I hadn’t originally planned on enjoying my shot of caffeine here, but just one look at her and my minotaur was demanding that I stay. I might as well stay anyway; there wasn’t anything I could do until those mirrors arrived. They were supposed to have arrived this morning, but morning had come and gone and it was now midafternoon. There was still no sight of them.

“Which bean?” she asked, gesturing to the two canisters of beans.

I frowned. Did that matter? “Which one do you usually use?”

“We cycle through different ones so that my customers can try different beans from around the world,” she said. “This one from Ethiopia has more fruity notes, and this Colombian one has hints of nuts.”

I leaned in to read the full descriptions. “Medium light roast. Well balanced. Citrus brightness with a hint of caramel. And this one is...” I furrowed my brows so hard that I was sure my bovine features showed through the mass-produced glamor spell I wore. “... thermal shocked? With hints of caramel and pistachio, reminiscent of vanilla cake. Okay, now I’m even more confused. You choose.”

“Let’s go with the first one. The citrus and caramel work well with the chocolate.”

I watched her intently as she made my drink, brewing a shot of espresso while she melted the chocolate before combining it all together with hot milk and finally topping it with whipped cream.

“I had no idea there were so many steps.”

“How did you think we do it?” she asked, amused.

“I don’t know, drip coffee and some hot chocolate powder?”

There were simultaneous gasps from both Gigi and her employee, whose name tag read Nick.

I put my hands up in the universal sign of surrender. “Hey, I mean no offense. Instant coffee is all I know. I can’t even make drip coffee.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” said Nick. “Instant coffee? Well, don’t you worry, we’ve got you covered. You just throw that garbage out and come here from now on.”

“Your mocha is the best I’ve had,” I admitted, which seemed to be the right thing to say.

“Welcome to the dark side,” Gigi said and handed me my drink.

“Fuck!” I slammed my fist down on the table before I could stop myself. Realizing I wasn’t alone, I looked sheepishly over at Gigi. “Sorry,” I said, patting the table and glad it was made of tough stuff.

I reread the message on my phone. The mirrors weren’t coming. When I’d called the vendor earlier asking about them, they’d sounded positively panicked, so I’d thought maybe they’d forgotten and had been scrambling to get them out. I was wrong. The



mirrors had made it out of the warehouse on time; the holdup happened after.

“What’s the matter?” Gigi’s voice sounded closer than I expected, and I looked up to see she’d come around the counter to stand in front of me, concern on her face.

“I just got an email from the company saying one of their trucks was hijacked today. They destroyed every mirror in the shipment. Left all the windows, which weren’t for me, untouched.”

Which didn’t make any fucking sense. Who the fuck held up a delivery truck just to break my mirrors?

Gigi exchanged a look with Nick.

“Someone hijacked a delivery vehicle just to smash up your mirrors?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. Unbelievable, right?”

“Not unbelievable,” Griselda said before they exchanged another look. “I wonder if it’s our friends from Arcane Development,” she said.

“What aren’t you two telling me?” I asked, because there was something there.

The door to the coffee shop opened with the chime of a bell, and two women walked in just as I asked the question. Griselda pasted on a smile to greet her customers, who both seemed to be regulars because Nick and Gigi already knew their orders.

“I’ll take care of this,” Nick said. “You get our new neighbor all caught up.”

Gigi looked toward the door and I took the hint. She didn’t want to talk in front of her customers.

“Why don’t you come over and see the progress I’m making to the gym renos?” I suggested.

I felt two new sets of eyes move up and down my body in appreciation.

“Oh! You must be the owner of the new gym next door,” one of the women said. “You don’t happen to be looking for a Zumba instructor, are you?” She looked hopeful.

There was a round of introductions and a quick exchange of social media accounts, and soon Gigi and I were making our way over to Bullseye Fitness.

Griselda started her story the moment we were alone.

“My last shipment of beans was destroyed en route. Basically, it's the same story as yours. The thugs held up the van and destroyed every coffee bean in it. Then they left. Didn’t steal anything and made no comments. Just fucked up the beans. It was shortly after you bought the two units.”

“I see.” That was mighty fishy.

“It cost me a pretty penny too. Ended up having to repurchase the beans, and I have it set to deliver through a private delivery service. One that knows what happened to the previous shipment. It makes it prohibitively expensive to run my business. Especially with that asshat outside scaring everyone away except for my most dedicated regulars.”

“Yeah, we need to do something about that guy. I’m guessing he’s not really homeless.”

“Nope. Nick and I call him Faux Hobo. Drives a new Lexus.”

“Does he now?”

“Yup. Saw him get in myself. Parks it around the corner.”

I nodded. “I’ll see what I can do about it.

Gigi frowned. “Don’t do anything to get yourself in trouble.”

She was worried about me? That had the bull part of me wanting to buck with happiness. Ridiculous! Because up until just two weekends ago, I was one hundred and one percent enjoying the permanent bachelor life.

“Don’t you worry about me,” I said. “I pride myself on maintaining a perfect record. You know I’ve never even had a speeding ticket?”

That didn’t mean I didn’t get things done. I was just extra creative when it came to always making sure that nothing came back to me. I hadn’t fought for my freedom just to get stuck behind bars over something silly.

“Never?” She raised a meticulously drawn and perfectly arched brow.

“Never.”

She squinted at my head. “I don’t see a halo.”

I couldn’t stop the smirk. “You of all people should know I won’t have one. Or do I need to give you another demonstration?”

A blush pinkened her pale cheeks ever so slightly, and the scent of her lust blossomed between us as she said, “I remember.”

The blushing surprised me as she'd been no shrinking violet that night. The burst of lust was a good sign. She was still attracted to me. It hadn't been my performance, though I hadn't thought it was. So why had she left that morning?

"Look, Marcus. I know we started out on the wrong foot, and that's probably because of me, but we're stuck in this together. Based the research I had done on them, Arcane has a shit ton of money and a lot of magic too. We have to work together if we want to beat them at their own game."

She was probably right. They didn't seem the types to back down easily.

"Can we please forget whatever happened between us and start fresh?" she asked.

I frowned. That wasn't what my minotaur wanted. I didn't think I could ever forget what happened.

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

Her shoulders sagged, and so did her features. I hated how disappointed she looked. Instinctively I stepped in, closing the space between us, and cupped her face in my palms. She inhaled sharply when our eyes met.

"I agree that we have to work together if we want to keep our businesses and homes," I said. "But I can never forget what happened between us." I inhaled deeply. Yes, she still wanted me. "And judging from your reaction, neither can you."

I didn't know how long I stood there staring into her beautiful green eyes. Those eyes had worked with her red hair perfectly, but now with the dark hair and brows they were absolutely magnetic. I found myself trapped in their depths.

It was the alert tone coming from my phone that freed me from her magnetic pull.

There was someone at my back door. Each of the three units in the building had two entrances: the front door opened directly into the commercial space, and the back opened into a stairway with access both to the shop and to the living space above.

Since I had two combined units, I had a grand total of four doors. I had signs in front of the two doors that had once led to the antique shop asking people to use the other ones. This particular chime meant that someone was at my back door.

I stepped over to my laptop which was sitting on my freshly installed front counter, and pulled up the feed. I'd made sure to set up cameras at all four entrances, just in case.

"Fuck!" I swore.

On the screen was a woman I never wanted to see again in my life. How the fuck had she found me?

My past had finally caught up to me and at the worst of times.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

The screen showed a video feed of a woman wringing her hands by the back door, and by Marcus's reaction, he was not happy to see her.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"That's Elise," he answered absently. "How the hell did she find me?" He dragged both palms over his face. "I'm fucked."

"And who's Elise?"

The woman on the screen looked young at first glance, but she also had the telltale signs of too much filler in her face, so it was hard to tell. It could be a young woman with too much filler making her look older, or an older woman with too much filler, making her look... well, like she had too much filler.

"My mother."

Ah, that explained it.

"Is seeing your mother really that bad?" I asked, almost glad that the attention wasn't on us and our mess of feelings anymore.

"Yeah, it is," he groaned. "I ran off and changed my identity for a reason."

I raised a brow. That was news to me. So was Marcus not his real name?

He stood and started pacing, then went to check that the door to his gym was locked. You'd think he was facing the executioner and not an impromptu parental visit. The windows were frosted, so they let the sunlight in while still blocking the view into the gym. I had thought that was to give his patrons some privacy, but now I wondered if it was for another reason.

"First the mirrors, and now this? Fuck my life." He was pacing now, the energy radiating from him turning more chaotic by the second. "I made sure never to show my face in my gym's social posts. How did she find me?"

I reached out and put a calming hand on his arm, and he stopped pacing. Whatever his mother represented, it was bad news. He was no use if he panicked, so I tried to lighten things up. "Should I be worried that you're not who you say you are? Don't tell me I've been screaming the wrong name."

He raised a brow. "I know what you're trying to do; you're trying to distract me. But no. You don't need to worry about that. Marcus is the only name I go by now."

"Want to enlighten me on why you're reacting to your mom like she's here to end your life?"

"It's a long story."

The doorbell rang again, and the woman on the screen looked up at the camera, finally noticing it. She pulled the scarf tighter to cover her face. Now that I knew she was Marcus's mother, I saw the similarities. However, this woman looked fully human, but maybe it was an illusion. Illusion and glamor spells were quite common now, but the cheap ones were easy to see through, unlike the glamor The Wall had provided.

The Wall was a spell that had hidden monsters and magic from humans for as long as

written history itself. It had suddenly faded a few years ago, shocking everyone except for those already in the know, like me. It must've been crazy waking up to discover that magic existed as well as monsters and creatures previously thought to be only things of myths and legends.

And that gave me an idea.

"I don't think she's leaving," I said.

"No, she wouldn't, not until she gets what she wants. But that ain't happening." Marcus still didn't offer any other explanation.

"Let's make a deal. I help you convince her that you are Marcus and not whoever you were, and you tell me why you're avoiding her. All of it. No omissions. No lies."

Marcus looked ready to bolt for a moment, but there was nowhere for him to run. Finally he said, "Only if you promise the information stays between us."

A secret then. I didn't know what to expect, but I did know that I needed a partner to help fight Arcane Development. I had this feeling that if Marcus's mother got what she wanted, I'd be out of a friendly neighbor.

"Deal," I agreed.

He nodded. "What's your plan?"

Instead of telling him, I simply said, "Sit still and let me work my magic."

He looked amused but didn't move. As I worked, the negative energy from him started to fade.



First I removed the glamor spell that hid his horns and other inhuman details. The original spell had kept his defining looks and simply humanized them. He still looked like himself despite the illusion. My job was to turn him into someone else completely.

“I’m guessing she expects a minotaur?” I asked.

“Yes, or one in glamor.”

“I’m going to keep your minotaur form so she thinks you aren’t wearing glamor at all. Trust me, no one can see through this unless they are a seasoned magic user.”

I focused on his face, manipulating the air around, sculpting a new one. A little nudge here. A small bump there. It was like working with modeling clay, except the magic made it much easier for me to form what I saw in my head. Then a few softly chanted words. Done.

“Ta-da!” I grinned at my masterpiece. It was still the same gorgeous face under the mask, but on the outside, Marcus was someone else. Gone were the sculpted cheekbones and the sharp jawline, replaced by something that was wholly and utterly average. Still decent-looking, but not cover-model gorgeous.

And he was still very much a minotaur, complete with horns, downturned bovine ears, and bullish features. Under his pants, his legs were those of a beast. I looked down to check, and sure enough the trainers he wore were shaped for a set of hooves.

He went to the single floor-length mirror he’d leaned up against the wall for a look, and reached up to touch his face.

“What did you do? I’ve never had glamor spells change my actual features before. Usually they only hide my bull parts.”

“It’s still a glamor spell, just a more advanced one. Even if she tried to use one of those illusion-detecting apps, it’d come back as natural. You might need to change your voice though.”

He shook his head. “My voice is very different from before. She won’t recognize it.”

He headed toward the back door and stepped out into the stairwell. I turned my attention to the screen. Moments later the door opened, and Marcus stepped into the shot, forcing the woman to step back. She frowned at him, confusion clear on her face. This was not who she’d expected.

“Ma’am, if you’re looking for the young lady who owned the bookstore, she moved. But if it’s important, I can try to get a message to her.” Marcus made himself sound ultra white-bread American.

“Um, ah, no. I was looking for...” She looked down at her phone. “...Marcus.”

“That’s me.” Marcus made a show of looking past her shoulder. “Is it the yoga mat delivery? I thought it was coming tomorrow.”

The woman suddenly lifted her phone and snapped a picture of him, the flash blinding the cameras.

“Hey!” Marcus complained, holding a hand over his eyes. “What the hell?”

The woman stepped back, her eyes on her screen. She looked confused, probably because her app failed to detect any illusion spells on him.

“No, no, no.” She shook her head. “ Mais, c’est vrai .”

“Delete that right now,” Marcus exclaimed in false outrage. “Who put you up to this?”

One of our competitors?”

But the woman was already running off.

A minute later the door opened and Marcus stepped back in. “She bought it. She even tried to use one of those apps, like you said. Thank you, Gigi. I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“First, you have to tell me what all this is about,” I reminded him.

“Right.” He looked around like he no longer trusted the walls. “Come upstairs. If I’m telling this story, I need a stiff drink.”

“Are you sure this isn’t just some ruse to get me to go home with you again?”

That had him grinning. “Maybe,” he said with a waggle of his brows. But the humor faded quickly, and he checked the camera feeds again before closing his laptop and tucking it under his arm. He started toward the stairwell. “Pardon the mess; I’m still setting up after the move. And there’s stuff everywhere.”

“I won’t judge.”

As he walked by the mirror, he frowned at the monster staring back at him. “Can I have my face back for now?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

I brought the heavy glass tumbler to my lips and took a sip. I'd insisted on breaking out the whiskey to tell my story. I needed it.

"Only one other person knows about this, so if this gets out, I know where you live." I kept my tone casual, but I meant it. This was a secret and had to remain so. I didn't even understand why my minotaur insisted I tell her. It was a big risk.

"All right, now you're kinda scaring me. This feels big."

"It is to me. But I don't think it's big in the grand scheme of things. No one will miss one minotaur except for my friends."

"Your life is on the line?" she asked with furrowed brows.

"Oh no, my life will be fine. It's my freedom that I'm worried about."

"You're not some kind of wanted felon, are you? Is that why you have such a clean and pristine record? Because it's fake?"

I chuckled. "No, nothing like that." I turned serious again. "But if she finds me, I'll be dragged off to a place that might as well be a prison. And up until just a few minutes ago, I thought I was safe. I have no idea how she found me."

Everything around me suddenly felt suspect. I glared at the walls like somehow they'd given me away. I checked to make sure the blinds were all closed. They were,

but it didn't stop the overwhelmingly irrational thoughts that someone could be watching me.

"Is this place warded?" she asked.

"Warded?"

"Blocked from magical intrusion," she said, like that explained it. "You know, to stop anyone from listening or spying on you."

"No." Despite being a monster, I didn't know much about magic itself. But I understood what she meant by wards now: barriers against magic. "You think that's a possibility?"

She shrugged. "That depends on how much magic the other side has and how much they want to get their hands on you."

"Shit. And all this time, I thought I was being a dumb, irrational conspiracy theorist when I worried about the walls having eyes and ears and giving me away. The other side definitely has access to quite a bit of magic, and I'm sure they really, really want to get their hands on me."

She rolled her eyes. "And you never thought to guard against it?"

"I didn't know how. I'm a minotaur, but I was raised like a human. Maman told me I had to hide what I was, or I'd be locked up forever. I thought I was the only one for the longest time. I most definitely didn't know about magic."

Her face softened. "Oh, then you're forgiven." She moved to one of the external walls, one not attached to her side of the building. "The good thing is I don't feel any magical spells inside your home or shop right now. I'm going to cast a blanket of

silence anyway, just in case your phones or devices have been hacked.”

I took out my phone and frowned at it suspiciously. I hadn’t thought of that either, and for that I had no excuse. I was raised with technology. I’d been living such a normal life, hidden away under my new alias here in Darlington, that I’d gotten too lax.

Gigi’s hands danced in the air, and she mumbled some words I couldn’t decipher. Then she grabbed the edge of something I couldn’t see and threw it into the air.

“All done. Your words won’t leave this circle.”

I didn’t know what circle she referred to, but I trusted her. I’d probably be able to see it if I could see magic like Declan, but I couldn’t.

“I guess I should start at the beginning,” I said, rolling the amber liquid in the glass. “Whenever the hell that was. I don’t know when this all started, but it was many generations ago. Back in the day, there weren’t many options for known monsters. It was either hide and hope the mob didn’t find you, become so powerful they can’t hurt you, or hide under the wings of someone who was.”

“What about The Wall?” she asked. “Didn’t it hide you guys from regular humans?”

“The Wall hid what we were, but some people knew anyway. And once enough people saw through the veil, there was no coming back. At least not with my family. A dragon masquerading as a merchant made a deal with my forefather. He’d protect and care for his mate and offspring if my many-times great-grandfather guarded his hoard.”

Her eyes grew wide. “A dragon!”

“Yes. And my family has been guarding his hoard ever since. The firstborn son of the last guardian must take his place.” I couldn’t stop my anger and irritation at the situation from oozing out and coloring my words.

“And you don’t want to continue this tradition,” she said perceptively.

“No. I do not. I have my own life to live, and I do not want to give it up so I can lose my mind roaming a maze for the rest of my existence, guarding something I don’t give a fuck about.”

“Did you just say a maze? Like the labyrinth at Knossos?”

“Yeah, the dragon has a sense of humor. He built a replica of the labyrinth over the entrance of his treasure hoard.”

“So you ran off to avoid being stuck in this labyrinth.”

“Yes. It’s a goddamn prison sentence for the crime of being born me. That’s why I left the old world and came here. Darlington is under the protection of another dragon, and I hoped that would be enough of a deterrent. Plus, there are plenty of other monsters here. Even other minotaurs. And since a lot of monsters show up here with no IDs, I was able to craft a new identity and start fresh. I hid in plain sight for years.”

“And I’m guessing you can’t just say no to a dragon.”

“No. The only way I figured I could get out of this was to find a loophole in the contract. The problem is I didn’t sign the original contract. I’ve never even read it. I’m not sure it really exists. So, I ran.

“Once we’re in the maze, we aren’t allowed out until we’re too old to serve. But by

that time, we're all fucked in the head after years of isolation. My granddad set a village on fire, then threw himself off a cliff when he came out and realized the woman who had my dad with him was now happily married. She was horrified that the monster went looking for her. To my grandmother, having and raising my dad was just a well-paying gig. Nothing more."

"Shit. That sucks. I'm sorry." But Gigi was smart and put two and two together. "Your mother is the same way?"

I chugged the rest of my liquor. Realizing that Maman only thought of me as a paycheck had been hard, but I'd had years to come to terms with it. But admitting it to this gorgeous, talented witch was more embarrassing than I could have imagined.

"Maman was contracted, just like my grandma and all the women before her. She was paid to go into the maze, conceive a male child, and then raise him. She was paid well too. We never wanted for anything growing up."

"Let me guess, now that you've run off, it's her job to drag you back so she can continue living a cushy life."

"Bingo. My grandfather was considered a lucky one. Most of my forefathers never left the maze at all; they died protecting it. The fact that Elise is showing up now after all these years? I can only guess that my father is dead and they need me to replace him."

I watched her face closely as she processed the information, looking for signs of what she might be thinking. I hated that she already knew this about me. I didn't want her to pity me.

"I don't know how to react. That fucking sucks. But I'm happy you got out, and I'm glad I helped you. Do you think she'd keep checking this place? Just to make sure?"



“She would.”

She nodded. “Then I’ll have to craft you a glamor spell you can use whenever you need.”

“The gym doesn’t open for two more weeks, so technically I don’t need to see anyone yet. When it opens, Declan and the receptionist can do most of the front-facing work anyway. I technically don’t need to be a presence there all the time.”

“Maybe by the time your gym opens she’ll have seen enough to give up.”

I wasn’t so sure. “Thank you for helping me. How can I repay you?”

Her eyes dragged over my body, lingering on my biceps, and the smoldering look on her face had me thinking of the many hours I’d had her in my bed.

“Oh,” she said, her lips curling up in a devious smile, “I have some ideas. Come by at closing time. The coffee shop closes at 6 p.m. on weekdays. ”

Topless vacuuming was not what I’d had in mind when Gigi said she had ideas on how I could repay her. But here I was, vacuuming her home as she looked on from her seat on the velvet couch.

Her place was a maximalist’s dream. It was filled with all manners of objects: knickknacks, books, candles, crystals, and curiosities of all kinds lovingly curated and lined up on shelves and stored behind glass in cabinets. I was willing to bet a good number of the objects here were magical.

In addition to the multitude of oddities, her home was also furnished with a sumptuous array of fibers and fabrics, from the deep red velvet of the couch and the handmade afghan tossed over it, to the billowing curtains hanging in front of the

windows.

I eyed the wall hanging of a raven on a branch set against a crescent moon. It was made of tiny X-shaped stitches and must have taken forever to make. Someone had most definitely made it because she certainly hadn't found that next to the Live Laugh Love prints at the local home decor store.

There were several houseplants—a bunch of succulents, and a single cactus—on the windowsill.

But the pièce de resistance was Triscuit, Griselda's African grey parrot. The bird had his eyes on me when I walked in, and even though Gigi had thrown a blanket over the cage to hide the vacuum cleaner from the bird, I kept hearing maniacal laughter coming from its cage every time I stopped vacuuming. The bird's oversized flight cage sat against one of the walls and, like Gigi's home, was filled to the brim with colorful toys.

Despite how full the home was, it smelled fresh and clean. Her numerous collections were lifted off the floor; everything had a home and was displayed like treasures.

I guided the stick vacuum under the table one last time before turning it off. The silence was greeted by evil-sounding laughter again, followed by rhythmic bird chanting. I frowned, hoping that birds couldn't cast spells.

I returned the vacuum to the closet, washed my hands, and returned to see that Triscuit was out of his cage now that the scary vacuum was gone. He stood on the perch above his cage, mumbling to his reflection in the tiny hanging mirror.

Gigi motioned me over to the couch.

"Now to cast the final spell." Gigi's mouth moved silently, and the room brightened

for a split second, so fast I wondered if I'd imagined it. "Done!"

She held up the single cuff earring I'd given to her earlier for the spell, and I took it from her.

"So the spell is in here?" I held up the earring. It didn't look any different.

"Yup. Just rub it and say, 'Hot-crossed man-buns,' and the spell will turn on and off."

"Hot-crossed man-buns?? You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. I'm completely serious." She failed at keeping her face neutral, and the corner of her lips twitched up in an amused smile. "But for complete transparency, it's attached to me, just like the magical wards around my home. When it's on, it's using my magic, so I'll know when you're using it."

"It won't be too much, will it?" I knew that witches had limited energy they could generate at any given time.

"It should be fine. This is a more complex form of a basic glamor spell. I want to make sure no one can see through it, even with magic. You mentioned a dragon, so I have to assume that this dragon would have witches and wizards at his disposal."

"Right. Does that mean I have to turn every mirror in my home around? That'll be hard in the gym. If the mirrors ever get here." I'd gotten an email earlier from the vendor saying they were sending them out again tomorrow. I just hoped they arrived with no issues.

Gigi laughed. "I'm not sure where you're getting your information, but we don't need a mirror to see you."

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’m beginning to think that little bit in your café about you failing at witchcraft is a lie,” I said wryly, like I hadn’t just witnessed her successfully cast a bunch of spells today.

“Well, that depends on your definition of failure. I had a tarot reading business before this. It was a failure because it didn’t make any money. Coffee, however, does. I’m not amazing, but I’m not crappy either. I just prefer people underestimate me than the other way around.”

“So you’re a sleeper witch. Got it. “

I looked around for a mirror since I wasn’t great at putting my jewelry on without one as I rarely took them off.

“Here. Let me do it,” She pulled me to sit down next to her on the couch, then took the earring from me.

She leaned in and I held my breath as she put the earring in. I was highly aware that I didn’t have my usual glamor on—like the glamor I’d kept on through our night together. The combination of magic and perception was powerful. Often what we saw was what we felt, the brain filling and correcting imperfect details.

Gigi had known I wasn’t human, but she hadn’t pried that night. Now, she didn’t shy away from my downturned bovine ears. Her hands were soft as she carefully fitted the earring back into place.

I made the mistake of inhaling too early, and the scent of her filled my lungs. Every detail from our night together came rushing back, and something in me snapped. My minotaur took over, and I pulled her the rest of the way onto me. Her smaller body fell into mine and I wrapped my arms around her.

She gasped, even as my lips crashed onto hers, claiming her. After a moment of surprise, she started to kiss me back, accepting my invitation with a soft moan that threatened to strip away my ability to think.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

Marcus's kiss sent the heated memory of our night together surging through me. His scent, a crisp blend of masculine cologne and something more natural, more primal, filled my nose. I wanted to roll around and revel in it.

Firm hands held me a willing prisoner against taut muscles, pressing me so that I fit against him perfectly. I slid my hand, which had been by his ear, into the denser hair around his horns.

He'd worn his glamor when we first met, but I remembered how much he loved it when I pulled his hair or touched around his ears. It made sense now as I scratched the sensitive area at the base of his horns. He reacted by grabbing my ass and squeezing, pressing me against the large erection that had sprung up between us.

Now that I saw him for what he was, the feel of his lips made a lot more sense. When he'd had the glamor on his mouth felt much larger than it looked, but seeing was believing, and I didn't question it despite knowing he wore glamor.

That was the thing about living in Darlington. Many people were covered by illusion, and this was especially true when meeting bed partners at places like Delirium. I just rolled with it.

I moaned into his mouth, my own hunger growing. The need started in my center, deep and aching, even as he parted my lips with his thick tongue and swept it into a dance with mine.

It was Triscuit who ended our kiss. He flew up in our faces and started harassing Marcus, who quickly scrambled away and put his arm up to protect his face.

This reminded me why I never brought anyone home. It was always their place, not mine. That was the thing about parrots. It was easy to trigger their overprotectiveness and jealousy.

Triscuit had actually quite liked Marcus when he first came in, probably because I had preemptively given him a treat to offer the bird. And he'd been relatively accepting while he vacuumed. In fact, Triscuit had been so unobtrusive that I'd forgotten he was there when the kiss had started.

"If you spring away every time, it'll just teach him that attacking you will make us stop." I pulled Marcus back onto the couch next to me. "Here." I quickly tossed Marcus a pack of pistachios. "Offer him a few, but only if he's nice."

After a while, things calmed, and Triscuit started playing on the coffee table with some toys.

"I'm going to extend my ward to cover the entire building. It's not foolproof though, so people can still look into the windows, but they won't be able to cast any spells into the building."

"Thank you. You don't have to do all this, but I'm glad you are."

"It's for selfish reasons," I admitted. "First, if you're gone, that will give Arcane Development an in. And second, who else is going to vacuum topless for me?"

That had him grinning, and I was glad I could lighten the mood.

Triscuit was shouting about biscuits, which meant it was his dinner time. And any

sexy or romantic feeling had to wait. Seriously, it was impossible with a shouting parrot.

“Before you go, can you put up the glamor and walk me around the building?” I asked. “I want to extend my wards to cover everything.”

Technically, I could cast a spell without drawing a demarcation by simply asking the spell to follow the outside of the wall, but it was a lot easier if I could see it. Just to save myself some energy, I grabbed a thick, black permanent marker so I could draw an uninterrupted ring around the property.

By the time I returned to my home, sans sexy neighbor, Triscuit was this close to tearing apart the fabric of reality because his dinner was late. Luckily, I’d put him back into his cage before leaving to fix the wards so all he could destroy were his toys.

I quickly fed him and myself, throwing together a dinner of whatever I had in the fridge. I really needed groceries.

But did I head to the grocery store? Nope! I went online instead, scouring the collective knowledge of the internet for any information I could find about minotaurs and mazes. I had to wade through pages of results repeating the same story from Greek mythology until I found something that mentioned a dragon. Except this was an unknown fantasy novel written in the late Victorian era, and aside from a single paragraph mentioning it, there was nothing else.

All I had was the author's name, not even a title! It was a nom de plume by the looks of it. Comtesse du Taureau. The Countess of the Bull. Interesting, because female authors at the time usually used a male pseudonym. This author decided to keep her female identity.



Was it the other way around? A man writing as a woman in the nineteenth century? That was very common now, but it was unheard of back then.

It was well past my bedtime by the time I looked up from my research.

Shit. It was Nick's day off tomorrow so I had to wake up early to open, but I did get half the day off since both Jules and Alyssa were coming in tomorrow afternoon. Maybe I'd take a trip down to the library and see what else I could find about this Comtesse du Taureau.

It was just before noon when a car alarm started going off, and Faux Hobo ran off, leaving all of his change. Hey, when you gotta go, you gotta go.

"About flipping time," Jules said. "I thought he'd never leave."

A few minutes later, Alyssa stepped in, panting like she just ran a mile.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my eyes scanning the windows for danger.

She waved away my concern as she caught her breath. When she could finally speak, she said, "I just saw the most unbelievable thing. An animal I'd never seen before—black and gray, stocky, big claws—just ran out of the bushes carrying a wasp nest and launched it through a car's windshield. Then it just ran off. The wasps started going crazy, so I booked it."

"A wasp nest? In the middle of winter?" I asked.

"Yup! I have no idea where it got it."

I exchanged a look with Jules before asking, "Did the car happen to be a Lexus?"

“I don’t know. All cars look the same to me. Maybe? It looked new.”

Hmm, I wondered if that was why Faux Hobo was running like the wind.

“What did you say the animal looked like?” Jules asked.

“Black and gray. Lighter bits on top. Short and stocky, with a big claws. And it didn’t seem to be scared of the wasps. And those wasps were angry as fuck.”

“What does a honey badger look like?” Jules asked.

Curious, I looked it up and showed her.

“Hey! That’s it!” Alyssa exclaimed. “But much, much bigger than in that photo.

Okay, so it was a honey badger.

“I don’t think we get them here,” I said

“Has to be a shifter.”

A lot of shifters’ animal forms are bigger than regular versions of the animals, especially if the animals they shifted into were usually smaller than humans. Magic was good with a lot of things, but mass was mass, and there was only so much it could fudge. That was why the human forms of bear, big cats, and wolf shifters were often heavier than they looked. It really messed up those guys at the carnival who tried to guess people’s weight.

“A honey badger shifter? Do they even exist?” Alyssa asked.

“No clue,” I said. I’d honestly never looked into it.

Once Alyssa got set up, I headed out to the library. Not just any library, though. Darlington's Library of Magic it was how I recharged my magic. But while I had a decent number of spell books, I didn't specialize in them.

Everyone knew about witches who recharged through sex and touch. They simultaneously intrigued and terrified the men of the world, and as such, they had been written about extensively by scholars. Education, for the longest time, had been a game only rich boys could play. This was true throughout magical and non-magical history.

But there were other ways for us to recharge our magic. Sleeping and eating were great options. And time does wonders. But to speed it up, many witches like myself surrounded ourselves with things we loved. For some, the items had to be magical. But for me, they just had to have a certain sentiment. My home was filled with wonderful objects, both magical and not.

And that was my little secret. Without all these objects, I was a shitty witch. I had magic, sure, and out of our little coven of three, I used to be the strongest. But I wasn't born this way. It wasn't until I'd learned to pull the inherent magic from the things around me that my powers became more notable. Now that Penny had found her incubus and tapped into her sex magic, I reckoned she was quite a bit more powerful than me, even though she'd started out as what she lovingly called "a special-ed witch," her words, not mine.

She'd had so much difficulty learning witchcraft that she'd started an online website showing other non-neurotypical witches how to access and harness their powers. I remember struggling to teach her when we were in college. It wasn't that she wasn't strong; she just did things a little differently. She wasn't a book learner, but rather, she had to learn through demonstrations or other more hands-on methods.

Currently, my home was too full for me to add to my collections. As much as I loved

things, I also needed them to be well-organized and neat. I couldn't handle piles of things on the floor. That just stressed me out. As a result, many of my collections have spilled out into the coffee shop. Interesting objects made great decorations; who knew?

It took me almost an hour of searching before I found anything on the Comtesse. Another quick reference about her work and this time, a title! Rencontre Avec un Minotaure . "Meeting with a Minotaur."

That sounded interesting. It had been published as fiction, an erotic fantasy, but I wonder if it was an autobiography masquerading as a titillating story. I understood why she kept the female moniker now. It was a saucy recounting of debauchery straight from the fallen woman's fountain nib.

I was searching for a copy of it when I felt the first unwanted prod at my wards. It was light at first, barely noticeable, and I thought I had imagined it. Then it became more insistent.

My home was under attack!

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

I peered outside my gym's window through the teeny-tiny unfrosted gap in the logo. Sure enough, the guy Arcane Development had sent had not returned.

I guess he was still dealing with his new wasp friends.

"It's going to be a while before he can move his car," Declan said. "Considering there's a wasp nest in his front seat."

We'd made sure there were no cameras in the area. Who'd believe someone would launch a wasp nest through a car's windshield? Can you imagine the stings the perp would amass? Totally unplausible.

"I had one witness, though," Declan said. "But she works next door at the Witch's Brew. After I shifted and dressed, I went in to check, and she was behind the counter."

"I don't think she's going to say anything considering her job is at stake. No coffee shop, no job."

The mirrors had finally arrived, and we'd spent the day putting them up. We'd learned the hard way that all mirrors in gyms, dojos, and dance studios had to be glued down in addition to the mounts. All it had taken was one accidentally flung weight. Glue prevented the mirrors from shattering into a billion impossible-to-clean-up pieces.

“So the witch next door knows your story now?” Declan asked casually as we lifted the large sheet up, fitted it inside the mounts, and held it to the wall.

“Yeah. I had to tell her. I didn’t expect Elise to show up when she did. We’ve been hiding so well.”

Up until this point, Declan had been the only one I trusted with my secret.

“I wonder how Elise found out. We were so careful to edit out your face in all the gym photo ads.”

“What if it’s not the photos?” I wondered.

If it was, how had she known where to look? Bullseye Fitness could be owned by any minotaur. And I was all the way here in America; the last time she saw me was in Europe.

“Maybe it wasn’t Elise herself,” Declan suggested. “The dragon could have a team working for him. Maybe they’ve exhausted all their leads in the old world and came here.”

I’d originally decided to hide in plain sight as a minotaur because it seemed almost silly. Surely a minotaur going into hiding would pretend to be a human or something, not another minotaur. It had worked. I’d been free for almost a decade. But had it really worked? Perhaps the dragon had simply let me believe I was safe until I needed to do my duty.

We were just finishing up trimming out the larger wall of mirrors and were about to start putting up the smaller one when my phone chimed multiple times, signaling that someone was at the back door. My hackles raised immediately.

The video feed didn't show my mother, but my little witch, her brows furrowed and looking visibly tired.

"It's Gigi," I said, tucking the phone back into my pocket and heading toward the back door.

"Wait. It could be a trick. I'll come with you too, just in case."

"You're right." I reached for the charmed earring Gigi had given me, rubbed it three times and whispered the ridiculous words, hoping Declan didn't hear them.

The familiar feeling of a glamor spell settled on my face. Unlike the magic of The Wall, which hadn't felt like anything at all, most single-use, ready-to-wear glamor spells available in stores were heavy and uncomfortable. Some have likened it to dry contacts but all over the face. I'd never worn contacts, so I couldn't confirm. Gigi's spell was lighter, feeling more comfortable as time went on instead of the other way around.

With both Declan and me in the stairwell, it was cramped, but I liked knowing that he had my back.

Gigi's face greeted me behind the door. She made to step inside, looking relieved, but I stopped her.

"Wait. What are the magic words?" I asked, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Magic words." Her brows furrowed in the cutest way.

I scratched my neck under the earring to give her the hint.

"Oh! Hot-crossed man-buns," she said.

Behind me, Declan let out an almost girly giggle. “Hot-crossed man-buns? So that was what you were mumbling!”

I let Gigi in, and Declan backed out into the main area of the gym.

“We weren’t sure it was really you,” Declan explained.

“I’m going to go on a limb and say that Declan is the other person who knows, considering you’re in your glamor.”

“Yes. I guess I don’t need it anymore.” I reached up, rubbed the earring, and said the silly words again, sending Declan into another laughing fit. Just because he was the type to get straight A’s when he was in school didn’t mean he wasn’t also a total clown at heart.

“It’s best you were careful. Someone’s been trying to knock down my wards all afternoon. That’s why I’m here. I tried to contact you. I didn’t have the phone number, so I called the gym, but it went straight to voicemail, saying you guys are closed for the next two weeks.”

“Oops.” Declan fished the gym cell phone out of his pocket. “I had it on silent.”

We exchanged our personal numbers, something we should have done before, and sat down in the office area. It was one of the few walls I’d left up. People would have to go through the office to access the stairwell leading to my home. The door to the other stairwell was kept locked.

“Who do you think is trying to mess with your magic?” I asked. “The land development company? Or the dragon?”

She looked pensive. “I’m not sure. But I just realized that you’ve only ever called



him ‘the dragon.’ Does this dragon have a name?”

“Not that I know of. At least I’ve never been told his name. But Maman always referred to the dragon as ‘him.’ I hate that I don’t know more about the whole situation. It almost feels like Elise kept it from me on purpose.”

“Perhaps it’s all she knew as well. Elise. That sounds French, especially the way you say it. And you call her Maman, which I’m guessing is also French.”

“It is.” I hesitated momentarily before saying, “I was raised in Paris.”

“You don’t have an accent. At least not until you started talking about your mother. And ‘Pair-ee.’ Aside from these instances, I would’ve pegged you as American, born and raised.”

“Thank you.” I beamed. “I worked hard to make myself sound as American as I could. I’m glad it paid off.”

“That’s why you said she wouldn’t recognize your voice.”

“Yep. Because this is how I used to speak English,” I said, letting the French accent come out.

Even I couldn’t recognize myself anymore. I was so used to hearing an all-American accent when I spoke.

“Yeah.” Gigi rubbed the back of her neck. “Nothing against French accents, and I’m sure tons of people find them sexy. But it’s weird coming from you when I’m used to the other one.”

“It could be Arcane,” Declan said. “They did lose their planted spy today.”

“You mean our Faux Hobo?” Gigi asked.

“That’s right.” It came out rather smugly, as if Declan couldn’t keep his victory in.

“One of my employees said she saw a honey badger launch a wasp nest through the car’s windshield.”

Declan barely kept a straight face. “A honey badger? In this part of the world? Nah. The guy shouldn’t park under wasp nests. They’re dangerous.”

Declan lived his life as a plain human, and if I hadn’t already known what he was, I would’ve believed it. Unlike other shifters, he kept his animal side well hidden. I suspect it was easier because his honey badger, though tough, was smaller than his human.

Or maybe it was because he didn’t smell anything like a wolf or a bear, the most common shifters in these parts. No one recognized the smell of a honey badger. Honey badger shifters, in general, aren’t very well known, even in the old world. They preferred to stay hidden, and the lack of a pack structure meant they didn’t have pack lands or large territories. They were happy to just hide amongst the humans in towns and cities.

“It could be Arcane. But those were some strong pokes I felt into my wards. Do land development companies normally keep wizards or witches on hand?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

Gigi rubbed the back of her neck. “I might have done a little bit of searching on your behalf online last night and at the library today. The reason I asked if the name was French is because I came across a certain Comtesse du Taureau.”

I raised my brow. “Countess of the Bull?”

“She wrote an unknown erotic fantasy in the late Victorian era titled—and I’m sorry if I butcher the pronunciation— *Rencontre Avec un Minotaur*. ”

“Maybe your great-great-grandmother?” Declan suggested.

“Perhaps.”

“It seemed it was generally ignored as a piece of smut. But it was notable enough to have been mentioned once in a book of urban legends and lore. I didn’t manage to get my hands on a copy, but even if I could, I wouldn’t be able to read it.”

“But I can read it.” It might not be useful, but I didn’t want to leave any stones unturned.

Griselda’s face suddenly darkened.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“They’re messing with the wards again. It’s already weakened, and I haven’t had the time or energy to fix it.”

“What can I do to help?” I tried to tamp down the urge to fight something, anything, just to protect her.

“Food and rest. And physical safety so I can focus all my energy on the ward and not have to worry. That’s why I came here instead of staying at the library or going home.”

Declan glanced around the gym. “We got a lot done today. Why don’t you go support

your witch, and I'll go see if I can dig up anything else on this Countess of the Bull."

"Be careful," Gigi warned.

"Aww. She's worried about me. How cute," Declan said flippantly.

Gigi narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm worried about you giving us away."

"I can handle myself."

Gigi didn't look too reassured but relented. "Well, if you're so good, then do me a favor?"

"Sure. What?"

"Look around the building for me and see if you find anything out of the ordinary."

"What exactly am I looking for?"

"Anyone hanging out inside their cars within sight of the building. It's possible to cast spells from afar, but it takes a lot more energy, and even then, most casters need to be able to sight their targets. There's an advance trick of opening a tiny keyhole portal to see the target before casting a spell. But again, that portal location needs to be sighted or relayed by someone else."

"Kind of like needing an IP address before connecting to it." Declan nodded like he totally understood. "Gotcha. I'll take a look around."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

“He’s back!”

That was the message that came right before Declan sent a picture of a rental U-Haul parked just down the street from our location with the perfect view of the building. And who was inside? None other than our Faux Hobo.

“We found our troublemaker,” Marcus said.

I could almost feel him relax through the air between us. If it was Arcane, then it wasn’t his dragon.

“I guess he never got the wasps out of his car. The question is: is he the one prodding at my wards, or is he simply spotting for someone else?”

“I still don’t understand how that works,” Marcus admitted.

“It’s kind of like this. Let’s say I want to open a portal that joins your living room with my living room—”

“Why would we need to?” he asked. “We can just knock down the walls.”

I tried my best not to roll my eyes. “Let’s, for the sake of this explanation, pretend we live across town from each other. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“And I want to travel from my place to your place without stepping out of my living room. I’d have to open a portal between our homes. But I can’t just guess where it is and open a random portal, even if I have a map and have been to your place before. I could miss, and it might open up in your basement, or in your neighbors’, or in the air above your house, or worse, underground.

“So, to make it more accurate, I’ll use you as a reference point so the portal opens up in front of you. And if you were another magic user, you can set a location in your home where all portals open so I won’t step out, say, onto your dining room table.”

“I think I understand now. If this guy isn’t our magic caster, he could be the one helping him or her reach us.”

“You got it.”

“One question.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

It was the sexy smirk lifting the corner of his mouth that gave him away before his words did. “What if I want you to portal into my bedroom instead of my living room?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, and he burst out into laughter as I smacked him playfully on his chest with my hand.

“Okay, but more seriously,” he said, still grinning. “Will it help you if he's distracted or if we block his view?”

“Yes. And if it doesn’t work, then we know it’s not him.”

Declan happily volunteered to create a distraction. He almost sounded excited to have something to do. It seemed like he preferred to cause mischief for a reason rather than just for the sake of it.

We went to my place through the rooftop patio so I could surround myself with my magical goodies. As I strengthened my magic, Marcus went through my kitchen to look for something to eat.

“I’m not sure what you’ll be able to find. I haven’t done groceries since last week. Here, catch.” I tossed him my phone. “Order in. Just choose something from my favorites list. As long as it’s high in calories, with lots of fat and protein, it will work. No salads, please.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“And grab yourself something too. I hate being the only one eating.”

As Marcus decided what to order, I dug a frozen chocolate sheet cake out from the back of my freezer and started into it with a spoon. I kept those on hand to replenish my energy in a pinch.

“Shouldn’t you defrost that first?”

“Nope. It’s best frozen.” I stabbed the spoon into the center of the cake, scooped out a big chunk, and shoved it unceremoniously in my mouth. Mmm. Cake. “And just for full disclosure, I turn into a total gremlin when my magic is low.”

“Well, I guess I better hurry up and order then.”

He ended up ordering Chinese food from a place down the street, which was just as well because greasy noodles were a great source of calories. Plus, they delivered

quickly. As we waited, I focused on the war around my home, going right up to the wall and touching it, trying to find where the problem was. I technically didn't need to touch it, but like seeing the target, touching made things easier. I was clearly outclassed here, and I needed every advantage I could get.

Triscuit knew the moment I picked him up that we were on a mission. This wasn't play time; this was work. He sat on my shoulder and started preening my hair.

The problem was that no matter how fast I mended the barrier, someone was tearing it down even faster. It was shortly after the food arrived that I started to make leeway. It was also then that I got a call from Jules.

"Hey, Gigi. You won't believe what's happening right now. There's a full-blown muscle man photoshoot happening right outside our door."

So that was the noise I'd been hearing.

"Everyone's coming in for coffee between posing," Jules continued. "The place is full for the first time since those asshats started messing with us."

I peered outside my curtains, and sure enough, there were about a dozen half-naked hotties strutting their stuff outside. There were also several large backdrops, and bright lights. One set of lights wasn't pointed at the models but rather directly at the U-Haul, blinding our spotter. There were also several large trucks between Faux Hobo and the building now.

Jules assured me that they didn't need extra help, but I told her I was upstairs and to call if she needed anything.

"A photoshoot?" I raised a brow at Marcus.



He just grinned. “That’s Declan for you. You said you wanted a distraction. Declan called the boys in and said they were doing a photoshoot to advertise the new location. Anyone chosen for the ad gets a free month’s membership.”

“I guess it’s working because they gave up. I managed to fix a bit of the ward, but there’s so much more to do.”

The photo shoot continued for about an hour after our spotter gave up and drove off. By then, I was totally exhausted. I checked the time. It was almost 6 p.m., which is when the Witch’s Brew closes on weekdays. While I’d managed to boot the intruder with Declan’s help, I’d only managed to patch up a few holes.

And I had the advantage of playing defense. Defending a long-established barrier was much easier than breaking one down from the outside. Magic liked consistency, and the channels that protected my home ran decades deep. They’d been set down by my grandmother. Even the extension around Marcus’s place felt secure, and I assumed it was because it had found the grooves left by previous magic.

I moved to find the next area that needed work and tripped on something on the floor.

“Fuck!” I swore, frustrated. Why was it on the floor? That was when I noticed that many of my beloved objects were scattered around the room next to the walls. I had been grabbing them and then just dumping them as I went.

“I think you need to stop and rest,” Marcus said. “You did great.”

“But there’re still so many weak areas.” Wow, my voice sounded so whiny.

“You can fix them tomorrow. You need rest now.”

I was so tired that I didn’t remember Marcus luring Triscuit into his cage with a

pistachio, proof that my familiar must be exhausted too. I also didn't remember him guiding me to the couch. All I knew was I was eating some very yummy Mongolian beef. The fork came to my mouth again.

Wait. Was Marcus feeding me? I blinked. He was! And I was curled up in his lap like a child. His brows were furrowed, highlighting his bullish features.

I then realized I had random items tucked around my body. Had he done that? I knew I tended to hold things to myself when I worked, letting the objects help refuel my magic.

When I didn't eat the next spoonful, he held up a sugary milk tea for me instead.

"Thank you." I took it from him and took a long drink. It tasted like milky syrup with a hint of tea, which was fine right now because I needed the sugar to function.

"Are you feeling better?" Marcus asked. "You had me worried."

"I am. Thank you for..." I waved at our unconventional setup.

I looked around, and I caught the reflection of myself in a mirror shard on the mosaic lamp stand. My makeup was a smeared mess, and the natural red of my hair was peeking out through the black illusion. But it wasn't these external features that worried me the most. It was my sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. I looked like I'd aged thirty years. No wonder Marcus was so concerned.

"I think I overextended."

"You think?" He pulled me a little closer. "Don't do that again, little witch. Is there anyone else who can help you fix up the wards so you're not doing this by yourself?"

“I’m not by myself. You’re here.”

He grunted, unamused. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing a pair of chopsticks and feeding myself. “And if I’d known this would happen, I would’ve called them before I started. I should call them now.”

Marcus handed me my phone, and I was soon catching Lily and Penny up on a three-way call.

“I can come by right now,” Penny said.

“Me too,” Lily agreed. “I’m working from home tomorrow so I can totally zombie it.”

“No,” Marcus said, surprising the other two, who didn’t know he was listening in. “Gigi’s been working on this for hours already. She needs rest first.”

There was a collective gasp on the other line.

“Is that the sexy minotaur next door?” Lily asked. “He sounds close.”

“Sexy minotaur next door? I’ll take it. And yes, it is. But Gigi needs rest.”

“Hey, I don—”

“You were about to pass out standing up with Triscuit on your shoulder. Then you couldn’t get the fork to your mouth and started pouting.”

Shit, did I? Okay, maybe he was right. Technically, the ward was still up, the spotter was gone, and whoever was fighting me must be just as tired.

“Tomorrow then,” Penny said.

“Yes,” Lily agreed. “Tomorrow. And Mr. Minotaur, sir?”

Marcus scrunched his nose in the cutest way, wiggling the septum ring he wore.  
“Yes?”

“We, her coven, leave our sister in your hands,” Lily said, sounding super serious.  
“Griselda is your responsibility until we retrieve her tomorrow. Take this responsibility seriously.”

I knew Lily enough to know that was her way of making sure Marcus stayed for the night, and I got lucky. But how she managed to keep a straight voice through all that was a mystery.

“Yes, ma’am.”

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” I said as I tucked her into bed. “I made a promise to your coven, and I’m not leaving.”

I’d gotten Triscuit fed and settled for the night, and he’d been so tired he didn’t even complain that it was me and not Gigi doing the feeding. And when I was done, Gigi was already in her sleep clothes. Tonight she wasn’t in the skimpy night dress I’d seen her in the other day, but a black and gray camisole and shorts set with little bats on them. It was made of a similar silky fabric as the dress.

“I told you, I’m not that kind of witch. You can’t help me recharge.”

She meant that she wasn’t the type of witch who recharged through sexual contact. I’d already gathered that much from today’s demonstration. She recharged with physical things.

“Do you really think that’s why I’m here?” I asked teasingly. “Okay, it’s partially why I’m here. But not right now.”

“Do I look that bad?”

“No. That’s not how I meant it. You look tired but not horrible.”

I’d have her under me in a heartbeat. I’d wanted nothing more since that wonderful night together. But if sex didn’t replenish her, then I didn’t want to make matters worse by tiring her out even more. Unless...

“What about skin-to-skin contact? Does that help you recuperate? I mean, it’s a basic mammalian need, right?”

“Basic mammalian need?” The frown she gave me was fucking adorable. “I’m a woman, not a lost kitten.”

“Are you sure? You’ve got the sass. And the claws.” I eyed her black-painted nails that had been shaped to a point.

She hissed at me.

“See. I knew it.”

“I’m not a kitten.”

I picked up my phone and brought up a video I’d seen recently of a swaddled black kitten hissing like it thought itself really intimidating. “See, you look just like that.” I tucked the blankets around her a little tighter. “You said you become a gremlin when you are low on magic. I’d like to argue that it’s closer to an angry kitten. Scary, but cute.”

“I’ll take it,” she said. “I am the night! Hiss!” She cracked a smile.

“Yes, very terrifying, Kitten. But you still haven’t answered my question about physical contact.”

“Yes, physical contact helps, as long as it’s calming.”

That was all I needed. I reached for my shirt and pulled it over my head, tossing it over the chair in her room. Then the pants came down.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Providing skin-on-skin contact.” I lifted the blanket and sheets, climbed into the bed, and was immediately treated to her body heat. Holy hell. It was like an oven in there.

“How are you so warm, woman?”

“I’m not warm. I’m cold.”

Suddenly a twin set of ice cubes pressed against my legs, and it took me a moment to realize they were her feet.

“You’re warm, but you’re also freezing. How does this make sense?”

“I don’t need to make sense.”

I pulled her close and tucked her into the hollow of my body, marveling at how perfect she was as my little spoon. But despite my intention to keep everything PG-13, my body decided it had other ideas. It was impossible not to react with her delectable form pressed up against me, the scent of her filling my lungs.

“Ignore it,” I said when my cock sprang up between us, pressing insistently against her ass. I moved it so it lined up with the centerline of her back; it was least intrusive that way.

But my attempt at chivalry proved to be in vain when she arched back, rubbing her ass against me, and her lust thickened the air between us until I couldn’t breathe. I wasn’t the only one who was recalling our night of passion and wanting an encore.

“It won’t help my magic, but it won’t hinder it either.” She gave her hips another suggestive roll.

I wanted her to be well-rested for tomorrow, and if we got started, there might not be a lot of rest on the horizon. But I couldn't leave her wanting either. The scent of her need was driving me half mad, and if I didn't relieve it, we'd both get no sleep tonight.

"Let's compromise," I said, my voice raspy. "I'll give you what you need, but you let me do all the work."

"How can I say no to that?"

That was all I had to hear. I shoved the blanket down and moved to position myself between her legs. The satin short shorts stood between me and my prize, and I pulled them off in a single fluid motion, exposing her to me. She gasped, and her arousal bloomed. Running a palm up her body and under the thin, silky tank top, I marveled at how soft and smooth her skin was compared to mine. I palmed a breast, glad that there was no pesky bra in the way.

I crawled up to cover her body, shoving the tank top over her breasts so I could capture a beaded nipple with my mouth. Gigi arched against my touch, biting her full bottom lip as I gave each nipple a thorough lathering with my tongue before kissing my way down her body.

Realizing I planned on tasting her, she protested. "But we can both—"

"You agreed to let me do all the work. I'm holding you to it."

I pinned her wrists down to the bed by her sides, and she struggled ineffectively.

"That's not fair."

"It's very fair. For me." I settled myself between her legs and bent my head, my



horns keeping her knees open wide.

I inhaled the scent of her lust and licked my lips. The slit of her cunt glistened with a hint of wetness, and I couldn't wait to taste it and draw more from her.

I bent my head and licked, letting my tongue travel languidly up the slit to the apex where her clit hid between the folds. Her breath hitched, and she froze when I thrust my thick tongue into her warmth.

Gods! She tasted as good as she smelled, and my cock was jealous of my tongue.

I released her wrists, and her hands went to my horns automatically. That was where I'd wanted them the other night, but the magic had encouraged her fingers to slide into my hair instead. She squeezed my horns, demanding I continue, and I could do nothing else.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

Who would've known that horns made such good handles? I grabbed the curve of them, my hips moving involuntarily, grinding my pussy against his mouth. His tongue was thick, but I needed more.

As if reading my mind, Marcus moved his mouth higher to focus on my clit, his fingers replacing his tongue. He pushed two digits into me. They weren't slim, elegant ones, but thick, masculine fingers used for labor and weights.

"Yes!" I hissed, tossing my head to the side.

He drove his fingers into me, pumping in rhythm with his tongue and lips. My impending orgasm started to build, and I held my breath, anticipating it. But it was too slow. I gasped for air and squirmed, rocking my hips and shoving at his horns.

"Faster," I begged.

He chuckled against me, making me shudder with the vibrations. But he didn't go any faster.

Fuck! I just wanted to come already. It would be so easy; he just needed to go faster. But instead, he kept the same pace, and I continued to climb impossibly higher until I was teeter-tottering on the edge.

"Please." I was begging now, but I only got another soft chuckle. The asshole was enjoying teasing me way too much.

I wasn't ready for it when he changed the angle of his fingers, moving them deliberately in a come-hither motion. I screamed as I came, my knees squeezing hard against his horns. He continued to suckle on my clit, not letting me down from the precipice. My entire body shook from the overwhelming sensations.

I didn't know how far or long I fell, but when I found myself back on my bed, I was Marcus's little spoon. The blankets were tucked around us perfectly, and I was already drifting off to sleep.

I woke to the sound of my morning alarm, except it was soft and distant, and definitely not on my bedside table. The events of yesterday and last night came rushing back. The ward. Marcus. And that thick and oh-so-talented tongue.

It was too bad that orgasm had put me straight to sleep. I would've loved to return the favor even though I'd agreed to let him do all the work.

Next to me, my marvelous minotaur was waking. He reached over to the side of the bed looking for his phone, but all he found was my bedside table. There was a lamp on it, one he was in the process of knocking over. I scrambled over his body, reaching for the antique brass lamp mid-tumble. Not only would it suck if I dented the base or crumpled the beaded shade, but if it fell on him, it would hurt. The thing was solid brass. They didn't make them like that anymore. I righted the lamp and then looked down at the gorgeous man I was straddling.

"Good morning, Kitten. This is a wonderful position to wake up in."

"Morning to you too." I rolled my hips, grinding against his morning wood.

But my phone's morning alarm was still going off, and that wasn't particularly sexy. I climbed off him and grabbed my fleece bat wing robe, pulling it on as the crisp morning air woke me all the way up.

I found my phone—still hanging onto the very last sliver of battery life—on the table from when we'd called Penny and Lily. I brought it back to my nightstand to plug it in while I got ready to start my day. Just because I had a magical ward to fix didn't mean the coffee shop was closed.

That was the thing about being my own boss. I was the strictest boss I knew, but only to myself.

I let Triscuit out while I brushed my teeth, hopped quickly into the shower, and got ready for the day. I fed him his breakfast, giving him extra nuts and treats for his work yesterday. He eyed Marcus warily as he walked out of the master bedroom. I wondered what Triscuit thought of him. There would be some jealousy, that was for certain, but all in all, I thought his reaction was promising.

"I'm going to head over to my place to get ready for the day." Marcus had his pants on but held his shirt in his hands. He hadn't come over with a jacket. "Should I meet you downstairs in your coffee shop? I feel like I have to personally hand you over, or else your coven might accuse me of not taking my responsibilities seriously enough."

"Oh, don't worry about it. That was just Lily being a wing girl and trying to get me laid." She was definitely successful, not that I was complaining.

"I can kitten-sit you again tonight. Just to make sure you're okay." He looked so hopeful I couldn't deny him.

"I think I'd like that."

He was grinning from ear to ear as he stepped outside into the stairwell. "No need to close up after me. I'm going through the rooftop patio. It just seems easier."

Plus, he was still topless, and that would most definitely draw some unwanted

attention in the middle of winter.

Triscuit started making a fuss as I got ready to head out, and I knew what he wanted. He wanted to come with me down to the coffee shop. I might as well bring him, considering I was only going to stay down there until my friends arrived. Nick could handle it on his own while we fixed the ward.

I grabbed the portable cage, and my baby birb climbed in. I'd just got him set up in his little corner and was washing my hands when the lock to the front door opened, bells ringing, and Nick walked in wearing his super stylish puffer jacket.

"Morning." I tossed the apron over my head and tied it in place.

"I heard I missed a fitness model photo shoot, and Faux Hobo's Lexus got wasped yesterday." Nick always got straight to the point.

"You're right on both accounts."

"Dang it! Why do I always miss the good stuff?"

The front door opened with another ring of the bell. I expected to see Nina from For Goodness Bakes with the day's goodies, but Marcus walked in instead. He was bundled up in a parka with a scarf wrapped around his face, and his hood pulled down low. He flipped the hood up, showing that he wasn't wearing the spell I'd given him. Instead he was using the store-bought one that made him look human.

With the scarf and the hood he was hard to recognize anyway. I wondered how large that hood had to be to go over his horns under the illusion.

"Oh crap," Nick swore under his breath. "I forgot to lock up behind me until opening."

“I’ll do it.” Marcus turned and locked the door.

Nick furrowed his brows, confused.

“That’s okay, I was expecting him.”

“Ooooh.” Nick wagged his brows at me. I knew he was joking, but he had no idea how close his joke was hitting.

“I might need you to hold down the fort in the morning,” I said, deciding to just rip off the Band-Aid.

Nick took his index fingers and rubbed them together like he thought we were going to do something naughty.

“Nothing like that, unfortunately.” Marcus leaned on the counter. “Gigi has a meeting with some friends to see what we can do about Arcane Development. I’m here just to meet them since we’d be working together.”

It wasn’t the full truth, but it technically wasn’t a lie, either. Marcus knew what information to keep between us and what to share. He must have picked up the fact that I didn’t tell Jules or Alyssa about the wards when they called yesterday.

I appreciated a guy who was perceptive, took notice of the little things, and acted accordingly. Not only did it mean he cared enough to pay attention, but he had a solid brain behind that pretty face.

Marcus settled himself down in one of the chairs, facing away from the doors and the windows, and started doing some work on his phone as Nick and I got ready to open up. Nina arrived a few minutes later with the cookies and pastries, and Marcus helped bring them in, his hood pulled down over his face.

Five minutes from opening, there was another knock again at the door. It was Lily. Right behind her, Penny and her incubus were climbing out of her BMW.

My bitches were here!

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

The incubus stared me down like he was trying to intimidate his younger sister's boyfriend. "You look familiar."

That was because he'd been there at Delirium the night I met Gigi. But I decided to play dumb. "Most minotaurs look similar," I said. "It's the horns."

Gigi introduced me to Prax, the incubus in question. He was Penny's mate, and Penny was Gigi's friend from college. So was Lily. The three witches had been housemates, and had formed their tiny little coven way back when, almost as a joke. They'd ended up as lifelong friends.

Penny had dark eyes and dark hair, with two blue streaks that framed her face. And while that particular detail wasn't familiar, her face was.

Now it was my turn to say, "You look familiar. And I don't mean because we met at Delirium."

Penny sighed. "It's because I'm Senator Davis's daughter."

Oh! Now I remembered! There was this fiasco a while ago about some senator's daughter being left at the altar. Shortly after images of the groom partying in Vegas with several women in his arms turned up, the jilted bride was seen at The Curio Collectors' Dinner ask me how I knew. Mirrors weren't cheap, either. These had already taken longer than expected to get here.



I decided to paint the office instead. I'd had the contractor install a sizeable one-way mirror so Declan and I could have some privacy and still see what was going on in the gym. The rest of the gym would need to wait until the mirrors were in for the first coat of paint and the bullseye mural I planned on painting on it.

I'd just finished the second coat when I decided to check my email. I found about a dozen images, the top picks from yesterday's impromptu photo shoot, waiting for me in my inbox. They looked good and would all work to advertise the business. The next step was to choose one lucky winner for the prize.

There was also a message from the photographer, who was an existing member of our gym, thanking me for offering him a year's basic membership for lugging his equipment over at a moment's notice. Ah, so that was how Declan had convinced him to do it. We'd been lucky it was a weekday and there were no events or weddings to shoot.

I quickly drafted a social media post, putting all the top picks up so our followers could vote on the winner. Then I wrote an email thanking everyone who showed up, telling them to check our latest post and remember to send the link out to friends and family so they could vote. Like most things in life, the winner wouldn't be the one with the best photos, but the one with the most friends.

On a whim, I decided to flip through some of the pictures the gym had been tagged in. We'd had a big bash before leaving the old location. Seeing the connections and friendships people made at the gym was the best part of owning the business. They weren't kidding when they said that men tended to be much lonelier than women.

Many of our members have told me that before they found my gym, they didn't have any friends, only coworkers who they couldn't really speak to. I was glad to be able to give them a second home, a place where they knew they could come by if they needed to complain about their asshole bosses. The relief was in having someone to

talk to, disguised as the serotonin of a cathartic workout.

Not every gym was like this. Some of them were too competitive and not focused on individual development.

After seeing all the pictures from goodbye bash, I decided to search for posts automatically tagged with our location but not tagged with our profile. I didn't have to scroll far before I froze. Because there it was. Someone had posted a video of their workout, and I was right there in the background, with a Bullseye Fitness T-shirt on, my face on full display.

Fuck.

I went to check out her profile. I recognized gymbunny4eva as a lady who came to the gym for a few months but had a problem about our strict policy of getting permission from everyone in your video before posting it. There were plenty of videos with my and everyone else's faces on her account. She even posted a video of one of the larger ladies we had in here, and not in a supportive way, either. Not the vibe at our gym.

But that hadn't been the final reason we'd kicked her out. No wonder she hadn't tagged the gym.

Ugh! I quickly sent Declan a message asking if he'd seen the posts. He hadn't, but he remembered gymbunny4eva.

Declan: I remember her. Andrea, was it? She was that wannabe fitness-guru influencer chick.

Me: Yup. She tried to use our gym to train her own clients.

Declan: I'll see if I can get her to take them down.

Me: Damage is already done, but yeah, try.

That was the final reason why she was banned. Our insurance only covered fitness instructors and personal trainers we had on contract, so not only had Andrea been taking advantage of the gym to run her side hustle, but she was also a major liability.

I'd possibly solved the mystery of how my mother had found me, but I wasn't any closer to a solution to my problem short of dropping this identity and going into hiding again. And that was something I wasn't willing to do, not when I'd worked this hard to build my life from scratch.

I ordered in for lunch since I hadn't had time to meal prep over the last few days. Hell, I hadn't even had time to get groceries. And that reminded me of Gigi's kitchen: it had all the basics: flour, sugar, salt, oil, and plenty of pantry staples like canned veggies and spices, but lacked fresh ingredients. She'd been busy too.

As another business owner, I knew how that was. There were only twenty-four hours in a day, and sometimes I had to choose life or the business, not both. And if time wasn't the issue, then energy was. When I first started the gym, I was eating like crap for a while too.

Unlike some shifters who had a natural tendency to stay lean, minotaurs tended to put on both muscle and fat if we weren't careful. Not to mention I was also half-human, and that hadn't helped. Since I was a gym owner and personal trainer, it was more noticeable, especially since I posted on social media without my face. The entire gaze was on my body.

That was the fitness industry's dirty little secret: those shredded bodies weren't always healthy. Even without the use of hormones and other cheats, the bulking and

cutting cycle wasn't healthy. The dieting to get leaner, the counting of micro and macronutrients, the one time the fitness nutritionist I hired told one of our clients the carbs she could eat in one day amounted to a grand total of six blueberries. Six! Who the fuck eats six blueberries?

Needless to say, that nutritionist didn't stay with us long. But still, I made a promise to myself to start eating better and start meal prepping. I didn't have magic that used up all my calories like Gigi did.

She'd worried me so much yesterday. I'd known that it was bad for magic users to overextend themselves, but I'd never seen it in person. Holy fuck, it was scary. It was like watching her waste away in front of my eyes. By the time I finally convinced her to stop, she could barely stand. Her cheeks had been sunken in, and she looked so pale I'd wondered if she needed a blood transfusion just to survive.

The only thing that had stopped me from calling an ambulance was the fact that she'd started to recover the second she started eating and resting. That change had been shocking too. She'd made it through an entire sheet cake, her dinner, and some of mine last night. Magic was powerful stuff.

As I waited for my food to arrive, I opened my grocery delivery app and got to work, ordering more than usual so I could make extra when I meal-prepped.

Despite all that had happened this week, I couldn't help but feel happy. I'd woken up this morning with the perfect woman in my arms. The one that had gotten away.

I shook my head. I was getting ahead of myself. I couldn't do serious relationships. Not when the dragon still searched for me. Gigi and I were neighbors with benefits, nothing more.

The food arrived, and I turned on the glamor spell momentarily to grab it, chuckling

again at the magic words. I'd elected not to use it earlier so I could give Gigi's magic some rest, but I'd bundled up real good and I was sure no one had seen my face.

I was carefully sketching out the logo on the back wall of the main area after deciding that free-handing might not be such a good idea for such a large logo with so many circles, when Declan unlocked the door.

"You look good," he noted. "Judging by the look on your face, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that yesterday was a success in more ways than one."

"You could say that." We'd technically won in the end. "Great thinking on the photo shoot," I said, deciding to move the emphasis off Gigi and me. I wasn't really sure what was happening between us yet.

"Some of the guys had been talking about doing one anyway. I'm just glad so many of them were willing to come down on a moment's notice on a weekday. We were lucky it was after work. I promised the ones who couldn't make it we'll do it again on a weekend since this one was unplanned."

"Does that mean we actually have to plan another one?"

"Yup!"

Griselda

“I think Faux Hobo is back,” I said, peering out my window. “There’s the U-Haul.”

“Faux Hobo?” Penny asked.

I got her and Lily caught up with the Arcane saga, clarifying that I wasn’t sure if the man was a wizard or simply spotting for one. They both went to the window. My wards made my windows quite reflective, and I was sure no one could see in.

“I see him,” Penny said.

“Want me to take care of him?” Prax asked, popping into existence next to her.

I frowned. He was supposed to be downstairs enjoying some coffee. “Prax, what was our agreement on nonphysical locomotion while at my place? My wards let you pop in and out because you’re on the whitelist, but it’s still annoying.”

He sighed exaggeratedly. “Fine. I’ll walk like a boring human.”

“And doors. Use doors,” I added.

“Yes, yes, doors.” He rolled his eyes and then turned back to his mate. “Just say the word, and I’ll make sure our little friend there can’t see a goddamn thing.

Penny looked at me, and I nodded. “But don’t make it too obvious, and be careful.”

Prax scoffed. “Did you hear that? She told me to be careful.” He looked directly at me. “You clearly don’t know how I work.”

“Oh, I have an idea,” I said.

Penny had told me how he’d disguised himself as an old lady to discourage buyers looking at her house when her parents had tried to sell it from under her. He’d also turned himself into a large woman in lingerie once.

“You like to play dress up,” I finished.

That earned a titter from Lily.

“It doesn’t sound as cool if you say it like that,” Prax grumped. “I like to call it ‘going undercover.’ Every good spy needs a disguise.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, glad that Prax was Penny’s incubus and not mine. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to handle the constant jokes. The incubus in question concentrated, and soon, he stood there in a cop’s uniform.

“Ooh!” Penny exclaimed. “Uniforms are a good look on you.”

“Isn’t it illegal to impersonate an officer?” Lily asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m not going to get caught. Duh!”

Prax strolled toward one of the walls, and I realized he planned on phasing right through it using his demonly abilities despite our extremely recent conversation about using the door. I focused on the patch he was about to disappear through, telling my ward not to let anything through. Prax smashed into the wall and swore. I tried my damndest not to burst out laughing. He deserved it.

I tossed him the keys and then pointed to the door with my best straight face. “The door’s that way. Exit through the back so he doesn’t see you.”

He grumbled something about bitchy witches as he left.

We all went to the windows to watch the Prax Police approach the U-Haul, looking real serious. I had no idea what story he planned on using to get the guy to move, but after a while, the truck drove away.

Prax made his way back, looking smug.

“What did you tell him?” I asked.

“I told him that several people called in complaining about a strange man hanging out in a rental truck being suspicious and pervy. Of course, he denied it was him. So I started asking him what he was doing here and how long he’d been parked there. When he couldn’t answer me, I said if he didn’t leave, I’d have to take him in, so he left. Easy, peasy.” He looked too proud of himself.

“You should meet Declan,” I said. “The guy pulled a muscleman photoshoot out of his ass yesterday, complete with backdrops and lights—pointed at the U-Haul—to distract our spotter.”

“Impressive!”

With that out of the way, Penny, Lily, and I worked on the ward while Prax entertained Triscuit with games of peek-a-boo. We were able to completely fix the ward and make it much stronger to cover the entire building and the immediate area around it. We were now magically secure. Individually we weren’t particularly strong, but together we were formidable, mostly because we’d worked together for so long, and our magic complimented each other.



“You’re magically safe now,” Penny said. “But what’s to stop Arcane from sending thugs?”

“They already have.” I told them of my destroyed shipment of beans and Marcus’s mirrors, which was a mistake because now they didn’t want to leave me alone. I assured them I would call them at the first sign of trouble.

“Maybe you should invite Marcus over again,” Lily suggested, keeping a straight face. “Until you know you’re safe. He seems like he could take care of himself.”

“I have him on speed dial.” I assured her. And I did because this time, we had each other’s number.

By the time I thanked my friends for being amazing and headed back downstairs, it was well into the afternoon. I sent them off with some coffee and baked goods and a promise that I’d keep them updated if anything happened.

I suddenly noticed Elise sitting in the corner of my café as I was seeing my friends out the door. What was Marcus’s mother doing here?

I sent him a quick message letting him know of her presence before quietly asking Nick how long she’d been nursing that coffee.

“Hours,” he whispered back.

I reached out to see if she was casting any spells but didn’t feel anything. I was tempted to call Penny and Prax back and send Prax in undercover, but that would entail telling them Marcus’s secret, and it wasn’t mine to tell.

A few minutes later, Declan showed up. “The usual, please,” he said.

“We gotcha!” Nick said, starting on the café mocha.

As we made his drinks, Declan sat at a table over from the woman, pretending to watch something on his phone. Every so often, he looked up like he was trying to memorize her face.

“Here you go,” I said, handing him both drinks in a cardboard tray.

He was on his way out when the woman cleared her throat. “Excuse me, monsieur,” she said with a strong French accent. “You work in the gym next door, no?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Have you seen this man?” She showed him her screen.

“Oh, yeah. That’s Martin. He worked with us at the old location, but he moved a few months ago. I don’t remember where he said he was going, I think maybe Brazil?”

“I see.”

Then Declan was leaving, and Marcus’s mother was walking out after him.

“Oh fuck. I think I fucked up,” Nick said the moment the door closed behind them.

“Why?”

“She showed me a picture of Marcus, and I told her he works next door. Declan must have a reason to lie.”

“Shit.”

“I didn’t know he was in hiding or anything. Oh! Was that why he was all covered up this morning with that scarf and the hood and...”

I nodded. “That is exactly why.”

The door chimed again and a couple—regulars I hadn’t seen for at least a week—walked in. I put my customer service face on and got them served quickly before stepping into the back room to give Marcus a call.

“We have a problem,” I said the moment he picked up.

I repeated what Nick told me and waited for a response. “I knew that was too easy. Fuck. Does she know I live here? Or just work here?” I motioned Nick in and handed him the phone.

He already knew anyway, considering he just watched Declan lie to the woman’s face.

“I didn’t say you lived there, only that you work next door,” Nick clarified.

Okay. She knew there was something amiss but not the full story.

“Are you running away from like an arranged marriage or something?”

I didn’t hear Marcus’s response, but I could guess by Nick’s victorious, “I knew it!”

The rest of the day went by as usual, and with the Faux Hobo gone, I got more walk-ins from the street. It wasn’t long before 6 p.m. rolled around, and we were closing for the day.

The first thing I did when I got back upstairs was let Triscuit out. He was cross with

me because I'd moved him back upstairs when my friends arrived, and he didn't get to greet any customers. But with everything that had been happening, I felt it was safest with him at home.

"I promise, Triscuit, once everything settles down again, you can come to work with me and greet everyone."

His response was to toss his toys on the floor one by one. When he started on some of my things, I reacted.

"No, Triscuit."

He glared back at me and then tried to shove the antique crystal candy dish one more time. I concentrated on it, making the bottom of the dish magically sticky so it wouldn't budge. This was how I'd trained him not to touch my things. I simply made them impossible to move, and over time, he just thought they were unmovable and left them alone.

Tired of shoving at the immovable crystal dish, he went for the foil-wrapped candy inside, picking each one up and flinging it across the room. He punctuated each flung candy with a maniacal laugh. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, feeling a headache coming on.

But I knew better than to yell at him because if I did, he'd just fling them faster and louder. At least this kept him occupied and not causing any more chaos. I quickly made up his dinner, defrosting some of his pre-cut fruit and vegetable mix in the microwave and adding his evening ration of pellets.

I eyed his frozen fruits and veggies, then decided to defrost some for myself in a bowl and consider it a strange salad. I still hadn't gone grocery shopping this week. Responsible me should go do that right now. But I was tired, and I also felt guilty for

spending so little time with Triscuit lately.

African greys were like toddlers. They needed a lot of attention, or else they became angry toddlers. His time on my shoulder while we were working on the ward didn't count. That was work, not fun, and my cutie pie needed fun. So I decided that today was a stay-in-and-play kind of day; I'd get groceries tomorrow.

My eyes landed on the wall separating Marcus and me. I wondered how he was doing. I wanted to call him, maybe ask if he wanted to hang out, but I also didn't want to come off as being too clingy. Besides, he had a lot more to worry about right now. We really should've told Nick what was going on, even if it was just a made-up version of the story like the one he'd made up himself—that Marcus was trying to escape an arranged marriage.

Scrounging up some crackers and jam to eat with my makeshift salad, I settled down for a night of hanging out with—and cleaning up after—Triscuit.

Marcus

I bolted upright, suddenly awake. I looked around, but everything was quiet, the room exactly as it had been when I went to sleep earlier. With me putting so much of my effort into preparing the gym, I'd ignored my own living space, only setting up what was absolutely necessary.

That meant my mattress was on my bed, and I had a dresser where I'd stuffed all my clothes, but my nightstand was still outside in the living room. I felt around my pillow for my phone but realized it had fallen to the floor. I reached for it, wanting to know what time it was.

It was just after midnight. I'd been asleep for less than an hour. I put the phone back next to my pillow, and that was when I heard it. The sound of breaking glass had me on high alert.

It sounded like it came from the front. Not my windows. The Witch's Brew. Gigi!

If they harmed a hair on her body, they were going to wish they'd never been born.

I pulled my clothes on, ready to run over there to help her. But a nagging voice in my head warned that perhaps my mother was trying to flush me out. I reached for my earring, rubbed it, and said the words. Once I felt the familiar weight of the glamor spell on my face, I went to my window to check.

Two men with dark parkas and balaclavas covering their faces stood outside, baseball bats in hand. And just as I surmised, they were making quick work of Griselda's

coffee shop windows. Those sons of bitches! I quickly pulled on a top and some pants and was already on my way downstairs, ready to teach those thugs a lesson, when the phone in my hand rang with a call from Gigi.

I stopped in my stairwell to pick it up.

“Gigi? Are you okay?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yeah. I’m just about to go out there and chase them off.”

“No. Don’t. I’ve already called the police. They’re on their way. I’d rather these assholes get caught than run away. Maybe they’ll spill the beans and tell us who sent them.”

Damn it. I was hoping to get my hands on them and do that myself. Somehow I didn’t trust the cops to find out anything, not if Arcane Development was involved. My research said that they had enough money to throw around to buy off the cops.

“Depends on if Arcane has already paid the cops off.”

“Not if they send Officer Hayes or Cooley. Those two are solid. Not only are they regulars of mine, but they’re the ones they usually send if it’s magic-related. This is just plain old vandalism, but it’s my coffee shop, and plenty of magical shit has happened in this parking lot before.”

“Yes, I heard about the troll,” I said. “You don’t happen to know anything about that, do you?”

“Nope. None at all,” she said in a tone that clearly told me she did.

“Let’s hope they send your officers.”

Another loud smash, this time sounding just below me, had me wincing. My newly frosted front windows! Oh no, they were going to go for my mirrors. Declan and I had just finished installing them.

“Fuck this.” I was going to save my mirrors. I rushed down the stairs and out into my gym just as one of the thugs stepped over the broken glass.

The streetlights filtered in wanly from outside, enough for me to see. I didn’t bother with the lights. Instead I growled, gave a sharp huff, and then lowered my horns, ready to charge.

“Holy shit!” the man yelled. “What the hell is that!”

He stumbled backward, tripping over himself to get away. I feigned a charge to hurry him out of my gym, even as the blinking red and blue lights appeared in the parking lot. Help was here. And I’d saved my mirrors just by bluffing.

Not wanting to be the one to talk to the cops first, mainly because I wasn’t sure if I should wear my disguise or not and also because I didn’t want to be the center of attention, I slinked back into the stairwell.

“Marcus?” Gigi’s voice came from my phone, and I realized I’d never hung up. Oops.

“Yeah?”

“Get back upstairs and watch your phone. I’m going to ask them to talk inside since it’s freezing out. That way you can meet them as yourself. I’ll call you over; come through the roof.”



She hung up before I could reply.

I removed the glamor spell and made my way back upstairs, nervousness brewing in the pit of my stomach. I had always known Arcane would be a problem, but this just brought it home. It had to be Arcane, because the thugs had been surprised to see a bull-headed man. If it was the dragon looking for me, then they would have been delighted to have found their prize.

After what seemed like much too long, I got a message from Gigi asking me to come over. I went through the roof as she'd suggested and found her waiting for me by her door on the roof.

"Are you hurt?" I pulled her close and patted her down, inhaling her scent into my lungs.

"I'm perfectly fine. I didn't go downstairs." She went up onto her tiptoes and pulled me down to give me a quick peck on the cheek. "Come on, Officer Cooley and Hayes are waiting in my kitchen."

Officer Cooley was a friendly-looking brunette with her hair pulled up in a high ponytail. She was leaning against Gigi's counter. Officer Hayes sat at Gigi's dining room table, drinking a cup of freshly brewed tea. He had a blond cop 'stache that made him look like he'd walked straight out of a 90's movie. They looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

It was relatively quiet, mainly because there was a blanket tossed over Triscuit's cage. But he was awake. I could hear him moving around inside.

The two cops introduced themselves, and Gigi added, probably for my benefit, that she'd already told them about the problems we'd been having with Arcane Development. I grabbed a seat at the table across from Officer Hayes who seemed

much too comfortable to be a cop investigating a crime in the middle of the night.

I couldn't stop staring at him because I swore I'd seen him before. But where? Had he gone to my gym once? Lots of people came through, especially in January when New Year's resolution drives were high. Was that where I'd seen him?

"Griselda says she's already had one of her coffee bean shipments destroyed even though they couldn't prove who was responsible. She said something similar happened to you," Officer Hayes prompted.

"Yes. With my mirrors. Exact same story. They didn't destroy anything else but my mirrors. The shipping company says they made a police report."

Officer Cooley scribbled furiously onto her clipboard. "We'll look that up. When we apprehended the suspects, they were speaking gibberish." Her brows furrowed. "Like they were magically compelled not to tell who had sent them. We had another pair bring the troublemakers down to the station for holding."

"The last time this happened, the Wizard's Elder Council was involved," Hayes said solemnly. "You might have heard about it on the news. They were kidnapping witches to try to reinstate The Wall."

It was the strong sense of déjà vu that had me racking my brain for an answer.

"Hey! Now I realize why the two of you look so familiar. You came to investigate the breaking-and-entering at my old neighbor's place. Shelby. She's the seamstress."

"Oh hey! No way," Officer Hayes exclaimed. "You're the same minotaur! I knew Bullseye Fitness looked familiar." He twisted around to look at his partner. "That's where we've seen it before!"

She studied me, tilting her chin. “I see it now. So you understand why we had to call in the EA. The last time we saw something like this, it was serious.”

I tried not to react. The EA stood for the Secret Enforcement Agency. The S was now silent since the existence of magic and monsters wasn’t a secret anymore. Bringing in the EA was bad news for me. They’d probably figure out who I really was, and it was a crapshoot between whether they’d take my side and protect me from an angry dragon or take the dragon’s side and hand me over.

“It just seems a little overblown,” Gigi said. “I understand it had to be done last time because, I mean, there was a troll in my parking lot. But this time I’m pretty sure it’s just those condo developers being assholes.”

Was she trying to convince them not to call in the EA to hide my issues?

“And weren’t the WEC going for witches who didn’t know how to tap into their powers?” she continued. “That’s what they said on the news. They wouldn’t try the same stunt twice. It’s too late for another wall, anyway. It’s been what, like, seven or eight years now? There’s too much history for them to erase. And even if they do, I’m not in the right demographic.”

“True,” Officer Hayes said. “So it might not be that. But strong magic is still involved. I know it’s a nuisance, but we’ve already called the EA. They’re sending someone as we speak. We are supposed to stay here with you and make sure you’re safe until they get here.”

I couldn’t help but notice that Officer Hayes was talking specifically to Gigi, not me. He thought she might be in danger. I should be glad that they were staying to make sure she was safe, but instead, the irrational, jealous part of me wondered if Officer Hayes secretly liked Gigi.

Was he staying because it was his job or because he wanted to? He seemed way too comfortable in her home. My minotaur wanted me to get between them, block his view of her, and claim her as mine. The man part of me knew that was crazy talk. I didn't need to make an enemy right now.

So I clenched my jaw to prevent myself from saying or doing something I might regret and pretended I didn't care. I focused on the positives instead. I didn't feel any negative vibes coming from the two officers. They seemed to be genuinely nice people, and of course, Gigi had worked with them before.

They asked more questions on what I had heard from my side of the walls, and I told them everything I remembered. It wasn't long before the representative from the EA arrived. When Gigi went to open the door, Hayes followed after her into the stairwell just to be safe, and I felt that crazy, irrational urge to throw him out the window.

"Oh, it's you!" Gigi exclaimed, clearly recognizing the person at the door.

"I saw where the location was, and I volunteered," said a smooth masculine voice. "Had to make sure you were okay."

My hackles raised even more. Another man in uniform to vie for Gigi's attention! This time, I didn't even chastise myself for feeling so possessive. I stood and started toward the door, but Officer Cooley got there before I did.

"You!" she exclaimed, with quite a bit less welcome than Gigi had.

"Hello, sweetheart, you miss me?" was the newcomer's reply.

Officer Cooley, not pleased with the nickname, marched back to her place, leaning against the counter as the others filed into the apartment. "Fuck this," she muttered under her breath.

The newcomer had his blond hair spiked up around his head in a way that was completely at odds with the EA enforcer uniform he wore. He didn't feel like a shifter, but that could be deceptive. Declan didn't feel like a shifter either. If this stranger worked for the EA, then he was either a shifter, another monster of some kind, or a human magic user.

He didn't look like a wizard. A male witch? Maybe that's how he knew Gigi. It didn't make me feel any better, though, as he pulled out another chair at the table and sat down like he owned the place.

"And you must be the minotaur next door." He offered a hand, and I took it. "I'm Seth, from the EA."

"I can't believe they sent you ." Officer Cooley's mood had soured, but her partner just looked amused.

"Like I said, I volunteered." He winked at the cop.

"Do you all know each other?" I asked.

Seth shrugged. "It's Darlington. The big city with a small-town heart." He grinned at Officer Cooley, who pretended not to notice him.

"We've been here for a very long time," Officer Hayes explained. "I know we're human, but we've always known. Before the fall of The Wall, Darlington was a lot smaller."

I knew that. I'd been part of the first influx of monsters moving to Darlington after The Wall fell. Before then, I hadn't even known it was real. The Wall had kept Darlington a secret, even from other monsters and magic-users. Any mention of it from before had been only hearsay.

“Not to mention,” Officer Cooley added, “it's impossible to forget the guy who stole my cruiser .”

“Hey! The EA paid for the damages. And it was an emergency,” Seth said defensively. “You were gonna let me borrow it anyway, weren't you, Sweetheart?”

“No!”

Officer Hayes cleared his throat like he'd dealt with this before. “I, for one, appreciated the upgraded vehicle we got as a replacement. Let's get out of Seth's way so he can work, shall we? My shift was supposed to end half an hour ago. Some of us have lives outside of work.” He turned to Griselda and me. “We have the place roped off. I recommend locking the entrance from your shops to your homes until you can get those windows fixed.”

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

“Now that the coppers are gone let’s get down to business.” Seth leaned back in his seat.

I was surprised that the EA had sent him when there were so many other enforcers they could send.

Seth was Prax’s friend. He was also a wizard, though he wasn’t the annoying, stuffy kind, like many old-school wizards. I’d met him a few times at the Howling Wolf, a bar Prax and his friends liked to frequent. This was the first time I’d seen him in anything other than his usual historically inspired or punk goth clothing.

“You look...different.” I eyed the uniform, trying not to show my amusement.

I was glad I’d been able to pull on a long black robe to make myself more presentable. It wasn’t nearly as comfortable as my plush bat wing one, especially in winter, but it looked like a dress in a pinch. I’d also used a bit of magic to make my hair look less like a rat’s nest and hide the pillow marks on my face.

He grinned. “Liam does like me in a uniform.”

“What’s he going to say if he finds out you’ve been flirting with Officer Cooley? I didn’t know you swung that way, wizard.”

“I swing any way I want to, witch. But Liam knows. I’ve caught him looking more than once.”

Marcus was looking more and more irritated. So, I placed a calming hand on his forearm. "Seth is Prax's friend," I explained.

"I see you glaring at me, minotaur. Don't worry, I'm not interested in your witch."

Was that why Marcus was acting so strange? Was he jealous? No way!

"Now that we've gotten that out of the way," Seth continued, "onto more important things. The first of which is that I've noticed your magical ward is exceptionally strong. Is there a reason for that?"

I didn't say anything.

"Let me be more clear. Have you already been attacked magically lately?"

I sighed, realizing I wouldn't be able to hide something like that from him. Next to him, I was a magic novice. He might not look it, but Seth was scary powerful. "You might as well know. Yes, someone was messing with my wards. I'm a hundred percent sure it was Arcane as well."

And I hadn't told the cops because I didn't want them to bring in the EA. Well, the joke was on me. I guess I should be glad it was Seth and not someone else.

"Anything else I should know about?" Seth looked directly at Marcus.

We were both silent. Seth was Prax's friend, but he also worked for Desmon, the dragon of Darlington, and I doubted Marcus would want his secret known.

"What if I promise that everything you tell me from now on is off the record and not a part of the investigation?" Seth waved his hand, and he was no longer in a uniform. He had a black button-up shirt, left unbuttoned over a ripped black tank top. His



piercings, which had been hidden before with magic, were back. A studded belt held his pants low on his hips, and his boots were spiked, too.

Marcus looked taken aback by the sudden change.

“Seth has that reaction with most people,” I said. “When he doesn’t look like a punk, he looks like a dead poet.”

“I’m going to stop beating around the bushes. The real reason I’m here is because Desmon sent me. There is a certain dragon sniffing around Darlington, looking for a lost minotaur. Desmon has known about you since you arrived.”

Marcus’s body language changed, but Seth kept speaking.

“He hasn’t ratted you out and doesn’t plan to. He’s quite enjoying watching this other dragon’s frustration, but he can’t actually help you. It’s against the rules, so consider this advanced warning that your dragon is near.”

So Desmon already knew. Things just got interesting.

After a long moment, Marcus replied. “Your advanced warning comes too late. Elise has already found me.”

“Your whore mother?”

“Seth!” I exclaimed.

But if it bothered Marcus, it didn’t show. “He’s right, though. Her loyalty and body can be bought for a price. That was all I ever was, a job.”

“Elise is just a pawn. If the dragon knew you were here, you’d already be gone,” Seth

said.

“You don’t think she told the dragon?” I asked, noticing that Seth also did not have a name for this dragon.

“She could have, or she could be waiting for more solid proof, which is more likely. She fucked up once already by losing sight of her charge. If she sent him to the wrong minotaur by accident, it would be her funeral. But then again, maybe she’s already told him, but he’s waiting to make his move because of Arcane Development.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why would a dragon care about them? Aren’t they above mundane shit like that?”

“Yes and no. Arcane Development is... different. They are a wizard coven masquerading as a company. And they usually don’t go after a piece of land unless they believe it’s special.”

I looked around my home. “So you think this place is hiding some unknown magic?”

Seth shrugged. “Hell if I know. I’m under the impression that sometimes it’s a false lead, so they build and make a profit. Developing the land funds their other projects. It could be nothing. They are less my concern compared to the dragon.”

He leveled a look at Marcus. “Gigi is hiding you from something powerful, something dangerous. She’s putting her neck out for you. Gigi is a friend. You can’t expect me to stand idly by while you put my friend in danger.”

“I offered to help,” I said. “He’s not putting me in danger.”

“Just because it was your idea doesn’t mean you’re not in danger. Desmon has his hands tied. This extends to me and anyone who works for him. We can’t help. It

would give away the fact that Desmon had known about you this whole time and hid you knowingly. Officially, I came with the EA.” He waved his hand, and he was back in his uniform.

“I understand,” Marcus said solemnly.

“Good. Then my job here is done. And while I can’t help you with the dragon, I can help you with Arcane. You two get some sleep. I’ll get those windows boarded up.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Marcus said. “We can—”

“It’s literally just a wiggle of my fingers. You can call someone to clean it up for good in the morning.”

For a wizard like Seth, it really was just a wiggle of his fingers. If only I had seemingly limitless magic like that.

I showed Seth out the door, and when I returned, I found Marcus with his face in his hands.

“We never expected help from Desmon to begin with. No big loss,” I said. “And plus, if Elise hasn’t told the dragon yet, I can still fuck with her memory.”

“You can?”

“Yeah.” I went to my bookshelf and picked up a large tome from the bottom shelf. “I don’t do it often, and I’m out of practice. But I can study up.” I opened the book to the right chapter and placed it on the dining room table.

“Not tonight you don’t, Kitten. You heard the wizard. We need sleep. We’re useless if we’re exhausted.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow. But can you stay?” I reached for his arm. “I don’t want to be alone right now.”

That was the truth, though I also didn’t want Marcus to be alone either. Not after Seth’s spiel about him putting me in danger. I didn’t want him to think he needed to do this alone, because he didn’t. We were a team now, had been since I stepped into his gym and saw him there staring at me like he’d seen a ghost.

His gaze softened. “I’ll stay. But if this becomes a habit, you’re going to need a bigger bed.”

I grinned. “I can make that happen.”

I let him gather me into his arms and usher me into the bedroom. As he helped me out of my robe, his bulky frame almost knocked over the wire mannequin where I displayed all my favorite silk scarves and crystal brooches, reminding me just how full my home was already with all my treasures. There really wasn’t room for a bigger bed.

But that was a problem for another day because the moment my head hit the pillow and Marcus nestled me neatly into the curve of his body, sleep came to claim me, and I fell asleep to the strong and rhythmic sound of his heart.

Marcus

I couldn't believe I'd just met Desmon's personal wizard, and he knew Gigi. Seth wasn't anything like I'd imagined a wizard to be, and most definitely not like the ones I'd seen on the news. But I guess if he worked for Desmon, he could dress pretty much any way he wanted.

He'd claimed that Desmon couldn't help, yet the dragon of Darlington had sent him to warn me. I considered that help enough.

I stared at Gigi's ceiling as I listened to her soft breathing. Even her ceiling had not escaped my little witch's numerous decorations. Instead of the plain ceiling light that graced my master bedroom, a chandelier hung from hers. One I'd almost caught my horns on when I knelt on her bed last night.

Swaths of fabric hung on either side of it, pinned up to the ceiling so that it almost made her room look like a tent. Pins and brooches were attached to the fabric, many of them looking like antique collector items. There were sun catchers hung up by the window, which currently reflected the moonlight instead of the sun.

At first glance, I'd thought it too full of useless things, cluttered almost. But now that I'd seen her at work and understood that she relied on her items to do her magic, I got it. Every piece was a part of her, collected from a life full of experiences.

It was so different from my own life. While I owned plenty of machines and equipment for my gym, my personal space was plain. The first reason was that I'd had to leave everything behind when I first made my escape. I kept no friends, no

items, no electronics. All I had was cash and the shirt on my back. I'd even had to abandon my bank account after taking out as much as possible.

I'd realized by then that the money hadn't really been mine to keep anyway, even though I'd earned it. Elise would've kept it after I "disappeared" into the maze. Leaving my things had been easier than I'd first thought. They were just items. And many of them reminded me that my life until that point had been one big lie.

I'd never gone into higher education. There was no point. And it wasn't encouraged anyway. The dragon—and Maman, by extension—didn't need someone who could think. In fact, the less I used my brain, the better.

Maman had tried to keep me naïve. She pulled me out of school the second I was old enough and got me working with a construction company. She'd claimed it was to get me set up so that when I finally came out of the maze, many decades later, I'd have money to live.

That had been a lie. I'd overheard her talking to her friend about using it as additional funds after the dragon's last payment when she handed me over. I'd only been a teenager when we opened the account, so she had access to it.

My whole life, she'd talked up what a privilege and honor it was to be the next keeper of the maze. She told me how proud she was of me. And I'd fallen for it for so long.

Perhaps in centuries past this ruse would've worked, but information was too readily available in today's world. Elise also craved a life of luxury. She spent much of her time going out, traveling, leaving me at home alone—enough time for me to think and piece everything together.

The trip to America disguised as a new worker on a freight ship had taken eighteen days. The cargo master hadn't found out about me until we'd already left the harbor,

but then again, it hadn't been the first time corporate had messed up, sending people to the wrong ship. He'd chalked it up to another mistake from corporate and put me to work.

I disappeared right after we made land and started hoofing it, quite literally, to Darlington.

I put one hundred percent of my effort into rebuilding my life. Everything cost money, so I mainly focused on that. I took a job doing what I knew best: construction. That was where I'd met Declan. He'd been taking classes at the University of Darlington and needed extra cash, so he'd worked construction during the summer.

It was during Darlington's big boom right after the fall of The Wall, and hard workers willing to put in the time and raw power were able to make a lot of money in a short time. But I knew I couldn't stay in that job long. Elise, or even the dragon himself, would come looking, and they'd probably check construction companies first, considering it was the only trade I knew.

So I'd made my money, then got out.

I'd moved to my old location, mostly because the rent was cheap, and started Bullseye Fitness. That was a few years ago. I had to continue doing odd jobs in the beginning, but over time, my gym started covering itself and my living expenses.

I put everything I earned back into my business. And what I didn't spend went into an emergency fund in case I had to drop everything and start over. And all that was to say that I still owned very little outside of my business. Unlike Gigi's place, my double unit was basically empty. I was a trendy minimalist by circumstance, not by choice.

It had been the reason why I'd only ever looked for one-night stands. It felt like I had to be able to get up and leave at any time. There was always the threat of the dragon, ever looming in the background. Plus, I couldn't trust anyone.

Gigi hummed in her sleep, stretching as she turned onto her back, making me ultra-aware of her presence. Somehow she'd wiggled her way into my life, even though it had only been a few days since I'd found her again after losing her the first time.

Telling Gigi about my past had been an exceptional risk, one I didn't know why I'd taken. She could've betrayed me, offering me up to the dragon for a price. She hadn't. She'd put herself in my corner instead.

But what if knowing my secret put her in danger? Arcane Development was bad enough, but now I'd also saddled her with a potentially angry dragon. I'd avoided closeness and intimacy before due to self-preservation, but now I wondered if I should have been worried about the safety of the people I cared about instead.

Could I ever drop everything now and start over? Without her? Without Declan?

The thought was depressing.

A feeling of something important weighed over me. And not for the first time, I wondered if Gigi was my mate. The thing was, I didn't even know if minotaurs had mates. I hadn't known any other minotaurs until I came here, and even then, I'd deliberately kept my interactions with them short and concise, lest they figured out who I was.

"You're still awake." Sleepy green eyes blinked up at me. "Did you know you mumble to yourself when you think?"

"I'm sorry." I hadn't known that. "Did I wake you?"



“Yeah, but it’s sort of cute, so I forgive you.” She reached up and slid her fingers into my hair, massaging my head at the base of my horns. “Here. Let me help you sleep.”

I moaned at the feel of her fingers on my scalp. That was nice.

I wasn’t sure if I was just plain ol’ tired or if she’d put a little bit of magic in that head rub, but when I opened my eyes again, it was morning.

Gigi was already out of bed, and I was disappointed I didn’t get to wake up with her in my arms today. I found an extra toothbrush laid out for me in the bathroom. By the time I stepped back out into the living room, she was already on the phone with a glass and window repair company haggling for a good deal to get the work done together.

As she called her employees to let them know not to come in and updated her store hours online, I sent a message to Declan to let him know what had happened.

His first reaction? “The mirrors!” Which had been my reaction.

“Don’t worry, I saved them.”

“Thank fuck! Because I do not want to put those up again. I’m glad you’re alright, man.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ve got something for you to look at while you wait for them to fix those windows,” Declan said. “You’ll have to sign into the University of Darlington library portal with my alumni account, but I have it saved.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll see. You can’t miss it.”

He hung up and sent me the link and sign-in credentials.

Curious, I went to the website and signed in. At first, I was confused. What was I supposed to see? I clicked around and eventually made it to a section labeled Digital References.

There it was: Rencontre Avec un Minotaure. Or at least, a scanned version of it, on a temporary digital loan from the once-secret Université de Magie in Paris.

“Whatcha got there?” Gigi asked.

“Declan found the book.” I showed her my screen. “Someone scanned it. He borrowed it digitally from Paris’s University of Magic.”

“You mean the one that vehemently claimed they didn’t exist when The Wall first fell?”

“That’s the one.”

“While you read up on that, I’m going to brainstorm what Arcane might be after.”

“Want some company?” I asked.

Somehow, returning to my mostly empty apartment felt rather...well, empty. Also, it felt like a dragon could appear from nowhere at any moment and drag me to my fate. Being around her calmed me, and I was able to think. And should that actually happen and I lost my freedom today, I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could.

“Yeah, I’d love some company.”

I quickly ran over to my apartment to grab a change of clothes and my laptop and returned to find Gigi on the couch deep in thought, with a project in hand and yarn in her lap. Triscuit was out playing with another smaller ball of yarn.

I sat down on the couch next to her, but the couch dipped, interrupting her...knitting? I didn’t think that was done with a hook, though. I moved to the opposite end of the couch instead and stuck my hoof out so that it touched her foot. There. We were still touching.

I loaded the page onto my laptop and started reading.

The book was smut and very little else. Though I was pretty damn sure by the end of it that one of my female ancestors had most definitely written it. For one, the descriptions of the maze had been nearly identical to the ones my mother had given me. Not to mention, the agreement was basically the same.

And that had only made it worse because, in essence, I’d just read breeding smut written by my great-great-grandmother, and that was just fucking wrong on so many levels.

“Still no name for the dragon?” Gigi asked.

“No. She only refers to it as le Dragon, which is exactly how Elise refers to him. I don’t think the women he contracted ever knew or cared. In the book, Jeanne, the main character, was originally born into the good life, but her father had gambled away everything, and her mother died of consumption. She was forced into a life of prostitution to survive when the dragon approached her. Elise was in a similar situation. Started out with some money but fell on bad times with no one else in her life.”

“And the promise of being able to live that way again was enough incentive to take the bait.” Griselda nodded.

“Yeah. Too bad there’s nothing useful in here. What a waste of my morning. This fucking sucks.”

The moment the words came out of my mouth, Gigi’s eyes grew round, and she made a zip-it motion with her fingers across her lips.

“What?”

I followed her gaze to Triscuit, who was chasing after a ball of yarn.

Gigi released a breath. “He didn’t hear it. Good. I said that particular combination of words one too many times in college, and Triscuit started saying it. Constantly. It took years to get him to stop. Years .”

“Oops, sorry. Won’t happen again.” Note to self: living with a parrot was like living with a flying child. “Thought of anything while you were...” I mimicked the motion she made with her hook.

“Crocheting?”

“Yes, crocheting. I should’ve guessed since croche is French for hook. I knew it wasn’t knitting.”

“Smart man. Never call crochet knitting unless you want to get intimate with a hook. And yes, I did think of something. But I might need your help.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

“My help?” Marcus asked. “How? You’ve been here longer than I have. Unless that sign in your coffee shop is lying.”

“No, it’s right. This used to be my Granny’s place when I was little, but my mom had no use for it, so she passed it to me. My grandmother used to sell potions. She was great at it. Me, not so much. I can brew potions, but not like her. She was exceptional. I don’t have a knack for brewing anything unless it involves beans.”

“And your mother?”

“Never appreciated her talents. My parents were more modern. Thought magic would be and should be replaced by technology. They never imagined the two existing side by side like it does now. But it was before The Wall fell, so I understood.” I grimaced, trying to remember the times I’d visited my grandmother as a kid. “I was raised in the suburbs.”

I’d loved coming to Granny’s because, like her, my magic worked and recharged with objects and things. Not only had her home been infused with all the magical artifacts she’d brought in, but there’d been the antique shop two doors down. I spent plenty of weekend afternoons hunting for treasures in there, and had even spent my first bit of saved-up allowance there for a tiny hand mirror I still owned.

“I think I know who might know more,” I said. “Evyyenia and Andreas.”

“You mean the old couple who owned the antique shop before I moved in?”

“Yeah. They’ve been here since forever. Maybe even longer than my grandmother. But I don’t have a way to reach them.”

“I have their numbers. It was a private sale, so we didn’t go through an agent.”

“That’s what I was hoping for.”

He dug his phone out and looked for the number. “Want to call them now?”

“They’re retired, right? Nothing better to do.”

Evyyenia picked up almost immediately.

After the usual greetings and a little bit of explanation, she invited us over to her new place, which, as it turned out, wasn’t too far away. It was perfect because I had a bunch of baked goods that weren’t going to get sold today. I packed those up, threw on a cute sweater dress, some tights, and a pair of ass-kicking boots that made me feel like a million bucks, and we were on our way.

We took Marcus’s truck, which had the Bullseye Fitness logo emblazoned on the side and the old address taped up. Evyyenia and Andreas had moved out to a cute little midtown bungalow that merged the best of both downtown and suburban living. Plus, they didn’t have to worry about those pesky stairs.

I was surprised to see that unlike their old antique shop, the place was not, in fact, filled to the brim with knickknacks. However, they did have one curio cabinet stuffed to the brim.

“Look at you two, so cute together,” Evyyenia gushed.

“Stop matchmaking, woman. They’re here for information.” Andreas shook Marcus’s

hand, all business-like, then gave me a pat on the head like I was still a little girl.

This was how he'd greeted me for years, and I guess to him, I was still the little girl who'd sneak candy out of the bowl at the front counter. The one who'd saved every penny she could to buy the next trinket she had her eyes on. When I moved in after my grandmother, they'd joked that many of the pieces were coming home.

"Those assholes at Arcane Development bothering you now, are they?" he asked.

"Andreas!" Evy gasped at the bad word.

Evyenia told us what she remembered over some tea and my offerings of baked goods.

"When I was a girl, the row of shops hadn't been there at all. It used to be a cute little cabin owned by a really old witch. She was ancient, really."

"Oh yeah, I remember her." Andreas had a smile on his face as if he was being transported back to another time. "It used to be a skating rink across the street, remember?"

"That's where you took me on our first date. Of course I remember. And the witch would offer hot chocolate to all the kids and couples skating in the winter."

"That sounds really nice," I said. Across the street was a bank now, and all that was left of the skating rink was a tiny fountain and a plaque.

"I didn't know much about her. The witch, I mean," Evyenia said. "She was really old, and we were still young back then. Andy was my high school sweetheart."

"I knew she was the one the moment I saw her with those pigtails."

That line probably wouldn't fly in today's world, but I was glad it had worked out for them.

Andreas turned to Marcus. "Gigi here is a good girl. She always came to visit her Granny. And she makes the best coffee in town. You should snatch her up like I did Evy."

Evy scoffed. "And you were telling me not to matchmake."

"This is different," Andreas huffed. "Man talk."

"Whatever you say, dear."

"I'm already on it," Marcus said, sending me a smile that had my belly flip-flopping like I was a teenager with a crush.

"Smart man," Andreas said, nodding approvingly.

"So, what happened to the witch?" Marcus asked, bringing the talk back on track.

"She got too old," Evy said. "We got the news that the house was being torn down. She'd passed away. Her son had moved to the big city to seek his fortune and didn't have use for a little house in Darlington. So he tore it down and built the current building on top of it. Shops on the bottom, homes on top. Enough for three families. He sold the units for a profit, and we've never heard from him again. We were one of the original buyers."

"We found out something about the condo development company," I said. "It's owned by a bunch of wizards. I was thinking that maybe it's not the land for condos they're really after."



The two exchanged a glance. Then Andreas got up and closed the blinds. “They probably already know, but why help give them confirmation?”

I felt around with my magic and realized the home was already warded.

“It was rumored,” Evyenia began, “that they’d kept the original cellar when they tore down the old home and simply built on top of it after sealing it off. It was faster and cheaper that way.”

“But we haven’t found anything that would prove it in all the time we’ve lived there. And we tried,” Andreas grumbled. “Many times. We checked every single inch of that basement. We did own an antique shop, after all. We’re the curious type. If there was something there, we wanted to find it.”

“There’s a basement?” I asked. I didn’t have access to any basement. But it did make sense. The foundation needed to be below the frost line.

“I have access to it,” Marcus said. “Below the gym. Now that I think about it, I have a double unit, but there’s only one access, and it’s through the stairwell for the unit that belonged to you.”

“Yes, we had the only entrance to the basement.” Andreas reached for his third cookie. He always did like the raspberry thumbprints. “We found nothing and used it as extra storage.”

“I hired an inspector when I bought the place, and aside from the older pipes and the roof needing to be replaced soon, he didn’t say anything about the basement.”

“Could be magic hiding it,” I suggested.

“We thought of that,” Andreas said. “But we couldn’t nullify it. Eventually, we just

gave up. Forgot all about it after many years, until Arcane came knocking. Say, you don't know anything about that fight with the troll in front of our place, do you?"

The investigation was over, and they'd just given us the information we needed, so I told them the truth. "A friend of mine messed up a love spell, and instead of sending the man of her dreams, it sent a bunch of randoms. She came looking for my help."

There was a silence before Evyenia cracked up laughing.

"The spell sent her a troll?" she cackled, stepping over from sweet little grandma to wicked witch territory for a brief moment. "Oh, poor child. I hope you were able to help her."

"Yes. We were able to nullify the spell." But not the love of a very devoted incubus, although I kept that detail to myself.

"Don't be so quick to judge, Evy," Andreas said, wisely. "That troll might end up as some woman's ultimate man. You know how it is. One man's junk—"

"—is another man's treasure," they finished together.

"You're right, Andy."

I wasn't so sure, considering how much the troll had stunk up the place. I thanked the older couple for having us over and promised that if we found anything interesting, we'd let them know. They told us to call or visit at any time. It must be nice to be retired with all that extra time on their hands.

Explaining that we'd had our windows smashed last night and the repair company was due to arrive after lunch, we apologized that we couldn't visit for longer. And with our newfound knowledge, Marcus and I headed home, eager to search in this

mysterious basement.

Marcus

There was nothing here. Nothing at all. We'd gone through and tapped on every brick, knocked on every patch of wall, and checked every floor tile. There was nothing here . But something still nagged at the edge of my consciousness.

"I know we've looked everywhere, but a part of my brain is still telling me that we haven't," I said, looking around the basement.

We'd brought down as many lights as we could since the basement had only one blinking fluorescent bulb lighting the entire place. Now, lamps from Gigi's home flooded the floor with warm light.

"I know what you mean," Gigi said. "It's like the answer is right here in front of my face"—she gestured to the wall in front of her—"but I can't see it."

"Do you want to call it quits for today?" I hated to quit, but we'd been down here long enough, and the longer I stayed, the more hopeless everything seemed.

Today had been a day of ups and downs, and it was getting exhausting. First we had our windows broken. That had brought Seth, bearing information about both the dragon and Arcane. Declan had found the book...which had been basically useless. Then we'd gotten our hopes up about the basement after visiting Evy and Andy. We'd gotten back just in time for the repair company to arrive. And now I felt as if we were back at square one.

"We'll try again tomorrow with fresh eyes," she agreed. "We should probably relieve

Declan anyway. He's been up there dealing with the window people all afternoon."

"He said they're almost done."

"Did Elise ever come back?" Gigi turned off the lamps so that the only thing illuminating our way was the unflattering fluorescent bulb.

My mother had dropped by just after lunch and had milled around until Gigi had gone up to let her know the coffee shop was closed, but they would open again tomorrow. She'd used the opportunity to feel around Elise's aura to see if she had magic. She didn't.

"But it's hard to tell," Gigi had said. "Because witches are taught at a young age to hide our powers from people who might want to use us."

"Well, I don't remember her casting any spells or doing any magic of any kind," I'd told her. "The only 'crystal' she's interested in are diamonds, and I'm pretty sure that if she could cast beautifying spells, she would."

"In that case, I'm just going to go out on a limb and say that she has no magic. This makes my life easier. When she comes back tomorrow, I'll be ready to mess with her memories."

We were lucky she only spoke with Nick twice, for about thirty seconds in total, and that meant we only needed to erase any memory she had of him. That made the spell concise and easier to prepare.

According to Declan, Elise never came back. But I was still extra careful and made sure my glamor was running when I went upstairs.

"Ready to paint the logo?" Declan asked when he saw me. He had already penciled in

the outline on the wall.

“Yeah. More than ready.” We were already days behind schedule.

“Any luck ah... cleaning the basement?” His eyes flitted to the workers who were just on their way out, their job done.

“Nope,” Gigi replied. “Still a fucking mess.” She looked as disappointed as I felt.

I wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her until she smiled again, but now was not the time, not with all this work ahead of me.

“Well, I’ll let you gentlemen get back to work.” She gave my hand a squeeze and turned to the door.

“Call me if you need anything.” I meant it. Anything at all.

I watched as she made her way out of my gym, my eyes on her swaying hips and wishing the logo would paint itself. I’d much rather be spending time with her.

“Aww,” Declan said when we were alone again. “Look at you, all moon-eyed for the little witch! You’re smitten!”

“I am not.” I picked up the bucket of paint and shook it vigorously.

“Oh, come on, look at her! Of course you are. You’d be crazy not to want a piece of that.”

I growled at the thought of my friend thinking of Griselda like that.

“Ha! See! I’m not even allowed to compliment her without you growling at me.”

I sighed and pried open the bucket of red paint. “Alright, so maybe I am. But you and I both know nothing good can come of this. Not with my problem.”

“Okay. So the future isn’t certain, but when is it ever?” Declan picked up a brush and dipped it into the paint, brushing the extra off on the edge of the paint bucket before starting on the left side of the bullseye. “That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve happiness. Hell! If we all waited until our future was set in stone before doing things we love, life would suck all around. And trust me, of all the people I know, you deserve happiness the most. Look at this place. Bullseye Fitness is a community. You saw how many guys showed up the other day for the photo shoot.”

“Yeah, because you promised the winner a free membership.” I joined him, starting on the right side.

“Pshh. You fucking kidding me? Half those guys are loaded. They don’t need a free membership. They did it for Bullseye Fitness. They did it for you. Remember back at the old place right before the move when we were talking in the office about what we were going to do about Arcane Developments if they came knocking? Some of the guys overheard us. They know what you’re dealing with; I didn’t have to spell it out.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

“Because you were busy getting all the legal shit together and signing all the important paperwork. You were stressed, and they didn’t want to bother you, so they came to me. You know the guys are proud of you, right? They look up to you. Bullseye Fitness is their home away from home. It’s their gym. And you made it happen. They’re willing to stick their necks out for you.”

“But the big question is, who’s willing to fling a wasp nest through a windshield? ”

Declan chuckled. “Anything for my brother from another mo—”

He must've seen my reaction to the mention of my mother and changed course. "My point being, you're not alone. You've got friends. And not just me. I know you can't tell anyone else about the dragon, but Gigi knows now, and it looks like she's willing to help. Don't fuck it up. Don't throw it away because you're scared."

"I ain't scared."

But Declan's words had me thinking. Maybe it was time to open up and let someone in. Hell, I didn't think I could stop it even if I tried.



*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

I was staring at my phone, trying to decide if I should call Marcus or not when it rang. His number showed up on the screen. I counted to ten so it didn't seem like I was literally by my phone waiting for him to call.

This teenager-with-a-major-crush feeling wasn't going away even now that I'd spent several days stuck by his side.

"Hello?" I whispered to avoid triggering Triscuit. I didn't need him to be saying hello on repeat for the next fifteen minutes.

"Hey."

Just that one word in Marcus's low rumble voice was enough to do funny things to my insides.

"I was just meal prepping for the next week," he said, "and I'm making some extra for you."

He was cooking? For me? Meal prepping. That was totally a gym-bro thing, wasn't it?

I was too shocked to respond, so he continued. "I know it's supposed to be all about the macros. But I don't make my food super healthy and bland. I tried, but I can't eat it. My version of meal prepping is palatable, I promise."

I finally found my voice. “I’m sure it will be great. I haven’t had time to get groceries, so thank you.”

That was a lie. I had time. Like right now, I could be at the supermarket this very moment doing my weekly shopping, but I was so tired. I decided I’d rather vegetate on my couch instead. It wasn’t the time, it was the energy I was lacking. Especially after the last few days.

“Let me be completely honest with you. I was resigned to being happy with peanut butter and crackers again tonight. I’m not exactly a domestic diva.”

“I don’t expect you to be. You’re already a successful business owner and a talented witch. Any more perfect, and you’ll be too intimidating.”

“Flatterer!”

Triscuit flinging his set of colorful stackable plastic cups around his cage and cackling like a madman had me cringing. It was cute, though that was dependent on who you asked, but it did not make for a very romantic setting.

“Did you want to meet me up on the rooftop instead? It’s a beautiful evening and it gives me an excuse to use the umbrella heaters.”

“Okay. Be there in twenty? I’m going to try to whip up some dessert too.”

“Dessert?”

“Unless you want to be dessert.” His growled words had me squeezing my legs together.

“Why not both? I’ll see you in twenty.”

Twenty minutes. I was glad I'd already taken a shower after our failed search of the dusty basement. But I'd let my hair air dry and it was a bit of a mess. Clean, but messy. It was also red again because I'd let the magic slide.

I decided not to use too much magic in case I needed it to bolster the wards through another attack.

Gathering a few candles, I ran up to the roof to turn on the heaters and pick up any cups I might have left out there. Then, with the candles in place but unlit, and the heaters warming the place up, I ran back inside and made myself look presentable.

I kept the hair simple, a quick blow dry and sleeking down with a jasmine-scented oil. The only magic I used on my hair was to make it black again. I'd noticed his reaction to it that first day. He liked the red, but loved the black.

I used real makeup instead of magic, focusing on my brows and eyes. I was lucky that my skin had been behaving recently. I stuffed the blood-red lipstick and a compact into my purse for later and chose a nude balm for pre-food lips instead. I wanted a hint of siren without being overdone for an impromptu homemade rooftop dinner.

I took way too long to decide what to wear. It was well below freezing outside but I knew the two umbrella heaters were powerful and put out a surprising amount of heat. I didn't want to be overdressed if he showed up in sweatpants. But I wanted to look good too.

Then I remembered his reaction when he stepped out onto the roof the other day and saw me in my satin nightie, the red one with a low-cut neckline and a hem that ended barely below my ass. A short dress then. That one was in the laundry, so I dug out a lacy crocheted one I'd made last year.

It technically covered all the essentials, but I'd only ever worn it at home because it

was basically see-through. I put that on, and then threw the black robe over it. They were still considered my “house clothes,” so I wouldn’t be overdressed, but they were sexy as hell, especially if I wore a pair of heels with them.

That was one thing I’d promised myself years ago. I didn’t wear ratty clothes at home. I wore sexy clothes that made me feel good, or cute clothes that I loved. Why? Because why should I spend my free time looking, and therefore feeling, like crap?

I stepped out onto the patio with a pitcher of iced tea—I cheated, it was bottled—just in time to see Marcus lighting the candles I’d put out earlier. He looked good. Smelled good too. He’d showered, and the clean scent of the body wash mingled with his natural masculine one. He’d trimmed his facial hair...or was that facial fur?

He’d changed out of his sweatpants from before and now wore a pair of jeans that molded to his muscular legs. A simple black T-shirt finished the outfit. But it wasn’t one of those sloppy, oversized ones. This one was fitted and showcased every ripped muscle. The bumps formed by his nipple rings showed through the fabric.

Dinner was good. Lemon and artichoke chicken on brown rice. Not spectacular, and much healthier than when I cooked. But since Marcus had made it, it automatically got extra bonus points. Dessert was a berry cheesecake protein parfait.

“A protein parfait?” I should stop the dubious tone.

”There’s protein powder in the cream cheese mixture. And I used high-protein granola.”

“I had no idea that even existed. But I’m willing to give it a try.”

“I used real sugar. None of that fake stuff. Maybe it’s my enhanced sense of taste, but I can’t stand sugar substitutes.”

“Oh, it’s not just you,” I assured him.

The cheesecake parfait was surprisingly good. I couldn’t even tell it was high protein.

But as I ate, I realized that Marcus’s attention wasn’t on the dessert at all. It was on me. Over the course of dinner, I’d gotten hot—those umbrella heaters were no joke—and let the robe fall open. He was gawking at the dress underneath, which meant I’d made the right decision.

Putting my dessert down, I leaned back and stretched, putting my legs up across him to rest my feet on his lap. His eyes went to my shoes immediately.

“Fuck, Kitten. You wore those at the club.”

“I did.” Was it a bad idea in the snow? Totally. But I survived. He’d waxed poetic over them, but he’d also been drinking that night.

“Still fucking hot.” He brought one foot to his lips and kissed the exposed skin through the straps.

I pressed the other foot down on his erection, which was becoming more obvious. It couldn’t be comfortable in those jeans.

I wasn’t ready when he suddenly moved, shoving the low table and sliding down to kneel on the ground. He gripped my ankles and pulled so that I slid to the edge of the seat, then spread my legs wide, trapping me in a compromising position.

“Beautiful.”

From his angle, I would be exposed to him. My dress was super lacy, basically a bunch of holes except for over my breasts, and the only thing solid between us was

the thin fabric of my underwear. He made quick work of that, bending to grip the flimsy garment between his teeth and yanking. There was a loud ripping sound and he tossed the scrap of satin to the side with his mouth.

Wow. Fuck. That was hot.

“Time for my dessert.”

With his hands still holding my ankles, he leaned in to kiss me, sending heat surging through my body. Our tongues dueled for dominance, even though I knew who’d win. I slipped my hand under his shirt, clawing at the firm muscles there. Lust and need descended on us so fervently I was dizzy with it all.

He trailed fiery kisses down my throat, then buried his face between my breasts, nudging the dress down so he could lick and kiss me thoroughly until my nipples beaded up, hard and sensitive. The bulge at the front of his pants brushed against my crotch, promising great things. I wiggled, trying my damndest to rub myself against him, but he moved away.”

“Bring that back,” I demanded. “I need it.”

“Fuck,” he swore, looking pained. He released one leg and rubbed the back of his neck, looking a little sheepish. “I won’t leave you wanting. But we can’t fuck.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t replenish my stash of condoms, and we went through all of them last time.”

Oh, we had? No wonder.

He wasn’t a one-night stand anymore, so I said, “I’m on the pill. And I’ve been

tested. So if you don't have any other reason—"

He let out a growl, the sound raw. "You shouldn't have told me that."

"Why not?"

His eyes changed, and now he watched me like a predator who'd cornered his prey. "Because you won't be able to walk tomorrow."

My heart was pounding in my chest. "Walking is overrated," I panted.

"Kitten," he murmured. "I've been wanting this since the moment I saw you again."

His jeans were down by his knees in an instant, and his cock sprang free. I reached for it, enjoying how hard it was in my hands. I saw now that without the glamor it was thicker and darker at the base. I pumped the majestic cock a few times before Marcus shifted back. His eyes were dark with intent when he bent his head, his heavy horns creating delicious friction against the inside of my legs.

I gripped his horns, pulling him closer and urging him to continue. His breath was so hot against my skin, and I bucked my hips in anticipation. I sighed when he finally covered me with his mouth.

His tongue found my clit after a thorough exploration and flicked it several times, drawing needy moans from me. His fingers dragged languidly up my legs, and his hands slid under my ass, gripping it firmly and tilting my hips for better access.

There was that thick tongue again. Spreading me open, preparing me for something even more generous. All I could do was hold on, my nails clawing at the base of his horns, something he clearly enjoyed from the sounds he made.

All it took was his thumb circling my clit firmly for me to fall apart.

I shattered, my muscles tightening and clenching around his tongue. When I cried out, I was glad that Marcus had just enough sense left to press his palm quickly over my mouth. We were on the roof, and this was downtown Darlington.

Then he was lining us up, the wicker chair putting me at the perfect height. He shifted his weight and pressed in. My eyes grew wide at how big he felt.

Oh god.

Remembering how loud I'd been at his place that night, I searched frantically for the robe so I could scream into it. I found it just in time. He rocked his hips, and every thick inch had me losing more of my mind. He was filling me completely and utterly, and all I could do was feel.



*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

I watched in the glow of the candles as my cock parted her folds and disappeared into her slick entrance. It looked fucking good. Gigi held her robe to her face, and all I heard was a muffled gasp.

With every thrust, I stretched her, filled her, each movement punctuated with her reaction, barely contained by her robe. I loved every moment of it. She was so reactive, so vocal, and it made me feel invincible.

I savored the moment, fucking her slowly, pinning her body in place with a hand over her collarbone. Her nipples hardened in the winter air, and her hair was a sexy, messy halo around her head.

“So fucking hot, Kitten.” She was beautiful like this, and I’d never tire of it.

Her channel started to flicker around me, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to keep control.

There was something she still didn’t know about me yet, a secret I’d kept from her that night we were together. She’d find out today because I could keep nothing from her. I only hoped she would not react with disgust because that would destroy me.

As her cunt tightened around me, I rolled my hips at the end of each thrust, grinding my pelvis against her clit. The extra friction had her whimpering and moaning, tears squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. She screamed, her robe barely stopping the sound, as her pussy squeezed and milked me.

Instead of pulling out and taking myself in hand like I did the other times, I buried myself in her to the hilt. I wasn't a bull shifter; I was a minotaur. And we were different, like some wolf shifters.

“Wha—” Her eyes went wide. “What’s happening? Oh god!”

I panted as the base of my cock swelled even more, locking us together. She started to struggle, shoving at my chest, and I held her hips in place.

“It’s okay, Kitten,” I gritted out.

“It’s too much,” she panted. Then, understanding lit in her eyes. “Oh! We’re stuck.”

“Yes. Don’t move. The knotting only lasts a few minutes. Just let me hold you. Please.” I didn’t mean for the last word to sound so desperate. What would I do if she rejected me now?

I closed my eyes, afraid to open them, until I felt her hands on my cheek pulling me down toward her. Then she was wrapping her arms and legs around me and burying her face into my neck.

We stayed this way until an errant gust of cruel winter wind blew into our cocoon of warmth, putting out the candles, and reminding me that we were still on the roof. I wanted to continue this somewhere a little more comfortable, but remembering the size of her bed and Triscuit, I decided my place was the best choice. I got up, taking her with me.

“Hey!” she gasped, her arms tightening around me.

“I’ve got you, Kitten.” I stopped in front of the heaters, and she reached out to turn them off.

“The dishes,” she said, looking down at them.

“Forget the dishes. We’ll come back for them tomorrow. I want to finish my dessert.”

She giggled, and nipped at my ear. “I thought you already had it.”

“Nah.” I squeezed her ass. “I’m not done with you yet tonight. Not by a long shot.”

I placed the tiny sticky note on the wall I’d just knocked on, marking it as searched, before moving on to the next square foot. I knocked on it with my knuckles and listened carefully. Nothing. I moved to the mallet. It still sounded the same. I peeled off another pink sticky note and stuck it on.

Gigi had shown up at the front door of my gym at 6:05 p.m. on the nose, ready to try again in the basement. Elise hadn’t stopped by the Witch’s Brew all day, which had been disappointing.

The good news was that with our Faux Hobo gone from the front, business was back to usual, and she was getting a lot more walk-ins from the street. Apparently, she’d come up with the idea of using something bright and colorful to mark all the places in the basement we’d checked while searching for the oat milk in the fridge. The Witch’s Brew employees usually stuck a pink sticky note on the oat milk to make it easier to find.

I stepped back and gazed at my wall of bright pink, blues, and yellows. The sticky notes did their job. It was extremely clear where I’d searched and where I hadn’t. I’d checked every square foot of wall and floor on my side of the basement.

“I’m out of wall space,” I said, turning to Gigi, who had her hair in the cutest little messy bun on the top of her head.

“And I’m out of sticky notes.” She held up her last yellow note.

“You missed a spot.” I took it from her, gently tapped on her head with two fingers, then stuck it on her forehead. “Now we’re done.”

“Are you saying there’s nothing there?” She didn’t remove the sticky note. “Because I did lend my last brain cell to Triscuit today.”

“Nope, just wanted to mark you as thoroughly checked.” I wanted to mark her as so much more. As Mine. The need to own her, possess her, had grown by the hour.

We started at the door and moved, going clockwise around the basement, being careful where we stepped so we didn’t move any of the notes on the floor.

I noticed a section about two by two feet at the bottom of the wall that was not marked with anything.

“What about that?” I asked.

Gigi furrowed her brow. “What about it?”

“It’s not marked. “

“Yeah, it is. That whole wall is marked.”

“No. Right there.”

“Where?”

“At the bottom, along the floor.”

“The floor is marked too.”

“No. On the wall! Right fucking there!” I realized I was raising my voice, and I cleared my throat. “Right here, about two feet squared,” I said softer, this time squatting down to draw my finger around the empty area.

Gigi was breathing heavily now and shaking her head. “I don’t understand.” She grabbed my upper arm and pulled me back up, and suddenly I found her huddled against me, hiding her face in my chest.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m scared.” Her voice was so small. “I don’t know why, but it just hit me. I’m so scared.”

I wrapped my arms around her protectively, my eyes and ears scanning for possible danger. “I’m right here. I’ll protect you.”

She nodded and peered at the spot I’d indicated again. I didn’t feel what she felt, but the need to guard her and make sure she was safe was nearly unbearable. Something significant was happening.

“Tell me what you see,” I said.

“A narrow sliver of wall. Too small for sticky notes.”

“Not two feet worth.”

“No.”

“And what’s making you scared? The fact that you can’t see it?”

“I-I don’t know. But I’m scared to look at it.”

“And it just started when I pointed it out to you?”

“Yeah. I think it’s spelled. Don’t you feel it?”

“No.” I tapped on the wall outside of the area, right next to a sticky note with the mallet. It sounded solid. Then I tapped on the center empty area. It sounded hollow. “I think we found it.”

I squatted back down and reached for the wall again, this time with my hands.

“No! Don’t touch it.” Gigi pulled at me desperately. “Let me think first. Somewhere else. Not here.”

“Okay.” I took her hand, and we went back upstairs.

Instead of stopping in my apartment, she continued out through the roof and over to her own place. She looked traumatized, like she’d just experienced something horrible. She didn’t relax until she had Triscuit in her arms.

“Talk to me, Kitten.” I felt useless. How could I fight something I couldn’t even detect? “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I think so. I’m just trying to get over that vile feeling.” She blew out a breath. “It felt like the world was ending. It was dreadful, and it fucking sucked.”

In her arms, Triscuit perked up. “Focking Socks! Focking Socks! Focking Socks!” He sounded just like Gigi.

“Oh no!” Gigi grumbled. But it had lightened the mood, and Gigi was already

looking much more relaxed, and my need to go fight some invisible foe waned.

“Oh no!” Triscuit mocked. “Stop it! Stop it!”

I grinned. “He already knows what you’re going to say.”

“Yeah. He thinks if he says it first, then I can’t say it.”

“Focking Socks!”

Gigi put Triscuit back into his cage, and he complained by screaming the line several more times at the top of his lungs, which was quite a bit more powerful than a creature his size should have the right to be.

Gigi made her way into her second bedroom, which she used as a spare room and a mini library full of books. She stood in front of one of the bookcases and scanned the spines.

“Well, the good thing is I think we found it. But we need to be careful. The spell on it is strong, and it didn't really start affecting me until I realized we weren’t seeing the same thing. Like it knows.” She turned and frowned at me. “Did you not feel an overwhelming sense of doom when you saw the empty spot on the wall?”

“No, not at all.”

“Hmm. I wonder if that means whatever it is wants to convince me it’s not there but doesn’t care about you.”

“It took me a while to find it too. And I looked in that area before. The first time, remember? I took that side of the room. I still missed it.”

“It might be two separate spells. One could be something like a look-away spell. Those are not targeted and have a certain area of effect instead, so it affects both of us. But the magic making me scared is targeted if you’re not feeling it, but I am.” She rubbed the goosebumps on her arm.

“Now that I’m away from it, I realize it is irrational. There was nothing to be afraid of. If it was really dangerous, it wouldn’t need to trick me with a spell.”

“I don’t like how you’re talking about whatever we’re looking for like it’s alive.”

“You’re right. They could be spells put there by the witch who’d lived here. If it only uses power when it’s active, like trying to stop us from seeing it or scaring me, she could have left a source of magic for it so it would work long after she was gone. Or she could have set it to use whatever source of magic that was nearby. Like me. Ah, there it is.”

She picked up a book and flipped through it before repeating the incantation on a page that had a lion on it. I couldn’t feel anything happening, but something must have happened because she seemed quite pleased with herself.

“Okay,” she said resolutely. “I think I can do it now. Let’s go back down there and see what we find.”

“What did you just cast?”

She grinned sheepishly at me. “The spell is called Lionhearted . I borrowed some courage.”

“You can do that?”

“Yeah. But it doesn’t last long. And it could become a crutch and have negative side



effects if used too often. But it's safe to use once in a while. Come on, let's go before it wears out."

"Are you sure?" I didn't like how terrified she was.

"Yeah, I am. That fear was completely irrational. There is nothing to support it. It was clearly put there to convince me I didn't want to look at or even be anywhere near it. It was fucking with my brain, trying to control me with fear." She looked angry.

"And that only pissed you off."

"Damn right it did! Don't fuck with my brain or tell me what to think. It was the wrong spell to use if they wanted me to leave it alone. Plus, I'm a hell of a lot more curious now. I want to know what it's hiding."

Her sudden bravery was affecting me as well. We could do this. Together.

"Alright then, Kitten. Lead the way."

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

Despite knowing that the sticky note-free section of the wall existed, I was still unable to pinpoint it when I first stepped into the basement. The second Marcus pointed it out to me again, the irrational fear hit me like a brick in the face. I wanted to get away from it as fast as I could. I felt physically ill, but knowing that I was perfectly fine just a moment ago when I was just as close to it as I was now gave me more courage.

It also pissed me off. How dare it try to control me!

I'd come prepared this time with the chalk marker we used to put up the menu at the Witch's Brew. I uncapped the marker, took a deep breath, and drew a large circle, making sure to extend the circle out past the look-away spell's area of effect as well as into it. I went around and around again making the circle unmissable.

Then I drew a big X on the spot with no notes. As I did, the fear intensified again. How the spell behaved now would give me an idea of how strong it was.

"Okay," I said, "I'm going to step upstairs and then come back down and see if I can see it now."

Marcus raised his brows like he thought it would be crazy if I couldn't see it, but humored me anyway.

When I stepped back into the basement, I immediately saw the circle and the X, which was a relief because I didn't know what I would do if it hadn't worked.

“Ready to see what’s inside?” Marcus asked, lifting the heavy weight he planned on using to demolish the wall.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Step back,” he said as he readied his swing.

It took several swings before he loosened things enough to go in with a pry bar. After that, it was smooth sailing. The second we got the wall broken down, the fear completely disappeared. The spell had been placed on the wall itself and not on whatever was behind it. Interesting. That meant whoever had built the wall had known about it.

According to Evyenia’s story, the son had the place built after the witch died. Did he do it?

The older couple hadn’t mentioned anything about him being a magic user, but if he was the witch’s son, it made sense, though the ability sometimes skipped generations.

“It’s a whole room.” Marcus shone the light from his phone into the hole. “This is the ceiling here. I don’t think I can get through this hole.”

Now that the wall was gone, whatever was inside practically invited me in. It felt warm and friendly. But I was wary. Things weren’t always what they seemed. I turned my phone’s flashlight on and peered inside...right into another witch’s home!

There were stacks of spell books on the table, candles and trinkets on the counter, and a pot still hung over the hearth. A large silver mirror hung on the wall, dusty with disuse. In fact, everything was covered in dust and dirt. A part of me wanted to clean it up and restore everything to its former glory.

This wasn't the cellar; this was part of the home itself! They'd sealed it over and left everything as it had been. What a shame all this had been hidden away down here and forgotten.

I shoved my phone into my bra so that the flashlight poked out to illuminate my way and prepared to climb inside.

"Wait! Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Look at it all! I can't believe all this was down here the whole time."

Marcus didn't look so convinced. "Can't you, like, tie a rope to yourself before you go down at least?"

"You sound like you think the room might eat me."

"It might," he deadpanned.

I didn't think it would, but I decided to concede so he wouldn't worry. "Better safe than sorry, I guess. Let's go find a rope."

We never did find rope, and instead ended up using cables from his gym. We also found a flashlight and extra batteries, just in case. Tied up like I was ready to go caving, I descended into the hidden room.

I didn't know where to start, so I found some rags in a corner and started wiping the dust off everything so I could see what was underneath. Unlike me, the witch who'd lived here hadn't been a big collector, and from the titles of the books on the table—one of them still opened to a recipe—she specialized in potions. She must've been a hearth witch then, like my grandmother.

Evyyenia had said she passed out hot chocolate to the kids skating at the rink. I'd reckon that was something a hearth witch would do.

As I explored, Marcus continued working on the opening, slowly making it larger and smoothing out the edges so he could fit. And when I was still alive after a while and the walls failed to swallow me whole, Marcus relaxed and squeezed himself into the room.

"Cozy," he said, shining the flashlight around the place. "Dark, though."

"Yeah, I wish I had more light." I spotted an old lamp in the corner. "I wonder if they hooked this place up to the electricity?" I walked over, dusted off the lamp, found the cord, and followed it visually to where it was still plugged into the wall. But when I tried to turn it on, nothing happened.

"We can drag an extension cord down here. I think I saw one on the shelf in the basement."

In a few minutes, we got the old lamp plugged in. To our surprise, the bulb didn't blow. It wasn't very bright either, but it was good enough.

"Look at that." Marcus pointed at a window near the ceiling that had been cemented over. "That was above ground."

"I think this was her living space."

"We are raised a bit higher than the building across the street; they must've just filled it in and built on top to cut costs like Evyyenia said."

"Or there's something in here her son didn't want us to find," I said.

“Great, now I’m creeped out again. Bad guys I can fight. Magic? I can’t fight that.”

“I don’t think it’s malicious,” I said. “Since that wall came down, I haven’t felt anything but warmth and welcome from this place.” I continued cleaning, wiping down the end table the lamp was sitting on to show the original wood grain. It was beautiful. “It’s kind of sad that this place has been hidden away for so long. Forgotten. Things have feelings. It’s not the same way we feel, but they do. I have a connection with them, and the things in this place? They were well-loved once. I want to make sure they are loved again.”

As I said those last words, it almost felt like the light got brighter, and everything in the room lit up.

“Then let’s clean this place up,” Marcus said. “We still have to find what it is those pesky wizards want.”

The thought of Arcane getting their hands on any of this made me angry. “Whatever it is, they ain’t getting it.”

Because from that moment on, all of this was mine. I closed my eyes, letting my magic filter out through my body to touch the wooden end table. From there it spread, diffusing through everything as it had done with the rest of my home. Energy from the room came back to me too, and all of it felt warm and perfect. Happy.

Marcus found some paper towels and rags in the basement and brought them down along with a bucket of warm, soapy water and a mop. Together we cleaned the long-forgotten room until Triscuit’s loudly proclaimed “Triscuit wanna biscuit!” rang out repeatedly from my phone.

“That’s the alert for me to feed him. If it’s going off, it means his dinner is already late.” I usually turned it off before it rang while I made his food.

“I’ll do it,” Marcus said. “Will you be okay here alone? I don’t feel anything dangerous.”

“I don’t either now that the wall is gone. I’ll be fine.” I held a gorgeous hand-carved bowl I’d just wiped clean to my chest. “So many treasures. Evyenia’s eyes would bug out.”

I should probably give her a call and let her know what we found. Despite all the looking and cleaning, we still hadn’t found whatever we were supposed to be looking for. Something here had caught the wizards’ attention. What could it be? Was it the space itself? It did feel magical, but not any more than other witches’ homes.

“I’ll heat up some food for us too,” Marcus said.

“Are you sure? I’m eating all your food.”

“I made enough for both of us.” The light from the lamp highlighted the bovine slope of his nose, but it was his genuine smile that had the butterflies starting in my belly. “And I like feeding you. I’ll have my phone on me, so just call or text if you need me to bring down anything.”

He left, leaving the basement open to the stairwell.

I was wiping the shelf clean so I could put down the bowl when a feminine voice behind me said, “Finally! I thought he’d never leave.”

I gasped and whipped around, but there was no one there.

“Over here.”

I let myself be called to the vanity, and my eyes landed on a small compact. It was

one of those old, ornate ones that women used to get refilled with pressed powder before makeup became a disposable industry. I reached for it instantly, picked it up, and opened it. The powder in the pan looked cracked and smelled stale. I wiped the mirror off with my thumb.

“Hello?” I didn’t know what prompted me to talk to my reflection.

“Hello,” it parroted back, its mouth moving even though I hadn’t spoken. “I’m so glad someone finally found me. It’s been dreadfully lonely down here. I can’t go very far, and I’ve read every single book I could reach.”

Was I talking to a ghost? Through a mirror? I was a little creeped out. But what good would freaking out do? I forced myself to remain calm and talk to my reflection.

“I’m Griselda. Gigi for short. What’s your name?” I asked.

There was a pause. “I don’t remember.”

“What did the witch before call you?”

“Child. She called me child.”

That didn’t help. “I’m too young to call anyone child,” I said.

“You’re older than me. Physically anyway. I was only fourteen when Mama transformed me.”

“Transformed you?”

“Into the compact.”



I shook my head. This was a lot to take in. “Why did she do that?”

“She was hiding me from papa and his friend. I was supposed to get married, but I didn’t want to.” My reflection made a face of disgust. “He was old and mean.”

“So your mom turned you into a compact so your dad couldn’t marry you off?”

“Yes. He never found me. Mama was supposed to turn me back, but she died and I was stuck in here until Father remarried and the new woman sold all of my mother’s things.”

I ran my thumb across the detailed metalwork of the compact. That was some strong magic. She was actually transformed. This was a real compact, made of brass and glass. Not a flesh-and-bone girl made to look like a compact through illusion or some other trickery. This was testing the bounds of physics, and as a witch, I knew that magic always had to work within its bounds, even if it sometimes seemed like it didn’t.

Like portals. We could make portals connecting two points, but we couldn’t teleport ourselves, lest we end up put back together with all our cells in the wrong order. Or perhaps we’d be physically sound but missing our consciousness. That was scary stuff. Scarier than talking to a ghost through my reflection in a mirror.

“And you’ve been stuck since.”

“Yes. It’s not too bad. I’ve gotten used to it, but it got boring being alone. I’m glad you found me.”

The face in the mirror changed for the briefest of moments, showing a plain-looking girl with mousy brown hair and dark brown eyes. But it was her genuine smile that had my heart lifting. I smiled right back.

This wasn't some vengeful spirit. This was a lonely girl, wronged in life, who just wanted some company. My heart broke for her.

"You won't be alone anymore," I promised.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

I hadn't meant to listen to the conversation. I was worried that Arcane or my mother was up to something, so I'd checked up on my camera feeds. The equalizer at the bottom of the feed showed the stairwell was moving. Remembering that I'd left the basement door open, I'd thought at first that it was Gigi singing to herself.

I turned on the sound to hear her voice because I could never seem to get enough of her despite all the time we'd been spending together.

My first instinct when I heard the stranger's voice was to rush down there and protect my little witch. And I almost had until I started to listen to their conversation.

I immediately felt a kinship with her. We were both raised by narcissists, her father, and my mother. And we both were trying to escape unwanted fates, with limited success. Though I guess she was successful in the end.

Deciding to bring Triscuit along, I loaded both him and his dinner up in the carrier I'd seen Gigi use to take him down to the coffee shop. With him in tow, I went up and over the rooftop patio and back into my home, with Triscuit complaining about the cold during the short walk over.

As I heated up our food, I listened as the girl explained how her father had blamed her for the bad luck that had befallen him and tried to sell her off to one of his friends, a much older man who only saw her as a possession. Her mother had tried to save her, using magic to transform her into what she was now.

“That’s strong magic. Your mother must have been a great witch.”

The other voice hesitated. “Something like that,” it said cautiously. “But then she died. They said it was suicide from heartbreak after I ran away—that’s what she told them. But I know the truth. My father poisoned her. I was right there in her purse; I heard him admit it.” The voice was sobbing now.

“I’m so sorry,” Gigi’s voice cracked as she spoke. “And I’m sorry I made you live through that memory again.”

“It’s okay. I had to explain it to the old witch, too.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat at the tragic story I’d just heard. I realized the spirit had waited until I’d left to talk to Gigi. I didn’t blame her. The men in her life had let her down. I didn’t want to start this relationship with lies and deceit, so I decided I had to tell her that I knew.

With Triscuit’s carrier in one hand and an overfilled plate in the other, I made my way downstairs. I decided to bring Triscuit along because I thought maybe he’d be able to tell if the spirit was dangerous or not. I also wondered if his presence would help make the introductions easier.

Gigi was quiet as I slipped into the room under the basement.

“I want to be completely honest,” I said as I placed the overloaded plate with our food on the table, which was now dust-free. “I heard everything you were saying down here while I was upstairs.”

She stiffened, and I could feel her worry in the air. Or was that the girl’s worry?

“I didn’t mean to snoop,” I said. “I have a camera in the stairwell, and it caught the

conversation. I thought you were singing to yourself at first, and I wanted to hear it.” I directed the next words at the innocuous-looking compact still in Gigi’s hands. “I brought Triscuit down to meet you since I thought you might want to meet him.” I placed Triscuit’s carrier on the table.

There was nothing but silence from the ghost girl. But Triscuit didn’t freak out either, which I took to be a good sign. I didn’t need to wonder long whether Gigi’s familiar could detect the ghost’s presence, because he started being friendly immediately.

“Hello! How ya doin’?” Triscuit asked, sounding much like Gigi.

Gigi grinned and reached over to open Triscuit’s carrier.

“Let’s eat before the food gets cold,” I said. “I had to put it all on one plate because I didn’t have enough hands.”

We ate in relative silence, surrounded by the old witch’s things, which already felt more familiar.

Triscuit continued reacting to something in the room, sometimes talking, sometimes nodding, and once even offering a toy, but it wasn’t until the end of the meal that she finally spoke. “I like Triscuit. Can you bring him down sometimes so we can play?”

“Sure. I’m Marcus,” I said, introducing myself now that she didn’t see me as a threat and vice versa. “Are you stuck down here?” I looked around the room.

“Kind of. I have to stay near the compact. There was a bookstore right above us, so I got to read new books sometimes. And I get to see the corner of the antique store, but it’s usually covered with things.”

“But you haven’t been in my coffee shop?” Gigi asked.

“No. That’s too far.”

After some testing, we figured out that she had a range of about ten feet around the compact. She could see past that but couldn’t interact with anything. Well, technically she couldn’t interact physically with anything at all, but she could go into books and read the words if it was within the radius.

“Wait a minute, I remember the bookstore. That corner should be the romance corner!” Gigi exclaimed.

If the air could blush, it did.

“That’s okay. Technically, you’re not really fourteen anymore. You can read anything you want,” Gigi said. “I have lots of books if you want to come upstairs with me.”

“Can I?”

“Wait,” I said. “How do we know it’s safe for her to go upstairs?” I didn’t say the second part, which was, how did we know it was safe for Gigi? “I’m pretty sure now she’s the one Arcane Development is looking for.”

“Maybe. But it could be something else in the room. Why would a bunch of wizards want a transformed girl?”

“Wizards?” her voice shook. “My father’s friend, the one he promised me to, was a wizard.”

Gigi and I exchanged a look. What were the chances that they were related? He’d be long dead by now. Why would they still want her? We were still missing something.

“Shit!” Gigi swore. “What if breaking down that wall exposed her to the wizards? What if it was protecting her the whole time?”

“You mean the spell on the wall?” the girl asked. “It wasn’t protecting me at all. The opposite. The brat cast it because he doesn’t like me.”

“The brat?”

“The old witch’s son. He hates me. That’s why he hid me away and made it so no one could find me.”

“Oh, wow. He sucks ass,” I said.

Gigi was treating her like an adult so I did as well. Technically she was older than either of us, even though she sounded so young.

But those words had been close enough to trigger Triscuit and his ”Focking Socks.”

The ghost girl giggled. “He does.”

“Well, if the spell wasn’t protecting you, then it should be safe for you to go upstairs,” Gigi said. “But I want to be very honest with you. These wizards have been looking for you. They’ve been trying hard to buy this building from us, messing with our businesses and making life miserable in general. It’s why we started searching ourselves. Do you know why they might be looking for you?”

There was a pregnant pause.

“No.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Maybe the wizard I was supposed to marry left a clue.”

There was something she wasn't telling us. But my instincts told me it wasn't out of malice. It was like when I let Nick believe that my mom wanted to drag me back home to get married. It was out of self-preservation.

“The wizards already know you're here either way. So it shouldn't make a difference. At least now we can get you out of here if they end up getting their hands on this place.”

We brought her upstairs into Gigi's home, and when our ghost girl didn't turn into an evil spirit, I relaxed. Gigi put the compact in a box on her bookshelf so that our nameless spirit could read to her heart's content. She could also hang out in the coffee shop if she wanted to, or step outside for some fresh air, something she hadn't had in decades.

But more importantly, it was more than ten feet from Gigi's bedroom so that when the door was closed, we'd have some privacy. But still, it felt a bit strange to stay over with a ghost in a compact hanging out at her place. For the first time in days, I decided to go home and unpack the rest of my measly possessions. But not before pulling Gigi into my arms and kissing her forehead.

“Call me if anything strange happens,” I said, holding her in my arms longer than usual. “I don't trust Arcane not to do something stupid.”

“I know what you mean. I'll keep watch on my wards.” She reached up and pulled my head down by the horns, pressing her forehead to mine. “You know, right now I really wish there were no walls between our apartments.”

“I could just break down the walls, but I'm not an engineer.” I imagined all her things and her numerous valuable collectibles spilling into my space, coloring it with her



magic. It wouldn't be bad at all. Now that I'd gotten used to being surrounded by pieces of her, my place felt so empty.

She grinned. "Maybe we should wait on that. I think we've knocked down enough walls for today."

"Agreed."

"Gigi?"

"Yes?" She stood there, her pretty green eyes bright and so beautiful.

"I—" I realized what I was about to say, and the words stuck in my throat. I'd almost told her I loved her. I stood stock-still even as a realization hit me. Minotaurs did have mates. And Gigi was mine.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Griselda

Penny and Lily had taken the news that there was a ghost girl stuck to a compact living inside my home exceptionally well. It was Saturday night, and instead of heading to our usual house, we decided to stay and have a girls' night in. I'd sworn them both, and Prax, into secrecy before breaking the news to them.

Then we'd declared it a girls-only night so we could get to know our new friend a little more. She was still hiding something from me, and if I was going to protect her, I needed to know everything.

Prax had been a little disappointed that he had to leave, but he understood. And to be honest, he couldn't be stuck to Penny 24/7. But then again, Marcus had stayed over for days after we found out we were neighbors, so I wasn't one to talk.

"So you're not married to the minotaur?" Bella asked.

Realizing that we couldn't just call her "compact girl" the whole time, we'd asked her to pick a name, one that wasn't "child" unless she really insisted we called her that.

"Because we would," Lily had threatened. "And it'll stick."

She'd picked Bella because it was the name of a heroine in a romance novel she'd read in more recent years. I didn't need to ask which one it was.

"No," I answered. "Marcus and I aren't married. He's my neighbor."

“You were together unchaperoned! And he cooked you dinner!”

I grinned at the thought that the idea of him making me food was as miraculous as us finding her.

“He cooked you dinner?” This time, it was Lily who posed the question.

She was already on her second glass of wine. Just because we were staying in didn’t mean she planned on being sober. Neither did I, though I decided to cap it at one glass since it felt like I had to keep my wits about me, what with everything that had happened in the past week.

“He said he was meal prepping and made enough for both of us.”

“Girl, what are you doing? Tie this one down now!” Lily said.

That had a body-less giggle sounding in my living room, followed by Triscuit’s impression of Bella’s laugh.

“A man who can cook is a keeper,” Penny said. “I can vouch for that.”

“Penny woke up the day after she met Prax to him making breakfast in her kitchen in nothing but a maid’s apron,” I explained to Bella. “That’s even better than topless vacuuming.”

Bella was back to giggling. “I think I’d actually like being a woman in this time.”

“Can you do that? Be alive again?” I asked, wondering if this was what she was keeping from me.

There was no answer for a bit. “Maybe. But it probably won’t happen, ever. I

wouldn't even know how to survive anyway. The world is so different. And I wasn't exactly raised to be independent like you. I've read about it in books, but it's different."

"Maybe" wasn't a no. But I wasn't sure that was what she was hiding.

"Neither was I," Penny said. "I was raised to be reliant on my family's money. Sitting and rolling over at their command. But I learned how to make it on my own. It's easier with friends."

"It would be so nice to be able to go somewhere on my own and not have to ask someone to bring me. Or worry that some brat is going to bury me underground for decades."

"If it makes you feel any better," I said, "the brat's dead. Marcus looked it up last night."

"Is it bad that it does make me feel better?"

"Nope. He buried you!" Lily said. "You're allowed to curse his name until the end of time. Heck, I'd do it on your behalf. I hope his spirit gets punted to hell, and he lands on an extra-large pinecone, butt-first. Sideways."

And that had Bella in a fit of giggles again. "I was never found by a young witch before. This is fun."

"When you were alive, did you have magic?" I asked, still digging for the missing piece.

She didn't reply, and Penny said, "If you did, you can join a coven. We're a coven. A small one, but it counts. And now that magic and monsters have been exposed, we

don't even need to hide it."

"I...I don't really have magic...like that."

But she did have magic of some sort. Something told me we were onto something; call it a gut feeling.

But before we could continue the conversation, there was a loud shouting from outside.

"Gigi! Gigi!"

That sounded like Declan. I went to the window, and Declan stood outside, his face red like he'd run here on foot. "You have to come now. It's Marcus!"

Icy fingers of dread reached into my chest to grasp at my heart. Marcus! "What happened?"

"You have to help him!"

"Okay! I'm coming!" A million scenarios ran through my head. What if the dragon had found him? What if it was Arcane? They'd sent people to break the windows, but what if they sent someone for him this time?

My feet moved of their own volition, and it wasn't until I was already out my door and in the middle of the parking lot that I realized something was horribly wrong.

First, Declan was nowhere to be seen. And second, the air was too still, too quiet. My friends, who had followed me out, realized our mistake at the same time.

"Gigi!" Penny cried even as I turned to run back toward the door and the safety of my

warded home.

But it was too late. Out of nowhere, a massive form swooped down from the sky. A vise clamped down around my middle, and there was a sudden whoosh of vertigo as the ground dropped beneath my feet. I was being lifted up into the air in the claws of a dragon.

I didn't need to look to know that this wasn't Desmon. This was Marcus's dragon, the one who was hunting him.

A loud voice thundered in my ear, "You for the girl, minotaur."

I realized that Marcus was at his door now, the real Declan next to him.

"You've evaded me long enough, and for what? This witch?" the dragon scoffed. "She isn't even particularly strong or beautiful. I should crush her."

The claw tightened around me, and I struggled, gasping for air.

"No!" Marcus yelled, stepping out of the building. "Don't hurt her."

I waved desperately for him to get back to safety. But did the valorous minotaur do it? No. He just stood there, ripe for the dragon's picking, as Declan scrambled to pull him back inside. At least one of them was thinking clearly.

"Why should I let her live?" the dragon asked. "As long as she's alive, you'll be tempted to shirk your duties."

I felt something else latch onto me, trying to tug me out of the dragon's claws. Penny and Lily weren't at the door anymore and instead were at the window in my apartment, their hands dancing and lips moving as they tried to free me.

The dragon roared. “Who dares direct spells at me?” he thundered. “It won’t work.”

He squeezed again, and I wheezed as I tried to inhale, the world around me darkening.

“Stop! Stop! Please.” Marcus stumbled forward like it was he who couldn’t breathe. “Let her go. I’ll go with you. Just let her go. Please.”

It happened fast. One second I was dangling in the air, and the next I was crumpled on the ground, the snowbank breaking my fall. My friends rushed out and gathered around me even as Marcus disappeared into the distance in the claws of a dragon.

It took an eternity to convince Penny and Lily to leave so I could be alone. They’d stayed even after Declan and I had explained everything. Declan hadn’t helped since he was in angry-go mode and was swearing to raise an army to free his best friend.

His anger and Lily’s need to “do something” had fed off each other, and they were even now on a joint mission to contact everyone they knew and leverage every person for help. Penny had joined Lily with the look that promised she’d keep an eye out on our friend lest she caused more trouble than she solved.

As for me, I needed to be alone. I needed to think. And I needed to scream into my pillow in frustration.

“Argh! That stupid minotaur! Why did he have to do the valiant thing and give himself up for me? Why?”

“Aaaargh!” Triscuit yelled in solidarity.

I wasn’t sure he understood what was going on, but he knew I was upset. He’d tried to preen my hair in an attempt to cheer me up.

Bella cleared her throat. Oh shit. I'd completely forgotten that she was still in my pocket and technically had been up in the dragon's claws with me earlier.

"Griselda?"

I wiped the tears from my eyes. "Yeah?"

"I need to tell you something important. I haven't been completely honest with you about why the wizards are still after me."

Oh great. Of course just losing Marcus wasn't enough. Arcane was still after Bella and, consequently, my home. Marcus's home. With him gone, the building itself seemed so insignificant, but I knew that it was just the too-fresh loss making my brain irrational.

"Tell me," I said.

It turned out Bella had a magical talent. I'd heard of people like that before. Unlike witches who could use magic by casting spells or brewing potions, she had only one magical talent. It was a strong one: she could grant "wishes." Kind of.

But there was a catch. Actually, there were two catches.

That first catch was that it was less like granting a wish like a genie would but more like providing step-by-step solutions so the wish makers could do it themselves. There was work involved, often a lot of it.

"It wasn't until I was ten that my father actually took one of my answers seriously. That counted as his first wish. He became very rich."

"Let me guess," I said. "That wasn't enough for him?"



“No. He made another wish, and I gave him another solution. We didn’t know much about my talent yet at this point, so I told him how to be famous. It worked, but not the way he wanted. He became famous for losing his fortune overnight.” Bella’s voice got small. “He blamed it on me.”

“So subsequent wishes are like the monkey’s paw.” That must be the second catch.

“What’s that?” Bella asked.

“It’s a story about a monkey paw that grants wishes but with disastrous consequences as a punishment for daring to toy with fate.”

“Yes. That’s about right. But we didn’t know at that time. I tried to explain that I didn’t know how my magic worked. He tried again anyway, wishing to have his fortune back. He struck gold in a location I told him to dig in. But then he lost both his brothers and his best friend to a cave-in at the mine. I didn’t do it on purpose, really. I didn’t know!” She ended her statement on a desperate sob.

“I believe you. Magic is like that sometimes.”

“That’s when he realized only the first wish was good. The moment my mother suggested it, I knew it was true. I was only good for one wish per person. By then, my father couldn’t stand the sight of me. He auctioned me off to his friends, and an old wizard won. Mama was so angry. She wished to keep me safe from these men.

“I tried to warn her that she’d already used her wish. It happened when I was little. Papa had a mistress, and Mama was crying, and she wished Papa would just be loyal. I didn’t know at the time, but I’d granted her the solution, and she’d followed it. My father lost interest in his mistress, and we were happy.

“But when she found out who Papa promised me to, she made the wish anyway. I

gave her the solution, and she made up a potion, and I drank it. It turned me into this compact, easy to hide from the men because the last place they'd look was her vanity."

"So that's why Arcane wants you. Every wizard there could have one wish."

"Yes. But don't you see? I can help you. You can wish for a way to get Marcus back. I can't do it myself."

Hope flared in my chest, but it was quickly dampened. "Then I won't be any better than they are by using your talent for myself."

"No. It's not the same. I want to grant this wish. I want to thank you both for digging me out of that prison and introducing me to your friends. I like them. Especially Lily. She's funny. Please let me help."

I still hesitated; there were always negatives attached to wishes.

It was like she read my mind. "The first wish always comes true. And in exactly the way you want it."

"Do I have to word it the right way?"

"No. It just knows what you want."

"It sounds too good to be true."

"It's not a wish like that. You don't even need to word it as a wish. But you do have to put in the effort and follow the solution for it to work."

"So, it's more like offering good advice than a wish."

“Yes! Maybe that’s a better way to describe it. But Papa always called it a wish. So it stuck.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll take it. Tell me how to get Marcus back safely and get the dragon to leave him alone.”

Marcus

I roamed the maze, feeling more monster than man. I didn't know how long I'd been in here. It could have been days, or it could have been months. The concept of time had ceased to exist. The magic in the maze meant it was always day. Hell, I couldn't even see the sky. The maze was covered by constant clouds. I wasn't even sure that was the sky above me despite the evergreens that made up part of the maze.

Other walls were made of stone. And there were clear ceilings blocking the light in some portions. Some parts of the maze were dark and dank for a dungeon, while others had flowers and ornate statues, and fountains that reminded me more of a garden.

When I first arrived here, I had a purpose. A singular purpose. I was looking for something. I'd searched the maze thoroughly for it. That was the reason why I knew I'd been here for a long time: I knew this maze inside and out. Every dead end, every wall, all of it. But I still hadn't found what I was looking for. Whatever it was.

I trudged through the familiar corridors again. Looking, searching. For what? The face flashed in my mind. Sometimes, she had red hair. Other times, her hair was raven black. But always, those mesmerizing green eyes bore into my soul. Was she the one I was looking for?

I didn't even remember her name, even though I knew I should. It was like whoever had put me in this maze had given me something so that I forgot everything else. Even her. But I sometimes saw her in my dreams, so I slept a lot. It wasn't like there was much else to do.

But my dreams weren't always of her. I also dreamt of another woman. Older. She told me how I was silly to have trusted a woman. That they would all choose cold hard cash over me. Was she talking about the one with the green eyes? Had she betrayed me?

None of it made any sense. How could it, when there was nothing in the world aside from the maze and the entrance I must protect? I didn't know exactly where this entrance was. But I knew that it was my sole purpose in life to make sure that no one who came into my demesne left alive.

This was my land. My maze. My territory. But why then did I remember other locations? A place full of strange machinery and heavy items. And another one full of things, objects, and artifacts. But those images in my head were fuzzy, and the labyrinth in front of me was clear.

The most delicious scent drifted through the maze into my nose. Something familiar. Something delicious. I stalked toward it.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

My prey didn't even run from me. The tiny form seemed to be searching for something. Searching for me?

She saw me moments after I noticed her, and instead of running away, she surprised me by running toward me, arms outstretched.

"Marcus!" She launched herself at me and all I could do was stare, confused, as she embraced me. "Marcus." She repeated the name several more times, plastering little kisses everywhere she could reach.

Was that my name? It sounded familiar too.

Now that she was in my arms, I realized she wasn't prey at all. Other memories were filtering in too. I grabbed her shoulders and held her at arm's length, studying her face. It was her.

"I missed you so much!" She buried her face into my furry chest and I could feel the wetness of her tears.

The memory of the other woman ran through my head. "She said you betrayed me." None of it made sense.

She shook her head. "No. I never did."

"She said you took money." For what I didn't know.

"It was the only way," she whispered, her mouth by my ear. "The dragon wouldn't let me in here. It was the only way we could get you out."

Out. That was what I had been searching for: the way out! The location in my head clarified. My gym! Her home!

"Gigi."

The rush of memories filled my head at the sound of her name falling from my lips. Moving into the new space, seeing her, recognizing her. Her in my arms and in my bed. And further back, of starting the gym, of meeting Declan, of me running away from my duties. I remembered it all.

I tossed my head, clearing the fog from my brain.

And now here I was stuck in the maze anyway. And she was here too, which meant...

“You agreed to the dragon’s deal.”

“It was the only way,” she repeated.

“No! I refuse. I refuse to put my son through this. I refuse to give him another generation.”

But even as I spoke, a sweet scent filled the maze. Not hers. She was sweet, but this was different. Something artificial. Then it started: the unbearable heat.

“What’s wrong? Marcus?”

I knew what was happening. The dragon wanted another minotaur to fill the role when I was too old or died in battle. And for that, he needed Griselda to conceive. Whatever was being pumped into the maze was pulling me into a rut. I could try to resist it, but eventually, I would succumb. And then, once she was pregnant, they would take her away. I’d never see her again.

And she’d be stuck raising our son alone. The child would be destined to serve unwillingly as I did now. Would she treat him like Elise did me? As a meal ticket? Or would she love him like a real mother, seeing me in his eyes every time she looked at him? That would be worse because then she’d lose her son too when the time came.

Would I remember her? Or would I forget her the moment she left, like I had just moments before?

“Magic...or chemicals in the air,” I choked out. “I need...run, Gigi. Get away from me.” Because my control was slipping by the second, and soon I’d be nothing more than a feral beast.

“It’s okay. You’ll be able to think again after.”

I shook my head, my horns heavy, but I was already forgetting what I was protesting. My head was a jumbled mess. Frustrated at myself for not being stronger and resisting whatever was happening, I bellowed a roar that shook the maze around me, threatening to rumble the stones loose and shake the evergreens of their foliage.

The female stepped back from me at my roar, her hands covering her ears. There was a hint of fear in her scent that hadn't been there moments before. But the sweetness was there too. Calling me.

Another lungful of tainted air sent my blood boiling in my veins. It was so hot.

“Marcus? Are you alright?”

The female's brows were furrowed, but it didn't detract from her perfection. I had to have her. She was mine. All mine.

We were not in a pleasant part of the maze, and even in my haze, I knew I couldn't, shouldn't, take her against the hard stones and metal grates. I stepped toward her, and she stepped back.

“Marcus? Are you there?” Uncertainty made her voice shake.

I didn't understand. I wanted to tell her I was right here, and she belonged under me, but all that came out was animalistic huffing and another loud bellow. I reached for her and she stumbled back, her eyes wide and scenting more of fear.

For a moment, it felt like I was watching the scene from afar like I'd seen it before. No. Not seen. Read. She had run too, even though she hadn't wanted to. They all did.

Then the thought was gone, and all that was left was that all-encompassing need again. I stalked toward the female. My female.



And she ran. But she didn't get far because I scooped her up into my arms. She squirmed in my hold, rubbing her delectable body all over mine, making it infinitely harder for me to get her to a more pleasant part of the maze before I lost control.

My cock was so hard and engorged it was no longer possible to run. And every movement she made rubbed up against it.

Unable to make it to the fountain with the cherub and the soft moss, I released her on the first patch of grass I found. It was better than stone path and metal grates.

She was still wrapped in useless fabric, the only purpose of which was to keep me from my prize. I grabbed the neckline and tore.

Griselda

Why the hell was I running?

This was Marcus. He might not be thinking straight right now, and those bellows were terrifying as fuck, but it was still him. I'd known this would happen. So why was I running?

I slid down his body as he released me, my clothes catching on his massive erection. If I hadn't seen it before, I'd probably have started running again. I braced for impact, thinking I'd hit the hard stone, but my knees landed on grass instead. He'd brought me to a part of the labyrinth that was greener and more lush. A definite improvement from the dark, dank corridors I'd found him in.

But I didn't have much time to admire the scenery because Marcus tore into my clothes like wrapping paper, and I was the gift underneath. I searched his face for any evidence that he was still there and forced myself to calm. He was completely naked, and his cock twitched in front of me.

Wanting some semblance of control, I reached for it. It was heavy in my hands, and Marcus groaned, his face turning to the sky.

I could do this. It was just him and me. And once he came, his mind would clear. I had to admit that his being like this, wild, out of control, like he wanted me more than anything else in the world, was a turn-on.

I moved my hands up and down his impressive length, pumping him as he huffed and

made feral-sounding noises. A shiny drop of precum beaded at the tip, and I rubbed my thumb over it, smearing it around the flared head.

He let out a snarl, too far gone for words, and dropped to his knees in front of me, yanking his cock out of my hands. His hands were strong and unforgiving when he shoved me down, flipped me over, and arranged me on my hands and knees. He shoved his face into my crotch, huffing like he was tasting me through his nose.

A few firm licks with his large tongue had me bowing my head, knees weak with the rush of pleasure that bulldozed through me. Then he was snarling behind me. His thick head slid against my slick opening, and he growled in frustration. I was shorter, and he had to lift me up with an arm under my belly so that my knees barely grazed the top of the grass as he lined us up.

Then he was driving into me, opening me up. I cried out, clawing my fingers instinctively into the grass to crawl away from the overwhelming sensation, but his grip was like a vise, and I wasn't going anywhere. He did slow, though, so I had time to get used to him.

“Mine.” It was the first word out of his mouth since that glazed look had settled over his eyes.

His hands tightened on my hips, and he thrust again. He was massive in this position, and it felt like he was splitting me in half. Only the knowledge that we'd done this before and that I could handle him kept me sane.

The next roll of his hips had him filling me completely. And then he was rutting into me, fucking me like a beast. It was too much. I couldn't tell if it was pleasure or pain. I tried to crawl forward again, if only for just a second of reprieve.

Marcus snarled, growing harder, even though he was already hard as rock that made

up the labyrinth walls around us.

“Gigi.”

My name. He remembered my name. Even now, in his haze, I was who he wanted.

“Mine. All mine.”

I shuddered at his words. I shouldn’t want to hear them, but I did. I was his. And he was mine. And nothing could ever change that. Not even a dragon.

Then he came, roaring as his hot seed poured into me. Then the base of his cock started to swell, locking us together, and that sent me over the edge. The world exploded around us. I screamed, but no sound came out as electric bliss blinded me.

I collapsed onto the grass, and Marcus crumpled behind me. But I only felt his weight for a moment before he turned us onto our sides and pulled me protectively into his embrace. I snuggled back against his chest.

We’d be knotted together for at least a few minutes. I sure hoped the dragon didn’t come charging in right now, realizing that I’d duped him.

We were still mostly naked but no longer locked together when the dragon in human form found us, just as Bella said he would. Here it was, my chance to execute the rest of the outlandish plan that she’d given me. So far, it had worked exactly as she’d said, but only because I’d done my part to a T. And it hadn’t been easy.

Bella was right; this wasn’t like granting any other wish. There was a hell of a lot of work involved for the wisher. She granted solutions, and one had to be smart and dedicated enough to make it work.

I'd stood behind the counter of the Witch's Brew day in and day out and waited for Elise to return. And I had to admit that for a while, I'd thought that she wouldn't and that Bella's solution was a bust. But then, two days ago, right before the spring equinox, Elise walked into my coffee shop wearing the latest designer clothes, shoes, and handbag.

She made an offer on behalf of the dragon, just as Bella said she would. The same offer she was given thirty-five years ago. And I accepted.

She'd given me one day to pack my things, warning me that I wouldn't be able to take my phone or any form of electronics into the maze. The second she left, I called Lily, Penny, and Declan, and we put our plan into motion.

The dragon was wearing a modern-day suit, his white hair slicked back off his face. He looked ready to rip my head off. Marcus's protective urges meant he tried immediately to put me behind him.

"What have you done, witch? Whatever tracking device you have, turn it off now."

I resisted the urge to pull the tatters of my clothes around me; it would only make me look less confident, and it wouldn't cover me anyway.

"You are not in the position to make demands, dragon," I said, hoping I didn't sound as terrified as I felt. I tried to channel my inner bitch. This asshole had stolen the love of my life from me. "Besides, I can't do that. And it's too late anyway."

"What's going on?" Marcus was lucid now that the heat had temporarily faded, but we didn't have long before the chemicals being pumped into the maze would start affecting him again. I had to talk fast.

"My friends already know the location of the entrance to your treasure hoard. What

happens now depends on whether you make the right choice.”

“You dare threaten a dragon. I should burn you to a crisp!” The words ended with a roar, and a wisp of smoke rose from his nostrils.

Marcus now realized that a concerted effort to rescue him was underway.

“Go ahead. Fry me. Destroy your only way to keep your treasures secret.” I was surprised by how confident I sounded. Maybe it was practicing in front of the mirror all these weeks. Or maybe it was the presence of Marcus by my side and knowing that both our lives were on the line. “Even killing my friends would do you no good. The location will be broadcasted over every social media outlet if I do not return safely with Marcus. It is automated, and only my safe return could stop it.”

The dragon stopped mid-step, rage on his face. But he did not, in fact, burn me to a crisp. “What do you want then? The minotaur? Then take him.”

“Not so fast. I want to make an official deal. With witnesses.” The dragon was wily and I wasn’t dumb enough to believe his words alone.

The dragon, still nameless, grumbled something about my human pestilence and then bellowed for Elise. The next few minutes passed in silence. Marcus and I glared at the dragon-man and he glared right back. A portal opening up next to the fountain ended our staring contest, and Elise stepped in. She looked a bit disheveled, like she hadn’t had time to fix her makeup or get dressed properly. She was, however, holding her most recently purchased Hermes bag.

“I guess since you don’t have a witness, mine will have to do.” The dragon looked smug.

“Oh, but I do.”

“The minotaur does not count, because he is the subject,” the dragon said haughtily, thinking he’d already won.

“I’m speaking about the incubus.”

Elise let out a shriek when her purse suddenly moved, morphing and changing until Prax stood next to her.

“There’s a demon in my maze!” the dragon growled.

“Prax Incubus at your service.” Prax bowed low before turning to Elise and winked, the Hermes logo still imprinted on his forehead. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Since everyone is here,” I said, wanting this to be over before I lost my nerve, “let’s get started.”

I listed all the criteria for the deal, and Prax helped, morphing a part of himself off so that he could float the words I had to say above the dragon’s head. I couldn’t forget any of the details of the carefully crafted and ironclad deal. Not only would the dragon free Marcus and let him return safely, he would also absolve him and future generations of his line from the original deal.

“And in exchange, I will put a stop to the information getting out the second I am in a safe location. Any attempt to attack us or our friends and family after the completion of this deal will result in the whereabouts of your treasures being leaked directly to Desmon, the dragon of Darlington, and to Emmett, his brother. As long as you hold up your end of the deal, we will hold up ours.”

Of course, the dragon could simply move his treasures, and the coordinates we had would no longer be of use. But a dragon’s hoard was massive, and it would take years, maybe decades, to move piecemeal. He wouldn’t be able to move it en masse

without calling attention to it. Making the deal was his best bet.

The dragon, not stupid, realized it as well. His face screwed into a menacing scowl, as he realized he'd been outsmarted. Eventually he conceded, but not before trying to change the wording to better suit himself. We didn't budge, having already been warned that he would do this.

When he finally signed, I leaned in to check the name. Ernest. His name was Ernie? No wonder he never used it.

But it was done. And it was official. Marcus was free! And so were his future generations.

Pissed off and unable to do anything about it, the dragon turned and stormed away.

"Great doing business with you, Ernie," I quipped, unable to stop myself.

"You silly woman," Elise said when we were portaled out of the dragon's maze as per the agreement and into a back alley in Paris. "You could have lived a life of luxury. Just one baby."

I wrinkled my nose at the stench. I wasn't sure if it was the alley or all of Paris that smelled like piss. Maybe it was Elise. Ugh. Talk about ruining the illusion.

"Unlike you, I don't see Marcus as a paycheck. Now get out of my face before I sic my demon on you." Prax wasn't mine to sic on anybody, but the threat worked, and the woman stomped indignantly away.

"Come on," Prax said. "We have a reservation at a nearby hotel."

I looked around but had no idea which way to go.



Prax came to the rescue. “I’ll take you there. But you might want to use some magic to cover up before someone calls the police thinking you were attacked.”

I glanced at my reflection in a window and saw how I looked. My hair was a mess and my clothes torn after my encounter with Marcus in the maze. I concentrated and crafted an illusion of proper clothes and decent hair and makeup around my body.

The hotel was just a block away and booked under Prax’s name, which had been a good plan since I had no method of payment on me. I didn’t even have my purse, which meant no phone and no wallet. It sucked.

“You two just relax,” Prax said. “Bella’s plan ends here, but we’ll figure out a way to get you two home. You did the hardest part already, Gigi. It takes some kahunas to face down a dragon. We’ll do the rest.”

Then he was gone. Lucky demon. I wished I could just pop back to the States like that and be at home.

“Bella’s plan?” Marcus asked. “Who’s Bella?”

“Our compact friend,” I said. I explained everything to him, from learning about her special magical talent to all the planning, and finally, to the relief of seeing him in the maze.

“I owe you, and her...I owe everyone my life.”

I shook my head. “You don’t owe anyone anything. That’s what friends are for.”

“Just friends?” he asked with a raised brow.

“No. Not just friends. Not for me anyway,” I said honestly.

“I should have told you this the moment I realized it, Kitten.” He cupped my face gingerly in his hands. “I never knew that minotaurs had mates until I met you. I know now because you are mine. I can feel it down in my very soul. I love you, Gigi.”

Happy tears brimmed in my eyes, threatening to turn me into a sobbing mess. “I love you too, Marcus.”

I collapsed into his arms, and we sat there, letting everything that had happened wash over us. We’d taken on a dragon and won.

But the adrenaline that had kept me going until now had faded, and exhaustion was quickly catching up. I let the illusion drop and cuddled into my mate’s arms. And there, safe and sound, I slept.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:47 am*

Marcus

Even with all three witches working together, Griselda, Penny, and Lily couldn't open a portal big and stable enough for both of us to get home from Paris. They had no trouble opening portals to each other's homes and apparently did it every Saturday, but cross-continent travel required a lot more magic.

"We really need to get stronger," Lily had lamented.

They did, however, get a portal big enough to pass Gigi her purse, which was spelled to open up into her cupboard at home. They'd left everything we needed there, including the cord to charge her phone, which was currently plugged into the socket in her home, meaning we didn't need to worry about finding an adapter. Clever.

It was for the best we stayed for a few days anyway. I was surprised to discover I still had access to my old bank account. I transferred everything to my account in the US. Then I told the bank I suspected my mother hadn't been paying her taxes and wished to remove myself from the joint account to distance myself financially from her.

Elise hadn't dipped into my earnings yet since she was still living high on her baby funds. That would probably end soon, especially when they start charging her for back taxes and interest. She'd be livid when she found out her backup was gone. I couldn't wait!

Was it vindictive? Sure. But the bitch deserved it.

I spent the rest of the time there showing Gigi the city. It was so much brighter now

that she was with me. Bella had always wanted to see Paris, so they'd passed her through on the last day so I could give her a quick tour.

We'd flown back like normal people, bringing lots of presents in our carry-ons for everyone who'd helped with the operation, including tons of goodies for Griselda's employees since they'd stepped up and kept her coffee shop running while she was away.

I was surprised to see that Bullseye Fitness was now fully renovated. During my absence, Declan made up a story about how I had to fly to France for a family emergency, and everyone stepped up, offering to help get the place ready to surprise me when I got back. He had that much confidence that they'd get me back. Or maybe he'd simply been in denial.

The thought that everyone had gotten together to free me had a warm fuzzy feeling blooming in my chest. The fear that no one would notice if I was disappeared had been unfounded. Everyone I cared about had noticed, and they'd come for me.

I'd been in that maze for only three weeks, even though I could swear it had felt much longer. Next Monday was Bullseye Fitness's new official grand opening, weeks late, but better late than never. That meant I had all weekend to relax and enjoy being truly free for the first time in my life.

It didn't take long for Arcane Development to remind me that our problem with them was still unresolved. Except this time, we were ready. Declan had a rotation of our gym members watching the place every day, and they surrounded the perps, trapping them in Gigi's coffee shop, and therefore inside her wards. Once inside, every magic wielder present, which included Gigi, her staff, several members of Bullseye Fitness, and surprisingly, Declan himself, worked to stop the spell that turned their words to gibberish from triggering.

Officer Cooley and Hayes were called in again, along with Seth, in his EA uniform, of course. The wizard took every opportunity to flirt shamelessly with Officer Cooley, making not-so-subtle innuendos that would've cost him his job if he hadn't been a dragon's wizard. She did her best to ignore him, but behind her impressive composure, I noticed the sparks of interest. She took sneak peeks at him whenever she thought he wasn't looking.

This time, the culprits spilled everything. With solid proof against Arcane and an investigation underway, it meant we could relax a bit. But we still couldn't drop our guard.

They wouldn't give up this easily, and we knew it. If they couldn't force us to sell the land so they could search for Bella, then they'd find some other way.

"What if they never stop looking for me?" Bella asked that evening after dinner.

The question had clearly been on her mind all day, and she sounded on the verge of tears even though she didn't really exist physically aside from the pretty metal compact. "I wish I wasn't special anymore so they'd just stop!"

It was the way she'd worded it that gave me the idea. We'd all agreed that Bella's papa had been wrong; she couldn't actually grant wishes. She gave advice. One set of reliable advice per person. But she could not do it for herself. What if I used my one good set of advice on her behalf?

"Is that what you really want, Bella?"

"Kinda. I want them to stop looking for me, and I don't want to have this stupid talent anymore. And I want to be a normal girl, and I want to grow up and do normal woman things. I'm sick of this...whatever this life is."

Gigi, who had been trying to get Triscuit to put away his toys, his least favorite trick, paused when taking note of our conversation.

“Well then, I would like my official solution now,” I said. “I wish for you to not have any magical talents you don’t want so they’ll stop looking for you and for you to be a normal girl so you could grow up and do normal woman things.”

Gigi was nodding with my words.

There was a sharp inhale. “Do you really mean that?” Bella asked.

“Of course I do. You helped me get my life back. It’s only fair that I help you to do the same.”

There was a choked noise that sounded very much like someone trying not to cry.

Not wishing to witness what was essentially a ghost breaking down, I decided to lighten the mood. “And besides, we can’t have a teenage spirit hanging out in the living room forever. I’d like to be able to bend my mate over the back of the couch.” I waited for the reaction.

“Marcus!” Gigi gasped.

“Ugh! TMI!” shrieked Bella, who’d been learning all the modern slang courtesy of Lily and Penny.

“So how about it?” I asked.

“Yes! I’ll give you the solution.”

Gigi handed a pen and a mini notepad to Triscuit and asked him to bring them over to

me. He did. But instead of handing them to me nicely, he dropped them on me while mimicking the sounds of a bomb falling, which had Gigi and Bella both laughing.

“Alright, hit me,” I said, ready to write everything down.

Except the solution included only a single step: Put the compact on display at the Darlington Museum. That was it.

I scratched the base of my horns. “I see how that would get the wizards off your back. Everyone knows that most of the things on display at the Darlington Museum are part of Desmon’s hoard. Those wizards would be stupid or suicidal to try to steal it. But how does it help you become a real girl?”

“I don’t know,” Bella said.

“It was like that for me too. The steps she gave me didn’t make sense at all in the beginning either. I didn’t see how talking with Elise could get you back. Then she came with the dragon’s offer and we realized it was our way in.”

“But you were given more than that.”

“I was. But maybe this is all you could do or have to do.”

“What do you think Bella, should I do it? You’re the one most affected.”

“Yes! I haven’t granted you a wish before. It has to work!” She was still calling them wishes. Old habits died hard.

I put my hand into my pocket and fingered the business card Seth had pressed into my palm earlier with the ominously uttered words, “You’ll need this soon.” Had he known? Or was it just wizard’s intuition?

He was our quickest way to Desmon, and our best bet of getting the compact displayed at the Darlington Museum, so I gave him a call.

“See, I told you you’d need my number soon,” was Seth’s immediate reply.

Despite my mess at explaining, Seth seemed to already understand what was going on and I wondered again if he’d known about Bella all along. Damn wizard.

A few hours later, a portal opened up in Gigi’s living room and an older lady with her white hair wrapped into a neat bun at the nape of her neck stepped through. Beyond her, the portal showed nothing but swirling darkness.

That was strange. All the other portals I’d seen before showed what was beyond.

“Hi, I’m Elana. I’m here for Bella,” said the stately older lady.

Gigi didn’t immediately hand her the compact, and Bella stayed silent. She glanced briefly at Triscuit, who was in his cage. He didn’t react negatively to the woman.

“Bella’s my friend,” Gigi said finally. “I’m sorry if I’m coming off rude, but I just want to make sure she’s going to be safe. What’s the plan for her?”

“Honestly, we’re not quite sure how to turn her back into a girl yet, but the first thing we are going to do is announce that the compact will be on display at the museum for a limited time. We plan on making a replica for the display while we figure out the rest.”

“And what’s in it for Desmon?” Gigi asked. The brave woman who’d faced down my personal dragon was back.

”I understand why you are reluctant to hand your friend off to a dragon. They aren’t



always nice people.”

“You can say that again,” I muttered.

The woman just smiled. “Thanks to you two and Bella, Desmon has won a bet.” She turned to me. “He bet that your line would be free in less than five generations. You were the fifth generation and his last chance. Think of this as a thank you.”

The idea that dragons had been betting on my life like it was just a game irked, but then I realized that without the bet, I’d probably still be in that maze. Seth’s visit as an EA enforcer had been the clue we needed to find Bella and her solution.

There was a soft clearing of a throat as Bella decided finally to speak. “It’s okay, Gigi. I heard the dragon of Darlington is nice, for a dragon. I’ll go, but only if Gigi and her friends can visit sometimes.”

“Of course, dear. Now let’s get you back before Carly sets up your room without you.”

Gigi handed the precious compact to the older woman.

“Thank you for using your only wish on me, Marcus. You’re the best.”

Elana tsked. “There’s your first mistake right there, child. You shouldn’t call it a wish. That’s why everyone’s after you.”

We said goodbye to Bella and Elana as they disappeared through the swirling darkness of the portal.

“I think we did the right thing.” Gigi’s eyes were still where the portal had been.

“I think so, too.”

A sense of righteousness settled over us, and for the first time in my life, I truly believed that everything was going to be alright. I wasn't alone anymore. I had friends, people who cared. I had a life that mattered, and I was freed from my obligations to the dragon. The gym was set up, our place would no longer be under attack, and most importantly, I'd found my mate in the most wonderful woman I'd ever met.

I grabbed the cover for Triscuit's cage and tossed it over temporarily. “Now,” I said, rounding on my luscious witch. “I meant it when I said I wanted to be able to bend you over the back of the couch.”

I did just that, lifting her up and placing her over the back of the couch. I bent her over it, shackling her wrists in my larger hands. Lust poured from her, and I drank it in.

“That's not fair, minotaur. You caught me off guard.” She shoved her ass back, bumping against the bulge at the front of my pants.

“Too bad, Kitten. You should have been paying attention. I've caught you and you're all mine now.”

“Forever and ever?”

“Yes. Forever and ever.”

Griselda

I stepped back to take another look at the restyled bookshelf. Even after adding all the spell books I'd decided to keep from the old witch's place in the basement, there was still plenty of room for the potted pothos vine.

I'd thought that Bella would like to keep them, but she hadn't. She worked part-time at the Witch's Brew now while she finished up her GED. Last time I checked, she wanted to write romance novels for a living. She claimed that she'd spent enough time in her head making up stories that she'd never run out of things to publish. I believed her.

It had taken a whole year of Marcus and I complaining about having to go up through the roof before we'd finally gotten the wall between our apartments knocked down. Since we hadn't needed three kitchens, we also renovated them so that we had one ultimate dream kitchen instead.

That was several years ago, and we still had plenty of room to grow. But that would change soon.

At first, I'd worried that my things were encroaching into Marcus's space. But he'd made it plenty clear that not only did he not mind, but he liked and invited it. He didn't like how empty corners reminded him of years of being too afraid to own anything and always thinking he'd have to drop his life and flee one day.

Needless to say, that was a thing of the past. He'd settled down here with me and wasn't going anywhere.

“How’s that look to you, Triscuit? Good?”

Triscuit bobbed his head before letting out a wolf whistle. “Looking good!”

I chuckled. He’d picked that up from Marcus, and it was said in his voice.

The door leading down to the gym opened, and Marcus stepped through, looking a whole lot of yummy.

“Sorry it took longer than usual. My last training client was late,” he said. “Do I have time for a quick shower?”

Today was Friday, and Friday was date night.

He did a double-take when he looked over at the clock and found it missing. “You moved the furniture on your own again. You should’ve waited until I got back. I can do it. The shelves are heavy.”

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid,” I said, rolling my eyes. Silly, protective minotaur. I wasn’t even showing yet!

Marcus’s protective side has been on overdrive ever since we found out I was pregnant. He worried that the dragon would come for me or his kid as revenge for freeing him. It was possible, but I doubted it as long as we stayed under Desmon’s wing.

Marcus went to the bathroom and turned on the shower, leaving the door open.

So naturally I peeked as he stripped.

Mmm. Yummy. I didn’t think I’d ever tire of those muscles.

You know, I felt a little sweaty myself after moving the shelf. Maybe I needed a shower too. Besides, the shower was now plenty big enough for the both of us after the renovations.

I waited for him to step into the tub before I snuck into the bathroom and started stripping. I'd thought I was being extra sneaky until Triscuit let out a loud, "Incoming!"

The shower curtain swung open, and Marcus stood there in all his naked minotaur glory, water sluicing gloriously off his fur and muscles. I stood there mid-sneak and let my jaw drop, because that would forever be my reaction to all that manly perfection.

Big, powerful hands lifted me up and over the edge of the tub and into the spray.

"You're too predictable, Kitten," he said as he soaped his hands up and rubbed them all over me, pausing over my sensitive breasts.

"You cheated."

"Teaching Triscuit to sound the alarm isn't cheating."

"Is too." But that was all the protest I could muster because Marcus's hands were doing the most wonderful things to my body.

We were probably going to be late getting to the restaurant, but right now, I really didn't care. When I was in his arms, nothing else mattered. I closed my eyes and sighed when his lips joined the exploration.

His touch might not refill my well of magic, but it refilled everything else that mattered. I'd found the love of my life in the minotaur next door, and I was never letting him go.

THE END