







# Secondhand Garagyre

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Laithog

Why did I live?

It haunts me that I still exist. A Garagyre isn't supposed to survive the loss of a mate...but I did. Have the gods forsaken me? Am I being punished? These are the questions that've swirled in my mind for centuries during the brief interludes of consciousness I allow myself from my stonelumber. Fate is a curious thing I've found. Why else would the dulcet tones of a human woman's voice have pulled my mind from the endless ether of slumber? Her grief...I understand it. Losing half of one's soul makes an indelible mark. Whoever dared harm her will feel my wrath, and I will make her fall in love with me...just as I've fallen for her.

My little flame will burn only for me.

Paisley Eloise

There's a gaping hole in my soul where my brother used to be. How am I supposed to exist without my twin?

Without Patrick, I'm defenseless and at the mercy of a madman. A man that intends to possess and own me...regardless of what I want. All hope seems to be lost when I'm shocked by the appearance of a creature only mentioned in children's cartoons and fairytales. He, too, wants to possess me...but he doesn't want to do it by force. He wants to woo me...maybe even ravish me. My mind, my heart, my soul...and if it must be said, my body...they're all his to seduce.

What I do know is that he will give his life to protect me... Hopefully, it doesn't come to that...because I think for the first time in my life I've fallen in love. I'm not his mate of fate. I'm something far more poignant.

I'm his mate of choice.

TW:

Please be aware that this book contains content some readers may find disturbing, such as mentions of a deceased fated mate, mention of war, battle scenes, graphic descriptions of gratuitous violence,

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

PAISLEY

The month of June .

I'm numb.

That's the only word I have to describe how it feels to watch your twin's casket lower into the ground in front of you.

It's a rather nice casket...if one cares about things like that.

I don't.

I want my brother back.

My eyes drift over to my parents.

Their faces are grief stricken with arms wrapped around one another, desperately clinging together, as if they were terrified to let go, lest they lose what little composure they have left. A parent isn't supposed to bury their child. It goes against the natural order of things.

After learning of Patrick's death, both of my parents have unraveled, not that I blame them. The other half of my soul is missing, so I , more than most, understand their pain.

I'm exhausted. After the wreck, being hospitalized for several minor injuries, learning

of my brother's death, then taking charge in making all the arrangements so my parents didn't have to... I don't have anything left to give to anyone. That includes the ornate casket my brother is ensconced within, slowly fading from sight with every shower of soil the backhoe pushes into the once-vacant hole deep within the silent embrace of the earth.

Movement around me signals the departure of the majority of Patrick's funeral attendees. My brother is a well-liked member of the community, so the church we have his funeral services at is so full, it is standing room only. Most everyone has followed along in the funeral procession to the graveside services as well, but that's done, and they're all leaving. I guess none of them could stomach watching Patrick's grave being filled with dirt.

Don't they know operators are paid by the hour?

I scoff to myself as my eyes dart around the dispersing crowd.

Cowards .

They're all going back to their regularly scheduled programming, as they aren't the ones who have a loved one ripped from their lives. Patrick is but a blip on the radar screen of their lives. Myself , my parents, a few of Patrick's close friends, and I are the only ones who will truly feel the absence of his loss.

A flash of gold out of the corner of my eye causes my body to tense, and I sneer at the stereotypical frat boy who has stared me down the entire time we've been at the cemetery. He cuts a tall, handsome figure as he makes his approach. The expression "beauty is only skin deep," strikes true with this person.

" Paisley , you look well. My deepest condolences for your loss."

Shock holds me immobile for a few seconds, as the smooth baritone relaying the words slides over me. The sheer audacity that this man attended Patrick's funeral is galling. Let alone having the nerve to approach and speak to me.

How dare he?!

My parents are standing right there!

“ I have absolutely nothing to say to you. Leave . Now ,” I bite out. My words are harsh and broken.

Piercing crystal-blue eyes narrow slightly before his face softens in a facsimile of what compassion is supposed to look like. “ Have you given any thought to my proposal?” he asks, voice deceptively kind. Oh ... so very false, but I know better.

Years before, I received a warning about this danger.

Indignation filled me as his words registered in my beleaguered mind. “ How dare you? How dare you speak to me at all, let alone ask me if I've given any thought to your proposal!” I sneer before continuing, “ Allow me to be perfectly clear. I will never marry you. Ever . That is my final answer, so I suggest you make your departure along with all our other well-wishers .”

“ Ah , I can see that you need time. That's entirely understandable, considering the circumstances,” he states loftily before nodding his acknowledgement at my parents. As he turns to leave, he calls out over his shoulder, not even bothering to break stride as he walks away.

“ I suggest you reconsider my proposal; it would be unwise not to.”

Soft hands abruptly grab hold of one of mine, pulling me around to meet the worried,

tear-streaked face of my mother.

“ Honey , what is all that about?” she tentatively asks, golden-brown eyes flecked with green and blue flecks, the same eyes I see in the mirror, reflecting concern as she looks from me to the figure moving towards his fancy car, before looking up at my father to gauge his response.

“ Nothing , Mom . It’s absolutely nothing.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

### Chapter One

#### LAITHOG

She is back again. The soft sound of a voice pulls at me from the dark depths of unconsciousness. It really shouldn't surprise me, but after centuries of peaceful solitude, mine is ruined by one incessantly caterwauling human female.

My existence is such a cosmic joke.

I am unsure which deity I pissed off, but I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. I do not even have the option of revealing my fleshly body to rid myself of the irritant before me.

In fact, it is sure to make my life an utter misery...not that it could get much worse than it already is.

The female in question does not come every day, nor is she the only crying woman I have dealt with in my long life, but she is the only one who has penetrated my mind through the depths of my stonelumber.

It is a concept that does not fill me with any level of comfort. Why did this specific human and her suffering call to me? I have never cared much for her species. I certainly did not before my mates' death, and my apathy for them has only grown over the centuries.

No one and nothing catches my interest, not anymore.



Except , apparently, this one vexing creature.

Ugh ! Why did she insist on sitting on the bench situated directly below the concrete pedestal my stone-shrouded body sat on?

Surely , there is somewhere else for her to cry out her misery...?

Is there no end to her tears?

A mere human should only possess so many of them before they run out. Only the gods know that I ran out of tears long ago, and the ones etched into my stone face are the last ones I cried before succumbing to my grief.

The sound of sniffing and a nose blowing brings me back to the nuisance before me. It has taken some time for me to care enough to look at the headstone of the grave she lingers at.

The name etched into the stone is a man's name and after listening to her many, many, MANY one-sided conversations, I have figured out the dead man is her brother. Not that I care or anything absurd like that. My initial annoyance with her is the first conscious thought I'd have in longer than I care to think about. I don't remember the last time I have been awake for any measurable length of time.

I am sure I should care, but when you have had half of your soul ripped from you, not much matters after that. I have finally been forced to use a small portion of what little magick I have left to perform a translation spell. Listening to a whinging female is one thing; listening to her wail in another language is downright impossible.

I am not sure why the gods have chosen to let me remain while everything I loved is ripped from me. Maybe she would shut up and let me go back to sleep. Softly spoken words ruin that delightful possibility for me.

“ Hey Patrick , I’m back. I told you I would be. Sorry that it took me so long to come visit you this week. Work has been absolutely overwhelming, and I’ve crashed shortly after doing chores every evening. Mom and Dad told me to tell you hello. I know neither of them has been to visit you since the funeral, but I also know you wouldn’t be mad at them. You’re actually probably pretty pissed at me for spending so much time here. You did always want me to be more social.”

The fact that her voice is husky with tears should not have made my long-dead cock twitch deep within my stone casing. My cock hasn’t been hard in millennia. Well , that is to say, my fleshly cock hasn’t been hard in millennia, and I am getting more than a little annoyed with myself. My current situation is untenable and the more interest my body shows in her the worse I feel.

How dare I betray my mate? My beloved Ilayahan , who was the embodiment of everything a Garagyre female should be. We were merciless on the battlefield together and were inseparable. The only thing stronger than our lust for battle was our lust for one another.

We have what the humans call an “ F and F ” relationship, (thanks to the weepy little human, I now know all sorts of new words and terms) with the exception that we fought demons and fucked each other every chance we had. How long has it been since I have allowed myself to think about her name?

The echo of pain that shimmers through the broken bonds of my soul make rage spark within my chest. This soft, weak, whimpering human should not be the one to cause my body to rouse, not that it should have in the first place. It is an insult to the memory of my dead mate and everything I have suffered since she was taken from me. The gods know I long for peace and to be left alone. Surely , that is not too much to ask for...

Determination fills me as I force my mind and body into stillness, then retreat deep

within myself, allowing the darkness to claim me.

I would not awake the next time this human visits my corner of the cemetery.

This I vow.

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*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

### Chapter Two

#### PAISLEY

Two days later.

“ Hey Patrick , it’s me again. Another full filled week of work under the belt. Thank goodness it’s Friday . Another day trapped in that office would have been torture. The piteous stares and fake compassionate comments from everyone make me want to scream. I can’t believe I have to be a real adult and function when you’re not here. How am I supposed to exist without you? You’re my twin...”

I sigh as I look down at the smooth stone and read the writing found there for the millionth time. “ Here lies Patrick Edward Taylor , beloved son and brother.” His birthday and date of death are listed below. It’s only been a month since the accident that took my twin’s life and left me broken inside and out. The drunk driver who caused the wreck walked away without a scratch on him and suffered no repercussions for his actions. He’s the son of a local, wealthy businessman, and the old adage “ It isn’t what you know, but who you know ” has been implemented as a result of his actions.

Bradley Archibald Thomas III hasn’t been arrested or seen the inside of a jail cell for what he did to us. My family has been torn apart by the irresponsible actions of a spoiled child in the body of a man. The fact that he has pursued me relentlessly in high school and college is the icing on the cake. He’s a prick with a false sense of entitlement because of his daddy’s money and social standing. Patrick warned me years ago to never be alone with him, and I’ve taken his advice seriously.

My parents are inconsolable because a parent isn't supposed to bury their child. And then there's me, the twin who lived. It should have been me who died, but Paddy saw what was about to happen and jerked the wheel of his truck so his side was hit on impact instead of mine. My brother's selfless actions saved my life but ended his. The level of survivor's guilt I've been dealing with is crippling.

“ Mom and Dad are doing okay, or are doing as okay as they can, considering the fact that you're dead, and the piece of shit who killed you is walking around breathing free air. He had the audacity to come up to me at the grocery store last week and try to speak to me like nothing happened. As if he didn't get behind the wheel plastered drunk and kill you as a result. He had zero chance with me before all of this, and now, he could be the last man on the planet, and I would still chop his dick off with a dull paring knife,” I ended in a fury-filled whisper.

My family's plot in the cemetery is in a secluded corner, but it wouldn't be wise for me to openly threaten one of the Thomases . I glance around to make sure I am still alone, thankful there isn't another living soul in sight.

The sole company I keep here is the stone gargoyle bordering my family's burial plot from the Joneses . My grief was too sharp at the funeral for me to notice much of the area surrounding Patrick's grave, but its stone visage has become increasingly familiar to me throughout the month.

It doesn't look like most gargoyles do. This one is almost... handsome in a way. It's been carved in an interesting pose.

Instead of crouching like it's about to spring off the pedestal to defend its domain like most gargoyles are, this one is seated in a chair of sorts with his head buried between his hands. It's a pose of utter exhaustion, grief, and dejection.

There's no doubt the artist intended the statue to be a male. The facial structure is

overtly masculine with sharp cheekbones, a protruding brow, and full lips. The fact that he has spikes jutting from his chin and some sort of textured jawline does nothing to detract from his appeal.

The palms of the hands end on the raised brows so any passerby can see the intricate detail the artist has taken on the face. The statue's eyes are closed, but you can see the tear tracks running down his face. Wings capped in vicious-looking claws drape over the shoulders while horns hold his long hair off of his face. Intricate detail has gone into the hair. You can see individual strands of hair where it hangs down on either side of his head. His tail drapes across his lap, ending down by his three-toed feet that connects to digitigrade legs.

I googled that one because I haven't seen that type of legs on anything else except the werewolves in Hollyweird movies.

My shoulders heave with a sigh. I really need to get a life. I'm more fascinated with a statue that borders my dead brother's grave than I am in any man who's asked me out in the last several years. With that thought, I gather my jacket and purse, then stand to leave. Melancholy fills me as I gaze at the only remnant left of my beloved twin.

"Bye , Paddy . I'll see you next time. Tell Gramma and Grandpa I said hello for me. I love you tons and bunches."

As I step around the bench situated at the base of the gargoyle's pedestal, I reach out and touch the pad the statue is connected to in a brief caress. The smooth stone under my fingers seemingly flares with warmth at my touch.

I shrug it off as a figment of my imagination. The stone is just warm from the rays of the setting sun, nothing more.

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### Chapter Three

#### LAITHOG

She touched me!

How dare that... that... that human touch what does not belong to her?!

The fact that she only grazed the tips of her fingers across the base my stone casing rests upon is beside the point.

The sheer audacity of that wench!

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### Chapter Four

#### LAITHOG

6 months later... December .

Where is she...?

Thanks to her incessant ramblings with her dead brother, I know it is Friday .

The female comes to the cemetery every Monday , Wednesday , Friday , and sometimes after her morning worship on Sundays .

In the last six months, she hasn't missed a single day... and I have become accustomed to the sound of her voice.

It is not as if I actually miss her or anything.

That is preposterous!

How can I miss a mere mortal and a soggy, annoying one at that?

I cringe slightly at my last uncharitable thought.

Grief has no timeline.

Time does not heal all wounds; it merely gives the body the ability to adapt to the



loss with the passage of time. I know my tears are etched into my stone body, a stamp for all to see. It does not shame me to be seen thus, so I will not shame the little human for her tears.

The irritation I have felt for her initially has faded as the days turned into weeks, then months. I have learned all about the female, not that I really have had a choice. I'm a captive audience, so to speak.

My sole frustration is that I still do not know her name. She has no need to introduce herself to her brother and has no clue that I am something other than a statue mounted next to his grave. The female is never accompanied by anyone else either. Thus , her name remains a mystery.

Where is she?!

The sun has yet to fully set, so I am bound to my stone form whether I like it or not. It has been far too many years since I fed. I do not dare risk any of the sun's rays touching my skin. It would essentially incinerate me on the spot. I am not stupid even if my mate told me so in a backhanded way many times.

Yes , I know I am pretty, but when she told me so in that tone, she was really calling me an imbecile. The gods spared me when Ilayahan was murdered for a reason, and I am beginning to think this little human is the reason. There is no other explanation for why she, and she alone, awoke me when no one else has.

Not my family, nor my friends could reach me. I have slept deeply, so deep I thought I would never wake again.

Did I hope to never wake again?

Yes ... I have prayed to any gods listening to take this pain from me.

Because ... what is life with half a soul?

Sighing , I strain my ears again. Listening for any slight movement that might signal the little human's arrival. More often than not, she lingers until the setting of the sun, allowing me to rescind my stonelumber from my eyes and observe her from beneath my lashes.

Lately , my mind has debated back and forth on what it would be like to reveal myself to the pretty little human.

Yes , I have noticed her uncommonly pretty appearance for her species, and over time, my initial disgust at her lack of additional appendages has slowly faded. I am hardheaded but not completely stupid, no matter how my mate told me there is evidence to the contrary.

My internal clock, the one every Garagyre possesses, tells me the sun is beginning to sink from the sky, and she still have yet to arrive. The first inkling of unease slithers through me. She hasn't ever missed a visit with her brother...

Where is she?!

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### Chapter Five

#### PAISLEY

One week later.

I heave a sigh, delighted when my lungs expand to their fullest extent on a deep breath. The lack of any overt pain streaking through my ribcage tells me I'm getting better. After the week I have had, the lack of discomfort is a blessing. I gingerly roll over in bed, my contused body sinking into the memory foam topper on my pillowtop mattress.

It's like sleeping on a cloud but with lumbar support, and I've never been more thankful for splurging on it than I've been during the last week. Turquoise -blue walls surround me, soothing me with the cool tones they reflect while a dark-oak bedroom suite complements them and pulls the room together.

Merry fluffin' Christmas to me... a groan escapes my throat as I force myself to get out of bed, flipping my dark-purple duvet cover back as I swing my legs over the side of the bed only to smile at the image of a fierce purple dragon looking back at me from the curtains hanging in the window beside my bed.

The curtains were a special order, but something that I didn't mind spending my money on. Purple and turquoise are my favorite colors, and dragons are my favorite animals, so being able to have a massive, intimidating dragon watching over me while I slumber is outstanding.

Sleeping beneath its watchful gaze each night gives me a sense of comfort, even though I'm not sure why. It's just an image. Dragons , if they ever existed, are nowhere to be found today.

The jingle jangle of tags announces the waking of Merry and Pippin , my two Pembroke corgis. Both of them sleep in the bed with me and are the only bed partners I've had for many years. Their comfort is worth the pain in the ass of keeping up with all the dog hair.

“ Well , good morning, sleepy heads. Are y'all ready for some supper? Give me just a second, and Mommy will let you outside to go potty,” I coo.

A quick glance at the clock on my nightstand shows three thirty p.m. I'm determined to make it to the cemetery today. I've barely been able to get out of bed the last seven days, let alone go to the cemetery for my scheduled visits with Patrick . Not being able to go and visit the last resting place of my twin has been weighing heavily on me. I know he isn't there, but some part of me feels closer to him at that peaceful sight than anywhere else.

Merry and Pippin dance around me, eager to go outside. My boys have been by my side all week. Corgis are an active breed, but most humans underestimate the empathy that some animals possess. My boys haven't wanted to do much but lie in bed beside me while I've been recovering. I couldn't ask for a better pair of dogs than the two I've got.

The trip across the house to the back door is tiring but necessary. I've lain around for a week, letting myself heal, but now I need to get back into the swing of things. The first step of which is to make sure I get back into my routine. Merry and Pippin thrive under a routine, and the last week has shot that to absolute shit.

“ Merry , Pippin . Wait ,” I command as I open the back door with a squeak. Stepping

to the side, I look down into their precious faces as they wait for me to release them to go into the out.

“ Free !”

Their exuberance as they bolt out the door makes me smile. Never a dull moment with those two. There's a reason I named them after the two most precocious hobbits from the Lord of the Rings by J . R . R . Tolkien . I mean, Tolkien is my favorite author, so I use his characters for lots of names for my animals. Peeking around the corner of my house, I make sure my boys are taking care of their business before I retreat back inside.

Turning , I make my way back across my old ranch house, through my bedroom, and into my bathroom. Flicking the light switch on as I shuffle through the door, I mentally prepare myself for the sight that'll meet me in the mirror. I take a slow, deep breath and allow my eyes to focus on my face for the first time since it happened. I've deliberately avoided the mirror after cleaning myself up that first night.

Tears well in my eyes and drip down my face as I think about what happened last Friday , the evidence still clear on my face. A black eye not quite swollen all the way shut and a busted lip greet me in the mirror, along with shallow cuts along my brow and cheeks. Moving gingerly, I remove the oversized t-shirt I'd started sleeping in to assess the rest of my body. Bruises in various stages of healing litter my body. I'm literally bruised from head to toe.

The men Bradley hired to punish me for refusing his “proposal” have thoroughly worked me over. Bradley is truly demented for thinking I would ever contemplate marrying him after what he did to my brother. The months after Patrick died have made me complacent, I guess. Apparently , Bradley is being kind, or that's the word he used as he watched his thugs work me over, and allowed me a whole six months to grieve my twin.

Turning from the mirror, I brace myself with one hand on the wall as I ease myself onto the toilet.

My bladder is on the verge of desperation to void.

Sweet relief.

Clinching my teeth, I gradually stand, flushing the toilet and closing the lid as I go. That chore taken care of, I reach for the shower curtain and pull it back. A hot shower should relax some of the tension from my body so I can make the drive over to the cemetery.

Stepping into the shower, the heat of the water washes over me as I lean against the tile wall for support.

The lack of harassment from Bradley had lulled me into a false sense of security that came crashing down at the end of last week. They were waiting for me in the alley behind my jewelry shop and grabbed me as I locked the back door. Bradley asked me if I had given any more thought about his proposal, and the expression that came over his face at my scoff made fear skitter down my spine. It hadn't crossed my mind that he would stoop quite so low, but I should have known better.

The consequential beating I suffered isn't as bad as it could have been. It pains me to admit that. He could have let them rape me, but he didn't. I hadn't even bothered going to the ER after they left, and I'd taken stock of my body. I didn't have any broken bones that I could tell, and the local police wouldn't take any action. They were all either friends with his family or on the Thomases' payroll.

Bradley's parting words chilled me to the bone. His big body hunkered down next to my abused form as I lay on the pavement, gasping for breath.

“ You have two weeks to change your no to a yes, Paisley . If you continue to refuse me, your next punishment won't be so light. Just remember... If I can't have you, no one else will. Why do you think I killed your brother?”

What I thought was a drunken, negligent accident... is actually murder.

The heat from the shower does nothing to touch the chill emanating deep from within my fractured soul.

### Chapter Six

#### LAITHOG

Another week passes, and she still has not come back to the cemetery.

If I knew how or where to find her, I would have left my pedestal for the first time in several hundred years. She has not ever missed this many visits. As it is, I have no clue how close or far she lives from where I sit. Nor has that information mattered until now.

The best I can do is to stay put and hope she shows back up. I am not sure what I will do if she does not come back soon.

My concern at her absence only grows by the day. Somewhere deep inside me, I know something is wrong. I do not know how, but I know something has happened to her. It has taken me awhile to admit it, even to myself, but a tenuous connection is forming between she and I . Perhaps ... perhaps it will allow me to locate her, if she does not arrive on her own.

Lately , I have developed the habit of napping during midday when the sun is at its highest and being 'awake' from early evening to moonrise. I do not want to miss her if she comes at an odd time. Not that she ever has before, but I do not want to chance it either.

The sun, in all its fiery glory, has almost fully descended, daylight giving way to the soothing embrace of night. My sensitive ears strain for the slightest sound, hoping



today will be the day she resumes her visits. Had my ears been flesh, they would be twitching restlessly, waiting for her arrival.

Faint rustling catches my attention. I identify it as the sound fabric makes as the body moves, and hope rises within my chest. The fact that I am so worried about a human female should cause a moment of concern, but I shrug it off. I feel as though I have gotten to know her over the last few months, and she is the only being on the planet who intrigues me.

Her grief... I understand it. I lost the other half of my soul, and so has she. I knew twins in my past life. The death of one is a wound the surviving twin rarely ever recovers from. It is akin to losing one's soul-bonded mate.

A soft groan announces her arrival, and I hear her sit on what I have come to think of as her bench. She is the only one who sits on it as far as I am aware. The parents she speaks of so warmly have not come to visit their son's grave once since I awoke. She is the only one who keeps a vigil over her brother, the only one who comes to his grave and speaks as if he were still here. It angers me that she should be so alone in her grief. As I have been alone in mine.

I tense with anticipation. I have awaited the sound of her soothing voice as she converses with a dead man. The rough croak that comes with her greeting catches me by surprise.

Why does she sound like that?

Allowing the stoneslumber to slip from my eyes, I look at her from under my lashes, ensuring she isn't looking my way before I open my eyes fully and freeze.

Fury, like I haven't felt in centuries, fills me as I gaze at her battered form. She sits gingerly, like her ribs are sore, and every exposed piece of skin is mottled with

bruises in varying shades of blue, green, purple, and yellow. The garments she wears are loose fitting. I am sure because anything tight would be too much for her fragile body to handle in her current state.

Without conscious thought, my body softens. The stoneslumber I have hidden within for so many years disappears as if it never existed, as the last rays of the fiery sun slip from the sky.

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### Chapter Seven

#### LAITHOG

I slowly stretch, enjoying the pull of muscle as I inhale, processing the scents of everything around me. The external stimuli assaulting my fleshly body is almost overwhelming after being deprived of it for so long.

Wetness on my face catches my attention.

My hands reach up and wipe the tears from my face, almost without conscious thought, but it is the last step in embracing the second chance I have been given. Ilayahan will always be my mate, but that does not mean that my life ended when hers did, no matter how I have wished it so many times over the years.

She would also have beaten me within an inch of my life if she knew I had shut myself off from the world in my grief. My mate embraced life to its fullest and would be very unhappy with me that I have, essentially, squandered centuries. My chest expands in another deep breath as I allow myself to enjoy the simple act.

I am going to have to work on my female's situational awareness. She does not seem to notice that the stone statue in her peripheral is no longer stationary but is slowly climbing down from the pedestal and walking towards her.

I pause for a brief moment.

My female?

I am not entirely sure when I decided that this delicate human is now mine, but it feels right. It is of no matter. I have decided she is mine, and mine she will be. I ... will just have to woo her into it... and pray she doesn't scream or faint at the sight of me.

That would be rather counterproductive.

Slowly , ever so slowly, I step in front of her and extend a clawed hand, gently grasping her chin to lift her head. I ignore the look of shock on her face, my thumb softly feathering along her contused jaw, as I kneel in front of her. “ Who did this to you?”

I watch as her eyes widen in shock, and her body braces as her flight or fight reflex takes over. A slight wince is the only outward indication that the sudden tightness in her body causes her any pain.

My eyes drift over her small form, assessing the damage as they trail across her body while I wait for her to overcome her initial shock, absently noting the pieces of blue-green stone jewelry in her ears and around her neck.

I wonder if she knows that's a protection stone.

Her lips are split where they impacted with her blunt, white teeth. In fact, the split is significant enough that it should have been seen by a healer. I could tell from the semi-healed edges that it is too late to have the wounds sutured.

Her lush lips will surely scar and provide a visual reminder of her experience. I wonder if humans still consider scars to be things of scorn, instead of trophies of survival like my people did. Truth be told, the damage would have been much worse if she had sharp teeth like mine.

One eye, a luminescent golden-brown color, is wide open and staring at me in astonishment, while the other is purple, so dark it matches my hide with only a sliver of color to be seen. It is not completely closed, but it is a near thing. It pains me to see the bruising extend down her nose and across her jaw as well.

Her delicate neck sports bruises in the shape of a hand, the delineation of fingers and thumb clear. What little skin she has exposed beneath her pliable garments shows more bruises hiding the delicious sprinkling of freckles that should be the only thing adorning her body.

Wee hands, tightly clasped in her lap, show fingernails broken off to the quick. A sign that she tried to fight back. Unexpected pride flares up. My female tried. She didn't just admit defeat when her opponents obviously far outclassed her soft frame.

Making sure my movements are measured, so as not to spook her further, I reach out and grasp her tiny hands in one of mine, massaging the rigid digits and easing the tension from her abused fingers, absently noting the varied collection of stone and silver jewelry littering her person.

Whoever did this...

I am going to make them bleed.

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### Chapter Eight

#### PAISLEY

Gravelly rasped words spoken by a being that shouldn't exist freeze me in place. A combination of disbelief, horror, and terror hold my body hostage on the bench I've become intimately familiar with over the last few months.

A quick glance over at the pedestal confirms what my mind doesn't want to believe. The gargoyle that sat there... is kneeling in front of me. I can barely wrap my mind around the concept. The creature in front of me is a gargoyle but... not. The position of his stone body hid several of his features from me.

His face is... interesting and definitely not human. The armored brows jutting out over the eye sockets and small horns emerging from his chin prove that along with skin colored a deep purple, eggplant is the shade that comes to mind, that merges into an inky black at the points of his body where the sheen of scales can be seen in the fading light.

I note that his hands and feet are covered in pitch-black scales, and all his digits end in wickedly sharp-looking claws. Black horns beginning at his temples curve down around the sides of his face, ending in wicked points that jut out to the side, away from his jawline. His horns appear to keep his bright silver hair out of his face, along with a few random braids here and there in the waist-length tresses.

An intricately designed leather kilt with silver stitching is wrapped around lean hips, and my eyes drift further down to observe the same digitigrade lower limbs I

observed on the statue, ending in claw-tipped three-toed feet. Movement out of the corner of my eye brings my attention to his tail. It has crept closer to me, almost as if it has a mind of its own.

A huff of amusement brings my attention back to his face. My gaze caught in jade green eyes that possess a vertical pupil, like that of a... dragon.

What on earth is he?

The hand at my jaw is a whisper of touch, as if he's afraid to jar me in my current state. I watch his other hand move methodically, with exaggerated slow motions, until it reaches my tightly clasped hands. It bemuses me that he gently begins to massage the stiffness out of my hands.

This creature, whatever he is, is showing me more care than anyone has since... well, since my brother died.

Even as terrifying as he looks, he hasn't made a move to hurt me. It makes me relax, minutely, but my body appreciates the release of tension nonetheless. The abuse I suffered last week at the hands of men is still too close, and my body can't handle anything else right now. If a human man could put me in this shape, what could the being in front of me do?

That thought makes me pause. This, this isn't a man at all. He isn't even human, so why should I judge him based off human standards? I shouldn't assume that this creature will do me harm just because he is male.

I don't think a human man has ever touched me as tenderly as this being is currently touching me. I allow my gaze to drop to my hands, surprised to see that they've completely relaxed while in his tender care. My mind is too preoccupied with gawking at him to realize he never stops soothing the rigidness out of my bloodless

fingers. After several moments of silence, where he allows me to look my fill, I hear him clear his throat, as if it has been a long time since he has spoken before he repeats his initial question. “ Little female, who did this to you?”

It strikes me as odd. That is what he wants to know? Of all the things I expected him to ask, that isn't even in the top ten. “ Why do you want to know?” I query.

“ Because , when you tell me, I am going to find the ones responsible and drain every drop of blood from their bodies!” he says, starting out softly but ending with a vicious hiss, baring impressively long fangs I missed during my initial observation of his person. His teeth are all sharp, like those of a predator.

The sudden menace he exudes causes me to jolt backwards, a groan of pain escaping me as my body protests the abrupt movement. Little sparkly lights flash everywhere I look, and my head spins with dizziness.

Did I eat today?

“ Shhh , now. Your body is battered enough as is. I did not mean to frighten you. I am sorry, little female.”

Stuttering a bit, I respond as another wave of lightheadedness hits me. “ My ... my name is Paisley ,” I manage to stutter out, my tongue tripping over the words.

“ Paisley , it is nice to finally meet you. I am Laithog .”

His name is the last thing I hear before the shock and pain overwhelm me, and I pass out in a dead faint.



### Chapter Nine

#### LAITHOG

Muffled curses escape me as I watch Paisley's golden eyes roll and her body go limp.

I quickly, yet gently, reach forward and catch her delicate little body. She has been through enough, and my matriarch raised me better than to let a female fall after she swoons. My purple skin and black scales are a stark contrast to her pale, freckled laden skin that is not covered in bruising, that is. I do not like that her wounds mimic the color of my hide.

“Now, what in the blazes do I do?” I ask, my voice rife with exasperation. “I don't know where you live, don't know where I am, or even what time it is. Let alone the fact that I have not eaten or drank in centuries. As delectable as I am sure that you taste, I sincerely doubt you would permit me that liberty. Furthermore, I do not trust my self-control right now either,” I finish with no small amount of self-recrimination.

I pause in the process of scooping my female up, removing her from the hard bench as I realize I'm talking to myself, somewhat like a being that has lost his mind. Scoffing, I ease myself down onto the bench where Paisley has spent so much of her time, careful not to jostle her maltreated body. Hissing at how uncomfortably cold the bench is the moment my rear touches it, I surge back up.

With a quick glance down at the precious bundle in my arms, I ensure that my actions haven't caused her any undue pain. Her face remains smooth, nary a frown to be seen. Standing there frowning at a bench in the middle of a cemetery is not my finest

moment, I must admit.

My ass is not touching that frigid bench.

I refuse.

With my hands full of soft female, I use my tail to smooth the back of my kilt close to my thighs as I re-descend, gingerly easing myself down, ensuring the fabric is between my flesh and the mercilessly chilled bench. I am shocked that she has sat here repetitiously without complaint. I have known warriors with less fortitude than she.

The sensation of holding someone after so many years of being stone is something I never thought I would ever again have for myself. It is entirely wanted at this point. I have spent so much time listening to this woman pour out her heart that being able to touch her is ambrosial.

Methodically , I scan the surrounding area with every sense available to me. My body is finally acclimated to being flesh, with all the consequences that come with having a fleshly body. Sight , scent, sound, and taste could be a blessing and a curse, dependent upon how one looked at it.

A faint heartbeat at the edge of the cemetery catches my attention as my stomach cramps with hunger. The rhythm of the heartbeat tells me it is a human. It has been so long since I have had blood that being around Paisley without finding someone to drink is foolhardy. My species is not one that is permitted to lose control. The results of such a happenstance are... deadly.

But ... the feel of her in my arms is not something I want to give up, either. Nor do I want to leave her lying here defenseless when, obviously, someone is lurking about.

I take a moment to assess my physical body, trying to ascertain if I have enough energy to glamour myself long enough to reach the whomever it is intruding on my time with my female.

Reaching deep within myself to where my magick dwells, I prod it and roll my eyes when it ignores me. I really should not be surprised; I have done nothing to nurture it for some time. Magick is dependent upon my kind drinking regularly.

No blood, no magick.

Snarling under my breath, I prod my magick again and am delighted when it finally responds to my call, and I watch my body, as well as Paisley's, fade. The magick is doing its job to obscure us from sight.

“ If you will last just long enough for me to reach the foolish human across the cemetery, I will be able to feed and replenish part of my energy levels,” I grumble, ignoring the fact that I am speaking to my magick as if it is a sentient being.

Apparently, I have been alone far too long and have lost what little mind I have to begin with. Ilayahan is probably laughing her ass off at me right now, watching me from the afterlife. Assuring myself that my glamour is in place and that Paisley is just as fully covered as I am, I stand on silent feet and stalk towards my evening meal.

My attention fully on the mortal I am hunting, I miss the whispering caress along my jaw. A caress that I had begged, pleaded, and wished to feel for many centuries.

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## Chapter Ten

### LAITHOG

Rage .

Incandescent rage is all I feel as I slink up behind the human male. My female's supple weight still fills my arms.

He has been watching Paisley .

For how long... and more importantly, why?

The soon-to-be-dead fool positions himself in a manner that has hidden him easily but displays an obvious line of sight to Paisley and the bench she frequents. The things he is holding appear to be what looks like a modified spyglass with two ports for a set of eyes to peer down simultaneously. A genius invention, but one that does nothing but infuriate me.

Because he has been using them to track Paisley's movements, I can tell from the depressions in the grass that this male, or others like him, has stood in this spot many times.

Looking around, I find an appropriate spot to set Paisley down. The grass here is not as well manicured, but it appears soft, and that is all that matters right now. It is softer than the bench she has been sitting on for the last six months, so I don't feel too bad laying her down while I attend to my evening meal.

Using my tail, I sweep a few fallen leaves and twigs out of the way as I lower Paisley to the ground, taking care not to jostle her as I gently slide her out of my arms. Assured that my glamour is still fully encasing her, I turn back to the dead human.

Because he is dead. He just does not know it yet. My primary fangs lengthen within my mouth in anticipation of my first meal in centuries.

The male is holding a small black square up to his ear, an odd light reflecting across his cheek as he rapidly speaks. “ I’m telling you, boss, something out of a Hollywood movie or a fucking nerd convention just picked your girl up. Then they fucking disappeared into thin air!” the man barks out in alarm.

What does he mean by “your girl?” He most certainly is not speaking about my Paisley , as she belongs to none but me... well, none but me as soon as I convince her that she wants to belong to none but me. My sensitive hearing picks up the sound of a tinny voice coming from the vicinity of the male’s ear, and I refocus on the matter at hand.

Ah .

This must be some sort of communication device. I may have been asleep for many years, but stupid I am not. Stupid creatures did not survive long in the time I grew up in. It is of no matter. The male does not appear to want to talk to whomever is on the other side of the little black box, so I sincerely doubt this little conversation will last very long.

The man winces as the tinny voice gets louder, and I cannot suppress my smirk.

Good .

He is in trouble for losing sight of his target.

I want this male to suffer greatly. The dressing down he is currently experiencing is nothing compared to what I have in store for him.

He sighs and heavily replies, “ Yes , boss. You’re understood. I’ll find her.”

I wait until I am sure his communication with the other human is completed before I drop my glamour. With a sadistic smile etched into my face, I grab the human with both hands and abruptly spin him around to face me, making sure the tips of my claws sink past his clothes and into his skin.

The small shriek of pain the man makes is music to my ears as the scent of his blood blooms in the air, and saliva pools in my mouth. What a tasty evening treat. “ Good evening, human. Let us have a chat about why you are watching my female, and to whom do you report? Shall we?” I gleefully ask, before continuing, “ I see I have rendered you speechless; I am rather impressive, but your opinion matters not to me. You are nothing more than an irritant. Much like an insect buzzing around a carcass. Your blood will tell me all I need to know; your cooperation is not really all that necessary.”

Baring my fangs into a facsimile of a smile, I let my secondary set of fangs drop and watch as the human watches them slide into place. It amuses me as he begins to struggle, trying to escape my clutches. He is large, especially for a human, but he is still no match for me. His shout of alarm is music to my ears as I drag him closer to me. I grab the top of his skull with one clawed hand and readjust my grasp on his shoulder with the other to ensure his cooperation as I pierce his neck.

The first drop of blood hits my tongue, and along with it, the male’s memories. I can feel my sanity slipping as I watch what this male did to my female. The combination of feeding for the first time in centuries, along with the incandescent fury of watching this male beat a defenseless Paisley , snaps the tightly held leash I have on my bloodlust.

My last conscious thought is that hopefully this male will be enough to assuage my hunger... because Paisley is the only other heartbeat I can detect in the vicinity.

And ... bloodlust knows no friend or foe, save that of a bonded mate.

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### Chapter Eleven

#### PAISLEY

The faint sound of whimpering pulls me from the depths of unconsciousness, and I frown in confusion. Who is making that sound? I can feel my eyelids flutter, before slowly opening.

Sitting up gingerly, I look around. I don't recognize the area of the cemetery I'm in and I'm not sure how I got here. The last thing I remember is having a conversation with the creature I've seen countless times as a stone statue...and then passing out.

Oh no!

I passed out!

Talk about a "too stupid to live moment."

My eyes widen as the cobwebs begin to clear from my mind, and I take in the sight in front of me. One of the thugs Bradley hired is suspended in the air in front of me, mere feet away, while Laithog is...

What exactly is he doing?

Squinting , I finally make out that his dark head is attached to the man's neck and Laithog's throat is rhythmically swallowing.



Oh shit.

Laithog is a vampire?!

But ...he looks like a dragon had a lovechild with a gargoyle.

Why in the world is he drinking that man's blood?

Not that I really care that he's doing so. Because let's be real. That bastard helped beat the hell out of me, so I don't really care what happens to him. That , and he works for Bradley , so he can't possibly be a decent human being. The same Bradley that admitted he killed my brother. The Bradley , that somehow, I am going to figure out how to kill because Patrick's death cannot go unpunished. Especially now that I know Bradley did it on purpose.

Bradley murdered Patrick . And . He . Must . Pay .

However , that is a plan for another day because the thug's struggles are getting weaker and weaker. I could also see the color is almost completely gone from his complexion and it didn't appear as though Laithog is done...eating. The thought did make me a bit squeamish, but everything needs to eat.

Right ...?

The abrupt sound of the man's body hitting the ground makes me flinch.

Laithog's head snaps around, the slight movement of my body bringing his attention fully to me. I instantly know this isn't the male I met earlier. His eyes are crimson, not the piercing jade green of before. Concern fills me as he turns to face me and pads towards me, his feet silent on the grass. Not a whisper of sound can be heard as he moves across the grass. A sign of an apex predator, to be sure.

I freeze, fear filling me. I don't dare move. There is no way I could outrun him, no way I could fight him off, so here I sit as I wait for him to do whatever it is he will. Hopefully , I survive it.

He reaches me in seconds, looming over me before leaning forward. His large hands on either side of my shoulders and his knees straddling my hips. I feel his hot breath against my neck and manage to whimper a one-word protest before his teeth graze the vulnerable skin of my throat.

“ Laithog .”

### Chapter Twelve

#### LAITHOG

Mmmmmm .

The female before me smells delectable. Hints of cinnamon and vanilla float across the air currents. The scents emanating from her lush body cause my mouth to water with anticipation. She will be far tastier than the guttersnipe I just drained. My stomach is full. The male lying on the ground fulfilled my bodily requirement for sustenance, but my bloodlust is a greedy thing. Once aroused, it's incredibly difficult to rein back in.

Quite frankly, why should I ?

This little human female smells delicious. Her blood would be ambrosial compared to the unpleasantness of the male. His blood had been almost gag worthy, but I am starving, and beggars could not be too picky. He is nothing but a means to an end, food at its basest requirement.

But her.

Her blood will be like sipping fine wine, and I have been denied for far too long. The reasoning behind his death flirted with the edge of my sanity, but the slight breeze causes another tendril of that enchanting scent up my nose. A hint of bitterness creeps into the scrumptious aroma emanating from the female.

Fear .

Good .

She should fear me. Her death is near, because I am going to glut myself on her blood until there is not a drop left in her fragile body.

“ Laithog .”

Her husky voice wraps around my name in an almost indecent caress. No , not a caress as one might address a lover.

It is a plea.

A weak, meaningless protest of what is about to befall her.

But .

Wait ...

How ...?

How does she know my name?

No human has ever known my name...

That is to say, not any human alive knows my name. It is enough to slice through the haze of bloodlust, and my consciousness snaps back into place with a jolt.

I freeze.

Horror and chagrin fill me as I realize that in my bloodlust-fueled state, I have prowled over to her and have caged her in. My much larger body has her completely trapped, and my nose is buried in the crook of her neck. Dual razor-edged fangs are a hairsbreadth from piercing her paper-thin skin. The whimpered utterance of my name is the sole feeble attempt at stopping me. Thankfully for us both, it worked.

I would have walked into the noon sun to escape my miserable existence had I drained the life from her precious body. My mind would fracture at the loss of not one, but two females I care for.

Snapping my wings out and down, I fling myself away from her with a burst of motion. The air my wings displace creates a small gust that blows her hair off her face. I feel the cold ground under my feet as they grapple for purchase in the grass, the razor-sharp talons on the ends of my toes gouge the soil where I land.

Turning away from where she remains stationary on the ground, I snarl viciously at the corpse of the human male. With the return of my conscious mind, the memories I obtained from the male's blood surge forth, igniting my ire once again.

Slight rustling behind me announces Paisley's movements. I can feel her as she steps closer to me, her tread shuffling and hesitant. " This male, he is one of the ones responsible for the state you are in. I saw it when I took his blood."

Her breathing pattern changes, almost imperceptibly, as she pauses before replying. " Yes , he and another man are the ones who did the deed, but only at the order of another."

Snarling , I snatch the dead male up, take a deep breath, and exhale a stream of black fire, completely engulfing the body held within my grasp. I don't stop until the body is nothing more than ashes in the wind. A tentative touch on my back, slightly below where my wing joints tie into my shoulders, alerts me to Paisley's presence.

What a bold female to approach me after what I almost did to her. The humor in her voice takes me by surprise. “ I think you got him.” She giggles out before continuing, “ So , I feel like we have a lot to talk about, but it’s getting colder the later it gets. I don’t like to presume, but since you have characteristics of at least two other mythological species, I’m going to guess that you also eat solid food. Would you like to come home with me? I haven’t had supper, and cooking for one is depressing. That is, if there isn’t somewhere else you need to be...?” The upward lilt at the end of her sentence implies the last bit is also a question.

“ Little Paisley , I would very much enjoy a home-cooked meal,” I reply warmly.

### Chapter Thirteen

#### PAISLEY

Laithog is quiet on the drive to my house. I've never been more thankful that I didn't let my mother brow beat me into buying a car or a small hatchback vehicle, because Laithog never would have fit in either one of those vehicles. As it is, he's slightly scrunched in my white, four door, F150 truck. But , to be honest, I don't think the manufacturers have taken into consideration hauling around a massive non-human being when creating the interior of said vehicle.

He explained to me, in the midst of one of the sincerest apologies I've ever received, that since his blood hunger is satiated, that he would be able to maintain a full glamour, the stuff that allows him to be invisible or pass for human should he go into public, as long as he fed regularly. Which is why I am not freaking out about having a mythological creature in the front seat of my truck.

He assured me that no one except me will be able to see him until he can craft an appropriate human glamour. Apparently , his kind needed to ingest blood as well as solid food. It is the blood, however, that fueled his magick, and nothing else.

All this information is delivered to me in a quiet, yet remorseful tone of voice as we walked across the cemetery to my truck. I could tell that his actions while he is in bloodlust, after he told me that's what have taken hold of him, were not consciously done and were attributed to his extended stoneslumber . In essence, he is starving and lost control of himself.

Maybe I should be more concerned for my safety, but I don't think Laithog is giving himself enough credit. My utterance of his name shouldn't have amounted to anything, but it is the only thing that allowed him to snap out of bloodlust and regain his sanity. That counted for a lot in my book.

It also created questions.

A lot of them.

After his hesitant, yet short explanation, he tells me he would tell me the rest of his story once we reached the "safety of my dwelling." His glance around the cemetery is piercing. Since discovering that man has watched me for months, Laithog is insistent on getting me somewhere safe.

Which brings us to now.

The lights shine across the cattleguard, and the truck rattles as we cross it, the tires sounding the departure from pavement to dirt road. The jarring nature of the truck must jostle Laithog out of the place he retreated to because he becomes more alert and looks around in fascination. "You do not live within the confines of the village?"

I laugh a little before I can stop myself. "No, I don't live in town. I live about eight miles south of the closest town. I've always preferred to live with nature surrounding me instead of the noise other humans make," I explain.

"Women of this time are permitted to live alone...?" he asks with trepidation.

That question takes me by surprise. I knew he is from another time but that tells me just how old he truly is. "Yes, women are allowed to live alone and have been for some time. We don't have to get married either and can have our own professions. Financial independence from our parents is also something that is a cultural norm



these days. Well , in this part of the world it is. I can't speak for all countries."

A pensive look spreads across his face as he absorbs what I've just told him. I turn left into the driveway, hitting the brakes out of habit since the road has multiple washed places where the county hasn't made repairs. It isn't until the truck comes to gentle stop, and I cut the engine off, that he speaks again. " I knew you came to speak to your brother by yourself, but it didn't dawn on me that you have no escort there and back until just now."

" No , no escort as you say. I come and go as I please, by myself, and have for years. I'm a mature adult by my species standards"

The look he gives me as his emerald eyes trace my figure from top to bottom and back again make me shiver slightly. There is a heat in his gaze that hasn't been there before. " Yes , little one. I am aware that you are a woman grown, this I assure you," he retorts, his bright green gaze running over my body, lingering in certain places longer than other.

" Oh , um. Well , here we are!" I chirp out with forced cheeriness, ignoring the heat in his gaze.

The deep sound of his chuckle hits my ears as I clamber out of the truck and shut the door behind me.

### Chapter Fourteen

#### LAITHOG

I am not sure what I expect to see when we open the portal to enter Paisley's dwelling, but the cacophony of noise once she opened the door startles me so much that I scoop her up and shoot into the air, away from the two tiny beasts making that gods-awful racket. My wings gust air across the fiends below, inciting them further.

I ignore her shriek of alarm and the sound her keys make as they hit the ground while I hover over the creatures circling below.

“ Why do you have deformed wolves in your home?! Those creatures are misshapen and unnatural!” I ask with mild alarm.

I have never seen the likes of these creatures before. They're long bodied, but sturdy. In fact, they look like small barrels, but with short, stubby legs, large, triangular-shaped ears, freakishly tailless, fluffy posteriors, and a pointed face. One of them is light, while the other is dark, and they have yet to shut up.

How does she live with these things?

A snort catches me by surprise, and I peer down at the woman in my arms to see one of her hands covering her mouth and tears streaming from her beautiful eyes. Alarm fills me until she bursts out laughing. “ Laithog , those are not deformed wolves. Those are my dogs! The breed is called a Corgi . Pembroke Corgis , to be specific,” she manages to eke out between fits of laughter.

Chagrin fills me.

I have just “saved” her from her own pets.

Not my finest moment, I must admit. Slowly , I lower us back to the ground. My feet have no more settled on the ground when I am assaulted by the two creatures. Who still have not stopped making that awful noise. Now I understand what the additional scents clinging to Paisley are from.

It’s these two... things.

“ Laithog , put me down. They’re just excited to see me, and they love meeting new people. The fact that you’re not human, apparently, doesn’t faze them because they’re still begging you to pay them some attention,” she says with a fond chuckle.

Complying with her request, I ease her down, being mindful of the state her body is in, and allow her wee feet to once again resume their contact with the ground.

“ Please , little one. Tell me you did not pay coin for these poor creatures? They do not appear... natural?” I ask, disbelief coloring my tone.

“ Oh , stop that. They’re adorable! Allow me to introduce you to Merry and Pippin . Merry is the red and white, while Pippin is a black-headed tri. That’s the name of their color patterns and why they aren’t identical. They aren’t litter mates, but they did come from the same breeder.”

I bite back a heavy sigh at the obvious love in her voice for these things. I can feel their beady little eyes staring up at me expectantly. “ They are staring. Why are they staring at me? It is most unnerving. Do they ever stop making that infernal racket?” I ask in rapid fire.

“ Merry ! Pippin ! Hush up! Sit !”

To my surprise, the irksome little beast immediately ceases their yapping, and their freaking fluffy posteriors descend the short distance to the ground as they follow Paisley’s commands to the letter.

“ Sorry about that. The breed is known to be yappy. I would imagine your hearing is fairly sensitive?” The upward lilt of her words indicates a question.

“ Yes , my hearing is rather acute. Their noises are borderline painful to me.”

At the crestfallen look on her face, I rapidly correct myself.

“ Ah , actually, it is more abrupt than painful. The tone of their noises is piercing but will not cause me any damage. Do not worry, little Paisley . Now that I know of their existence, I am sure I will become accustomed to their noises,” I soothe.

Stepping around her, I scoop up her keys and hand them to her. I pull my wings close to my body and duck into the house, holding the door open for her and her tiny beast. “ Come inside. It is cold out. I was promised a meal, and I am quite looking forward to it,” I say with a charming smile.

She rolls her eyes at me, but I see the tiny grin she tries to hide as the three of them step past me and into her home.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### LAITHOG

Paisley's home embodies every element of the word.

I know not how long she's lived here, but a being can tell that she's settled in and settled well. The walls are all a crisp white with a softer white trim, with the exception of what she explains to me is called an "accent" wall. These accent walls are all done in shades of what is called turquoise. The color matches many of the stones in the various pieces of jewelry she adorns herself with.

It would seem that my little female has an eye for shiny trinkets. Something I would need to keep in mind for future reference. The first thing she does after entering her home is move to her sleeping chamber, to remove her jewels (so she says), then promptly shuts the door in my face.

A soft chuckle is my only response to her nonverbal demand for privacy. It leaves me alone to wander about her house, inspecting it at my leisure. To my consternation, the two tiny, mishappen beasts follow behind me, the sound of their claws clicking on the hard wood floor makes my eye twitch in irritation. The smirk Paisley sent me as she closed the door earlier told me she did that on purpose.

Clever little female.

An evergreen tree in the corner of what appears to be the communal room of the house perplexes me. It is covered in shiny pieces of material, ornamentation, and

some sort of sparkling lights. The cross at the top appears to be the crowning piece. It takes me a moment to recognize the symbol and what it represents. The religion of the one god was very young and new when Ilayahan and I were fighting the dark forces trying to sweep across the land. It seems it is more common now than then. No human then would have boasted such an item so boldly in their home, but it is interesting, nonetheless.

Winding deeper into her home, I discover a room full of books. Floor -to-ceiling shelves litter three of the four walls, and there isn't an inch of available shelf space on any of the vertical shelves to be had. A small desk sits in the corner to the left, while a large glass front cabinet takes up the remaining wall.

A tingle runs across my skin, catching me by surprise.

But where is it coming from?

Tapping into the magick within, I methodically check each shelf, the desk, and finally the glass-faced cabinet. It's there that I find the source of the tingling sensation from moments ago. Reaching out, I pull the door open and pick up the small wooden box on the bottom shelf. Flipping open the lid, I find a box full of depleted crystals. I see pieces of raw amethyst, black tourmaline, obsidian, labradorite, and many more.

How fortuitous!

Tonight is the first night of this lunar cycle's full moon. These crystals will be incredibly powerful after they've been charged by the light of a full moon. Silently , I close the lid to the box containing the crystals, return it to its place and close the door.

I am unsure if Paisley knows what she possesses or if she would be uncomfortable with me touching her crystals. Long ago one did not meddle with another's crystals for fear of magickal backlash, either from the owner or the crystal itself.

Further intrigued I peruse the shelves, once upon a time I greatly enjoyed the written work. Those books, however, were written in my native tongue. These ...are not. The color covers are dazzling, though, and some of them even have color images within them! Looking closer, I see that many of them have human men of various coloring and build on the covers, most of them without any garments upon their upper body.

How incredibly fascinating!

Such a thing did not exist when last I walked this plane.

I wonder if Paisley would be willing to teach me the language these tombs are written in. It would be a boon to rekindle my love of reading. A love that my female obviously shares, if the contents of this room are to be believed. The sound of a door creaking open signals Paisley exiting her sleeping chamber.

“ Laithog ?”

I smile at the question in her voice. My little female is seeking me out and it brings me joy.

“ I am in your...what do you call this room of books? Ah , yes. A library. I am in your library,” I gradually respond. My attention still very much arrested by all the wondrous things about me. A series of images catch my eye, and I step closer to inspect them. They’re tucked into a corner between two shelves, as if they’re not to be seen by just anyone.

Once my eyes register what I am seeing, shock holds me immobile. There are males, males that are not human in appearance in a series of sexually explicit positions with human females!

Surely , if she has things of this nature in her home...she would not be opposed to

eventually doing some of these things with me. Peering around, the spine of one of the books on the back wall, just below the explicit images, catches my attention. Squinting , I lean closer to get a better look, and jerk back in astonishment at what I find. There is an image similar to the one on the wall, just smaller!

Gently , I use the tip of one of my claws to slide the book out from its slot and turn it over in my hands. The cover shows a winged male holding a beautiful human female in an impassioned embrace.

I smirk.

My female doesn't just enjoy looking at images of multi-specie couples, she reads about them as well! The sound of Paisley walking through the door announces her arrival. When she see's what I am holding she emits a soft shriek and moves as fast as her sore body will allow, snatching the book from me and shoving it back into its place on the shelf.

Never one to pass up an opportunity such as this, I lean down and seductively whisper in her ear. “ You've no need to read about males of my ilk when I am here. I am most willing to get to know you better...in every way a male can know a female.”

Using the tip of one finger, I close her mouth that fell open in shock at my words. “ Worry not little one. I will not move with haste. You do not know me, as I know you. You have questions, and I am still quite famished for a real meal. I do, however, have a request.”

Her brows crease at that.

“ I have not had the pleasure of reading in far longer than I care to admit. Would you be willing to teach me the language of your people, so that I may read again? I have no care to seek out any of my people at this time, nor anytime soon. And , if I may be



so bold, I would like to ask a second favor of you...” my words trail off slowly since she still hasn’t says a word.

A small nod of encouragement from her makes me smile before I continue.

“ Would you pick a favorite story of yours, and read it to me after our evening meal? I noticed a fire place in your communal room. I will be happy to fetch firewood and start a fire while you begin prepping our meal. Not that I expect you to do all the cooking. I am willing to assist in that as well,” I finish warmly.

The smile that comes over Paisley’s face is a thing of beauty, and makes my heart swell with warmth. “ Laithog , you have just described my ultimate stay at home dream date. I don’t think there is anything I would enjoy more right now, than what you’ve just described.”

Her pleasure at my suggestion makes me almost giddy. We both turn to leave the library when both of her tiny terrors sound the alarm, and lights make their appearance, the beams bouncing around the house through the windows.

“ Who in the world could that be this late?” she queries.

Irritation fills me.

Whoever it is needs to leave.

With .

Haste .

I have food to consume, a story to be had, and a female to seduce.

Smirking , I recall the image of a human male I saw on one of the books in Paisley's library and allow the facade to shimmer across my body.

### Chapter Sixteen

#### PAISLEY

“ You need to do your glamour magick thingy and fast. The human world has no clue that monstera, don’t get that look on your face. I am not calling you a monster, but that’s what other humans will think when they see you! Hurry !” I bark out, panic filling me as I hear a vehicle door shut and the yard gate creak open and closed.

I do my best to hurry back across the house to get to the front door before Laithog does. Merry and Pippin also haven’t shut up since they heard the sound of the engine pulling up the drive.

Who needs an alarm system when you have dogs like mine?

“ Boys , hush! Box , box!” I command. Thankfully both of them are in a mood to listen as they cease barking and go get in their respective kennels. Considering my parents and Patrick have been the only ones to come visit me in years, the fact that I have company does not bode well.

“ Paisley , do not worry so. I understand that I am in a humans home, and out in a world I no longer know anything about. All will be well,” he soothes, the deep timbre of his voice a balm against my tattered nerves.

My eyes dart over to Laithog , and relief fills me when I see that he’s glamourised himself to look human. In fact, he looks eerily similar to the character on the cover of my favorite historical romance novel. My relief is shortly followed with a tingle of

something that I shouldn't feel. The form he's chosen is one of an exceptionally large and devastatingly handsome human man. His eye color, facial features and overall body size are about the same, just no wings and no purple. I'm almost... disappointed to see him this way. However, I don't know him well enough to have this sort of a reaction to him.

Do I ?

Logically, I know this is the safest course of action for him, but somewhere deep inside of me I am irritated on his behalf that he has to hide himself. To be frank, I find him to be far more handsome in his natural form than this. When he looks like this, he reminds me of every other human man that's harmed me. Shaking my head I try to clear these thoughts. I don't have time to dissect how I feel about my inhuman houseguest.

Laithog must somehow sense my disquiet with his new appearance, because I feel what must be his tail wrap around my waist and move me behind him so it is he that will greet whoever is on the other side of the door. Just before he reaches out to grasp the doorknob he whispers in my ear. "It is still me. There is no need for you to be apprehensive. It is a glamour and nothing more, my true self is still here for you to touch, even if you cannot see it with your eyes."

His words still the part of me that began to fear him, ever so slightly, due to his new appearance. It isn't consciously done, but more of a gut reaction due to my recent experiences with large men. The comforting weight of his tail reassures me.

I take a deep breath and nod at him as a knock on the door sounds.

A sense of satisfaction comes over me when Laithog rips open the door, and none other than Sheriff Grady Stewart stands there. I watch as the superior smirk on his face fades swiftly only to be replaced with a look of bemused confusion. He wasn't

expecting me to have company. Sheriff Grady is an older man that, once upon a time was a handsome man, or so I've been told. The last decade of poor personal hygiene and laziness have softened his body to the point that his belly hangs over his belt. His breath wheezes slightly with every exhale, and I see food stains where his belly bulge begins.

“ Well hello Sheriff . What brings you out this way?” I ask with saccharine sweetness. This man makes a mockery out of what his position is supposed to be about. I don't miss his quick glance at the bruises littering my body and the consequential smirk.

Asshole .

Laithog , missing nothing, feels the tension that instantly entered my body at the sight of Grady . His tail tightens even more around my waist and moves me slightly farther behind the bulk of his body.

“ Paisley ... I didn't realize you have...company. I received a welfare check phone call earlier that you may have been in some trouble and came to check on you.”

What a crock of crap. This man wouldn't have done anything, even if I would have reported what Bradley and his thugs did to me in the alley behind my jewelry shop. Bradley's underling, a now very dead underling, have probably called and told Bradley about Laithog , and in turn, Bradley have sicced one of his favorite dogs on me.

Hardy -har-har.

A quick peek around Laithog's broad shoulders confirms that Grady brought at least one or two of his deputies with him. “ Well , as you can see, I am perfectly fine. Or , as fine as I can be after getting the shit kicked out of me by two monsters while

Bradley stood there and watched. He told me that I have two weeks to make a decision. I still have a whole seven days left. You're here at his behest. We both know that, don't we, Grady ? I sneer out, enjoying the way his jaw clenches every time I call him Grady instead of Sheriff . He hates being called Grady instead of his title, so naturally I do it every chance I can.

Misogynistic prick.

“ Now , now Paisley . You know better than to be making accusations like that. Mr . Thomas advised me that he has a solid alibi for the evening you were attacked. He wanted that known in case you came in to press charges. You do know filing a false police report is a crime, don't you?” He explains, speaking to me as if I'm slow.

“ Why yes, Grady , I do know that, but I do so appreciate you taking the time out of your busy day to come check on my welfare and to explain that concept to me. Well , as you can see, I'm a bit busy, so why don't you fuck off from whence you came, and leave me to my evening? You're polluting it with your presence,” I gleefully ask.

That fucker was planning on coming here and kidnapping me. There is no other reason for him to show up at my house, let alone after dark, and it would have been under the guise of him doing his job.

Thank the Lord , Laithog is here. Grady wouldn't chance a witness, especially a stranger. You never know who knows who or who is connected to who. Bradley and his family didn't get where they are because they acted rashly or were stupid, and Bradley wouldn't let any of his underlings act without explicit permission.

Unfortunately , for the rest of us.

“ Does your friend here not have the ability to speak?” he bites out, irritation plain in his tone.

To which Laithog lets out a menacing chuckle. “ I do not lack the ability to speak. Paisley , it would seem, does not care for you, and this is her home. I would not do her the disservice of speaking for her in her own home, nor speak to her in a demeaning manner, as you have done since your arrival,” he grates out.

Unaccustomed to being challenged, shock comes and goes from Grady’s face before it’s replaced with a calculating look as he assesses the “man” in front of him. “ Interesting ...and just who might you be?” suspicion clear in his tone.

Before Laithog can answer, I interject. “ This is my friend, Lance . He’s in town for a while and is crashing with me. Lord knows I have plenty of space out here all by myself. Don’t we, Grady ?” I bite out, my smile full of teeth.

“ I ...see. I didn’t know you have...friends like that, Paisley . Best be careful or folks might get the wrong impression about what kind of woman you are,” he patronizingly insinuates.

Indignation and fury rival for supremacy within me.

How .

Dare .

That .

Fat .

Fuck .

“ Considering you’re in Bradley’s pocket, and have been for years. That’s fucking hypocritical coming from you. You’ve never respected a woman or her reputation in

your life. So don't you dare insinuate that I am anything less than the honest, law-abiding citizen that I am. My personal life is just that. MY PERSONAL LIFE . Unless you have anything further to say to me, I suggest you leave and tell Brad to fuck off for me," I end with a furious hiss before continuing.

"Now , I've asked you to leave twice. I am in my home, have done nothing wrong, and unless you have a legitimate reason to be here, which you don't, you need to leave. I have no issues submitting an anonymous tip to Internal Affairs to have your entire office investigated. Hopefully so thoroughly you feel violated. Just like you violate the rights of citizens, you should protect every damn day."

For a second, Grady wavers, as if he might actually have a conscious, but then his face twist in a vicious sneer. " You're luckier than you know, Paisley . It's lucky for you that Bradley wants you, and the rest of us can't touch you. Or else..." his words trail off menacingly, and I feel Laithog's body tense.

But , with that parting shot, Grady and his deputies turn to leave.

Laithog and I watch them as they exit my yard, climb into their vehicle, and leave my property. We wait until the tail lights have completely faded from sight. The second the lights disappear, the rigidity leaves Laithog's body, and he relaxes.

" Little one, I feel as though there is much for you to tell me," he states as he turns to me, closing the door with his tail as he does so. The human glamour fading to nothing now that our unwanted guest is gone.

I sigh heavily.

" I was afraid you were going to say that."



### Chapter Seventeen

#### LAITHOG

The human male is not to be trusted.

I may have been asleep for millennia, but my instincts about beings were never wrong. The male looks wrong; he smells wrong, and he speaks in hidden innuendos... as well as not so hidden innuendos. His visit visibly alarmed Paisley, even though she hid it well behind affronted bravado, and I need to know why. The human males could not hear the rapid beat of her heart, or smell the acrid scent of her fear, but I can.

I am not at liberty to just kill whomever I want, no matter how much they might need killing. Humans. I sneer to myself, always have attachments. That thought makes me pause as my eyes slide across the female in front of me.

Well, almost all of them.

The fact that she is alone deeply troubled me.

After, what is his name? Ah, after Grady left, we retreat into her kitchen, where she starts preparing our evening meal, after releasing her little, deformed beasts from their cages. Both of the disconcerting creatures are loitering in the kitchen, dancing around Paisley's feet as she cooks, making her smile fondly at them.

If Ilayahan taught me nothing else, she taught me not to prod a female into action

until she's ready. This pertains to many things.

Talking .

Fighting .

Fucking .

The last thought makes my tail curl, but that isn't the priority of this evening. I need to ensure Paisley is comfortable with my presence in her life before I attempt to woo her.

I am not human, after all.

Paisley keeps shooting me looks from under her lashes that she thinks I don't notice as I sit at her kitchen table. The chair I currently reside in gave her a bit of a giggle. She hasn't ever seen someone with wings attempt to sit in a backed chair. Naturally , I played it up a bit in my attempt to bring some levity back to her face. Making a large display of sitting, fidgeting, and grumbling before I turned the chair around for me to straddle it finally softens the firm line of her mouth.

The silence that descends is comfortable and lacks the strain from earlier. I watch as she flits across the kitchen, and watch with twisted amusement as her wee beast follow her for every single step she takes. Whatever it is she's preparing smells delicious, and it makes my stomach grumble with hunger.

Regular hunger, not bloodlust.

The two are not the same.

I hear Paisley take a deep breath and smile to myself. She is finally relaxing. The

tension she's carried since the deceptive male left is fleeing her body. Much to my disgruntlement, the diminutive creatures flanking her appear to be helping her regain good mood.

Ilayahan would be proud. I did not barge into a conversation with my little human before she is ready to speak to me, thus creating strife where none should be. My mate literally beat this lesson into me during the early years of our mating, but it never really took. Maybe this is because I enjoyed riling her so.

But .

My little human is not like my Ilayahan is. Yes , she is spirited, but she will not physically attack me and knock knowledge into me by force. Nor can I afford to cause her affront when my welcome is somewhat tenuous. I do not want to offend Paisley , and be consequently kicked out of her home.

It would make my wooing much more difficult.

Who says a male can't learn new things?

### Chapter Eighteen

#### PAISLEY

I don't know why I'm so nervous. The weight of Laithog's gaze follows me as I move around the kitchen making supper, almost as if he intends it as a caress. It's not...unpleasant. Quite the contrary. After the events of earlier, it makes me feel safe, and I haven't felt safe in a very long time. Merry and Pippin are skulking around the kitchen, hoping for some sort of morsel as per usual.

I smile down at them fondly. My dogs are the only source of comfort I'd allowed myself since Patrick died. I didn't want to burden my parents anymore than they already were. Laithog didn't try to fill the silence with idle chitchat or urge me to speak. Most men, or males in general, would have immediately started in on me, demanding explanations in order to begin "fixing" my problem for me. Maybe his kind don't do that?

It's not that I don't need help. I know I do...but I need time to formulate my thoughts so I make a rational decision, not an overly emotional one. His patience, while unexpected, is deeply appreciated. I watched Laithog kill a man in front of me without so much as blinking an eye, but the thought of talking to him about Bradley makes my stomach hurt. Honestly, I'm sick and tired of that piece of shit being on my mind all the time.

I dart a quick glance over at him from beneath my lashes before I sigh. The venison I've pan seared is done, the potatoes I stuck in the microwave are soft all the way through, and the green beans are warmed up in their corning ware dish. There isn't

anything left for me to do other than plate the food and serve supper.

Quickly I fix two plates and turn, speaking as I go. “ I’m not sure what you eat, but I pan seared venison, baked some red potatoes and have some canned green beans heated up. I tried to put several different types of food together for you in case there is something you don’t like or don’t eat.”

Relief fills me when a warm smile creases his face and his eyes light from within. “ My people are omnivorous, but lean heavily on meat for protein purposes. We are, at heart, predators, but we also eat tubers and vegetable. Everything you’ve prepared smells delicious and I am thankful to you for using your stores to feed me,” he thankfully assures me.

“ Merry , Pippin . Out ,” I order, pausing to make sure they do as I ask, before putting Laithog’s plate down on his place setting, and move around the corner of the table to take my own seat. The sound of his chair scraping catches me by surprise as he suddenly lurches to his feet, his long sinuous tail reaching out to grab my chair and pull it out for me, bowing slightly.

I can feel a slight blush creeping up my neck and across my cheeks.

Stupid fair skin!

He waits for me to sit and then pulls my chair closer to the table. His tail moving from the back of the chair to the horizontal bar at the back, ensuring the chair slides evenly across the linoleum floor so that I’m not jarred in my seat. Once I’m seated, he turns his chair with the back facing the table and takes his place catty-corner to me.

“ Well , dig in before it gets cold,” I urge him.

The words have no sooner left my lips than he descends upon the plate I sat before

him like a starved man. I'm a little taken aback at how voracious he seems to be, but if he's been a statue for as long as he's implied, it would stand to reason that he hasn't have a meal in far longer than my mind can wrap around.

His groans of enjoyment ensure me that he's well pleased with what I've prepared, releasing me from some of the anxiety that he would eat what I cooked out of politeness. This is not that in the slightest. With a small, happy smile, I tuck into my meal with relish.

Cooking for one has always depressed me and seeing someone else blatantly enjoy my cooking makes me happy. I've made it half way through my plate when Laithog looks at me and ask. " Little one, would it be acceptable for me to refill my plate?"

" Yes , I had a feeling that one serving wouldn't fill you up. There's plenty more on the stove, help yourself to whatever else you want," I answer warmly.

I chuckle a little as he jumps up out of his seat and flits across the kitchen to the stove, his right-hand darting from container to container as he loads his plate down a second time before returning to his spot at the table. I watch as he resumes his enthusiastic consumption of food. Focusing on my plate, I finish my meal and lean back against my chair, eyes widening in surprise to find that he's cleared a second plate in the time it took me to finish one serving. Jade green eyes peer at me from where he sits, waiting for me.

Well then.

Pushing my chair back from the table, I start to rise only to be stopped by the soft touch of a large, black scaled hand. He quickly withdraws his hand, as if he's afraid I would find his touch abhorrent. " If you would permit me, I will take your plate to the basin and wash our cutlery while you put away the rest of the foodstuffs. Is this permissible?" he hesitantly inquires.

Shock holds me immobile for a few seconds, and I see his face begin to fall. “ Yes ! I mean, yes. That would be quite lovely. You don’t have to do that though,” I retort, tucking my chin a bit embarrassed at my small outburst.

Deliberately , and with great care, he reaches out with one finger, the clawed tip pricking my skin as he tilts my chin up so my eyes meet his. “ Do not hide yourself from me, little one. You’ve no need to ever be embarrassed in my company.”

His voice is tender as he reassures me, the deep rumble of his voice reaches out and caresses me as his brilliant jade green eyes rove across my face. Laithog removes his finger and picks up our plates, striding over to the sink when I feel a slight tug on my ankle. Peering down, I see his tail unwinding from my leg.

Ignoring the flick of heat pooling in my lower belly I get up from the table and begin putting the food away. With two of us working together, it doesn’t take long before the kitchen is clean.

I grab a glass from the cabinet and pour myself a glass of wine, heading towards the living room, waving at Laithog to follow. His large body following close behind me causes the hair on the back of my neck to prickle with awareness. He’s so much bigger than me, he makes my full figure feel almost delicate and petite. Something that is rather hard to do since I’ve been described as having a renaissance Venus body type.

We enter my living room and I head towards the couch. The click clacks of little claws on the hardwood floor as my dogs follow me to the couch make me smile. There should be enough room for both of us to sit and hopefully it won’t pinch his wings.

Laithog peeks over at the fireplace, before glancing at me with a questioning expression. The earlier discussion in my library comes to mind and I can’t help the

disappointment that wells within me. Stupid Grady and his stupid visit ruined the almost jovial mood of earlier.

I shake my head no, in answer to his unspoken question and all he does is smile at me. Granted his smile is taking a bit of getting used to, due to the mouth full of sharp teeth, but it does nothing to detract from how handsome his strange features are becoming.

Once we are both settled on the soft surface, I motion for Merry and Pippin to get up on the couch, snickering at Laithog's pained look as my boys force their way between us. I take a bracing sip of wine as he waits, looking at me with an air of expectancy.

I guess it's time to talk.



### Chapter Nineteen

#### LAITHOG

Digging deep within the well of my patience, I watch as Paisley takes a sip of the fermented beverage.

She's stalling.

Whatever it is she has to tell me must be worse than I've surmised. I know it's not good, which is an understatement. Human males beat a defenseless female. Had they been Garagyre , they would have been executed for their transgressions. She reaches forward and sets her glass on the low wooden table in front of the cushion bench we are sitting on. The padded back is surprisingly comfortable to lean against, no wing pinching at all.

Marvelous piece of furniture if you ask me.

Leaning back against the arm rest of the bench she pivots to face me, curling her legs up under her and wrapping her arms around herself, while her creepy little animals snuggle in around her. They can smell the pain, stress, and sadness emanating off her, just as I can. The action makes my hearts pang. She's holding herself for comfort.

How long has it been since someone has held her?

How long has it been since she's allowed someone to hold her?

I dare not move.

Not now.

Her voice, when she speaks, is clogged with tears. The pain she feels is obvious. “ Six months ago, my brother Patrick died in a vehicle accident.”

She must notice my confusion because she elaborates before continuing. “ A vehicle is the machine we drove here in. It’s called a pick up, truck, or vehicle.”

At my nod of understanding she carries on.

“ I thought... I thought it was an accident. Everyone did...but a week ago the man that hit my brothers truck told me he did it on purpose. That he targeted Patrick with the intent to kill him and remove him from my life. He told me that if he can’t have me, then no one else will. The bastard propositioned me at Patrick’s funeral and I told him to leave me the fuck alone. That it would be a cold day in hell before I married him, and that is before I knew he murdered Patrick ! I guess he figured he gave me enough time to grieve because he approached me last week. When I denied him a second time he ordered and then watched as his goons beat me until my broken body lay on the ground.”

Her luminescent multicolored eyes are filled with pain. “ I don’t understand, Laithog . I really don’t,” She pauses slightly before finishing with, “ Patrick isn’t just my brother...he’s my twin. That bastard killed the other half of my soul.”

The word “soul” ends in a tortured whisper before she crumples into herself, her tiny body rocking with the force of her sobs. Without thought to the consequences of my actions, I lean forward and scoop her little body up, jostling her wee creatures, and placing her in my lap as my wings envelope us both. To my surprise, she doesn’t recoil from me but latches onto me and the comfort I’m offering, her wee hands

clinging to me desperately.

My arms hold her to me as I gently rock her, a soothing purr rumbling in my chest. I don't say anything as she cries out her sorrow. Eventually , her sobs lessen and her breathing evens out. When she leans her face against my chest, nuzzling her cheek against my hide, my purr swells within me, so much so that my chest is almost rattling with it.

Once I know she's calmed down some, I begin speaking. " I , too, know what it is like to have the other half of your soul ripped from you." I know I have her full attention when her lush body freezes. " Long ago, when mankind was young. The world was a darker place inhabited by all manners of beings. Good as well as evil. I am a warrior in the Legion of the Light ...and so was my mate, Ilayahan ."

Paisley raises her head to look at me. " You said 'was,'" and I nod at her whispered words.

" Yes , my mate is no longer amongst the living." The words scrape against my throat, though not as abrasive as they once were. This is because of the precious being within my arms.

" Oh , Laithog . I am so very, truly sorry."

" I do not tell you this to earn your pity, or to make you feel sorry for me. Only that, I am one of the few that can understand how you feel. I know of the bonds between twins. Ilayahan has a twin sister. When my mate died, her sister was never the same. The only reason she did not greet the sun is because of her mate."

" What ...what happened to her?" comes the hesitant question.

" As I said, Ilayahan and I were both warriors in the Legion of the Light . Truth be

told, we were some of the most elite warriors in the entire Legion . Garagyre , my kind, are nocturnal...as were the creatures we hunted. The sun is an enemy to us both.”

I hesitate for a moment, uncertain how she will react to what I am about to tell her, but an elbow nudges me, prodding me to continue.

A low chuckle escapes me at her daringness before sobering.

“ Demons .”

### Chapter Twenty

#### LAITHOG

The word is ripped from me, causing her unswollen eye to widen at my vehemence.

“ Filth from below the surface of the earth. A blight upon every being not of the underworld. They seek out all that is good, all that is pure, and they corrupt it. They wish to envelop all the worlds in eternal darkness, to feed at their leisure. Humans are particularly easy prey. Your species does not have any natural defenses.”

Raising my hand, I extend my claws from my fingertips, making a visible point to her. Her hesitant nod spurs me forward. “ We were winning. Between the day walking species and others of my ilk at night, we were beating the demons back. They got no quarter as they gave none. During the final battle, Ilayahan and I were cut off from the rest of the Legion in a purposeful move by Rulzik .”

“ Before you ask, Rulzik is one of the demon generals. An extremely old, powerful being from when the world was nothing more than a primordial concept the gods were toying with before they finished creation. I know not where the gods came from, but I know that there are good gods, just as I know there are evil gods. Rulzik was created by evil. He served his master faithfully for eons, and was finally rewarded with the perfect mate. If possible, she was far more viscous than he ever was...and Ilayahan and I killed her.”

A quiet gasp is her only response.

“ In a last act of revenge, Rulzik successfully plotted to separate Ilayahan and I from the rest of the Legion . We were overwhelmed, but we did not fall. If there were two things my mate and I were good at, it was fighting and fucking.”

Paisley snickers at this and it makes me smile.

“ Rulzik used his minions to create a diversion, while he approached, hidden from our eyes with cloaking magicks.”

I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the next part.

“ He beheaded Ilayahan in front of me. I felt her die. Felt as her soul was ripped from mine as it ascended to the afterlife. Watched as her body turned to ash on the wind. I do not recall what happened in the moments after that, but when finally came to my senses, I was surrounded by the corpses of countless demons, one of which was Rulzik . I killed that piece of filth, but it did not bring her back to me. I questioned why I lived, when so many die with their bonded mate. In my grief, I retreated from the world. That is, until a voice, laden with a familiar grief, reached out to me deep within my stoneslumber. ”

When I look down, much to my surprise, silent tears are running down Paisley’s face. A trembling hand cups my jaw, her thumb whispering a caress against the ridges and scales found there. “ Oh , Laithog . I know I’ve already said this, and the words aren’t enough, but I am truly sorry for your suffering. I don’t say this because I pity you, but because I feel empathy for your pain.”

She pauses, as if waffling with something difficult, before a glint comes to her beautiful eyes as she uses the hand on my jaw to tenderly pull my face down to hers and kisses me.

### Chapter Twenty-One

#### PAISLEY

I don't know what comes over me and makes me decide to kiss him. I just want to ease some of his pain. The tormented expression on his face as he told me what happened to his mate shattered my already tattered heart. I would have to be made of stone to not of been affected by his story.

I've never been in love so I've no clue how devastated he must be. In all the books I've read about fated mates, they go into such detail about how deeply bonded the two beings are. As if they were two parts of one whole. If the fictional bond is anything similar to the real life being before me...how does he function?

And ...his other half was ripped from him by a being that cares for nothing except bringing about pain and destruction. Seeking only to comfort him in one of the only ways I know how, I pull his face to mine and lightly press my lips to his, the caress a whisper of sensation causing awareness to ripple down my spine.

His entire body freezes as he allows me to lead in this dance. I made the first move, and no matter the words he spoke to me in the library earlier, I do not fear this male. I think he would sooner cut off one of his hands than harm me in any way.

I don't know how I know that; I just know that I do.

Gathering my courage, mindful of his razor-sharp teeth, I flick my tongue against the seam of his lips, a tentative query. Laithog parts his lips and kisses me back with

restrained passion. His tongue gently plunders my mouth, sliding sinuously alongside my tongue, the sensation catching me by surprise.

What on Earth ?

His tongue is textured!

I whimper as my mind considers the possibilities of where else that tongue could be applied to, but the second I make a sound Laithog pulls back, my welfare still foremost in his mind.

“ Paisley , you are well?” he demands.

“ Yes , Laithog . I’m fine. I promise,” I respond with a smile, ignoring the way my torn lip pulls.

“ As much as I would enjoy continuing our current activity, I do not think you are quite up to bed play yet. You are still recovering and, also, do not yet know me.”

I hate that he’s right. It’s been a long time since I’ve been attracted to someone, and even longer since I’ve slept with anyone. Not to mention I’ve only known him a few hours...and he’s not human.

His next words pull me from my internal reverie and make my smile grow even bigger. “ Perhaps ... I could build the fire we discussed, and you could fetch one of your favorite books to read to me before you retire for the evening. It is not that late yet.”

He’s ...almost adorable. It’s as if he’s bashful about asking me to read to him after the heaviness from earlier. “ I think that is a wonderful idea. We should enjoy our evening together. We are both alive, full, and safe. Things to be thankful for.”



“ For longer than I care to admit to you, I did not count those things as blessings, but I assure, I do now. Go and fetch us a story, and I will start a fire for us. First , I beg of you. Please tell me your creepy little beast did not watch us the entire time we were embracing...?”

Laughter bubbles up and I let out a snort at his horrified tone before I can stop myself. Glancing to the side, I can see Merry and Pippin sitting...and staring.

They do like to stare.

With a disgusted huff, Laithog stands, making me squeak in alarm since he takes me with him. His large hands support my ample weight as he eases me to my feet, sliding me down the length of his body until I’m standing before him, my front pressed to his. Craning my neck, I look up at him, finally realizing just how large he truly is. The top of my head comes to what would be a collarbone on a human. Add in his horns, and wings, Laithog is one truly intimidating figure.

“ Bah , enough with your sly seduction female. I’ve a fire to build and a tale to hear, off with you!” he playfully scolds with a light tap to my right butt cheek before he strides to the back door, glamouring himself as he goes.

Rubbing my butt, I can’t help the goofy grin that pulls at my lips as I go to the library to “fetch a tale.”

### Chapter Twenty-Two

#### LAITHOG

It is late and the moon is high in the sky. The fire I built earlier is naught but glowing coals within the depths of the hearth. I need to hurry if I am to charge the box of crystals still tucked away in the library. My Paisley is fast asleep, safe in the warm embrace of her bed. Thankfully she took both dogs (the proper name of the disfigured beings she keeps as pets) to bed with her. It would take far longer than one evening for me to become accustomed to creatures such as those.

The remainder of our evening passed without any more excitement. Paisley read to me from a book entitled *The Hobbit* by a human male from decades ago by the name of J . R . R . Tolkien . My attention was ensnared from the first sentence. I've added this evening's activities to the growing list of happy moments I've experienced since waking fully.

After Paisley retired for the night, I set about warding her home. It took precedence over charging the crystals. She is under more of a threat than I previously thought, so it is paramount that her home be protected against all that would do her harm, be it mental, emotional, or physical.

I am not taking any chances.

I am out of practice. Warding both entrances and all the windows took me longer than it should have, but my magick is strong. I could find no weak links in any of the wards. As long as I lived, these wards would hold since they were tied to my magick

and thus my lifeforce.

Satisfied with my wards, I silently stride to the back of the house. Entering the library, I go directly to the cabinet, open the door, grab the wooden box, and walk back out of the library, passing a closed door to my left on my way back through the house. Just as my body is parallel to the closed door, the box in my hands pulsates.

That's odd.

Pausing , I move the box closer to the door and am rewarded with another pulsation from the box I hold. Interesting , there must be something in the hidden room that resonates with the crystals I hold. Reaching out with my tail, I test the lever.

Locked .

Looking back over my shoulder, I check to make sure Paisley is not watching my invasion of her privacy as I use my magick to pick the lock on the door, pushing it open with my tail after I hear the soft snick of the lock mechanism releasing. Inside I find a flat work table set against the far wall, and multiple glass top boxes full of trinkets. Ones similar to the pieces Paisley wear. The gleam of silver and black catch my eye in the case to my right.

Striding over the case, I'm filled with disbelief at what I find.

Surely the gods meant for me to find this!

There , in a bed of soft looking purple material lies a heavy silver cuff with large pieces of obsidian and turquoise embedded into the silver. Bold etchings cover the silver complimenting the stones set within the cool, gleaming ore.

This is a protection amulet.

One , that if the gods permit it, can be charged under the light of a full moon, such as tonight, thus granting the wearer protection from its greatest weakness. Mine is the fiery ball suspended in the sky during the day walker's dominion.

The sun.

Silver is the ore of the moon, and is revered by my people.

Gold is that of the sun.

Turquoise offers protection from negative energies, such as the negative effect the sun has on my moon kissed hide. Obsidian absorbs, blocks, and transforms negative energies.

Excitement races through me as I pop the latch on this case with a claw, grab the cuff with my tail, close the lid, and retreat from the room. Taking care to ensure I leave it as I found it, save for the cuff, as I make my exit and return to the front of the house taking extreme care to move soundlessly, lest I wake the dogs.

Digging through the crystals, I'm happy to see that all the stones I'll need are present. If this isn't the work of the gods, I know not what is. I position the black tourmaline, turquoise, obsidian, and selenite where they will catch plenty of moonlight, as I noiselessly open the front door while ducking to avoid hitting my horns and step out on to the porch, catching the glass door with my tail lest it bang shut.

Carefully , I set the box on the edge of the porch in a pool of moonlight. Those will charge without further ado.

The cuff however...

Only the gods can permit that type of talisman to be charged and used. The wearer

must be pure of heart or the cuff will remain nothing but a pretty trinket to be worn. I place the cuff on my left wrist, quietly citing my request to the gods as I do. The left is for receipt whilst the right is to offer. I most definitely need to receive this blessing.

“ Please bless this amulet by the light of the full moon, bless it with the energy to protect me from my greatest weakness the sun. Bless it that I may protect my precious Paisley from those that would do her harm. I ask this not for myself, I ask this not with greed in my heart. I ask this humbly so that I may uphold the way of the Light , and defend those that cannot defend themselves. This is I beseech of the night gods. Blessed be.”

Seconds go by.

Just as my shoulders begin to sag, thinking my request has gone unheard, the metal on my wrist warms, and the stones begin to glow with an otherworldly glow.

A faint multitonned voice on the wind whispers.

“ Worry not, warrior of Light . Long have we watched. Long have we heard your grief. You , who has only ever served faithfully, even at great personal expense, will be granted your selfless request. You need only recharge this cuff with the light of a full moon henceforth. We bless this amulet for your use, and only your use from this day forth, until you no longer have any purpose for it. This is our will, so mote it be.”

With the departure of the voice, the glow from the cuff dissipates. Cautiously , I test the cuff with my magick only to be dumbfounded at the sheer power held within the cuff. The night gods... they blessed this cuff to the point that it is almost a god's relic.

“ From the bottom of my hearts, I humbly thank you.” Bowing low, I give my thanks for the gift granted to me.

So .

She thinks to deter me with another male?

Inhaling deeply, I take in the scent of my rival.

A Garagyre !

The scent seems...familiar and I wrack my mind trying to place it.

Crafty little human, I didn't think there were any of those left on this plane.

It matters not.

He will die...just like all the rest who have stood in the way of what is mine.

Deserting my vantage point, I turn to walk away.

I've plans to make...

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### PAISLEY

The sound of little feet traipsing down the steps next to my bed are what wakes me. Used to this routine, I gather the covers in my left hand, ready to toss them back when my bedroom door creaks open, just wide enough for my boys to scamper out. A deep, hushed voice stops me before I can swing my legs out of bed. “ Be silent, little beasts. Your human needs her rest. I gather that you both need to go into the out to do your business, so come along.”

If he’s trying to earn brownie points, he’s doing a marvelous job. I don’t ever get to sleep in. Not that it bothers me, I wouldn’t trade my boys for anything, but every so often it would be nice if they didn’t get up at dark-thirty a.m.

Relaxing , I sink back into the comfort of my warm bed and doze on and off for a while. I vaguely hear Laithog opening my bedroom door and letting Merry and Pippin back in with me before rolling over and slipping into sleeps embrace again.

The next time I wake, sunlight is streaming into my bedroom through the cracks in the curtains. I must have slept later than I thought. Rolling over, I check the red glow of my alarm clock across the room and see that it’s shortly after nine o’clock.

Wait ...

SUNLIGHT !

Bolting out of bed, panic racing through my body, I fling my bedroom door open, while avoiding a startled Merry and Pippin , screaming for Laithog . “ LAITHOG ! The sun! We didn’t make arrangements to hide you from sun!! Where are you?!” my words crack at the end, desperation running through me, far deeper than it should for only knowing him for half a day.

The sound of the back door closing catches my attention and I rush through the living room, ignoring the throbbing in my body as it protests the abrupt motions I’m forcing it to perform, through the connecting door into the kitchen just as Laithog steps into the house, sunlight streaming across his body.

I stop, dumbfounded.

He said...sunlight is his greatest weakness...?

The smile that grows on his face is less unsettling this morning than it is yesterday, though I don’t process why . My mind is too full of the fear he died due to my carelessness.

“ Paisley , be at ease. I am unharmed. I’ve just finished warding the edges of your property,” he soothes both hands raised in a reassuring manner.

“ The sun...”

“ You said...”

“ HOW ARE YOU NOT DEAD , LAITHOG !” Is what I finally bark out. My shout makes his ears pin back against his head as a look of contrition replaces his smile.

“ Ah . Ehm . Yes , well. I will have to explain that, whilst apologizing for appropriating one of your items from the locked room next to the library.” My eyes



narrow as I cross my arms and start tapping one of my feet.

Just what is he doing in my jewelry room, and what did he mean he took something out of there?!

Sensing the change in my mood, Merry and Pippin sit on either side of me and stare at Laithog, silently judging him for whatever it is that he did to upset me. What loyal little fluffylumpkins they are.

“ Perhaps we should move to the communal room? I started a fire earlier and...” his words trail off when he notices my attention is captured by what is on his left wrist. The flash of silver there wasn’t present yesterday.

I take a step closer to get a better look. “ Why are you wearing that cuff? It took me forever to find something like that! It’s worth quite a bit, and I intended to resell it in my shop!” I exclaim indignantly.

“ Erm, yes. That is the bit I need to explain, if you will allow me to do so,” he replies, a slight edge to his tone.

With a huff, I turn and slowly flounce to the living room, or as he calls it the “communal room,” only to see that he did, in fact, stoke the fire and I can see flames merrily licking across fresh logs. Merry and Pippin following behind me as usual.

Stiffly marching across the room, I carefully sit on the couch tucking my legs underneath me, aware that I’m only wearing my old lady nightgown and a pair of granny panties. Finally being mindful of what my body is screaming at me, I wait for Laithog to settle himself across from me.

Only he doesn’t.

He walks past me on the couch calling Merry and Pippin as he stalks to the front door as I absently notice the small wooden box full of natural stones, I found at a garage sale is sitting on the coffee table in front of me. “ Little beasts, come. It is time for you to go into the out. Neither of you have been out in some time,” his deep voice states.

Merry and Pippin trot across the living room, out the glass-paned storm door onto the patio as Laithog closes the door behind them. Leaving the solid wooden front door open so the sunlight streams in through the glass of the storm door.

Well .

Shit .

I can feel the beginning of something that bears the resemblance of guilt building in the pit of my stomach.

I may have overreacted.

A bit.

Okay ...so I totally overreacted.

Stupid mornings...

### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### LAITHOG

So , my little human is not all sweetness. She has some spice to her. It makes me desire her all the more, even though I am mildly aggravated with her. Not for her words, but because she has jarred her healing body. I can tell by the way she's sitting that she's in more pain than she was last night.

The vigorous movements of earlier are too much for her to handle. Thankfully , if I am correct, the crystals I charged last night will remedy what ails her and erase my vexation at her current state.

Closing the door behind her dogs, I march back across the room to the low-slung cushioned bench she calls a couch. Snagging the box of crystals, I pop the lid to it as I sit down.

To my surprise, a pale hand lightly lands on my forearm, her colorless skin is a stark contrast to the purple hide and black scales that make up my body. “ Laithog , I apologize. I shouldn't have snapped at you. All I can say is, I hate mornings to begin with, and I woke up terrified that something happened to you because of my negligence. I just wanted to tell you that before we get started with...whatever this is.”

Her words catch me off guard. While I loved my Ilayahan , she is not one to offer an apology unless the offense is grave. The bit of pique Paisley showed earlier, while justifiable, haven't rankled me at all. My mate had been far more forceful than

Paisley could ever hope to be.

It is not as if Paisley has been out of line. I could smell the tumultuous array of emotions coming off her skin when she met me at the back door, a perk of heightened sense. I knew she snapped at me out of fear and concern while the vestiges of sleep still clung to her.

“ You’ve naught to apologize for, little one. I took no great offense. You were alarmed and worried for my well-being. I thank you for the apology given, however. You are kind to care for the feelings of something so different from yourself.”

Reaching over, giving her time to rebuff my advances, I place my hand atop her tightly clenched hands, the scent of her distress thick. “ Come now, there is no need to fret. No harm done,” I say, trying to alleviate her worries.

A short nod followed by the relaxing of her body is my answer. “ I know you have quite a bit to tell me, but do you mind waiting just a sec for me to go to the bathroom and brush my teeth. I have dragon breath and my bladder is yelling at me,” she states, slight embarrassment in her voice.

“ Of course! I do not mind a slight wait at all. My wards are in place inside and out, naught can bother us while I am alive and well.”

I watch her head tilt as she takes in my words. “ Ooooookay . Well , I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

I smother a chuckle as she scampers off the couch and I hear the latch on what she calls a bathroom door.

While Paisley is taking care of her personal business, I select the stones from the box that I’ll need to attempt to heal Paisley . I’ve never actually tried this before, and

definitely not on another species. The battle mages of my past always carried a pouch of healing stones with them to use during the midst of fighting in case they or their brethren were felled.

Hmmm .

Surely , I would need red jasper; the vitality stone, citrine; the ray of sunshine, amethyst; the zen master, clear quartz; the all-around stone, black tourmaline; the protector, jade; the dream stone, lapis lazuli; the truth seeker, and, finally, turquoise; the ancient talisman. As evidenced by the gods blessed piece adorning my left wrist.

Taking the stones out, I set them with care on the low table in front of me. I can feel the power each stone holds. They're fully charged from last night's full moon.

Good .

I've the notion they'll be drained if what I have planned works.

The sound of the toilet flushing, and what an interesting invention that is, announced Paisley's eminent return. I was agog when Paisley showed it to me last eve. The scratching sound of her tooth stick tells me she's cleansing her teeth.

Sweet little female appears to be a stickler for self-care.

Creaking floorboards herald her approach. Looking up, I smile at her warmly. Pleased to have her return to my side. Her pauses at my smiles are getting shorter and shorter. I know my visage is not considered handsome to humans, even though I am quite the catch amongst my own species. Both my hearts glow with warmth because the female I've chosen is slowly beginning to accept me.

She is adorable in her sleepwear, the short tunic she has on has flowers all over it, and

I can tell her breast are not bound as they were yesterday. Averting my eyes, I swallow and force myself to focus.

She's yet to acknowledge it to herself, but the nose knows. Her pheromones are shifting, but I mustn't be hasty. That way lies failure.

“ Okay , I'm ready. I'm not sure what I'm ready for, but I am prepared nonetheless” she declares.

Reluctant to waste any more time, I delve right into the hearts of the matter. “ Yesterday , while I wandered your home, I found this box of crystals.” I wave at the array of stones on the table and those still ensconced within the box.

“ Yes , I found those at a garage sale, and had the thought to use them in some jewelry pieces. I just haven't gotten around to it so I stuck them in my china cabinet.”

Nodding at her explanation, I continue. “ It is good that you know they are naturally occurring stones. What you do not know is that they can be charged by the light of the full moon to fulfill greater purpose than merely jewelry. I , however, do. On my way out of the library, box in hand, the crystals pulsed and lead me to the cuff you now see me wear. I know not how you came by this cuff, but it is a sign of the gods that I am exactly where they intended for me to be. This is a protection amulet. One , that if the gods will it, can protect the wearer from their greatest weakness. In my case, that would be the sun. Hence why, for the first time in my existence, I have felt the warmth of the sun upon my face. No wonder you day walkers are so fond of it.” I snicker at my own joke, and catch the small smile on Paisley's face before I finish my explanation.

“ The rest of the stones I charged overnight, and as you can see, the gods blessed the amulet so that I may protect you during the daylight hours as well as the nighttime. The stones I've selected, in theory, should be able to heal your body, and mind, from

what you suffered a week ago. I am not a mage, but I've seen it done many times. Would you give me permission to try?" my words ending on a hopeful request.

She pauses, before answering. "If it doesn't work, will it hurt?"

"Absolutely not." Vehemence clear in my reply. "You would feel no pain at all, these stone can only do good when the wielder is selfless."

Hesitantly, she nods. "Okay, I have nothing to lose, so let's give it a try."

### Chapter Twenty-Five

#### PAISLEY

I can't say I'm not apprehensive about this whole healing me with rocks thing.

But ...

I trust Laithog .

It doesn't make any sense I've known him less than a day, but I can't deny the fact that I do. Trust him, that is.

Keeping that in mind, I don't flinch when the stones lying on the table float into the air, an eerie glow emanating from them. I watch as they hover around me and start to circle my body. Laithog closes his eyes, face pinched with concentration while his hands make graceful motions in the space between our bodies. His lips move as if he's speaking but it's definitely not English because I can't read his lips at all.

Suddenly , I feel a tingling begin where the worse of the bruising is. This mainly being my black eye, split lip and bruised ribs. The tingling turns in to a sensation of coolness, that grows into icy prickles. It's on the edge of uncomfortable and maintains that level of sensation for several moments, just when I don't think I can take much more of this, the frosty sensations slowly dissipate into nothing.

I watch as the stones lose their glow and slowly float back into the box Laithog removed them from. The realization that I can open both of my eyes all the way



gradually dawning on me. Laithog's eyes open, traveling across my face and down to my neck. A smile of, what looks like relief, I think, ( I'm still learning to read his facial expressions) appears on his face. He also looks...tired. I would have to address that shortly.

“ Good , it worked. Get up and move around. See if you have any lingering side effects. The bruising on your face and neck is gone as well as the split in your lip,” he observes in an overly pleased manner.

Apparently , I am not moving fast enough to suit him because he plucks me from the couch effortlessly and sets me on my feet on the far side of the coffee table. He sure does know how to make a girl feel dainty and petite.

To my astonishment, I feel perfectly fine. I bend, twist and stretch this and that, testing out my body to make sure I don't have any lingering ailments. Nothing hurts at all.

After the misery of this past week, being pain free is bliss. Without conscious thought, I shoot around the coffee table and launch myself into Laithog's arms, one of my knees landing on either side of his hips while my ass is cradled by his thick thighs.

Raining kisses all over his inhuman face I chant. “ Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!”

Chuckling , he remains perfectly still as if he's soaking up every ounce of affection, I'm smothering him with.

Pulling back, I look into his eyes and smile, delighted when my lip doesn't protest the motion. “ I haven't been to my shop in a week and since I don't look like I went through a meat tenderizer anymore, I can go to town without having to deal with

pretend pity or knowing glances. But , first. Why do you look so tired?”

I can feel my eyes get squinty with irritation when he glances down and to the right. Good to know that’s his tell when he’s about to utter some bullshit.

“ It is naught. I am fine, Paisley ,” he answers placatingly.

“ Bullshit ,” I bite out.

“ You’re tired. You said you set wards inside my home and around the property boundary. You also said that blood is the only thing that can fuel your magick while regular food satisfies your tangible body. You drained yourself putting the wards up, didn’t you?” I hypothesize while staring at him.

He heavily sighs before shooting me a rueful look, while rolling his eyes upward. “ Gods save me from intelligent and observant females.”

“ You might as well just tell me, I pretty much have you pinned and at my mercy,” I faux haughtily inform him. Leaning forward until my breast are pressed against the wide expanse of his hard chest.

“ Yes , fair lady, I see that you have me at a disadvantage. You have the high ground. It would be in my best interest to acquiesce to your demands,” he playfully responds while his hands slide down from my hips to cup the ampleness of my curvaceous rear. The slight prick I feel in various places tells me his claws have come out a bit.

Enjoying our game, I get a bit bolder and grind myself down on him. I’m rewarded with a low groan as his hips twitch beneath me. Tilting my head, I whisper in his ear. “ Admit defeat warrior, and I will grant you a boon.”

“ What boon does milady speak of?” he growls his retort.

Sitting up straight, I smirk at him and taunt. “ That’s for me to know and you to wonder about.”

“ Bah ! You are skilled in torture, little Paisley . I surrender to a worthy adversary. Yes , I am worn. I’ve been awake longer than I have in centuries, and I used most of my magickal energy to place wards around your home, property, and your conveyance. Before you ask, yes, I need to drink again to regain my stores.”

“ Okay , that makes perfect sense. Do you have to feed from a human or a creature like a human? Or will something like a deer work?” I ask inquisitively. My inner nerd activated at learning about his species.

“ A non-sentient being would do in a pinch but the best blood, comes from creatures that have achieved self-awareness,” he informs me.

“ Hmmm . Well , it’s a small town, so we can’t just go out and get you someone to drink from, nor can we just snag you a bad guy to drain and incinerate like we did last night. It would make too many waves.” Pausing , I wrack my brain trying to come up with an alternative when the answer hits me right between the eyes. “ You should drink from me.”

### Chapter Twenty-Six

#### PAISLEY

The look of horror he shoots my way surprises me. Indignation rises, and I speak without thought. My body tenses with offense. “What is that look for? Is my blood not good enough or something?” I ask with more than a slight bite to my words.

Pressure at my waist makes me look down and I’m surprised to find his tail wrapped around me, holding me to him. I suppose he thought I was going to get off his lap, and he’s making sure I don’t go anywhere.

The small display of dominance is...titillating.

Focusing on the matter at hand I urge him. “Well ...?”

“It is not that your blood is distasteful to me, it is quite the opposite. I’ve made no doubt that I desire you. I am...concerned that taking your blood would incite my bloodlust and I wouldn’t stop. I am not starving as I was yesterday, but I am rather hungry. It would destroy what’s left of my soul if I hurt you, Paisley.”

Understanding floods through me. “You won’t hurt me. You stopped yourself last night in the cemetery, and I’ve no doubt you would stop before you took too much. Logically, it’s the best choice. Grady’s visit last night tells me that they’re watching my house, so it would be a risk for you to come and go, even with that invisible glamour. This is the technological age. It takes one slip up because you’re weak or distracted, and then your inhuman self is plastered across the internet for billions of

humans to see.

Since you're here, Grady will have reported that back to Brad , so I won't get that second week's worth of reprieve. He's going to see your presence here as me flaunting another man in his face as a deterrent. If I wasn't safe before, I'm damn sure not safe now."

The low growl followed by a snarl is his response to my explanation. Frustration rife in both sounds.

"It'll be okay," I soothe.

Reaching down, I grab one of his rough, black scaled hands, pressing down on the tip of one finger as I bring it to my neck. I know I've won when he doesn't stop me since my intent is clear. Using the tip of his razor-sharp claw, I nick the spot where my neck meets my shoulder, forcing myself not to wince at the tiny flair of pain. I see his pupils blow out the instant the scent of my blood registers to his superior sense of smell.

A low whine escapes his throat, and he swallows hard. The hand I used to cut my neck tenderly cups the back of my head, thick fingers tangling in my long garnet-colored tresses while his other grasps my ass more securely. His tail tightens around my waist infinitesimally.

"Gods , help me. I can deny you nothing." Are the words he grinds out before baring a set of massive fangs and sinking them deep into my fragile skin. At the first draw of his mouth, I feel heat shoot from where he's latched at my neck, down to my nipples, then to my clit.

My brows furrow.

Well that's unexpected .

Abruptly , I realize that every time he swallows, my arousal deepens. It's like he's pumping an aphrodisiac into me as he drinks. Laithog moans and drags me closer to him, shoving my crotch against the cradle of his hips. The heat hits me like a freight train and lust surges within me. I've never been this turned on in my life. Writhing mindlessly, I grab both of Laithog's horns and pull his head closer to me, desperate to anchor myself to something amidst these overwhelming feelings.

Without removing his mouth, he releases the hold on my hair, and I feel his hand shove between our bodies and grab the waist of my panties, ripping them off me with a jerk. Desperate for relief, I spread my legs, making room for his hand. We both moan when his searching fingers find my drenched slit. Without hesitation, he shoves two thick digits in me, curling them forward and hitting my g-spot unerringly.

The orgasm is instant, and I scream out my pleasure, throwing my head back in ecstasy while still desperately clinging to horns, holding them to my neck. With a snarl, Laithog rips his fangs from my flesh. The hot glide of his tongue runs across the wound, causing it to tingle. Using his free hand, he removes my hands from his horns and forces them behind me, holding them hostage in the small of my back.

Meanwhile , his tail slithers up inside my nightgown, the tip emerging at the neckline and the sound of ripping fabric fills the silence.

He .

Just .

Ripped .

My .

Muumuu .

Off .

With his tail!

Tossing the ruined material to the side, his eyes bore into my bared breast. Leaning down, he takes one of my aching nipples into the heat of his mouth and sucks. My eyes roll at the sensation, only to emit a brief shriek when his teeth sink deep and the burning heat intensifies as he drinks from me again. Scissoring his fingers inside my pussy, he stretches me until I relax for him, only to be shocked when he adds a third finger, forcing my body to accommodate the added girth.

A flicking sensation at my other breast makes me look down. The dark end of his tail is toying with my other nipple, ensuring it's not neglected. The blistering glide of his tongue on the nipple trapped within the inferno of his mouth is released, as he growls out a word that should alarm me if I have any logical awareness.

“ Mine .”

The fingers inside me haven't stopped their ministrations, and he adds a fourth finger, my body protesting as he does. I've never been stretched this much, and not even my largest toy requires this must preparation. Laithog plays with my pussy, forcing another orgasm from me, as he thumbs my clit while he stretches me.

I am completely at his mercy, my body his to do with as he wills.

The infuriatingly teasing tail stops torturing my nipples and snakes down between our bodies, flipping the end of his kilt up to expose a pitch-black seam where his cock should be. Too lost to the haze of desire rushing through me, I don't fully realize he doesn't have external genitals.

A low keening fills the air and it takes a moment to realize I'm the one making the sound. " Empty , Laithog , I'm so empty. Please , fill me. Make the heat stop," I shamelessly beg.

I've no more uttered those words than he lines my cunt up with the seam in his groin, and I'm abruptly full of cock. The sensation of emptiness to being full to the point of bursting is too much and I come instantly, shrieking out my pleasure as it explodes through me.

Just as my pleasure begins to wane, Laithog pivots our bodies on the couch, so that I am laying on my back and he is looming over me. Baring his teeth in a facsimile of a smile, he grits out.

" My turn, little female."



### Chapter Twenty-Seven

#### LAITHOG

At the first snap of my hips, Paisley lets out a moan so lurid it makes my sack draw up within me. Lost to the mating heat, as this could be nothing else but a mating heat, I rut my female without mercy. Slamming my hips into hers, I fuck her relentlessly. Savage enjoyment coursing through my body at the sight of her full breast bouncing with every thrust.

One of my hands keeps both of hers trapped at the small of her back while the other cradles her neck to prevent her fragile neck and head from bearing too much weight. My tail is wrapped just under her breast, supporting her torso while also pushing up both of the luscious beauties to me. Without ceasing the movement of my hips, I eyeball the dark red mark on her left breast and then the naked right breast.

That won't do.

Leaning down, I sink my fangs into the delicate skin of her unadorned breast, my mating venom flowing freely from the glands under my tongue to enter her bloodstream via the wound my teeth made. A short scream followed by the sensation of slick gushing around my cock tells me she's reached her peak again. The mating venom is hard at work, urging us both on to fulfill the mate bond. I can feel the first tenuous threads of my soul reaching for hers.

Sliding my tail up to support her neck, I remove my hand, extend a claw, cut a shallow line across my chest, watching as my bright blue blood beads and then begins

to run down my chest. I am mindful of the height difference between my new mate and I , so I make the cut low enough for her mouth to reach.

Stilling the motion of my hips and ignoring her whine of protest, I lean forward, the bleeding cut within easy range of her cupid's bow mouth. Paisley is almost mindless at this point, three doses of mating venom is a lot, even for a Garagyre , but I don't have a choice. A half-formed mate bond would kill me after losing Ilayahan . Humans are not natural blood drinkers, so even though I did not mean to start this process, I have to finish it.

I've no choice.

" Little flame, you must drink. If you want me to continue, you must bite here, and bite hard." I force myself to growl out the words, dominance heavy in my tone.

Paisley is at her most base self right now and is beyond conscious thought. With a glare, her head snaps up, and she latches onto me fiercely with her adorable, little blunt teeth.

" Now swallow," I command, baring my teeth.

The first draw of her mouth makes my eyes roll.

The second renders me nothing but a beast.

Lunging forward, I pump my hips into my mate's lush ones, giving her no choice but to accept the heavy length of my cock branding her from the inside out. The tingling at the base of my spine, and the thickening at the base of my cock, inform me of my impending climax.

Furthering my efforts, I grind the front of my pelvis against her pleasure button. She

needs to come again for the extra slick if she's going to be able to take the added girth my cock will transform to. One , two thrusts of my hips and I grab both of her plush hips in my hands, my tail holding her neck to my chest as the ridges surrounding my cock expand and my knot blooms at the base.

Locking me to her.

The first splash of my seed within the hot confines of her cunt makes me roar as I come deep inside my new mate. Her answering scream telling me that she reached her final completion as well. The sensation of her rippling cunt along the length of my cock shoots pleasure throughout my body, extending my culmination further, forcing my body to ejaculate again and again.

The bond finally snaps into place with the blood and bodily fluid exchange forces a sigh of relief from me as I collapse over Paisley , catching my substantial weight on my forearms on either side of her precious little body. Looking down upon her, I send up a thanks to whatever god is listening. I should not have been able to take a second mate, it's supposed to be biologically impossible.

It appears that I have been blessed beyond all measure.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

#### PAISLEY

What the fuck just happened?

I can feel Laithog's thickness lodged deep within me, wiggling a bit. I test if what I think is happening is actually happening. The hiss we both let out tells me that, yes, his dick is locked in me.

There's an odd taste in my mouth. It's not unpleasant, but it's one that I can't place. Reaching up, I wipe my hand across my lips, frowning as I see Laithog wince. Looking at my hand, I see traces of a viscous blue fluid.

Blue fluid that matches the rapidly healing cut on his lower chest.

Opening my mouth, a scream on the precipice of escaping my throat, I'm cut off by Laithog's mouth sealing to mine. Muffling the shriek of horror, I am about to let out. His plunging textured tongue tangles with mine, building that insidious heat low in my womb as he thoroughly distracts me from my distress.

Moments go by and Laithog gradually softens the kiss, soothing me in degrees. With a final swipe of his tongue across my lips, he verbally reassures me. " Shhh , little flame. There is no need to fear. You need never take my blood again. It is only a requirement of our first joining."

My head snaps up at that. " What do you mean it is a requirement, and that's awful

fucking presumptuous of you to say “first joining’ like there will be another!” I retort hotly, full of indignation.

Without warning, he emits an audible sound, reminiscent of a cat’s purr but far deeper and with resonance to it. It makes my brain short circuit and my cunt clench simultaneously as lust blooms inside me instantly. The sound soaks into my body, rendering me completely submissive to him.

Through heavily lidded eyes, I watch as his mouth descends and takes one of my nipples in his mouth, his tongue lashing the overly sensitive peak, that sound still rumbling deep in his chest. Abandoning the first nipple, his dark head moves to the other, treating it to the same treatment. A climax ripples through me as he works my nipples and grinds his thick member deeper within me. He lets my body down in increments, leaving my overly sensitive nipples alone.

Laithog raises his head and pins me with a smug look.

“ Okay , so you’ve made your point,” I huff out.

Leaning to the left, he puts all of his weight on that forearm, raising his right hand to tenderly scrape a lock of my red hair behind my ear. “ I have known you for many months, little flame. You’ve known me for less than a day, and must learn about me. This I know. However , inadvertently, my body initiated a mate bond with you. It shouldn’t have been possible, but as you can see, we are more than compatible. Our souls are now tied together. We live and die as one. I will always be solicitous of you, but you will not send me away or deny me the privilege of your company, your mind, your heart, your soul, and, if it must be said, your seductive little body.”

Shock renders me speechless for long moments, while Laithog watches me warily.

Good .

He should be wary.

I've never dealt with ultimatums well, and to be honest... I AM FREAKING OUT .

I just experienced the best fuck of my life and now I'm permanently mated to an otherworldly being, while also being targeted by a crazy human man that wants to force me to marry him.

Talk about fucking ironic.

But then it dawns on me that he said my body last.

Company is first, then my mind.

Gradually I relax. Laithog isn't Bradley . He doesn't want to own me.

This male isn't going to use and abuse me.

From what I've inferred...he wants the opportunity to love me and be loved by me.

And love, love is something that should always be sought. No matter what, and I cannot find it in me to resent him for that. It's not like I am seeing anyone, and my parents are getting older. If I were to have Laithog , aka " Lance ," it would comfort them with the knowledge that I'm not alone anymore.

Refocusing on Laithog , I notice that his entire body is tense, as if he's expecting me to snub him, to throw his words back in his face. Relaxing my body under the weight of his, I soften my body and submit to him. " It's okay, Laithog . I won't send you away. That isn't something you have to worry about," I reassure.

Once my words register within his conscious mind, his entire body collapses on me.

A small squeak of alarm escaping me as I'm smothered by a colossal purple and black body. Laithog buries his face in the crook of my neck, scrunching his torso since his cock has yet to soften. "Paisley, I have a grave confession to make." His solemn muffled words make me stiffen in apprehension.

"...what..." is my cautious reply.

"The tiny, deformed beasts. Your dogs..."

"Uhm ...yes?" I ask, my confusion clear.

"I believe the two of them watched us the entire time we were within the grips of the mating heat..." chagrin evident in his voice as his voice trails off. I guess the thought of my two little loafs watching us fornicate is enough to cause Laithog's erection to falter. His cock softens and withdraws abruptly, leaving me empty as his spend leaks out of me.

Bleh .

Ignoring the leaking situation I've got going on, I turn my head towards the front door. I can see the tops of Merry and Pippin's heads, their beady, judgmental eyes in clear view through the glass of the storm door. Laithog didn't close the solid wooden front door, so they had a front row view to all our activities.

The hilarity of the situation hits me and I snort out a laugh, ignoring Laithog's huff of disgust as my entire body shakes with mirth.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

#### PAISLEY

The town of Taggart , Texas , is bursting with holiday cheer. Everywhere you look, Christmas decorations and festive décor abound. The courthouse lawn boasts a massive Christmas tree covered in ornaments that catches the light the sun cast over it.

Hmmmm .

I wonder if Laithog would be interested in going to the annual lighting of the tree next week? Christmas is my favorite time of year, but this year it's been hard for me to find joy in the season due to Patrick's death. Glancing over, I see him peering at the tree in question with a curious look on his face.

Well , that decides that. I'll surprise him with a trip to town to watch the city officially light the tree. Technically , the tree has had lights on it since right after Thanksgiving , but City Hall does a special ceremony the day before Christmas Eve to bring the whole town together in celebration.

I explained to Laithog earlier, after we finally got off the couch, that I haven't been to my jewelry shop in a week. Not since my...altercation with Bradley behind said shop. It was imperative that I go to town today to check on it and make sure nothing happened to it during my forced absence. I chose not to tell my parents about the beating I suffered. There wasn't anything they could do and it would just cause them more worry.



Which also means, that they didn't run by the shop and check on it for me. I'm sure someone in town told them about me being closed all week but a few texts messaged to my mom had resolved that issue.

I told them I needed a small break from work because I wasn't dealing well with my first Christmas without Patrick . After that, they left me alone for the most part. Mom couldn't help herself so she checked on me a couple times a day all week.

Thanks to Laithog , I wouldn't have to come up with excuses not to see them until the bruising faded enough to cover with cosmetics. My plan is to check on the shop, call my parents while I'm there, and invite them to lunch to meet Laithog ...aka " Lance ."

The sooner I get that ball rolling the better.

Convincing Laithog to go to town was easier than I expected it to be. He had just looked at me and says, " I go wherever you go, little flame."

With that thought in mind, he donned his glamour, I loaded myself, the dogs, and Laithog in my pick-up and off to town we headed.

He didn't say much on our way here as he appeared to be content observing his surroundings and taking it all in over asking me questions. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Laithog craning his head this way and that way as we make the square and pull into a parking spot in front of my jewelry shop. I wonder how he's processing the changes in our world that have occurred since the last time he was awake?

Is he overwhelmed?

Tentatively , I follow the tendrils connecting my soul to his, delicately touching the

strands to get a read on my mate. I heave a silent sigh of relief when I find curiosity and inquisitiveness rather than any negative emotion like I feared. Thankfully , he appears to be taking his introduction in to modern society rather well.

Refocusing on the road, I smile when my shop comes into view.

Looking at the street entrance to my jewelry shop never fails to fill me with pride. It was a heck of a blessing to land a commercial spot on the town square. The business is much better here than it was in my original location several blocks away. More foot traffic and ease of access means more business.

“ Well , here we are!” I announce, pride clear in my tone.

Opening my door, I get out while the sound of the passenger door closing echoes that of my door. I shiver a bit as the crisp Texas winter air hits my exposed face. I’m glad I decided on a comfy turquoise colored sweater to go with my purple skirt with turquoise paisley designs on it. I added leggings under my skirt, too.

Cold air hitting one’s ass is not pleasant.

At .

All .

“ Wait ,” I command Merry and Pippin , before opening the back door. They know not to barrel out of the backseat before they have their leashes on, but it never hurts to make sure they’re listening. I would be devastated if one of my precious little loafs got hit by a car, especially if it was my fault for not being a top tier pet parent.

Leashes fully secure, I lift both of my boys out of the truck and set them on the ground before stepping up onto the sidewalk and walking up to the front door,

Laithog trailing protectively behind me. My eyes flit over the front of my shop, checking for any disturbances. Relief fills me when I don't see anything out of the ordinary.

Pausing , I dig my keys out of my purse and go to unlock the door when Laithog's words stop me. " Paisley , has the one you call Bradley ever been inside your place of trade?" he asks, interest heavy in his tone.

" Now that you mention it, no. Bradley hasn't ever been inside. He's always stopped me on the sidewalk out front or ambushed me out back in the alley. Why do you ask?"

" Mmm , I thought not. The stones you've displayed in the front windows are in clear view of the sky. Meaning , the moon charges them monthly, even if you sell a piece, I would hazard a guess that you fill the vacant spot as soon as possible in order to create another sale."

Nodding my agreement to his statement, I pull the front door open and we all enter the building as he continues his explanation. " You , however unintentionally, have protected your space from those that would do you harm. The turquoise jewelry you've exhibited out front is a protection stone. Since he wishes you ill will, he may not enter this place. I am sure he is not cognizant of that, though, most humans aren't sensitive to the metaphysical. It probably never enters his conscious mind to come inside, since the stones repel negative energy."

I'm astonished. Even though natural stone jewelry is how I make my living, I never really gave a lot of thought to the ancient uses of the crystals, as Laithog calls them. It humbles me a bit. Leaning down I unsnap Merry and Pippin's leashes, letting them loose to muck about as they so choose, replying to Laithog as I do.

" I have to say that I'm a bit embarrassed. Jewelry is how I support myself, but I've

never researched the alternative uses for any of the natural stones. Humans that use rocks, stones, crystals, whatever you want to call them, are considered to be witches or wiccans in today's world. It makes you different, not that it's bad to be different, because it's not. It's just something that hasn't ever really entered my mind or interested me...until now."

A small smile creases his handsome visage and I have to force myself not to cringe. Laithog , observant creature that he is, notices the look on my face and wraps his tail around my waist, squeezing lightly to comfort me. " I am still here, little flame. All is well."

I roll my eyes at his choice of endearment for me even though his words are a comforting balm I didn't know I needed. The tension that began coiling inside me the moment we left my house dissolves instantly with the reassuring weight of his tail.

A soft sound, reminiscent of the sexually arousing sound from earlier, begins to hum from within him. This time, instead of arousal, a sense of calming reassurance sweeps over me, eliminating my anxiety as if it had never been.

" Do you have a sound for everything?" a slight edge to my voice as I question him.

He snickers a bit at that. " No , little Paisley . Only the two. One to soothe and one to inflame. It is a male's responsibility regarding the first, and a privilege earned for the second," he responds with a playful leer.

" Ugh ! Enough with that! There's only so much this human woman can take. I have a few things to check on the computer, and I need to call my parents. Do you feel up to meeting them today? I haven't seen them in a bit over a week. When I tell them I'm in town, they're going to want to have lunch somewhere," I say as I round the counter, walking through the doorway that leads to my office in the back, Laithog , as usual, right on my heels along with Merry and Pippin .

Shaking my head, I fight back a snicker of my own at how strange my life has become in the last twenty-four hours.

“ You wish me to meet your patriarch and matriarch?” The incredulous, yet hopeful, tone in his voice makes me stop abruptly, before I whip around to face him. I hear the snap of Laithog’s wings grabbing the doorjamb as he grinds to a halt, trying to keep from bowling me over.

“ You said we are tied together for the rest our, for me unnaturally, very long lives. Correct ?”

At his decisive nod, I go on.

“ So , yes. I want you to meet my parents. All things happen for a reason, Laithog . Yes , I’m still getting used to the different species thing, and the permanent bond that ties us together, but I’m not going to punish you for either of those things. I can feel you. Whatever magick is in this bond of ours, I can now feel your emotions, and I’m guessing you can feel mine.”

A brilliant smile pulls his lips back from his teeth and his glamour flickers for a brief second as his joy fills my chest. “ I was unsure if you would experience the full scope of a mate bond, since you are human...but it appears that you’ve bonded to me just as fully as a female Garagyre would!”

Scooping me up in his arms, he hugs me to him as a manic purr reverberates from his chest. Leaning into his hug, I wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. Letting him hold me and soaking up the happiness that’s overflowing into me from him.

It’s hard to be sad when your soul is being inundated with elation.

### Chapter Thirty

#### LAITHOG

After I finish embracing my mate out of sheer delight, she set about checking whatever it was she needed to on her computer. It must be said that there are many things in this new world that I do not understand, but must learn so I don't become a hinderance to my mate. Our bond should be one of equal status, not one where she has to coddle me every step of each day.

It is good that I am not a stupid male. I've picked up on several things after listening to Paisley for the last six months, as well as observing her for the last day.

While Paisley is on her computer, I set about adding wards to her place of trade, or shop as she calls it. After drinking from her so deeply earlier this rising, my magick is almost overflowing from my body. A Garagyre mating, would mean that we sustain each other after mating, unable to drink from another living source other than one another. The magick inherent to the bond would replenish our bodies blood supply in a never-ending process.

Paisley , however, is human. I am unsure how her end of the bond will work since she is not a natural blood drinker. I know that my magick replenished her body via the mate bond, which is why she's not weak from blood loss. Whilst my ingestion of her blood has energized my magick in a way I haven't felt since the last time I drank from Ilayahan .

It's a blessing to be at full power again.

Refocusing on the task at hand, I finish warding the front entrance, enhancing the natural protection offered by the jewelry located there. Once that's completed, I prowl through the shop, observing her set up as I do. There are glass top cases along each exterior wall, and one large one that runs the length of the shop so patrons may circle around it. Similar to a racing track. She's set the space up to be artful, yet open so beings don't feel trapped or overwhelmed.

It is very clever.

Moving around the counter and through the open doorway into the room Paisley has her personal items in, I peer over my shoulder to ensure no one is looking through the front windows and drop my glamour, shooting her a toothy grin filled with puckish humor as I do so. Paisley rolls her eyes at me while looking at my natural form, appreciation in her gaze as she continues her conversation on what she calls a phone.

Continuing through her office, I curl a lip at the two voyeuristic little abominations curled up on the couch across the room from my mates' desk as I make my way to the back of the structure. I easily locate the second entrance, and begin warding it, keeping one ear focused on her conversation.

“ Yeah , I'm in town right now.”

Pause .

“ I was just about to suggest that.”

Pause .

“ That sounds great, Mom . We'll meet you there.”

Pause .

“ Yes , I said ‘we.’ You’ll just have to wait until we get there, and I’ll explain.”

Pause .

“ Because , I’m not going to repeat myself twice, that’s why. I’ll tell you and Dad at lunch, at the same time. Okay . I love you too, Bye !”

The click clack of her fingers on the peculiar looking black rectangle tells me she’s back on her computer after wrapping up the conversation with her mother. A few moments later, the sound of her standing from her desk is the precursor to her calling for me. “ Laithog , are you about done?”

My hands finish etching the last sigil into the air as I reply. “ Yes , little flame. Your shop is fully warded now. I am ready to depart if you are. I take it your parents are to meet us for a midday meal?” I ask as I prowl back towards her office.

“ As if you don’t already know the answer to that. I’ve no doubt your hearing is extremely sensitive,” she sassily retorts, her words a bit muffled.

The sight of her, as I stride back into her office causes desire to curl through me. My mate is bent over at the waist, rifling through some sort of metal box that appears to have drawers that extend out, that is full of parchment documents. Paisley must feel my desire because without looking back she says,

“ You best cut that out, we don’t have time for that before we have to leave to meet my parents,” she admonishes. Never one to shy from a challenge, I prowl towards her snatching her up into my arms so abruptly she lets out a short screech.

“ Laithog !”

Ignoring the dogs , I carry my mate to one of the other two rooms past her office. One



of my hands begins plucking at her mate marked nipples, while the other massages her pussy over the pretty purple skirt she donned prior to our departure. It's a little thing, but the fact that she dresses in my color...it pleases me deeply.

Her moan tells me that she's not as adverse to my attentions as she wants to be. I can feel and smell her desire building.

“Laithog, we really shouldn't. My parents don't like tardiness.” She tries once more.

Never one to fight fair, I allow my mating purr to begin emanating from my chest, never missing a step as I carry her to a more private location. Paisley moans again as my mating purr slides over her, causing her cunt to begin dripping with slick.

She smells delicious.

Looking between the two doors in front of me, I see that the one with the open door looks similar to her kitchen in her home, so the other must lead to what she calls a bathroom.

It has a door that shuts.

Using my tail, since both hands are preoccupied with teasing lust out of my mate, I turn the knob, pulling it open as I drop my wings low as I can, using them to block both of the irritating wee beast from following us. I refuse to be observed while I rut my mate.

Well ...

Observed again .

Bleh .

### Chapter Thirty-One

#### PAISLEY

A haze of desire clouds my mind as I absently note Laithog has closed the bathroom door behind us, the motion sensor lights coming on as we enter the room. I'm not so far gone to my lust this time that I couldn't put a stop to it.

Unlike this morning.

Laithog makes me feel good...and it's been so long since I've felt anything but grief and misery. That's why I don't put forth more than a couple of token protests. Truth be told, we have almost an hour before we're supposed to meet my parents and I bent over in front of my filing cabinet on purpose.

Hoping for this sort of outcome.

Laithog gently sets me on the counter next to the sink, pulling my sweater off as well as my bra, tossing them aside before he sinks to his knees. "Your cunt is leaking slick and smells delectable, little flame. I must have a taste."

He no more utters the last word than he reaches up under my skirt with both hands and rips my panties and leggings down my legs, leaving them pooled at the tops of my ankle boots. The dexterous end of his tail gathers the end of my skirt up and holds it out of his way. Large, black scaled hands grasp my pale thighs, forcing them wide open to accommodate the width of his head and horns. The tips of said horns are gently digging into the plush skin of my legs.

“ Are you not supposed to have hair here?” he murmurs absently, clearly preoccupied.

Even though I’m prepared for what’s about to happen, the first stroke of his textured tongue makes me jolt. Laithog growls, that damn purr of his is finally interrupted with the aggressive sound. His tail abandons the hold it has on my skirt and grasp me around my waist, which appears to be its favorite place to be, and drags me closer to Laithog’s mouth as he begins to devour me.

The tip of his tongue gently teases my clit, providing just enough sensation to bring me to the edge but not push me past it. He alternates between the gentle teasing and dipping his long, dexterous tongue deep within the well of my pussy to stroke my g-spot.

What he’s doing is slowly driving me insane.

I’ve never liked or enjoyed edging.

I can feel the tingling low in my pelvis, the impending sign of my climax when Laithog backs off, yet again.

Patience gone, I grab his horns in my hands and yank his head back.

“ Laithog , if you don’t get on with it...” I growl out as menacingly as I can, allowing my words to trail off full of intent.

Intent to do what, I don’t know...but I’ll do something to retaliate.

Smirking up at me, his chin wet with my bodily secretions, all he says is,

“ As you wish.”

My inner nerd doesn't have time to fangirl over his usage of that exact line before he buries his face in my snatch and begins eating me out with vigor. His wicked tongue begins a rough methodical rhythm as he licks me with unbridled enthusiasm.

All of a sudden, he spears me with two thick fingers as he scissors them back and forth, stretching me to be able to take his enormous dick. I moan in pleasure as he adds a third, and finally a fourth, forcing my pussy to open for him. Just as I feel him begin to curl his fingers into a fist, the forcefulness of his ministrations forces an orgasm out of me, rapture filling my body I frantically cling to his horns, grinding myself into his face, desperate to chase my orgasm to its fullest.

Laithog moves his hands to grasp one of my full ass cheeks in each hand, growling into my pussy as he continues to tongue my sensitive clit. He doesn't allow me any time to come down from my first orgasm before he forces a second and a third out of me. I'm nothing but a quivering mess of over sensitized nerve endings before he raises his head. Satisfaction written all over his face.

Standing , his much larger frame looms over me, as he reaches for the buckle on his kilt and unfastens it. Allowing the leather garment to fall to the floor with a soft swishing sound. I look my fill since this is the first time I've seen him fully nude. There is a black scaled slit, where his penis should be and I vaguely recall that he lined us up the first time and filled me abruptly without warning. Laithog allows me to look my fill before he lifts me from the counter and positions me where my ass is meshed with his pelvis.

Due to the height differences, my feet are dangling off the floor, the weight of my body held in his massive hands, while my forearms are braced on the counter in front of me. He's situated us directly in front of the mirror that hangs over the sink/vanity area in the bathroom.

The image reflected there holds me captive.

That can't be me.

The woman in front of me is wantonly gorgeous. Deep auburn hair frames, a delicate heart shaped face flushed with pleasure, while a cupid's bow mouth pants out each breath. Lush breasts hang and press against the counter now warm from the heat of my body. My golden-brown eyes are flecked with green and blue, but they reflect nothing but desire back at me.

Movement behind me draws my gaze to Laithog. His dark purple and black body directly contrasts to my peaches and cream complexion. The difference is startling to see all at once, but also titillating. Maybe reading paranormal romance novels all these years has conditioned me to be more accepting of being plowed by a creature that is decidedly not human.

"Now you see what I see when I look at you, sweet Paisley." His rumbled words elicit a shiver of pleasure from me.

"Now, watch your mate rut you." His words are followed by the firm grip of his tail around my neck. The end of his tail wrapping around the delicate length, while the tip rests under my chin, keeping my head from tipping forward, forcing me to look nowhere else but the mirror before me.

I am completely at his mercy, his little fuck toy to do with as he chooses. Lifting my hips slightly, he lines my pussy up with his slit and enters me in one sudden movement. The instant intrusion makes me moan, my eyes closing in pleasure. Laithog's tail tightens on my neck, almost to the point I can't breathe, causing my eyes to fly open. "Tch. I told you to watch."

Relaxing the hold his tail has on my throat enough so I can breathe easily, he begins to fuck me in earnest. There's nothing I can do but hang there and submit to the ferocious thrust of his massive cock shuttling in and out of me. I can feel the ribbed

length stimulating my g-spot with every thrust added to the visual stimulation of watching myself being plowed by something otherworldly. The combination of watching him fuck me and the marvelous ridges on his dick strumming my g-spot, along with the friction of the counter on my, now, overly sensitive nipples rip another orgasm from me.

I come so hard I see stars as the decadence of my pleasure fills me from head to toe. Moaning out my peak, I grind my ass back into Laithog the best I can as I feel his thrust getting shorter and shorter. The unexpected sting of his teeth sinking into my unmarked shoulder causes me to come again, and I feel his knot bloom for me as the heat of his seed splashes against the opening of my womb again and again. A low growling groan is the only sound that escapes Laithog since his teeth are buried deep in the flesh of my body.

Slowly , he eases his teeth out of my skin, his sinuous tongue licking the wound to seal it as aftershocks of pleasure ripple through my body. Nuzzling the area he just bit sends shockwaves down to my clit. My eyes are locked with Laithog's as I pant, and I come again in a slow, languorous climax, soft moans falling from my full lips.

He emits a soft grunt every time his seed jets out of his member to bathe my snatch. Easing to a standing position, he carefully turns us to the full-length mirror situation on the opposite wall as he leans back against the counter while repositioning his hands under my thick thighs in order to support my weight with ease since we are locked together and will be for a while.

The image we make is no less lascivious than that of moments before. I can see my naked, delicate pink pussy spread open wide by the inhuman girth of his knot. His tail hasn't released its hold on my neck and he's forcing me to look at us in all our full-bodied glory just as he did when he took me from behind on the counter.

Absently I note that the tip of his tail is stroking along the side of my jaw in a loving

caress as I watch him watch me in the mirror before us. Squinting a little, I focus on my lower abdomen. There's ...a bulge. Whimpering a little, I realize that his cock is so big, I've got a belly bulge where he's lodged inside of me, not to mention the flood of cum he shot into me.

Well .

That's something you don't see every day.

### Chapter Thirty-Two

#### LAITHOG

My mate is so nervous I can smell the stress rolling off of her in waves. She wants her parents to like me.

Badly .

Though I am not sure why. To be fair, she barely knows me, and I did spring a mate bond on her. Technically , without her permission, and she is handling my addition to her life with aplomb.

But .

Introducing “ Lance ” to her patriarch and matriarch has her all out of sorts. The booth Paisley insisted we be seated at is in the corner of the room and there are not any patrons close by, so I allow a calming purr to softly rumble. It’s loud enough for her to hear, but low enough not to garner attention from the rest of the room.

Gathering her to me, I tuck her under the protection of my shoulder as my mind wanders. After we finished rutting in her bathroom , I helped her clean up before we departed to meet her patriarch and matriarch for the midday meal. I assured her that the garment she wore covered both of the vivid mating marks on either side of her neck.

I couldn’t help but smirk triumphantly at her two dogs when we exited her bathroom .



Little bastards had been most displeased about being shut out of the room their human was in and voiced their grievances with yowls, grumbles and yodels.

Too bad.

They'll have to learn to share from now on.

Paisley insisted on taking both of the little vexations to potty before we left, as they would have to stay in the backseat of her conveyance while we dine with her parents. Against my better judgement I voiced concerns about them being shut up inside such a small area. She explained that it wasn't hot, and they had blankets to curl up within in their designated area inside her pick-up .

The jingle of the bells attached to the front door of this tavern causes Paisley to jump and pulls me from my mental wanderings. An older human couple enters, the woman bearing a striking resemblance to Paisley . That must be her matriarch, while the slender, pale-headed male walking next to her is my mate's patriarch.

Paisley nudges me with her elbow, urging me to get out of the booth to stand and greet her parents. I can see that both humans before me look...tired. They have dark circles under their eyes and their faces are drawn with suffering. Burying a child has taken its toll on them both, but the grasp they have on one another's hand is firm. It's as if they're afraid to let go of one another lest they lose their spouse as well.

“ Hi , Mom . Hi , Dad . I'd like you to meet Lance . He's ...a dear friend of mine from college. Lance , I'd like you to meet my dad, Benedict Taylor and my mom, Emmeline Taylor , my parents.”

I don't think either of her parents caught the slight pause as she introduced me. She told me earlier that lying to them didn't sit well with her, but she knew they wouldn't be understanding if they knew I wasn't human. Remembering what Paisley told me

on the way from her place of trade to the tavern, I reach out with my right hand and gently, yet firmly grasp Benedicts extended hand and shake it. I repeat the same gesture with her mother as I speak. “ It is an honor to finally meet you. Paisley has always spoken highly of you during our conversations.”

Paisley’s body jerks imperceptibly. Ah , she didn’t fully understand that I’ve been listening to her talk to Patrick for months. I know all about her life and the people she loves.

Her matriarch hesitates slightly before exclaiming, “ What wonderful manners! Benedict , isn’t this lovely? Paisley finally has a man!” are the words that burst from her, her grief briefly overshadowed by the excitement of her daughter bringing a male to meet them.

Benedict lets out a quiet laugh, his demeanor staid than that of his livelier mate. “ Yes , Emmeline . I see that,” he replies.

Glancing around, I see that we are gaining notice from the other patrons, something my Paisley does not want, so I interject into Emmeline’s happy chatter. “ Won’t you have a seat? I’ll be happy to answer all your questions,” I ask with a slight wave of my hand towards the booth.

“ Oh , yes! That sounds lovely! Doesn’t that sound wonderful, Benedict ?” Emmeline exclaims as she slides into the booth across from where Paisley and I are standing. Offering my hand, I help Paisley back into the booth under her patriarch’s watchful gaze.

I must have done something right because some of the tension in his body relaxes after watching me solicitous of his daughter. Extending a hand, he claps me on the shoulder, and I barely move my wing out of the way in time. “ Lance , I think we are going to get along just fine.”

I breathe a sigh of relief at the acceptance in his voice. Looking over I see the happiness on Paisley's face and I smile back at her, my heart full of love for her.

Her smile falters, just a bit, as she rubs at her chest with one tiny hand, before it blooms into something so beautiful it takes my breath away.

She feels my love for her.

It is enough...for now.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

PAISLEY

He loves me!

Laithog .

Loves .

Me .

It took all of my mental capabilities to focus on the conversation floating back and forth between Laithog and my parents during lunch. Which went far better than I expected it to. For a creature that's been asleep for hundreds, if not thousands of years, he adapts exceptionally well. There were only one or two faux pas that I had to quickly cover, but other than that I consider lunch to be a resounding success.

Standing on the sidewalk, I wave to my parents as they back out of the parking lot in their silver Ford Explorer to head back home. Turning to face Laithog , I look up and relay my mental musings to him, “ That went much better than I expected it to. You must have been listening intently to me for the last six months to know so much about this modern world you awoke to.”

Chuckling , he wraps his tail around my waist and pulls me to him. “ I am from a time when it was adapt or die. That is no different than what I am doing now. If I don't blend in, I call attention to myself. If I die, you die, and I will not put you in

danger because of my actions,” he says solemnly.

His words are low, just in case there’s anyone close enough to hear our private conversation. Squeezing me one more time, we start to head to my pick-up when a soft breeze gust past us. Laithog stiffens and emits a sound I haven’t heard before. It’s a snarling growl so low it vibrates my entire body. Jerking me behind him, he whirls to face the direction we just came from.

“ Demon .”

I freeze at his word. What the fuck does he mean “demon?!”

Peeking out from behind his back, what I see causes terror to slide down my spine. It’s Bradley ... but Laithog said there was a demon.

The implication makes me freeze in place.

“ Well , well. I guess the cat is out of the bag now. Naughty , Garagyre , telling my future mate about my true nature before I could.” He takes a step closer, ignoring Laithog’s warning snarl, and just what the fuck does he mean ‘future mate,’ I would rather die than marry Bradley !

“ Paisley , you are looking rather well. Interfering Garagyre figured out how to heal you, did he? It’s of no matter; I’m sure a week of suffering taught you a valuable lesson, but maybe not. Since instead of coming to heel, like you should have, you went and found the only Garagyre male left on this plane. Hmm . And not just any Garagyre , if my nose is telling me the truth... Hello , Laithog . Tell me, how is Ilayahan doing...oh wait, that’s right. I killed her, didn’t I ?” he chortles with sadistic glee.

I can feel the rage simmering in Laithog as well as determination. At Brad’s last

words, however, disbelief and astonishment filter to me through our bond.

That ...cannot be true.

Laithog told me that he killed Rulzik in a battle long ago...

Bradley pauses, his nose twitching as if he smells something that catches him by surprise. I watch as he takes another deep breath and flinch at his exhaled rage filled shriek. At his apparent loss of control, I'm given a brief glimpse of what's hiding beneath Bradley's handsome exterior.

It's horrifying... and colossal.

Pitch black skin.

Blood -red eyes.

Massive horns.

Sharp teeth.

Curiously , smoke immediately starts rising from the nonhuman image, and I recall what Laithog said about demons being bound to the darkness.

So , how is he out in the sun?

Just as suddenly as the ghastly image appears, Bradley regains a modicum of control, and he hides the visage once again behind his handsome countenance. “ You mated her! How dare you! It's taken me centuries to find a soul as pure as hers, one so divine that it would be nirvana to corrupt, and contaminate it with my darkness until I created the perfect mate to replace the one you took from me!!” Bradley grinds out

between clinched teeth, no that isn't right. This is Rulzik disguised as a human, and he's seething with rage at the perceived slight that Laithog took what was 'his.'

“ Your mate was a blight upon this planet as well as all the races of Light , she earned her ending...and more. Furthermore , Rulzik , you are supposed to be dead as well. Banished back to the pit of hell whence you came. You must not care for your mate that much, since you chose not to join her there for all eternity,” Laithog taunts, an echo of pain reverberating through our bond at the reminder of what he, too, lost.

Rulzik ...

Why does that sound familiar? Then it hits me. This is the demon that killed Ilayahan ! Dread pools in my belly as the reality of my situation becomes apparent. I've garnered the attention of something far worse than a narcissistic man. A demon wants to possess and corrupt me. The only thing standing between me and that horrible fate is my secondhand Garagyre .

The male that chose me to fill the void in his soul after the demon before us killed his mate of fate.

### Chapter Thirty-Four

#### LAITHOG

I cannot lose control.

Paisley's terror beating at me through our bond isn't helping. It's igniting every protective instinct I have. Inciting me to eradicate the threat to her. Taking deep breaths, I silently repeat that mantra.

I must not lose control.

Paisley will be in danger if I cannot keep myself contained. My glamour must not slip. Thus far, no one has approached our small group, but there are humans watching from afar. Thankfully , out of earshot.

Excluding the shriek of rage Rulzik emitted upon the revelation of my mate bond with Paisley , our conversation has been in low tones. Even he isn't stupid enough to reveal his presence to the humans. From what Paisley tells me, this "human" has a choke hold on this town, but...they would turn on him en mass if they learned he wasn't human.

It's just what the species does, well...most of them do.

Rulzik isn't going to want to relinquish his life of ease and domination over this village. He's probably been here for generation, hopping from one body to the next, exerting his malevolent influence here and there until he created a small empire to



rule. I was shocked when the revelation of my mate bond with Paisley enraged him enough that he lost control for a split second, revealing his demon form to the punishing rays of the sun.

Not that he let that slip last long.

Without the protection of the human body he's infiltrated, his true form began to burn in the light of the full sun. It's good to know that he doesn't have a protection amulet such as mine.

With that thought in mind, I taunt Rulzik with what I have, and he does not. "It must be demeaning to have to hide yourself inside something you consider to be a lesser being. How unfortunate that your gods chose not to bless you with a protection amulet..." I taunt as my words trail off, my tail pulling Paisley closer to my back as I keep my hands down by my sides, ensuring the onlookers that nothing untoward is happening between the three humans having a conversation.

Rulzik isn't stupid. He picks up on the innuendo instantly and rage-filled gaze fixates on my left wrist, eyeballing the amulet there with avarice. If it's possible, his fury grows. "Your gods blessed you with a protection amulet. How quaint. I was mildly curious as to how you were out in the sun. I should have known. It is of no matter; I will cut it from your arm as your hearts beat their last. After that, I'll defile your mate on your cooling corpse to solidify my mate bond with her," he hisses his threat through clenched teeth, his eyes darting to and fro to ensure the nosy human loitering about don't hear his threats.

Without another word, he spins on his heel and saunters away, as if he doesn't have a care in the world. Waiting until I can no longer see, scent or sense his presence anymore, only then do I turn to gather Paisley up into the comforting embrace of my arms. I know she felt the echoes of my pain at realizing just exactly who the demon is.

Conflicting emotions war within me.

Terror .

Grief .

Remorse .

Love .

Guilt .

Soft hands appear on either side of my face in the void between my jawline and curved horns, thumbs feathering over the rough scales hidden beneath my glamour. “ Shhhh . There is no need for you to feel guilty. You are allowed to have an emotional response to what just happened.”

I do not deserve her compassion. How can she tolerate to be mated to a male that has such a visceral reaction to a nightmare from the past? I know she felt the swell of grief, loss, and love, unfaded by the passage of time for my Ilayahan . I am the one that should be comforting her, not the other way around.

“ Laithog , look at me.” A gentle pressure on my jaw follows her stern words, urging me to lift my head from where I tucked it against my chest in shame.

“ There is no need for you to feel guilty or to be ashamed. I can feel you, remember? Ilayahan was a large part of your life for longer than I’ve been alive. Just because you still feel love for her does not mean that you are incapable of caring for me, or incapable of loving me. I know you love me. I may not have been the mate ordained to you by fate, but of all the beings that have spoken within your vicinity in the time since your Ilayahan was taken from you, my voice is the only one you heard. I know

you love me just as much as you love her. You just love me in a different way than her, because I'm a completely different being. It doesn't make your love for me less than the love you hold for her, nor does it detract from our mating in any way."

Hope slowly builds within my chest as she takes a deep breath before continuing. "I find myself blessed to be mated to a being that has so much love to give that he chose to take a chance on life a second time. So , don't you dare feel guilty. You've done nothing wrong...not then, and not now."

Pulling my face down to hers, she kisses me in an achingly tender caress as she pushes her emotions down the bond towards me, proving her point with more than just words.

Hope .

Pride .

Gratitude .

Warmth .

Affection .

And ...maybe, just maybe, the first hint of...

Love .

### Chapter Thirty-Five

#### LAITHOG

Waking with my mate in my arms is something I never thought I would experience again. Decadence doesn't even begin to cover how sublime the feel of her in my arms is, and I can feel my smile grow as the image of a fierce purple dragon stares at me from the material hanging in her window. She truly was meant to be mine.

I had no intention of being forward and asking to sleep in the same room as her, but when we arrived back at her dwelling after the confrontation with Rulzik , she asked me to cuddle her after she finished her nighttime ablutions.

Who was I to deny so simple a request?

So , I had gently climbed into her bed, barely settling in before she practically draped herself over me, sighing as her body relaxed. Our positions must have shifted overnight, resulting in her plush bottom pressed against my pelvis and my arms around her like a vise. One of my wings is draped over us while the other is extended across the bed behind me.

Inhaling her scent makes my eyes practically roll back into my head. Vanilla with hints of cinnamon is now synonymous with my mate.

She smells like home.

Because that's what she is.

My home.

Suddenly I realize that I can feel the sensation of weight on my feet, and I frown in confusion. I do not remember anything being on my feet when we went to bed last night. Easing my head off the pillow , what I see makes my lip curl in a silent snarl. Both of my mates' dogs are asleep at the foot of the bed, upside down, with all four feet up in the air. The weight I feel is half of Merry's body lying across my feet. Glancing over, I see that Pippin has assumed the same position on Paisley's feet.

Reluctant to wake my mate, I suffer in silence for an extended period of time as the sun slowly rises until I feel Paisley take a deep breath, her ample chest expanding as she slowly emerges from the depths of sleep.

Hazy golden-brown eyes peek up at me as she turns her head towards me. " Good morning," she mumbles, turning over until her front is pressed to mine as she burrows deeper into my embrace.

" Good rising, to you as well," I rumble, my voice rough with sleep.

Neither of us move, in no hurry to get up.

Unfortunately , we are not the only beings within the confines of this bed. The sound of Paisley's voice rouses the dastardly duo at the foot of the bed. Gods , they make so much noise between the ear flopping and the metal bits on their collars jangling as they shake their heads.

Raising my wing up, I use it as a shield to prevent the horrid little beast from pouncing all over us, growling under my breath in irritation.

A soft snicker pulls my attention down to the sumptuous female in my arms. " They just want to be included in the snuggly cuddles, Laithog ," she says beseechingly and

does nothing but laugh harder at my answering snarl.

Reluctantly , I release her from my embrace and watch as her heavy breast sway as she gets out of bed. “ Merry , Pippin , you wanna go outside?”

The dreadful sounds her dogs make in answer to her question cause my ears to flick backwards and pin against the side of my head, their sensitivity assaulted by the cacophony of noise. Flinging an arm over my eyes, I settle myself back into the comforting support of my mate’s bed and doze as I wait for her to return. I can hear her moving through the house as she lets both vexations out to do their morning business, and then back into her kitchen to turn on the coffee pot.

I listen as she moves back through the bedroom and into her bathroom , chuckling quietly as I hear her turn on the water in the basin. After the things we’ve done, she is still shy about her bodily functions. A few moments later I hear a whooshing sound, followed by the swish of her teeth cleaning brush moving across her teeth.

I hear the bathroom door creak open and then flick an ear in her direction when I hear her steps slow.

It appears as though she deliberately quiets them. Willing to play along, I don’t move, lying there as if I have no idea that she’s attempting to sneak up on me. My hearing is so sensitive I can hear her heartbeat, but I won’t ruin my mate’s fun. She was so melancholy last eve that I welcome her playfulness this rising.

No matter how odd it is for me to rise with the sun instead of with the setting of the sun. I hear her take a slow, deep breath and have to hide my smile.

She’s about to pounce.

I no more have that thought when her body collides with mine and she shouts, “

Gotcha ! I've got you pinned sir, and there's nothing you can do about it!" she gloats, and I can smell the mint on her breath while her plush thighs cuddle my hips where she straddles me.

" I suppose I must surrender to a worthy adversary," I retort, willing to play, as long as she keeps smiling at me like that as I take in the sight of the dressing gown she wears. It's got a peculiar little blue creature with a garish smile and four arms on it, staring back at me.

Letting her fingers trail down the length of my chest, distracting me from my perusal of her sleeping clothes, she scooches back to make room for her questing fingers. Stopping at my seam, she begins to torment me with tantalizingly brief strokes of her fingertips against the sensitive scales lining the edges.

" I want to see your cock."

Not one to deny my mate, I allow my fully erect prick to extrude from my slit into her waiting hands.

### Chapter Thirty-Six

#### PAISLEY

How the fuck does this fit inside me?

No wonder I'm a bit sore, even with all the preparation Laithog did to stretch me for him each time we had sex.

This thing is massive.

Like .

Freakishly huge.

How am I alive after taking this thing?

I won't ever be able to get all of it in my mouth, but I'm definitely willing to give it a try. Considering how sharp Laithog's teeth are, I would be willing to bet that Ilayahan's were as well.

Which means...he's never had a blowjob.

Pleasure curls inside me at being able to give him one thing that she couldn't. Not that it's a competition, it just makes me happy that he and I will have something special that differs from what he had with his first mate. Glancing up at Laithog , I see that he's gathered our pillows with his dexterous tail to prop himself up against



the headboard and is watching me curiously. His silver hair is pulled to the side and draped over a shoulder so he isn't reclining on its length as his eyes regard me.

“Do you trust me?” I ask.

His reply comes without hesitation. “Of course, my little flame. Do as you will.”

Permission gained.

Because consent is sexy... and required to quote two of my favorite performers from the Texas Renaissance Festival . Refocusing on the hard length in my hand, I take the time to examine his cock in depth for the first time as I haven't had the opportunity for a closeup to this point in time.

Thick is an understatement... I can barely wrap one hand around his girth and there's no way I could get both hands around his knot and it's not even at its largest. I can see a bulge at the base that can't be anything else but his knot while the ridges on either side remind me of the ridges on an old fashion's wash board.

No wonder I've come so hard from g-spot stimulation.

He's literally ribbed for her pleasure.

His cock is a vibrant electric purple, far brighter than the darker tones of his skin and scales. It's a startling contrast...and it's almost...pretty.

“Little one, the humor I am feeling from you right now does not fill me with confidence. No male wants their female to laugh at their prick.” Comes his disgruntled observation.

“Laithog , you and I both know that your dick is impressive. The humor you feel is

because of the color. I didn't realize it was so...colorful. That's all."

A low grunt is his only reply.

Well , here goes nothing. This should cheer him up.

Licking my lips, I gather plenty of saliva in my mouth as I lean forward while parting my lips and take the head of his cock in my mouth. It's a tight fit, but I'm able to get the entire head inside my mouth.

Triumph fills me. I can give him this.

His feelings blast me from across the soul bond, and I know that he's enjoying what I'm doing.

Disbelief .

Awe .

Pleasure .

" Paisley ...what...what is it that you do, my mate?" He pants out between breaths as his hips writhe under me.

Pulling his hard length from the hot confines of my mouth, a trail of spit connects my mouth to his cock, and he moans at the salacious sight. " It's called a blowjob. Just lay back and enjoy it, sugar," I say with a smile.

Resuming my ministrations, I envelope the head of his swollen shaft back within the depths of my mouth and double down, trying to give him the best first blowjob ever. Hollowing my cheeks, I suck while pulling back agonizingly slowly while I use both

of my hands to massage what won't fit in my mouth. Bobbing my head up and down, I set a languorous rhythm. I'm in no hurry and I don't want to rush through this.

A rasping, rolling growl rumbles from deep in his chest in response to my languid attentions to his turgid member. My pussy is beyond wet. Giving head has always turned me on, but doing it for Laithog is something else.

Something more poignant.

If sucking dick can be poignant.

Snicker .

Humming , I lave his cockhead like a lollipop, my eyes locked on his face while he watches me with avid fascination, lust stamped across his face. A whispering sensation pulls my attention for a brief moment as his tail reaches underneath my nightgown and rips my panties off. Calloused hands, sans claws, reach down and cup my face between them, as his hips carefully thrust up while something caresses me between the legs.

Laithog , unexpectedly, takes over and starts face fucking me with cautious shallow strokes. Moaning around his hard member, I'm at his mercy as he takes his pleasure from my mouth. My pussy is empty, so very empty and it's as if he knows exactly what I need because I no more have that thought than I'm stuffed full by the supple end of his tail.

The dual sensation of oral and vaginal stimulation pushes me over the edge. Moaning around the prick in my mouth, my jaws relax and it allows him to slip a bit deeper into my mouth as pleasure overwhelms me. Two thrusts later, Laithog cums with a growl so low it rattles the bed as my mouth is flooded with his spend.

He tastes like caramel.

His . Cum . Taste . Like . Caramel .

Swallowing as fast as I can, I still can't keep up with the volume and some trickles down my chin. Slowly , he pulls his softening dick from my mouth, his thumbs feathering sweet caresses over my swollen lips as he eases his tail from the tight clutches of my snatch, causing me to emit a tiny moan when he fully slips from my body.

Peering up at him from where I'm knelt between his legs, ass up in the air, I smirk at his mystified expression. His mouth is parted as he pants for breath, his chest heaving with exertion.

Apparently , I just sucked his ability for conscious thought right out of his dick.

### Chapter Thirty-Seven

#### PAISLEY

The days leading up to the Christmas Eve tree lighting ceremony have been nothing short of wonderful, and I can feel myself falling in love for the first time in my life.

Laithog ...just fits.

He quickly adjusted to my schedule. Meaning , sleeping at night and being awake all day. He did say it was a bit odd, and I knew that he waited for me to fall asleep before he went back outside to check his wards and muck about outside during his preferred portion of a twenty-four-hour cycle.

It didn't bother me at all. He's a nocturnal creature, and I don't begrudge him enjoying the night. I wake every morning in his arms and I am quickly growing addicted to it. I didn't realize how much I longed for the simple comfort of sleeping next to someone who cares for me. Sharing a bed with another person hasn't ever really been high on my priority list until now.

We fill our days at my shop on the square where I introduce everyone to “ Lance ” as my boyfriend (which I had to explain in detail to Laithog after he heard me say it the first time), and our evenings are quiet time with one another. Laithog is happy to spend time with me, no matter what we are doing.

My television has been an excellent tool for Laithog to learn about the modern world. The rate at which he absorbs information and learns new concepts is nothing less than

utterly remarkable. He asks me a few questions here and there if he needs me to further explain something to him such as cell phones, the internet and electricity in general.

The only shadow that falls over our time together is an impending sense of doom. We both know that Rulzik is plotting something.

We just don't know what.

However .

It's Christmas , and I refuse to let that piece of filth ruin Laithog's first time experiencing the magic that is Christmas . With that thought in mind, I broach the subject of teaching Laithog to read one evening after we returned home. I want him to be able to read English and enjoy the bounty of books within my personal library.

The joy that lit up his face took me by surprise. He hadn't been trying to impress me at all. Laithog really did love to read and has been quite serious about learning. Far more so than I expected him to be. Truth be told, it gets me a little hot and bothered watching him applying himself so studiously. In fact, it's only been a few days, and he's learned the alphabet as well as how to read simple words. His ability to learn and adapt to new things is nothing short of astonishing.

Today is the day of the tree lighting ceremony. I posted my holiday business hours at the beginning of the week so folks know that I'll be closed today, tomorrow for Christmas Eve , Christmas Day and Boxing Day . It's not like I'll lose out on a bunch of sales. Small town Texas mentality means that just about every business in town is closed in some sort of variation of the hours I posted. Family is still treasured over the almighty dollar in Taggart , and we like it that way.

Walking through the house, I open the door to my jewelry room, glancing around to

make sure that Laithog isn't loitering somewhere trying to peek in here. I've been working on something special for Laithog in my spare time. To keep it a secret, I come in here when he's outside, or practicing his letters. Sitting down at my work table, I get to work. Today is the day before Christmas Eve , so I need to finish this as soon as possible. Smiling , I get to work. There isn't a moment to lose.

Someone ...or something has been testing my wards. I've yet to tell Paisley that particular piece of information. She's under enough stress as is with the looming threat of Rulzik , and my mate so desperately needs the joy of her winter solstice celebration. Reaching out with my magick I probe the areas to see if the being left an energy signature.

Nothing . I sense nothing, and it fills me with frustration.

How am I to protect my mate if I cannot sense the enemy when they are right on our doorstep?

Clever demons.

A feeling deep in my gut tells me it can be nothing else and I've lived through many a skirmish by listening to my instincts. It appears as though they have evolved since last I battled them. Adding another layer of wards can't hurt, so with that in mind I augment my existing wards, supplementing them even more with the excess magick I have from drinking from Paisley .

Just the thought of drinking from my mate makes my prick twitch inside my sheath. Forcing myself to focus on augmenting my wards, I can feel the layers building upon one another, creating an impenetrable layer of defense for my mate. I relax marginally after completing the final layer.

Diving back into the weave, I check the connections, assuring there are not any weak

links before I turn and walk back towards the house. My mind turns to the outing my mate has planned as I exit the tree line and stride across the driveway. Paisley says we are going to something called a lighting of the tree ceremony this evening. I am hesitant to allow this. Especially knowing we are being watched and the wards are being systematically tested for weaknesses.

Humans have odd traditions, but my mate seems to enjoy this thing called Christmas . As evidenced by the excessive amount of décor, she's artfully arranged all over her, now our dwelling. The items are not off-putting but...there are a great many of them.

A great many of them, and she's added to her hoard in the short time we've known each other. My mate hoards her treasures like the dragons of lore I'm descended from. I am part dragon, after all. My curiosity finally got the better of me while we broke our fast earlier this rising, and I asked about all the festive-looking things in her home as well as the village.

Her explanation fascinated me, and it still does.

However , it does pose a slight problem. If gift giving is a tradition of her people for this winter celebration, what do I get for my mate for our first Christmas together? I do not possess this money she speaks of to procure her an item of some sort, but...maybe I do not need it. The making of crafts for one's mate was a tradition amongst my people during the winter solstice. I do not see why this need be any different. Having magick makes crafting all that much easier, and I do not consider that to be an unfair advantage at all. I need all the help I can get.

So .

What do I make for her?

Pushing the yard gate open, I stalk through, allowing it to swing closed behind me as



I make my way down the sidewalk to the back door. Entering her home, the scent of cinnamon and vanilla wash over me, filling me with contentment. Wiping my feet off on the rug just inside the door, I make sure my feet are clean before proceeding further into the dwelling.

My mate likes to keep a clean home, and it's not an imposition for me to help her in small ways, like wiping my feet off. She is a maker of jewels and as I look around her home, I can see that she does not have a shortage of items. Maybe there is a seller of books in her village that would not miss a tome or two? There is no such thing as too many books as far as I am concerned.

I'm not above borrowing books...long-term borrowing, that is.

Prowling into the communal room, I seat myself on the couch, waiting for my female to finish her preparations for our outing. The lights on her Christmas tree twinkle in the low lighting caused by the closed curtains. To prevent anyone from seeing my true form, Paisley lowered all the blinds and closed the curtains the day after I arrived.

The jingling of bells pulls me from my thoughts as my mate and her two beasts walk out into the communal room. My mate is a vision of loveliness. An intricate-looking braid sweeps her dark red hair back, a bright green top that makes her eyes luminescent, and dark blue bottoms, that do nothing to hide her curves from my appreciative gaze, complete her ensemble.

A flash of something bright low to the floor catches my attention. "What in the night gods have you done to the wee creatures?" I ask, my words filled with trepidation.

She's put...apparel on them. It's highly disturbing.

"My mate, why do your dogs have on garments? Surely this is not a normal thing for

humans to do with their pet creatures... Have they no dignity at all?" Looking closer, I see that the images on the garments look eerily similar to the fluffy tailed rodents that both of her dogs despise.

Shaking my head, I add. " You have added insult to their degradation. The garb you have put on them has their mortal enemy painted upon it. You do them a grave dishonor in that, my little flame."

The incredulous look on my face causes Paisley to burst out laughing. " Laithog , those are doggie Christmas sweaters with squirrels on them! Aren't they cute?"

The disgusted curl of my lip incites her laughter once again. As her fit of hilarity continues, she wipes tears of mirth from her eyes.

Grumbling at the indignity of it all, I roll my eyes and gain my feet, moving out from between the coffee table and the couch. Using my tail, I smack her delightfully full ass as I walk by, calling to the dignity-less pair of fluffy beasts as I go. " Merry , Pippin . Come . Our human has assured me that this evening's festivities aren't to be missed. Perhaps we can convince her to acquire you... sweaters without your foe on them once we are done with this burning of the tree."

In my haste to get out the door, I miss my mates' smile at hearing me call her "our human."

### Chapter Thirty-Eight

#### PAISLEY

“ Oh , good! We got here early enough to get a good spot! We can lower the tailgate and sit on it. That way, we don’t have to fight the crowd!” I cheer as I guide my vehicle into a parking spot.

I can’t say that I’m not a little apprehensive about running into Rulzik , but Laithog has assured me he won’t risk a confrontation with so many human witnesses around. So , we should be safe enough as long as we are in a crowd or on my property.

Traveling to and from town, however, is a problem. Laithog hasn’t just been looking around in curiosity on our trips back and forth from town. He’s been surveying the terrain to ascertain where an ambush might most likely occur at. It’s a marked difference between how our minds work and how we grew up. The rural county roads are a perfect place for an ambush, or that’s what Laithog said on our way to town this evening.

Thankfully , my parents live in town and don’t have to drive anywhere as rural as I do.

My parents!

What if Rulzik goes after my parents?! How could I have been so stupid and selfish?!

Laithog must feel my alarm because he looks over, concern on his glamourised face as

he asks, “ Paisley , what is wrong? I can feel your apprehension and terror.”

Putting the truck in park, I unbuckle my seatbelt, then reach over and frantically grab his hand. “ Will Rulzik go after my parents?”

His slight hesitation tells me the answer before his words do. “ Yes . That is something he is capable of. He would use them to lure you out from the protection of my wards and my sphere of bodily protection. He is a demon and is not capable of love in the sense that we know it, so he would not care for you to have any attachments other than him. Ultimately , he would most likely kill your parents, even if you begged for their lives.”

He must feel my bone deep terror as my eyes begin to water because he quickly adds. “ But you need not worry. Since you have fed me regularly, I was able to perform tracking spell and located where your parents reside. I set the wards on their home shortly after we returned home from our confrontation with Rulzik . I knew that you would want them protected, so after you fell asleep, I flew to their home and warded it as well as their vehicle. ”

Laithog’s reassuring words erase my worry. Reaching up with my free hand, I caress his delightfully textured jaw. “ Thank you. You’ve no idea how much better that makes me feel.”

Leaning further into my touch, he smiles and looks at me. His gaze is full of tenderness. “ You forget, little flame. I can feel your emotions. I know exactly how you feel, and you are most welcome. It is no small thing to protect your loved ones. I want the opportunity to know your matriarch and patriarch. This I cannot do if Rulzik takes them from you as he robbed you of your brother. I vow to the night gods that he will not deprive you of anyone or anything else you care for.”

Glancing out the driver’s side window, he peers around with overt curiosity before

looking back at me. “ I must admit. I am most curious about this ceremony you’ve told me of. Electricity is a marvel that I’ve yet to fully comprehend.”

Laughing quietly, I reply. “ Yes , it is a marvel, for sure. It’s definitely something we take for granted now,” I add softly.

Warmth grows in my chest and I don’t know if it’s coming from him or me. Laithog leans forward and down, eyes focused on my lips when the unexpected appearance of a furry little head, followed by a pink tongue licking him from chin to cheekbone, makes him jerk back abruptly, a sibilant hiss escaping him. Baring his teeth at Pippin , the tongue happy offender, his glamour flickers, ever so slightly, with the depth of his annoyance.

“ Vexations ! If my mate did not love you, I would find a way to dispose of you both!” he snarls, wiping the dog saliva from his face with the back of his hand, an expression of intense disgust on his handsome faux human features.

Covering my mouth with both hands, I try to hold my snickers back so I don’t add insult to injury, forgetting for a brief moment that he can feel my humor at his expense. Snarling , he seizes both my hands with his invisible tail, pulling them down from my mouth as one of his huge hands grabs my braid while the other grips my throat.

Pulling me to him, part of my body draped across the console, I absently note that I can’t see Merry or Pippin in the back seat. He must have his wing blocking them from accessing the console. The hand on my throat tightens, almost imperceptibly, and brings my full attention back to my disgruntled mate. Opening my mouth, I start to say something to sooth his ruffled feathers, but before I can get a word out, his tongue invades my mouth, almost punishing in its intensity. A hint of his mating purr rattles out of his throat, causing my body to go limp in submission.

His rumble of satisfactions fills the cab of the truck. Ripping his mouth from mine, he stares down at me, irritation still stamped across his face as I pant for breath still held captive within his grasp. His calloused hands are gentle, his strength tempered by the feelings he has for me.

“ It must be said, my precious Paisley . I do not like your dogs. ”

### Chapter Thirty-Nine

#### PAISLEY

Unfolding the fluffy green comforter I brought with us, I get Merry and Pippin settled after their brief walk and then climb up on the tailgate, settling in before the festivities start. Looking around the square, I don't see my parents' vehicle, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. It's filling up fast and they may not even left the house yet.

Laithog is still standing in front of the tailgate, looking at it with trepidation. “ You are sure this will hold our combined weight? The thinness of the strands holding this tailgate does not look very sturdy. I would not want to sit and then cause it to break. You could be hurt.”

Always so conscientious of me, is my Laithog .

My Laithog ?

Mmm , yes. I do like the sound of that.

“ The things holding the tailgate up are made of metal and are called ‘cables.’ They're much stronger than they appear and won't have any trouble holding us both up. I promise,” I assure him with a warm smile. Patting the identical butt cushion next to mine, I motion for him to sit next to me.

Hesitantly , he lowers his bulk onto the tailgate, and I cringe inwardly when the truck

sinks a bit with the addition of his weight. Once he's settled, I beam a sunny smile over at him. " See , that wasn't so bad, was it?" I ask tauntingly, only to be met with a censuring look.

" Do not patronize me, little one. I felt that brief moment of uncertainty when I sat down."

Sniffing , I roll my eyes. " I've no clue what you're talking about," I say with a suppressed snicker, flicking the fluffy blanket out over our laps while I try to hide my smirk.

The low rumble in his chest tells me I failed.

Paisley is happily chattering to me and her dogs beside me, waiting for the event to begin. Completely oblivious to the danger we have arrived to.

We are being watched. I can feel it. I knew that coming to town was foolhardy, but Paisley was so excited about her tree lighting that I could not tell her no.

This was a mistake. Potentially a deadly one.

The demons in our midst are doing nothing to hide their energy signatures from me. They want me to know I am outnumbered. I can sense at least four lesser demons. Since they cannot cloak themselves from me, they have to be younger and less powerful. The problem is that I cannot see or sense Rulzik .

That coward won't face me alone. Last time I almost killed him and he knows it. This means he will have found another upper-level demon to assist him. His vanity won't allow him to have anyone more powerful than him within his little fiefdom, so at least there will not be an archdemon present. The lords of hell are the only ones more powerful than Rulzik , and I would have no hope of defeating one alone.



As long as Paisley does not leave this vehicle, she's safe. The wards on it will protect her and the two irksome beasts she loves. The drawback is...she must get off the tailgate to walk around the side of the conveyance to get back inside it. That is a moment of vulnerability as she is not touching the vehicle. If I tell her of what is watching us now, it will ruin her evening.

I know the demons won't bring attention to themselves with so many humans. This thing Paisley calls technology is dangerous. Every human seems to have one of the things my mate calls a phone with them at all times. She's shown me that these things can record images and then be distributed to the entire planet in seconds.

I have no doubt that there are still warriors of light either on this plane or that monitor this plane. To bring attention to themselves means that they would have to deal with more than just me.

That would ruin the good thing they have going here in this small corner of this plane. Unfortunately, I do not possess the ability to summon any help without revealing myself as well. The amount of magick it would take to send a message across the planes of existence is substantial and it would take several feedings for me to recuperate. I do not have that luxury at this time.

Gazing at the giant tree before me, an idea begins to form.

When I notice a short, round human man with a rather large amount of hair above his upper lip. Paisley quietens as soon as she notices him.

Ah . It is about to start.

I do not have much time, so with that in mind, I gradually let my magick unfurl, taking care to ensure none of the demons are aware of what I'm doing. Wielding my magick, I slide it into the magnificent tree before us. Linking a sunlight spell within

the countless glittering bulbs that are to be lit at any moment.

If I can imbue an abundant amount of the bulbs all around the tree with enough power, it will temporarily blind the demons and buy me some time to get my mate back to the protection of our home. Curiosity along with mild apprehension filters to me through our bond.

Blast .

I was not warding my feelings as studiously as I ought. My focus on the sunlight spell and monitoring the surrounding demons caused my hold on them to slip. Forcing more magick into the lights as rapidly as I can makes me a bit lightheaded. Which does not bode well. Creating sunlight is draining, but generating this much this fast is depleting my magick more than I need it to. I cannot afford to be at any sort of disadvantage, considering I am outnumbered.

Even a lesser demon is hard to kill.

My mate is not slow. She's figured out something is going on and isn't paying any attention to the hairy man before us at all.

She waits until I look over at her, my focus no longer on bespelling the tree. " What the hell is going on, Laithog ?"

### Chapter Forty

#### PAISLEY

Something is wrong.

The warmth of Laithog's feelings in my chest cooled several minutes ago. Just about the time Mayor Hawkins stepped up to the podium to give his yearly Christmas Speech before he flicks the switch to light the tree. Waiting as patiently as I can, I watch Laithog's glamoured face until his bright green eyes look over at me and actually see me. "What the hell is going on, Laithog?"

My discreet question makes his shoulders sag almost imperceptibly.

Inclining his head towards me, like he's sharing a secret in my ear, he replies in a low voice. "We are being watched by at least four demons. Rulzik has been very busy indeed. They've been testing the wards at home since shortly after our run in with Rulzik. They will not do anything with so many humans present, as I've told you, but when we get up to leave, and you are no longer in contact with your conveyance, you will be vulnerable. That is what they are waiting for."

Irritation wars with fear. Why didn't he tell me the wards were being tested?!

"Little flame, do not be cross with me. I did not want your season's celebration to be dampened any further that it already is. This is not something I intended to hide from you. I ...just wanted you to have some peace and joy instead of more stress and sadness."

His low, somewhat remorseful words cool my ire instantly. “ I have performed a sunlight spell.”

At my quizzical look, he continues explaining. “ I have essentially created a flash of sunlight that will blast across the crowd present when the tree is lit. It will buy us some time to get you and the vexations within the confines of the vehicle . If I am lucky, it will temporarily blind some of them...”

My attention sharpens as his words trail off. Like he is hesitant to say something. Elbowing him gently in the side, I prompt him to finish. “ Okay , what else? I know there is something you didn’t say.”

Glancing up, I note that Mayor Hawkins is almost at the end of his speech. We don’t have much time before the lights come on.

“ I used too much magick to create the sunlight and me being at less than full strength is not something either of us can afford.”

Realization dawns on me. He needs to drink. Right here. Right now.

Fuck .

“ Okay , okay, okay. Shit . Uhm . I understand. Mayor Hawkins is at the tail end of his speech, so we have about two minutes to get this done. Where do you want to feed from? My wrist or my neck?”

Chuckling softly, he says. “ I think your wrist would be the safer of the two. I do not think you would let me rut you in public.”

“ No ! I . Will . Not . Let your rut me in public ! ” I whisper yell.

Extending my right wrist to him, I feel a small ripple in the surrounding air. “ I’ve semi cloaked us. Others can still see us, but the details will be blurry.” Are the words I hear right before his teeth sink deep into my wrist.

### Chapter Forty-One

#### LAITHOG

Ambrosia .

That's the only word I have to describe how delicious Paisley's blood is. Unfortunately , I do not have time to linger, nor can I allow my mating venom to leak at all. Garagyre , as a rule, do not have an issue with public fornication, but my little human mate is not as lax. Which I will respect, even if the thought of rutting her in front of others makes my prick hard.

Paisley is softly panting next to me. Just the feel of me drinking now is enough to deeply arouse her. The time we have spent together, while not long, has been enough for me to train her delicious little body to respond to me in a variety of ways. Glancing around, I make sure that no one is paying us any attention.

I cannot leave my mate wanting.

Taking another hard pull on her wrist causes her to emit a soft whimper as I swallow. I don't need much more since I discovered that drinking from her regularly satisfies my thirst faster and powers me more than any other I have ever drunk from, including Ilayahan . It must be because she is human, with direct access to the sunlight.

Sunlight is what powers everything on this plane, so the blood fueling my magick is directly impacted by the sun, making it far more potent than a nocturnal Garagyre's magick that is powered by the softer light of the moon. Of which a full moon

provides the most power, but that only happens once a month, not daily.

Licking across the puncture wounds on her wrist, I seal them as I swallow a last mouthful of blood. Looking up, I see Paisley's face is flushed and her eyes are heavy lidded with desire. Flicking a tiny amount of magick out into the surrounding air, I blur our images a bit more. My mate does not wish to be watched, so watched she will not. "Stay quiet unless you wish the ones around us to know what I am about to do."

An adorable little moan is my only response along with the widening of her lush thighs. What a good mate, making room for me to tend to her. Scanning the area, I see that the little hairy man is bowing.

Hmmm .

If I time this right, my mate can reach fulfillment as the tree bathes the crow with light and since we are both in full contact with the conveyance, there is no worry of a demon sneaking up on either of us.

With that thought in mind, I slide my hand between Paisley's legs and use my claws to cut a slit in the crotch of her blue trousers, creating a convenient avenue for my tail. Maneuvering the bulk of my body so that she is seated in front of me, almost in my lap, the size of my massive thighs boxing her in, I block Paisley's body from the two vexations behind me, using my wings to keep them from intruding.

I ignore the low grumbles from behind me and hiss halfheartedly in their direction. The crowd before us has its attention trained on the tree and the little hairy man holding some sort of box in his hands. Peering right and left, I'm gratified to realize the raised sides of the conveyance keep her privacy hidden on either side.

Using one hand to collar her delicate throat, I apply gentle pressure while the other

arm bands around her soft belly to hold her steady. Our images are blurred but if a human were to look closely, they would see her beautiful cunt on display.

Well , that won't do.

A low, rumbling purr starts rattling in my chest. I need to get her aroused enough that she's on the edge of completion as I flick the soft blanket she brought with us over her lap, covering her from prying eyes.

That task complete; I slide my tail under the blanket, being careful not to disturb the soft fabric. Inclining my head, I pull Paisley's head back, shoving my mating venom covered tongue into her mouth. I don't give her much, just enough to bring her to the edge along with my mating purr.

Pulling back, I smirk at what I see.

Her pupils are blown wide and her nipples are so hard I can see them beaded through her sweater. Purring harder, I use my tail to tease her clit through the hold I've made in her trousers. Skimming my hand at her waist down her body, I position it under the blanket as I retract the claws on my first two fingers and replace the tip of my tail with them.

Slanting my eyes up, I see the little man lift the box in his hands. " Look at your Christmas tree, my mate. Watch , or you will miss the reason for our trip to town."

The second I see the human reach for the switch, I slam my tail into Paisley's weeping slit. I feel her cunt ripple around my tail as I use the tip to strum the little sensitive spot inside her as my fingers pinch her clit. Light bathes the crowd, as my mate falls apart in my arms, watching the brilliance of the tree coming to life before us. Her chest expands on a deep breath and I quickly raise the hand at her throat to her mouth to muffle the sounds of her pleasure. It is my duty to protect her, even



from herself.

The faint shrieks and hisses of the demons present is music to my ears and I feel their presence rapidly departing from the painful light now emanating from the tree. The sunlight spell will last for several days, so any human within this area will be protected from their hunting. Leisurely , now that the most pressing threat is gone, I bring my little flame down from her pleasure, and remove my tail from her drenched slit.

Peering down into her bemused face, love envelopes me. “ Let us go home, little flame.”

### Chapter Forty-Two

#### PAISLEY

Laithog is on edge.

And has been since we left the modicum amount of safety offered by the crowd. After I recovered from his...attentions. He didn't waste any time gathering me up in his arms and carrying me to the driver's side to ensure nothing snuck up on us while I was vulnerable getting in the pickup.

Once satisfied I was protected, he went back to the bed of the truck, scooped Merry and Pippin up, slammed the tailgate, and unceremoniously dumped my boys in the back seat before climbing into the passenger seat. He hasn't stopped scanning the surrounding area as we left town, and it's a bit unnerving. I haven't seen this side of him since the first night we met and he saw my abused countenance. After that initial meeting, he's been nothing but kind, caring, and considerate.

It's not that I don't understand that he was a warrior for centuries.

Because I do.

But ...now I'm seeing it firsthand with a rational mind.

His body is radiating power. The blood he took from me in town appears to have restored his magick and then some. Focusing on the bond that connects our souls, I take a peek to see what feelings are circulating through his body.

Tension .

Concern .

Apprehension .

Worry . Angst . Terror .

Love . Devotion . Determination .

“ We’re being followed.” His blunt words chill me to the bone. It’s not like I didn’t expect something like this to happen, but speculating about it and it actually happening are not the same.

Pulling myself together, I ask. “ What do we do?”

“ We are not going to do anything. I am going to ensure you and the vexations get within the safety of my wards, if it’s the last thing I do. You are my mate. Not his. The only comfort I can give you is that if I fall, you won’t survive long enough for Rulzik to unravel the wards to capture you.”

A new fear fills me at his words. “ Laithog ...what about Merry and Pippin ?” I hesitantly inquire, trepidation filling me as I glance from the road over to his granite face.

“ If we...die. They’ll be alone with no one to take care of them, and what if Rulzik gets ahold of them?” Tears clog my throat at the thought of that monster hurting my fur kids.

Snarling , his fearsome teeth bared, he looks over his shoulder into the back seat. Two sets of soulful eyes staring back at him in doggie adoration. “ I can’t believe I am

about to do this,” he mutters to himself.

“ Do what?” My question goes unanswered as a silver glow, eerily similar to the light a full moon casts, fills the cab of the truck.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as three luminescent tendrils extend from Laithog’s chest and reach out towards me, Merry and Pippin . Flicking my blinker on, I make the left turn onto the dirt road that leads to my house, slowing the truck as we rattle over the cattle-guard. Once we are safely on the caleche road, I turn my head to the right and shock fills me when I see a sky-blue tendril emerging from Merry and a sea-foam green coming from Pippin .

Darting a look back towards the dirt road, to make sure I don’t wreck the truck, I slow down further. Fully invested in whatever the hell Laithog is doing, I ease my pickup to a stop right before the road narrows at the creek crossing, putting it in park before turning to the right to face Laithog .

I’m beyond curious right now.

Unexpectedly , a golden light appears from between my breast and extends out towards Laithog . One of the colorful coils darts towards me and I watch in awe as he weaves the silver and gold like braiding hair. Once he’s entwined the silver and gold, he drags them both towards the blue and green colors belonging to Merry and Pippin .

Laithog’s silver and my golden braided tendrils reach out and twine with the blue and green emanating from my dogs, creating a colorful triangle where all four colors are interwoven together, creating a four-strand braid. I observe Laithog as he inspects the weave between the four colors. With a decisive nod, he appears pleased with...whatever it is that he’s doing.

“ Ligatus , anima ad animam. Ut fiat fiat.”

The moment the last word leaves his lips, the silver, gold, blue and green colors surge in brightness, so bright I have to close my eyes against the brilliance of the strands. Cracking my eyes open, I check to see if the radiance has faded any, only to see that it has, and watch as the colors slowly fade out of sight. “ Laithog , sugar...what did you just do?”

“ I bound your dog’s souls to ours.” The words sound like he’s forcing them out from behind clenched teeth. Gazing over at Laithog , I see that his jaw is, in fact, clenched. The tendons in his jaw pulsing with his irritation.

“ You ...did what?! ”

“ There is naught wrong with your hearing, little one. I bound their souls to ours. Now , if the worst were to happen and I fall, taking you with me. They will follow us into whatever afterlife awaits us. I will be stuck with them for all eternity.” He finished with a long-suffering, heavy sigh, his tone resigned.

As the realization of what he just did washes over me, I’m filled with joy. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I launch myself over the console and wrap my arms around his neck, raining kisses down on his beloved face.

Beloved ?

Yes , after the selfless thing he just did for me...a task that gains him nothing whatsoever, I can feel the love welling up from deep within me and filtering along the soulbond tying me to Laithog . I know the second he feels my love for him because his eyes fill with wonder, before a wave of his love washes over me. The tender moment breaks, however, by the sound of someone...or something bellowing.

“ LAITHOG , COME OUT AND FACE ME , THIEF .”

In unison, Laithog and I turn to look out the windshield to see Rulzik illuminated by the headlights in his horrifying natural form.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

### Chapter Forty-Three

#### LAITHOG

Blasted . Fucking . DOGS .

Stopping to soul weave the dual vexations to myself and Paisley allowed the demons following us to catch up. And not only did they catch up, they've maneuvered themselves around the pickup in a loose circle surrounding us.

It's less than ideal.

The dry creek bed is the boundary of my mate's property and the edge of the wards. A tiny bridge, if it can even be called that, is the tangible marker of the boundary. If I hadn't been so focused on protecting her dogs, I would have noticed her stopping short of the protective barrier.

Now , Rulzik and his demons are between Paisley and safety.

I can sense several of the same energy signatures from town...which means Rulzik possesses a healing relic. There's no way the lesser demons left the town square unscathed from the sunlight spell. My plan to remove the lesser demons from town failed.

It is of no matter. I'll kill them all.

And then I'm going to kill Rulzik , permanently this time.

Rulzik doesn't know that drinking from Paisley's made me twice as strong as I was the last time we clashed.

A fact I am most thankful for. Especially now.

I'm outnumbered and have a mate to worry about.

Sensing the tension between their beings, the vexations release tiny whines of apprehension. " Shhhh . All will be well," I murmur absently as I assess the best way to handle our situation.

" Laithog ...what are we going to do...?" her words trail off. I can smell the fear rolling off her.

Assessing the situation, I make a swift decision. Rulzik doesn't have any patience and he won't wait on me much longer. " Little flame, they have us vastly outnumbered. The only advantage I have is that they do not know I'm far stronger than ever before because of drinking from you. They cannot touch your truck, but that doesn't mean they cannot use a weapon of some sort to force you to leave its safety. The wards prevent them and their magick from infiltrating it, nothing else. It's not impervious to bullets or explosions. "

The color drains from her face as she listens to me speak.

" I am going to make a hole, and you need to get across the creek. You will be safe from anything present if you can get past the ward boundary."

The mulish expression on her face tells me exactly what she's thinking. Releasing a sharp bark, the sound makes her snap her mouth closed, halting whatever imprudent words she was about to speak. " You will do as I say, as you do not understand the scope of what is waiting for us. There are worse things than death, Paisley . "



My words are harsh, but she needs to hear them. “ Now . Nod that you understand me. Rulzik has motioned for several of his minions to begin their assault, and we cannot loiter any longer.”

Her nod of understanding is short and sharp as a flare of outrage flickers across the bond. I care not if she’s offended. I will make it up to her later. Taking a brief moment, I gaze upon her precious face before I jerk the door open and slide out, dropping my glamour as my feet touch the hard packed soil on the dirt road. Shutting the door firmly behind me, I step out away from the vehicle , making sure Paisley can see me so she has no excuse not to follow my order.

“ Well , well. How nice of you to finally join us, Laithog .” Rulzik’s oily words grate across my ears, the sound harsh and disjointed.

Bowing slightly, I respond. “ How could I decline such an invitation?”

A trace of insecurity fills me. Paisley is under the impression that the form I currently present to the world is the only one I have.

This is not so.

Stepping towards Rulzik , and without looking at my mate, I allow my battle form to surge forth as I move towards him in a steady, methodical manner. My body thickens to almost twice my normal size. I grow another a foot in height. Razor sharp spikes burst from my forearms, shoulders, spine, elbows, hocks, and the tip of my tail.

A second set of horns erupts from my forehead, curling over the top of my skull. The claws extending from my fingertips double in length and are as hard as diamonds. Black scales emerge from underneath my purple hide, covering my entire body in an almost impenetrable hide, the shining black plates longer relegated to the lower ends of my extremities.

Rulzik no longer looks so smug. I am now slightly larger than he is.

Smirking , I extend my right hand and summon my sword. “ Baldr , Daemonis Carnifex . Veni ad me.”

Dark purple fire shrouds my arm, and I feel the familiar weight of Baldr as he solidifies in my determined grasp. Roaring , I raise Baldr up, the midnight black blade naught but a shadow whistling through the night air, and grasp the comforting weight of the pommel in my palms as I leap towards a fleeing Rulzik .

### Chapter Forty-Four

#### PAISLEY

Oh . My . Lawd .

I had no idea Laithog had another form!

If he was intimidating before, he's truly daunting now. He's got to be at least a foot taller, and twice as broad. Not to mention he's not purple anymore! His entire body is covered in black scales and deadly looking spikes. Then there's the sword. It's got to be at least six or seven feet long and the blade is...black. I've never seen a sword with a black blade before. From the little I can see from where I'm sitting, the cross guard and pommel that make up the hilt look to be silver and a lighter shade of purple.

Lavendar , maybe?

Where in the fuck did he get a sword from?!

I didn't even know he had a sword!

Without warning, Laithog's colossal body springs forward, his wings spread wide as he brandishes his sword, gripping the handle in both hands. This has to be my cue. Laithog told me he was going to make me a hole. He's literally making a path for me...and using his body to do so.

Jerking the shifter into drive, I slam my foot down on the gas so abruptly the back tires spin, making the truck fishtail a bit as I rocket towards the house and the safe haven Laithog created for me. I'm not worried about running Laithog over. He's moving so fast he's almost a blur as he ducks, dives, weaves, and dances in and out of the attacking horde of demons.

There's so many of them.

Just as my truck crosses the dry creek bed, an explosion blast right behind me. The reds, yellows, and oranges from the flames illuminate the night and a demon holding a fucking rocket launcher.

Laithog said they would try to get me out of the truck.

Hurrying towards the house, I glance up into the rearview mirror and watch as Laithog beheads the demon that shot at me, it's body crumpling before disintegrating into nothing. Pressing down on the gas, I gun it toward the house. I may not be able to leave the safety of the wards, but I'm damn well not going to sit here and do nothing.

Sliding to a stop in front of the house, I jump out of the truck, and quickly unload Merry and Pippin . Carrying them simultaneously with an arm wrapped under their front legs and around their chest, their little drumstick legs dangling in the air, I sprint through the yard gate, kicking it closed behind me.

Once I have them secure inside the yard, I gently lower them to ground and dig my keys out of my pocket. Unlocking the door, I urge Merry and Pippin into the house. “Merry , Pippin . Go to bed!” I bark, running through the house to my bedroom, their little feet rapping out a rhythm on the hardwood floor.

Following my command, I hear them clatter up the doggie steps onto the bed as I dart

around the end of my bed. To the gun cabinet disguised as an armoire. I'm not even sure Laithog has figured out what I have hidden in it. Pressing my thumb to the biometric keypad, I pause briefly and sigh in relief when the less than a second later the light turns green.

Pulling the door open, I grab my Springfield M1A semi-automatic rifle with a thermal scope attached to the picatinny rail. I can't see in the dark, but I don't have to be able to see in the dark. This scope will show me anything with a heat signature.

Grabbing my gun belt, I strap it on and holster my Kimber 1911 .45acp on my right hip, checking to make sure the clips for it are secured in their slots. Snatching up my hunting vest, I shrug it on and stuff every single extra magazine I have for this gun in the pockets. I've never been gladder to of been raised in rural Texas than I am right now.

Daddy didn't raise no sissy.

Slamming the door closed, I hurry around the end of the bed, kicking my cute booties off as I go. Pulling the bedroom door closed behind me, I close Merry and Pippin up in the room they are the most comfortable in. They don't like the sound of gunfire and it stresses them out. Rushing back through the house, I stop in the mudroom, lean my gun up in the corner by the back door and put my work boots on, lacing them up tight. I don't need to trip on something as simple as my shoelaces.

I'm fighting demons, for fuck's sake.

Snagging my rifle, I jerk the door open and rush out the door, closing it quietly behind me.

Laithog is going to lose his shit.

Maybe I can get a spanking out of this...

Potential silver lining.

### Chapter Forty-Five

#### LAITHOG

Baldr trills through the air as I behead the demon that shot some sort of projectile at my fleeing mate. Sneering , I briefly glance in Paisley's direction. Relief fills me when I see the end of her vehicle cross the protective boundary. The demon I just beheaded turns to ash as I whirl, using Baldr to block a blow from the demon, trying to rip my wings from my back.

Lashing out with the spiked end of my tail, I impale yet another demon, his body turning to ash as his life-force leaves this plane and the ashes sink into the soil beneath my clawed feet as I spin between two more demons, head butting one while I backhand another. The deadly spikes running along the back of my hands and wrist catching it under the jaw.

Killing it instantly. Another one defeated.

Only the night gods know how many more are left.

More and more demons appear out of the night, trying to overwhelm me with sheer numbers. They might have been successful before I mated a human, but now I have far more stamina...and speed. Compared to the rate of motion I'm maintaining, it's almost as if my adversaries are moving in slow motion.

I can virtually see their blows before they happen.

Roaring out my rage at the sheer audacity they have to challenge me, I take a deep breath and exhale a stream of black fire, turning in a circle, incinerating every demon within the wingspan length of my body.

The remaining demons step back, glancing back and forth between themselves. Trying to decide if whatever Rulzik promised them is worth attacking me again. I'm still grossly outnumbered and the small wounds they've managed to inflict will start taking a toll sooner rather than later.

I need to finish them...quickly.

A derisive snort escapes me as smoke twist and coils out of my nostrils. I can't allow these demons to escape. They'll only cause death and destruction elsewhere if they live. " Well . What are you waiting for you, witless worms? Come and get me...or are you too scared of a lone Garagyre ?" I jeer, taunting them and pricking their pride.

Demons have always been susceptible to the seven deadly sins.

Pride being the worst of the seven. Especially if the insult is coming from a species they feel is lesser than. The remaining demons let out sibilant hisses as my words stoke their ire to a fever pitch. Shrieking , they launch themselves at me in unison and the battle begins anew.

Using Baldr , I block the swing of two swords while the claw on my right wing rips through the throat of another, and my tail disembowels a fourth. Shoving the two sword wielders back with a heave, I snap my wings out and slam them down, leaping into the air, grabbing a fifth demon by the hair and ripping his throat out with my fangs.

Spitting his mangled flesh out, I retch a little. Demon blood is still as vile as I remembered it. Dropping the body, I watch as his body turns to ash on the wind.



Pumping my wings, I hover over the snarling mass of demons, taking long, slow deep breaths as I force my heartbeat to slow. The flap of wings catches my attention right before I'm joined in the air by half a dozen winged demons.

“ COME ON THEN ! MEET YOUR DEATH ON MY BLADE OR BY MY FIRE !” I bellow. Propelling my wings down in a sharp motion, I shoot up into the sky, gaining altitude and speed rapidly before tucking my wings close to my body and diving straight down towards the horde of demons trying to keep up with me.

Opening my mouth, I rain black Garagyre fire down upon their malevolent bodies without mercy, ignoring their shrieks of suffering as they die. Snapping my wings out, I groan at the pressure it exerts on my wingjoints as I come to an abrupt stop, swinging Baldr in an arc and lacerating yet another demon.

A loud crack splits the air and one of the demons beside me falls to the ground, the back of its head missing portions of the skull. Seconds later, another crack sounds and another demon falls from the air to the unforgiving ground below. The explanation for this hits me just as a wave of icy determination fills me.

Determination that doesn't belong to me.

“ PAISLEY , GODS DAMMIT !” I thunder, while dodging a spear aimed at my gut. Flicking my wrist, I swing Baldr around, severing the spear handle before catching the end with the spearhead attached, flipping it around and stabbing the demon through the eye with it. Killing it with its own weapon.

“ Don't you take that tone with me, Laithog . I'm inside the wards and you need the help. So shut up and let me concentrate!” she shouts back as another crack fills the night air and the last demon capable of flight falls from the sky before turning to ash.

Night gods, I love her.

Diving towards the ground, I land with a boom, my knees bent to absorb the impact of my landing. Straightening slowly, I raise my head and smile at the few remaining demons, Baldr still clenched in my right hand, the black blade dripping ichor onto the cold ground.

Charging forward with a roar, I launch a last attack. Demons start darting in random directions trying to avoid my blade and the projectiles Paisley is firing at them. My little flame and I will be having a discussion with said discussion being held with her bare arse draped over my lap awaiting the shock of my hand cracking against her flesh.

Yelps , curses, and squeals of dying demons sound all around me. They can't get to Paisley to stop her projectiles without killing me, and they're having so much luck in that endeavor. Not that I'm escaping unscathed. There are just too many of them to keep my guard up on all sides.

I'm covered in wounds, and my wings are tattered in several places. The worst, however, is a series of puncture wounds low on my side where a particularly crafty demon wielding a trident impaled me before I ripped his head from his body, taking his spine with it.

With my mate's help, it doesn't take long before the last demon falls. Stumbling a bit, I stick the tip of Baldr in the ground and lean on him. Panting , I look up into the golden-brown depths of my mate's eyes and wink. Paisley rolls her eyes at me in exasperation.

During the course of the battle, I moved almost to the edge of the warded boundary. Smiling at her in reassurance, I stand and start to take the last step across the boundary and pause in confusion when her face pales. She raises the odd-looking black stick in her hands and points it in my direction, screaming at me to move.

Blazing , white hot pain punches into me as I look down and see the tip of a halberd sticking out of my chest. I stumble as the blade is yanked from my body with a wet, sucking sound. Paisley steps to the side, her face a mask of murderous rage as fire explodes from the tip of her black stick.

Ah .

This must be a type of gun.

Looking over my shoulder as I fall to my knees. I see Rulzik's black body jerk as bullet after bullet hits him. He looks almost like a marionette as his limbs flail this way and that way. His halberd falls from nerveless fingers, thudding to the ground beside him.

Swaying , I fall to the ground face first, losing consciousness just as I feel Baldr gently pulled from my grasp.

### Chapter Forty-Six

#### PAISLEY

The recoil of my rifle keeps me centered and I'm filled with satisfaction with each bullet's impact into Rulziks loathsome body. The look of surprise on his face is gratifying. He didn't expect me to do anything, let alone attack him.

Dumbass .

He obviously doesn't know me that well. What lackluster stalking skills. Laithog is much better at it than Rulzik is, and he was a fucking statue for the first six months he knew me.

I don't know how many bullets it takes to incapacitate a demon, but I know how many I'm going to use.

All of them.

So , I empty a full twenty rounds into Rulzik . I'd just put a fresh magazine in when Laithog dispatched the last demon, so I don't stop aiming and pulling the trigger until I hear it click.

“ You pathetic little bitch, you think bullets are going to kill me?” Rulzik wheezes out, his mutilated body oozing ichor, making it look like an eldritch horror as he takes a staggering step towards me.

Shooting a quick look over, I see Laithog's fallen face first to the ground, and he's not moving. I'm too scared to check our soulbond. He's not dead because I'm not dead, but we just found each other and I'll be damned if this piece of shit takes that away from either of us.

Not after everything he's done.

Murdering Patrick and robbing Laithog of Ilayahan are only two transgressions in the eons this vile piece of shit has been alive. I have to keep my composure until the threat to us is neutralized.

Or die trying.

Laithog's body collapsed half across the warded barrier. If Rulzik gets any closer, he can grab Laithog and finish what he started with that spear thing. Pushing the magazine release, I drop the empty mag, grab my last full one and pop it into the mag well, and pull the charging handle back, racking another round in the chamber.

"Nope . I sure don't, but I bet it hurts like a bitch." Aiming at center mass, as I look through the thermal scope, I start shooting like my life depends on it.

Because it does.

I can't allow Rulzik to recover or regenerate or whatever the fuck it is that demons can do. Rulzik must be in more pain or weaker than he lets on because he lurches to the side a bit to try to escape the barrage of bullets raining down on him. But that half ass attempt is the only one he makes. I watch in disbelief as Rulzik takes three drunken steps and then collapses in a heap, his chest rising with each rasping breath.

He's down, but not out. Forty rounds of ammo knocked him down but didn't kill him. I need something else, something capable of killing that rat bastard for good.

Glancing over at Laithog , my eyes land on the black blade shining in the moonlight.

His sword. Of course!

I know it'll kill a demon.

I watched him use it to behead more than one of our adversaries. Dropping my gun, I sprint over to Laithog's fallen form and gently pry his clawed hand from the grip. Lifting its impressive weight takes every bit of upper body strength I've got. Proves how strong Laithog is because I saw him wielding this thing like it was light as a feather.

It's a sobering realization. He could have taken me by force...but he chose to seduce me instead.

He wooed me with kindness, and I love him for it.

Hefting the sword, I walk over to Rulzik's fallen form and smirk at what I see when I get there. “ Damn . You're fucked up, ain't ya? Guess demons aren't bullet proof at all.”

Each breath rasping from his chest is a struggle, his words broken and grating. “ You ...stupid...cunt. I ...would...have...made...you...a... Queen !”

“ Yeah , that's just it, Rulzik . I never wanted money, power, or control. I just wanted a peaceful life full of peace, joy, and love. You stole that from me, so now I'm going to take the only thing you truly care for from you. Your life.”

Panic flashes in his crimson eyes when I heft Laithog's sword over my head and let the weight fall, aiming for his vulnerable throat. His squawk of alarm is cut short when the razor-sharp edge of the sword slices through his pitch-black hide.

Wincing at the wet sound removing the sword makes, I watch as his body slowly disintegrates and turns to ash. To my surprise, the particles of ash sink into the ground and disappear.

Assured that Rulzik is truly dead and gone, I drop the sword and sprint back over to Laithog . Skidding to a halt, the caliche tearing at my knees, I grab Laithog gently by the shoulder, being careful to avoid the various wounds littering his massive body. “ Laithog , sugar. You gotta help me. You’re too heavy for me to move when you’re in your everyday version of you. There’s no way I can shift you like this.”

Worry fills me when I get no response. Biting my lip, I start trying to figure out how to get him back to the house. A hundred yards has never been so far. A subtle silver glow surrounds Laithog and his body drifts into the air, raising until he’s eyeball level with me.

“ No way...” I whisper. Somehow , someway, he heard me and his subconscious tapped into whatever magick he has left. Getting to my feet, I take a couple of steps and, to my pleasant surprise, his prone body follows me. Reaching out, I tenderly turn his body over so his face is up and his wings are facing towards the ground. I won’t be able to carry my rifle and his sword at the same time, and I don’t want to lay his sword across his back.

Jogging over to where I dropped Laithog’s , I bend down and pick it up, carefully laying it lengthwise down his body. Crossing his arms over the hilt, I make sure the sword is secured before grabbing my rifle and starting a ground eating jog back to the house.

My mate’s unconscious body floating alongside me the entire way.

### Chapter Forty-Seven

#### LAITHOG

How much brew did I drink last night?

Memories slam into me, and I jolt up in bed, ignoring the twin fluffy bodies pressed up against the side of my body that startle with my motions. Groaning , I grab at the center of my chest when my sudden movements send jarring pain radiating through my body.

“ PAISLEY !” Calling her name as I carefully swing my legs over the side of the bed, still ignoring the dual vexations following my every move with beady little yellow eyes. I ease to my feet, one hand braced on the tiny table beside the bed, when movement out of the corner of my eye makes me jerk my head towards the bedroom door.

“ Paisley .” Her name is a whisper on my lips as relief fills me at the sight of her standing there, completely unscathed.

Well ...

There is a small bandage around her left wrist.

Seeing where my gaze is fixated, she starts talking as she walks towards me. “ Don’t get that look on your face. I didn’t know what else to do to fix you except feed you.” Her words are conciliatory as well as placating.



Huffing in exasperation, I reply as she gets within arm's reach and I gently reach out and grab her by the back of her neck, dragging her to me as I sit back down on the bed. " You did not err, little flame. Most likely, your quick thinking saved our lives. Thank you, my love."

Scrutinizing the bandage, I remove it, making sure I cause her no discomfort with my ministrations as I inspect the wound. It's a clean line made by a blade, not a bite mark I failed to heal. " Tsk . I will fix this."

Leaning forward slightly, I bring her wrist up to my mouth and lave the cut with my tongue, thoroughly coating it in my saliva. Sitting up, I'm glad to see the edges of the cut closing as the wound heals while I watch.

" Today is Christmas Eve , sugar. That means it's the day before my version of what you call the winter solstice. After all the excitement of yesterday, I think it best we stick close to home today and most of tomorrow. I've already texted my parents and let them know we won't be over until tomorrow evening for Christmas supper instead of midday."

" I think there is much you need to tell me, little one..." my words trailing off in question.

" Ehm . Yes . I suppose there is." Tucking her glorious red hair behind one of her ears, she seems almost...bashful. Pulling her more firmly between my thighs, I wrap my tail around her waist and gently roll us onto the bed. Ignoring her shriek of protest as I position her to my liking.

Which , considering my healing state, is cuddled up next to me with her head across my chest. " Now that we are more comfortable. Tell me what happened after I lost consciousness," I urge. Taking a deep breath, as if she's preparing herself for my reaction.

She tells me everything.

She tells me how she faced Rulzik .

She tells me how she shot him many times with her gun.

She tells me how he fell. She tells me that she retrieved Baldr from my fallen figure.

And , finally. She tells me how she beheaded the foul beast named Rulzik and banished him to the abyssal hellscape all demons hail from. Pride fills me and I feel her body relax as she feels my feelings flow to her across our body, her scent calming as her stress dissolves as if it never existed.

Turning my head, I find hers tipped up, gazing at me, relief filling her beautiful golden eyes. “ You did well, Paisley . I will not admonish you for what you did. You protected us and did something others far more powerful and skilled have tried for centuries to do. You vanquished Rulzik . His error was underestimating a human woman, and it was his demise.”

My words are the final validation she seems to be seeking because all the ridged tension leaves her body as her breath gust from plush parted lip. “ Laithog , sugar...there’s something I want to tell you. I know you felt it after you bound Merry and Pippin to us. Get that look off your face! I’m trying to confess my undying love to you and you’re glaring at my dogs!”

The edge to her tone doesn’t bode well for me at all, so I assume an innocent expression after one last glare towards the little bastards loitering at the foot of the bed. “ I am listening intently to what you say, little flame.”

She rolls her eyes at me in exasperation. “ Anyways , as I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me, was that I love you. Because I do love you, deeply, without

reservation or end.”

Her words fill me with delight bordering on ecstasy. Of course, I felt her love for me the evening past, but hearing the words hits all that much deeper because she admits her love with a conscious mind to me willingly. It's not a developing feeling submerged in her subconscious and it makes all the difference in the worlds.

Just because you love someone doesn't necessarily mean you want to love them. “Thank you for giving me the words. You've made me the happiest Garagyre in existence. Know that I will love you until the breath leaves my body and we ascend to the next life, and then I will love you there for the rest of eternity as well.”

My heartfelt solemn words cause tears to well in her eyes, until they spill, unchecked, down her rounded cheeks, as she beams at me in happiness.

“I promise you that I will wake each day beside you and do my best to make every day worth your acceptance of me.”

“Oh, Laithog, you already do. Didn't you know that?” Is her profound response.

### Chapter Forty-Eight

#### LAITHOG

Today is Christmas !

My eyes snap open in excitement as I look down at the warm weight draped across my chest. A damp spot tells me she's drooled on me again, but I do not care. I have been covered in entrails before.

What's a little spittle?

Jostling my mate, I ease her into wakefulness. It must be said that she does not care for mornings.

At all.

Groaning , she rolls over and stretches as her eyelids flutter before she semi-glares at me out of one cracked eye. “ Whatchu wakin’ me up for?” she grouchily asks.

“ It is Christmas !” I retort with merriment. Yesterday Paisley disappeared into her jewelry room for several hours, and while she thought I was napping, I crafted her gift. I cannot wait to give it to her, even though I am slightly nervous. This holiday is new to me and my mate is not Garagyre , she's human. With that in mind, I made a backup gift in case she doesn't care for the first one.

Having magick is truly a blessing sometimes...and I do not care if other beings

consider using to craft gives as cheating.

They can jump off a cliff. My mate is still staring at me balefully, as I scoop her up into my arms and set her on her feet next to the bed. With a patronizing pat to her backside, I shoo her towards the bathroom. “ Go tend your morning ablutions, and I will meet you in the communal room. Merry , Pippin , let us go outside!”

Cringing at the raucous yodels both dogs let out, I head towards the back door, following the two bouncing balls of hair as I go.

Quite frankly, I need to piss too.

Laithog is in the living room by the time I finish my morning bathroom routine. He’s lounging on the couch in his leather kilt with one leg bouncing up and down. His nerves have been radiating across the bond since we got up. I’ve no clue why he’s so nervous. I know I’ll like anything he either made or...procured for me.

The second I walk into the living room; he bounds to his feet and meets me halfway across the floor. “ Come , my mate, sit, sit. I ...made you a few things, and the wait is too much to bear. I must give them to you now, so I know if I have done well or not.”

His words are running together. He’s talking so fast. I’ve never seen him this rattled...it’s adorable. Sitting on the couch as he asked, I settle in and look at him expectantly. With the coffee table separating us, he waves his hands in a circular motion and says, “ Nanna , coniunx ultor. Veni ad me.”

In a shower of white light, so bright it’s almost blinding, a sword appears in his hands and he gently lays it on the table in front of me. The blade is so white its opalescent, reflecting the multicolored lights from across the room on the Christmas tree, and the hilt is made of gold and soft greens. It’s a replica of his sword, Baldr , in shape and design, but the colors are an exact contrast to his weapon.

Looking at it in awe, I reach out and grasp the grip, unsurprised when it fits my hand perfectly.

“ Do you...like it? I named her Nanna , mate avenger. So , should you ever need to defend me again, you will be sufficiently armed. I know a sword is not a normal gift for a human female, but you are not a normal human female. You are mated to a Garagyre , and a warrior of Light .” His words are hesitant but steadfast.

“ Laithog ...this is...” Before I can finish, he speaks again.

“ I made you these, in case you did not care for the sword.” Waving his hand again, two wooden figurines appear next to the sword. One glows with a soft blue aura while the other a light green. Squinting a bit, I look at the little models and when I recognize them, my eyes go wide in shocked delight.

Just to make sure I'm not seeing things, I turn my head to where Merry and Pippin are laying in their dog beds across the room and then back to the sculptures in front of me. “ You made me exact replicas of Merry and Pippin !”

Jumping up from the couch, I race around the coffee table and jump into his arms. “ Laithog , thank you!! I adore my gifts! I've always wanted a sword and now I have one, thanks to you...and you knew I would just love the figurines you made me of my sweet little fluff fluffs,” I gush, wrapping my arms around his neck, tangling my fingers in his beautiful long silver hair, and I hook my legs around his thick waist.

Pulling his head down to mine, I smack a kiss across his stunned lips. “ Wait here!”

Hopping down, I race to the back of the house and into my jewelry room. Snatching his gift off my worktable, I hurry back through the house and into the living room.

Holding out my fist, I motion him to hold out his left hand. “ I made you something

too! Well , I made us both something, but it has a certain significance in my culture. One that I think you will greatly appreciate,” I say as I slide a wedding band made of silver with chips of rubies and turquoise inlaid into the band on his ring finger, silently thankful that he has four fingers and a thumb just like me.

Making sure he’s watching, I slide a matching band with onyx and amethyst inlaid into the band onto my ring finger. The swirling designs are the same, with the sole difference between them being the color of the stones. My colors for him and his for me. “ These are called wedding rings. They’re symbols that humans in this part of the world will recognize and know that you and I are bound together. The word we use is married,” I hurriedly explain.

“ You would claim me in the human way...?” comes his tentative reply.

“ Laithog , sugar. I will claim you in any way I can...even in that delicious looking other form you’ve got hidden inside you,” I respond sassily, ignoring his dumbfounded look of shock, as I pull him closer to me and roll onto my tiptoes, meeting his descending head halfway.

Right before our lips meet, I whisper. “ Merry Christmas , Laithog . I love you to the moon and back.”

Love and devotion overwhelm me as he gathers me to him, holding me in his embrace as he says, “ Merry Christmas , my precious Paisley . I will love you unendingly.”

A sharp bark followed by a warbling grumble announces Merry and Pippin joining in our loving huddle. I snicker when I look down to see Merry has his front paws on Laithog’s left leg and Pippin is sitting on his right foot. Baring his teeth in a facsimile of a smile, he snarls at them as I burst into laughter held tight in the arms of the male I love.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

LAITHOG

Many , many years later.

“ Little flame, where are you? It is time for us to leave.”

My mate, not the one gifted to me by fate, but the one I chose for myself, is pregnant with my kits. A blessing I haven't dared wish for, unsure that our kinds would be compatible enough to create life, let alone twins. Not that my mate knows that part yet. She is finally far enough along that I can scent the two lifeforms growing within her. A boy and a girl. It is just one of the reasons, we were leaving the place we've called home for decades.

Neither of us are aging, and it is beginning to become noticeable. A comment here and a comment there about how well “ Lance ” and Paisley looked for their ages. We didn't have the luxury of staying any longer. Both of Paisley's parents have since passed, and Patrick is her only sibling.

As disheartening as my mate found it, she no longer has any living family to hold her in this place. Only the memories she cherishes kept us here as long as we've lingered. A fact that has weighed heavily on her...until she discovered she is pregnant.

Donning my glamour, I exit the house, peering over and note that her pickup isn't parked in its normal spot next to mine. Merry and Pippin are sitting by the yard gate looking at me expectantly. “ What do you two insouciant shits want?” I gripe. After being with Paisley for a couple of years, I picked up a few of her more human words, and my speech isn't as stilted or formal anymore.



It delights me to no ends how informal humans speak to one another. Only to have Merry yowl and Pippin grumble as he paws the gate with one small front foot. “ If Paisley did not love you both so much, I never would have bound either of your life forces to mine. The things I do for my little flame. Gah ! Fine ! I know where she is. Let us go.”

At the defeat in my tone, both dogs start dancing about and yapping, apparently excited that they’ve gotten their way. “ Yes , yes. We all know that I secretly adore you, but our interactions amuse our human to no end,” I gripe as I open the gate, letting both of them out and watch in amusement as they both dart to the back passenger side door where they plop both of their fluffy behinds, waiting on me expectantly.

Muttering under my breath, I go around the truck and deposit both of them in the back seat. “ I’m never going to hear the end of this,” I sigh. Getting into my one-ton King Ranch ford truck, I start the engine and put it into gear, backing down and out of the driveway.

Rolling both back windows down halfway for the irritating little shitheads, I put the truck in drive and head to the cemetery.

“ Hey guys, it’s me again. This will probably be my last visit. Laithog and I have to move. Even though I don’t want to, we really don’t have a choice. I’m ...pregnant. Not to mention the not aging thing.” Joy rips through me as I tell my parents and brother the news.

“ Laithog , and I didn’t think it was possible. We’ve been mated for almost twenty years and never hoped for a child. A human doctor cannot deliver my child as it takes years for a Garagyre to master their inherent magick in order to glamour themselves. This means our baby would come out looking decidedly unhuman, and we can’t take that risk. Laithog has reached out to some of his people, and we’ve been invited to

move to a village with multiple interspecies couples, so I won't be the only human there...or the only human raising a hybrid child. The snag is...this village is on another plane of existence. Sorta like another dimension. Most of the other species left this plane long ago due to humans and their almost zealous need to attack what's different."

The jingle jangle of tags on collars catches my attention right before Merry and Pippin appear in front of me, their adorable fluffy butts doing a wiggle dance with happiness at the sight of me. I smile as I start shaking my head. If my dogs are here, that means my mate is not far behind.

Laithog adores my corgis. He just won't admit it. If he actually didn't care for them, he wouldn't have bound their souls to ours so many years ago, and then left their souls bound. He could have undone the soul weave at any point in time to let nature take its course years ago, and let Merry and Pippin age like normal dogs. Instead, he made the excuse that he couldn't bear to see me grieve them, and he kept their souls linked to ours.

Something definitively taboo in his society, I finally found out, but he told me he didn't care. They weren't a dangerous species and posed no threat to anyone, so it didn't matter if he made my two little loafers immortal or not. To hide it over the years, I told folks in town that I replaced my dogs with ones as similar as possible and named them Merry 2, Pippin 3, and so forth.

Heat envelops me as Laithog drapes a blanket around my shoulders. "Little one, you are with child, and it is cold out. You should have brought your coat," he gently admonishes me, the heavy silver cuff on his left wrist flashing in the fading light.

"It's that time of year again, warm in the afternoon with the temperature dropping in the evening. I didn't realize how cool it's gotten. I have to come say goodbye..." my voice trails off, but I know he understands.

After so long together, we don't have any secrets from one another. " I know. I am surprised you have not come sooner or with more regularity in the days leading to our departure."

His words hit home with the accuracy of a well-placed blow, making me grimace a bit. " I ... well, I should have done this sooner, but I've put it off because I don't want to say goodbye. I know that these graves are not my family, but they are the last place I saw any of them before they were lowered into the ground," I explain despondently.

" I understand, little flame. Would you like me to hold you while you finish your goodbyes?" he lovingly asks. Reading the emotions their human and Garagyre are emitting, Merry and Pipping lay down on our feet, smothering us with doggie love and comfort. Laithog clicks his teeth, making me giggle a bit. " Oh , stop. You love them, and they love you," I cheerily admonish.

" I will never admit to this, little flame. They are as vexing today as they were the day I met them," he deflects while settling himself next to me.

With my mate by my side on the stone bench that instigated our meeting so many years ago, I finish my goodbyes to my family. " So , anyway. Laithog and I can't stay here. It's just too dangerous for our child, but I did want to tell you that I've thought of some names for the baby. I haven't even told Laithog yet," I snicker.

Laithog's body starts a little with surprise. We haven't discussed names since I'm barely past my first trimester. Turning my head to look up at him, I see his true face under his glamour, a trick he devised when he figured out his human glamour disturbed me. I reach out and slide my hand along his jaw, cupping it with all the love and affection I have for him as I finish relaying the news to my family. " If it's a boy, I'm thinking Paidrag , for Patrick ...but if it's a girl... I think we should call her Ilayahan ."

I watch as tears fill my mates' eyes, spilling over to run down his cheeks, unchecked, as he gazes at me with incandescent joy. " My Paisley , you bless me with this gift, but I , too, have a surprise for you..." a slight hesitation before he continues. " We will have to use both of your names, little flame. You are carrying twins. This secondhand Garagyre thanks you from the depths of my hearts and soul. You are a gift I do not deserve, but one I will cherish until we take our final breaths. I love you, my precious Paisley ."

Shock renders me speechless for a moment, closely followed by apprehension. Regular human pregnancies with twins can have complications...but my children aren't fully human. My hands dart down to hold the swell of my belly protectively as Laithog watches me with concern. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to quiet my thoughts. As long as I have Laithog , I know that we, my children and I , will be just fine. He's taking us to a place with healers that have delivered multiple blended species babies.

" We will be fine. After all we've been through, nothing will take our joy from us, and I will deliver our twins safely. I love you, my warrior of Light , and I always will"

His lips meet mine in an achingly tender kiss, pulling me closer with one of his wings, while one large hand cups the small swell of my belly over the top of my hands.

Holding all of us close, sheltered under his wing and close to his heart.

Right where we belong.

Ilayahan looks over at Patrick , a question on her inhuman face and at his answering silent nod, she reaches out, firmly grasping his hand.

It is time for them to go.

Long has she kept vigil over her mate, unable to leave him on this plane alone. No matter that he thought she ascended long ago. She couldn't leave him knowing how he suffered.

And suffered he had, for far too long.

Stubborn male.

To her surprise, she was accompanied by the spirit of a human male, Patrick , several decades ago.

He , too, was unable to leave the other half of his soul while she grieved his loss so deeply.

To be honest, both spirits have lingered far longer than they should have.

Their loved ones were happy and were in no danger.

But . Letting go is hard, even for those in the afterlife.

However . It's time.

So , hand in hand, they turn and walk into the brilliance of the setting sun.

Their ascension only marked with the stirring of a gentle breeze.

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*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

PAISLEY

“ Okay , the twins are finally asleep. Every time I had Paidrag on the verge of sleep, Ilayahan would wake up and start fussing.” I mutter, dropping into my mate’s lap, the curve of my ass tucked neatly against Laithog’s pelvis, enjoying the way his tail immediately wraps around my slightly thicker waist.

He’s always so comfy, far superior to a chair.

Laithog puts down his book and begins massaging my neck before moving his calloused hands down to my shoulders, making me moan in pleasure as the tension slowly fades from my body because of his tender ministrations. Looking around for Merry and Pippin , I see them passed out in front of the fire crackling in the hearth. Merry is upside down with all four feet in air and Pippin , is hanging half off their sleeping cushion with his head on the floor.

Chuckling , I shake my head. Some things haven’t changed, and for that, I’m eternally grateful.

Acclimating to our new home has been a process and I’m still not quite up to speed on some things. Such as how much effort it takes for what was once a simple task...

Stupid butter churn.

Modern conveniences have made humans complacent.

Far more than I thought.

Dismissing my intrusive thoughts about my new household chores, I sink into the comforting warmth of my mate and focus on something that's been bothering since me since my final post birth check up with the village healer.

It's been two months since I gave birth to our miracle twins...and my mate hasn't touched me since a month or two before I gave birth. I got so big there at the end it wasn't comfortable to do anything, let alone have sex. Carrying human twins is taxing enough, but half-garagyre babies were much larger than a full human baby.

I can't say that I'm not getting a bit worried about the fact that Laithog hasn't even tried to initiate sex recently. The village healer told both of us at that I healed completely from the birth and could begin relations again.

Laithog was there. He heard the healer.

But . He . Still . Won't . Touch . Me .

And that was almost three weeks ago.

I know Laithog loves me, but good old human insecurities are starting to raise their ugly head. My body isn't the same, my belly isn't as flat, my waist is thicker, boobs are larger with a bit of sag to them from breastfeeding, and my ass is almost freakish in the way it's grown.

I was curvy before my pregnancy...now I'm what the human men would call "thiccc" with three "c's."

Sturdy is an understatement when describing my post pregnancy body.

Laithog's deep voice pulls me from my inner reflections as he leans forward and adjusts me in his lap, turning me sideways so my legs drape over the side of the chair and tucks my shoulder into the warm comfort of his chest. " Little flame, you smell

worried and I can feel how unsettled you are. Tell me, what is wrong so I may fix it?”

Love wells deep within me, and his face softens as my emotions flow across our bond. That’s my Laithog , always thinking of me and how he can “make it better.” Taking a deep breath, I rip the band aid off.

“ Whydon’tyouwantohavesexwithmeanymore?”

I spit the words out so fast, it’s more reminiscent of word vomit than an actual question. Laithog’s head jerks back, as if I’ve slapped him before a thunderous frown takes the place of his perplexed expression as my question registers. “ You think I do not want to rut you?” His low rumbled words tell me he is not pleased with what I just said.

“ Well . I mean. What am I supposed to think? I know how high your sex drive is and you haven’t attempted to touch me in the last three weeks since Seydia said it was okay for us to resume having sex. On top of that, having the twins made my body different from what it was before and I’m afraid you’re not attracted to me anymore...” my words trail off as I feel his emotions swell.

Shock .

Disbelief .

Irritation .

Lust .

Hurt .

I yelp as he lurches to his feet with me in his arms and stalks to our bedroom without saying a word. Accustomed to the new status quo, Merry and Pippin don’t stir from



their comfy spot in front of the fire as Laithog carries me out of the room. It's with some trepidation that I notice his body is shifting to his battle form around me as his bulk and height grow and his natural armament becomes that much more.

Unwrapping his tail from my waist, he quietly closes our bedroom door, the inaudible action somehow far more nerve-wracking than if he had slammed it, before striding over to the bed and dumping me unceremoniously on its cushioned surface. Leaning over me, with one arm braced on either side of my body, he looms over me before carefully snaking his tail under my dress and ripping it off my body, all without saying a word.

Using one of his massive hands, he grabs me by the throat and holds me still for his descending head as he meshes his mouth to mine and darts his long, dexterous tongue inside to tangle with mine. A low growl is rumbling from deep within his chest. Taking a deep breath, I see him make a concerted effort before the growl changes into his mating purr. His purr is far more potent in this form for some reason because a few seconds later, I've lost any rational thought and become a wanton mess of hormones and emotions.

The first climax hits me and I see stars as the pleasure floats across my body and my cunt clamps down on nothing, making me keen at how empty I am. Not relinquishing his hold on my throat, Laithog uses his other hand to move me up the bed, so I'm laid out like a sacrifice with my legs from the knee down, hanging off the bed.

Manipulating my body like a maestro does an orchestra, he strums his mating purr harder and harder. He forces me to come for him repeatedly, until I'm a limp mess laying beneath him, begging him for cock. "Laithog, my mate. Please fill me. I'm so empty without you deep inside me."

His words, when they come, are so deep in this form that they practically vibrate the entire room. "I think you are finally wet enough to take me."

Flipping me over, he's very careful not to nick my delicate skin with his freakishly long claws, or touch me with his now deadly tail before settling his pelvis at the curve of my ass while he pushes my face down to the bed. The position puts everything I'm self-conscious about on display. My ass is up in the air while my heavy breast and loose belly are hanging below me while my bent elbows hold my weight up.

“How dare you insinuate that this delectable little body does not arouse me? These luscious breasts feed my younglings, this soft belly held them safe within you...and this scrumptious ass...”

The sound he makes as his words trail off is nothing short of lewd and causes a flush of pleasure to fill me.

“This ass is mine, and I will not tolerate you saying anything negative about it. Now, spread your legs like a good mate, and let me fuck you, like I've been dying to do since you birthed our younglings. Foolish female, you went through an ordeal. I was waiting for your body to heal and for you to be ready to resume mating with me!”

Doing as he commands, I spread my legs to accommodate his added bulk. The second I get them far enough apart; he extrudes and slams his immense cock deep inside me. A scream escapes me at the sudden invasion, the pleasure bordering on pain at the added girth he just shoved inside me. The excess slick my body produced because of his exceptionally potent mating purr is the sole reason his additional circumference slid inside without causing me any damage.

Laithog doesn't give me a chance to catch my breath. He starts shuttling his hips into my ass, setting a punishing rhythm right off, fucking me in earnest and without mercy. “You . Are . Beautiful . And . The . Light . Of . My . Life .”

A brutal snap of his hips follows each word as he plows into my pliant body. I can feel a brutal climax building low in my pelvis. The angle Laithog is fucking me at has his dick ridges rubbing against my g-spot mercilessly. Writhing under him, I attempt

to meet his thrust by shoving my ass back into his marauding body, only to be met with a sinister snarl. The heavy hand at the nape of my neck tightens, his talons pricking my skin as he leans a modicum amount of his substantial weight into his hand, and snarls at me, his chest vibrating with the basal tone.

My mate's deadly tail wraps around my waist, the lethal tip resting against my fragile skin as he forces my body into stillness. The sensation of being forced to submit to his dominance is the final push my body needs and I fall off the precipice as stars burst across my vision. Pleasure radiates from my cunt across my entire body as I scream out my completion.

Without warning, Laithog starts his mating purr, dragging me into a second vicious climax. My body clamping down on him, triggers his release and I can't do anything but submit to the truly gigantic knot my mate is forcing me to accept. I can feel my body desperately trying to accommodate the added bulk within my human body. A feeling of devastating fullness as his knot lodges in my pussy immediately follows a soft squelching sound.

Jet after jet of hot seed splashes against the entrance of my womb as Laithog roars out his rapture, his final gratification complete as he loses himself to the hedonism of knotting me in his battle form. His knot is so big it lodges against my g-spot; the feeling is enough to rip one final peak from me, the pleasure so overwhelming I do something I've only ever read about.

I pass out from pleasure.

“ Little flame, please wake up. I need to know you are well.” The concern and mild panic in his words are enough to pull me from the dark void of unconsciousness. Opening my eyes, I see the worried face of my mate as he looms over me on our bed. Absently , I note that he's reverted to his normal form, cleaned me up, and has me cuddled up with him under the covers, my satiated body limp against his chiseled form.

His exhale is rife with relief. “ Thank the night gods. I was worried that in my vigor, I had damaged you even though I waited to take you in my battle form until after you had our younglings. Several of the other males said it would be easier for you to take my additional size after your channel...ehm...uh... stretched after birth.”

Chuckling , I reach up and pat his cheek patronizingly, hard enough that he winces slightly. “ Laithog , sugar. I don’t know which males told you that...but they fucking lied to you. That is not how that works. The vagina heals in four to six weeks after birth and it doesn’t get looser or more stretched out permanently .”

I can’t hold back my hysterical laughter as his face falls and his eyes dart to my crotch, an appalled look on his face as my words sink in and realization hits. Falling into his chest, I’m laughing so hard I’m wheezing and crying, tears leaking from my eyes as Laithog begins growling. At my continued hilarity, his face gets scrunchier and more thunderous in his embarrassment.

After several minutes, I finally get myself under control while he sits there sullenly. “ Laithog , sugar. Bless your heart.”

At his scowl, I hurry to finish speaking. He figured out what that Texas idiom meant years ago. “ Misunderstanding , aside. I owe you a thank you. No , don’t interrupt me.”

Taking a deep breath, I dive into the situation I created by not being forthright and communicative with my soulmate. “ I should’ve discussed this with you, instead of internalizing my insecurities. Humans ...have become exceptionally wrapped up in maintaining an ideal body image, and my body before pregnancy wasn’t what society called beautiful, so I got exceptionally insecure after I had the twins and realized my body wasn’t going to go back to...well...my normal. Then we got wrapped up in having newborns and our new schedule.”

Looking up at him, I know my heart is in my eyes as I wipe at my eyes, dashing the

tears welling there away. “ I’m sorry, sugar.”

Laithog sits up abruptly, dragging me up his chest as he moves us into a sitting position, his back cushioned against the headboard by our pillows. “ Little flame, you have absolutely nothing to apologize for. I am not as unobservant as you seem to think. You’ve been unsettled for a spell and as forthright as you are... I thought I would wait for you to tell me what bothered you. It would seem that in this instance, I erred in my line of thinking. From now on, both of us will do better in communicating ourselves to one another. Yes ?”

What did I do to deserve this male?

Lunging forward, I wrap my arms around my beloved’s thick neck, hugging him to me. “ YES ! I promise not to let it get to this point, where I’m doubting you, myself, or our relationship.”

“ Good , I’m glad we have that settled. I love you to the moon and back, my little flame. Never doubt that.” As he speaks, Laithog swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands, then he smacks me on the ass, the sound loud in the quiet of our room. “ Your breast are leaking. ‘ Tis time to feed the younglings!”

Looking down, I see that my nipples do, in fact, have small beads of milk leaking from them, and my boobs are heavy and slightly painful. A sure sign I need to feed the babies. Laughing , I follow my mate out the bedroom door, smiling up at him as he grabs my hand in his, and together we walk down the hall to the nursery.

The End.