



# The Last Gargoyle's Christmas Wish (An MM Monster Christmas #3)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** An ancient gargoyle. A hearth witch baker. They've always looked after others. Is it time to look after themselves... and their hearts?

Uzoth is the last of the gargoyles. He sits on rooftops as snow gathers on his wings. But Uzoth is used to the cold. He once had people to protect and brethren to stand beside, but that is all gone. Still, he continues his silent watch, wishing he had a purpose once again.

Strung-out and overworked, Grady is the eldest of ten children. Since his parent's death, he's dedicated himself to caring for his siblings and running the family bakery. He hasn't had a moment for himself. Or for love.

One night, thieves attack Grady. Uzoth swoops in and rescues him. An unusual and tentative friendship forms between them. Soon, feelings and desires grow. Still, Grady has so much responsibility. Can he find time for a relationship with Uzoth? Or will he end up sacrificing a chance at love for the sake of others?

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

## CHAPTER 1

The ancient gargoyle's talons pressed into the ceramic-tiled rooftop. Snow gathered on his wings and horns. His tail lay buried beneath the white powder. Cold echoed in his bones. But he had long ago gotten used to the cold. Used to the stillness. Used to being utterly alone.

A pigeon fluttered through the air and settled on his knee, scattering the snow that had accumulated there. Uzoth remained unmoving. Several minutes later, the pigeon took flight.

Uzoth's gaze remained fixed on the dark streets below, empty in the middle of the night. Fresh snow lay undisturbed in the cobblestone alley. Come afternoon, much of it would turn to slush beneath the feet of the passers-by.

Above, clouds filled the night sky and fat flakes of white drifted down. Colourful Christmas decorations hung in windows marking the beginning of the festive season. Uzoth had never experienced a Christmas. But he had watched many from above.

As morning approached, the door opened to an apartment where a family of hearth and kitchen witches lived. A witch wearing black robes and a hat stepped out.

"Come on, Kit." Lachlan the witch strode down the stairs to the bakery run by the family of witches. His cat followed.

Uzoth had seen the black stray cat many times wandering the streets, scrounging through trash and hunting for rats. Now he was the witch's pet. As a sentinel, Uzoth

learned much about those he watched.

The bakery's door opened without Lachlan touching it, welcoming the witch within. Light flickered inside the bakery as the witch and cat entered. The door closed behind them.

Silence and stillness returned. After a while, others passed along the alley as they began their day. Uzoth remained watching.

Many years ago he'd guarded a powerful sorceress and her kingdom, shoulder to shoulder with his gargoyle brethren. He'd had a purpose then. And he'd not been alone.

But that time had passed. The sorceress's rotting bones lay beneath the dirt. The kingdom had crumbled to dust. He had no one to protect now. No one to guard. And no one watched beside him.

Now he merely existed in Anorra, a city that had grown from fields where tribes of gnomes once roamed. He watched from rooftops, ready to protect those who might be set upon. But it was no true purpose. He had no true purpose. He'd lost any sense of that long ago. After all, most did not want the help of a terrifying monster.

Over time, his heartbeat slowed. The blood pumped sluggishly through his veins. Movement became difficult. He wondered sometimes if without a purpose, he would turn to stone, never to wake again like the rest of the kin.

Another witch left the apartment, the eldest of them, Grady. The "witch protector," as Uzoth thought of him. Grady paused as he left the apartment, pressing his hand to the door. He whispered an incantation Uzoth could not hear.

But Uzoth sensed the protection magic surging and calling to his gargoyle blood.

After all, protection magic had been used to create Uzoth.

Every door, every window, and every witch in the apartment and bakery had a protection charm or spell placed on them by this particular witch. And it called to Uzoth. He'd felt the magic one day as he flew above the city.

Now he remained close to the protection charms. Being close to them somehow made him feel he was a part of that protection magic and almost had a purpose. Because at his core, that was what the gargoyle wished for, a true purpose. Someone to guard and stand sentinel over. And not only that, but someone to stand with. Then Uzoth would no longer be alone.

## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 2

Conjuring clitweasels and cockmonkeys!

Grady stretched his neck from side to side, trying to alleviate the dull ache in his temples. A muscle twitched beneath his left eye.

He let out a weary breath. "I think we are almost ready to open." He glanced at Leo and Jasper, his identical twin brothers.

From before dawn yesterday, Grady had been here setting up the Magic Bakery stall at the Christmas markets. It had been a long day assembling the wooden stall, setting up the large oven to one side, and then decorating it with garlands, fresh pine, tinsel, and baubles.

Magic bakery stall set up. Check.

Decorations. Check.

Fire lit in the oven. Check.

Grady assessed the pastries, tarts, truffles, and other baked goods lined up on the counter. They made those in the bakery and carried them here as needed.

Ready to sell. Check.

Now they just had to make dough to bake bread fresh at the markets. He stifled a

yawn. After days of preparing and barely sleeping, they were finally ready to open. On the first day, the markets opened late afternoon. They'd open midday throughout the rest of December.

Several protection charms Grady had made hung from the roof. Grady pressed his hand to the wooden wall of the stall, to a sigil he'd carved into it.

"Protect this space. Protect my kin," Grady whispered. Warmth flared beneath his hand as the charm charged, his energy passing into it.

Protection charm charged. Check.

Grady dropped his hand. Hopefully, the rest of the day would run smoothly.

"Shit!" Jasper groaned.

Then again, probably not. Grady's jaw tensed, the muscle beneath his eye fluttering. "What's wrong?"

"We don't have enough flour." Jasper rummaged through their supplies. "We only have enough for...maybe a few hours."

Leo made a face. "That is, if we aren't too busy."

"Fucking frog guts," Grady muttered.

Jasper frowned. "Sorry, Grady. I must have miscounted."

"It's fine." Grady rubbed at the back of his neck, trying to release some of the compounding tension.

“I can go back to the bakery now and get some more. As long as we have enough to cover the time it will take me to get there and back, everything will be fine.”

Jasper nodded. “We should have enough for that.”

“Do we have everything else we need?” The muscle beneath Grady’s eye felt like a butterfly had burrowed beneath his skin and was fluttering as it tried to escape. He hoped no one else could see the twitching muscle.

Jasper glanced down at the supplies. “I think so.”

Still, Grady stepped forward and double-checked. Which was what he should have done earlier instead of relying on Jasper and Leo.

Once certain they only needed flour, Grady straightened. “I’ll go now and be back soon.” Grady opened the side door of the stall and stepped out, not waiting for a response.

He strode through the markets, passing the other stalls still setting up. Soon the crowds would come, marvelling at the picturesque decorated wooden stalls and the Christmas trees towering over them. The scents of roasted nuts, hot chocolate, grilled meats, mulled wine, fried bread, and sugar would meld in the air. As darkness fell, candles along with magicked glowing globes would illuminate the picturesque wintery wonderland.

Grady didn’t give two shits about any of that right now. He had too much fucking work to do.

Cauldrons and clusterfucks. Of course the first day of the Christmas markets wouldn’t go fucking smoothly! When did anything ever go fucking smoothly?

Grady hunched his shoulders as he strode through the falling snow. His temple throbbed, and the muscle beneath his eye wouldn't stop twinging. He rubbed at the muscle, trying to get it to stop to no effect.

Why hadn't he double-checked the crates to make sure they had enough flour? Why had he relied on Jasper and Leo? If he had just checked, then he wouldn't be racing across town to get more.

His stomach grumbled as he walked. When had he last eaten? Fuck if he could remember.

He walked the streets through the city to the quarter where the family bakery lay. He came around the back. He glanced up and spotted the gargoyle squatting on the rooftop, gaze fixed on the alley below. Horns twisted above his head, and wings curled around him.

Everyone in the neighbourhood knew of the gargoyle who lived in the district. He had arrived sometime in the last ten years after Grady's parents' death. After Grady had become responsible for his nine younger siblings.

A pigeon flew, passing before the gargoyle, fluttering down into the alley.

Grady paused his strides. "Archimedes?"

Archimedes, his brother Briar's familiar, landed on the cobblestones. Grady spotted the canister, which meant a note from Briar.

He held in a sigh.

What did Briar want now?

Grady leaned down and removed the canister from Archimedes's leg. He took the note and unfurled it.

"Can't work tonight. Found an injured dog in my cave. I need to care for it. I'll stay here overnight," Briar had scrawled.

The dull ache in Grady's temples twisted into a sharp stabbing pain behind his eyes. The muscle beneath his eye intensified its twitching.

Pissing potions. Another fucking thing to deal with.

Instead of going into the bakery, he ran upstairs to their apartment. He opened the door and strode to the desk. He grabbed a small piece of paper and wrote, "Bring the dog back to the house. I don't want you sleeping in your cave in winter."

Archimedes had followed him and perched on the back of a chair. Grady rolled up the paper, placed it in the canister, and attached it to Archimedes's leg. He picked up Archimedes and took him outside.

"All right, back you go to Briar." Grady threw Archimedes into the air. The grey pigeon circled twice in the air before flying in the direction of the cave, passing the gargoyle, who remained exactly where he'd been several minutes ago. He hadn't moved an inch.

Sometimes, when Grady had a moment to breathe, he'd stare up and see if he could catch the gargoyle moving. He never had.

But sometimes the gargoyle would be on one rooftop. At other times, another. So he must move. Still, the gargoyle often remained here above the alley out back of their bakery and apartment.

Grady shook his head. He didn't have time to stare at the gargoyle. He placed his hand on the sigil on the apartment door. "Protect our hearth. Protect our home. Protect my kin wherever they roam." Heat flared as the energy passed from him into the spell.

He sprinted down the stairs and entered the bakery. He gave a quick glance around at his siblings at work. Customers lined up at the counter in the front. Cas, Lacy, and Jack all served whilst Trent worked in the back.

Trent glanced up from kneading dough. "Hey." He smiled. "How is it going at the Christmas markets?"

"We don't have enough flour to get through the day," Grady said. "And I know you've got tonight off. But can you work the Christmas markets? Briar is looking after a feral dog in his cave."

Trent's eyes widened. "What is Briar doing?"

Grady shrugged. "I don't know. The dog is injured or something. Can you do it?"

"Sure. But I'm meant to be getting Ordellia some stuff from the grocer's after work." Trent wiped his hands on his apron, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a piece of paper. Ordellia was their sister and had a baby.

Grady took the note. "I can do that after I drop the flour off at the markets."

"Then no problem. I can cover for Briar."

"Thanks." Grady grabbed a crate and began to place bags of flour into it. He might need to make a few trips back and forth. Especially if he didn't want to break his back by carrying too much. He was only thirty, and already it felt like his body was

crumbling apart.

Grady paused and counted the number of bags of flour they had remaining in the bakery. How long until he'd need to order more from the supplier? Grady held in a sigh. The bloody cost of flour had once again increased recently.

Something to do with production costs. Just another fucking thing for Grady to worry about. At least they made more money during the Christmas season. The stall at the markets brought in good coin. And the bakery itself was busier. Many wanted baked goods to celebrate the holiday season.

But it meant long hours and lots of work. Much of which fell on Grady's too-tense shoulders.

Maybe he needed to try to find a new supplier. Someone cheaper and more affordable so it wouldn't eat up so much of their profits. But he didn't have time to find a new supplier. Maybe after Christmas.

"Archimedes is here," Trent said.

Archimedes sat on the windowsill outside, peering in, the canister attached to his leg. Grady gritted his teeth, really hoping Briar was agreeing with Grady and telling him he'd be back home with the dog tonight. He did not want to be worrying about Briar out in the forest in bloody winter.

Grady strode to the door and went out. He took the note. It read, "Dog is unconscious and is too big to bring back."

Grady took a slow breath, in and out. In and out. The muscle trembled violently beneath his eye. He shouldn't be angry. Briar was just being a caring and loving witch. He was being a good witch. It was what their parents would have wanted. It

was what Grady should have wanted for his younger brother.

But sometimes, Grady really fucking wished that just one day would go smoothly with no complications or things he needed to deal with. He rolled his shoulders.

He hated Briar staying in the forest overnight. He didn't mind so much in summer or spring. But in winter, a sudden snowstorm could be the death of his younger brother. His throat spasmed.

Thankfully, Briar, like all Grady's siblings, wore a protection charm. And Grady had put a shit ton of protection charms and spells on Briar's cave.

Although, when was the last time Grady had been out there to recharge them? He paused. Grady really should go out there to check them. He closed his eyes, head dropping back as he added one more thing to the never-ending to-do list.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes. He stared straight at the gargoyle above. The gargoyle stared back at him.

Had the gargoyle moved? Or had Grady just positioned himself directly in the gargoyle's line of sight?

"Everything all right?" Trent asked from the doorway.

Grady dropped his gaze to the note in his hand. "Fucking brilliant," Grady muttered, too low for Trent to hear. "Everything is fine," he said louder. Then Grady sprinted up the stairs to write a return note to Briar.

### CHAPTER 3

“Protect this hearth. Protect this home. Protect my kin wherever they roam.” Grady’s energy flowed into the charm, hand warming.

He lifted his hand off the sigil carved into the wood. He knocked on the door. A few seconds later, the door opened, revealing Ordella holding her baby, Ruthie, in her arms.

“Did you just charge the charm?” Ordella asked in lieu of a greeting. She frowned at the sigil. “You know it was still practically fully charged from when you charged it two days ago. You shouldn’t charge them so often. It will diminish your energy and strength.” Her eyes flicked over him. “You look so tired.”

“Well, thanks.” Grady gave a weary smile. “And you’re one to talk.” Grady took in Ordella. Bags lined her eyes. Her hair hung messy and wild around her shoulders. “And is that vomit on your shoulder?”

“Probably.” Ordella glanced down at herself. “And I’m allowed to look tired! I have a baby who doesn’t sleep!”

“Fair enough.” Grady paused. “Anything I can do to help?”

She gave him a look. “No. I don’t want your help. I just want you to rest more and work less. And also stop using your energy to charge those damn charms so often. They don’t need it.” She frowned. “You really do look tired, Grady. More so than usual.”

Grady shrugged. "I'm fine."

Ordelia's nose wrinkled. Ordelia, like his other siblings, didn't fully understand his obsession with the protection charms and spells.

But of course, they hadn't been there that day. They couldn't still smell the blood or hear the crunching of bone.

Grady lifted the paper bag. "I brought you groceries."

"What happened to Trent?" She stepped aside, gesturing for him to come in.

Grady placed the groceries down by the door on the inside of the apartment. But he shook his head. "I can't come in. I've got to get back to the bakery. And Trent is working the Christmas markets tonight to cover for Briar, don't ask, so I offered to bring you groceries."

Michael, Ordelia's stepson, appeared, wrapping his arms around Ordelia's legs. He smiled at Grady, revealing several missing teeth.

"Hey, Michael." Grady smiled.

"Hi, Uncle Grady," Michael said softly.

"You being a good big brother to Ruthie?"

Michael nodded his horned head.

Ordelia placed a hand on his hair. "He is an excellent older brother."

Michael's grin widened.

A year and a half ago, Ordellia had married Tony, a faun widower with a young son. Ordellia still worked in the bakery. But less frequently now that she had a baby and a stepson to look after.

“Are their charms still good?” Grady’s gaze flicked to the woven protection bands he’d made that wrapped around his nephew and niece’s wrists.

“They are fine, Grady!” Ordellia rolled her eyes.

Grady’s hand twitched. “I can charge them.”

“No!” Ordellia said firmly. “I don’t want you draining yourself of magic more than needed.”

Grady clenched his hand. For some reason, he just liked the protection charms to always be fully charged. If something happened to one of his siblings, or his nephew or niece, and their protection charm hadn’t been in place, he’d never be able to live with himself.

The protection charms his family wore weren’t foolproof against all dangers. For example, they weren’t particularly good against intentional attacks. But they provided pretty good protection from some things, like accidents.

The metallic scent of blood lingered in his nostrils.

“The charms are charged enough,” Ordellia said firmly.

Reluctantly, Grady relented with a nod.

She gave him a gentle smile. “Thank you for bringing the groceries.”

“Of course.” Grady nodded. “I’ll see you soon. Bye, Michael.” He rubbed the boy’s head. “Bye, Ruthie.” He glanced at his niece before turning away.

“Love you, Grady,” Ordellia called out.

“Love you too,” Grady called back.

Out of all his siblings, he was closest to Ordellia. And as pleased as he was that she was happily married, he missed her. Although, their five-bedroom apartment could definitely handle nine siblings better than ten.

He walked the short distance to the Magic Bakery. He’d work a few hours in the bakery before returning to the Christmas markets.

In the back, Grady took out the ingredients to make a hearty nut loaf. Grady’s speciality was bread. Particularly bread meant for those who might work dangerous or risky jobs. He had a protection affinity; thus the food he made provided some protection to those who ate it.

Some witches were born with their affinity, some developed it, and some never had an affinity. His protection affinity had developed soon after his parents died.

He lost himself in the motion of kneading the dough in his hands, focusing his attention and his energy. For the first time that day, Grady felt like he could breathe. Even the muscle twitching beneath his eye receded. His mind focused on the task and the intent, not worrying about a million other things that needed his attention.

Protect those who eat this. May they be safe from danger and harm.

This sort of magic didn’t require the same level of energy as the protection charms.

His parents, uncle, and aunt had taught him to bake. Unfortunately, his uncle and aunt were giant dickheads who'd left them in the lurch when they got jobs as fancy servants in rich houses. They'd not even helped him and his siblings when their parents died.

As he kneaded, some of the tension released from his neck and shoulders. Grady wished he could just bake all day.

But that wasn't his role in the family. He was the eldest, and therefore he was the head of the family. Since the moment his parents died, he'd taken charge and done what needed doing.

After closing the bakery, Grady pressed his hand to the sigil on the door. "Protect our hearth. Protect our home. Protect my kin wherever they roam." A flare of warmth and his energy flowed.

"Didn't you already charge that today?" Cas laughed. His wings fluttered, feet hovering above the ground. He carried several crates of baked goods.

Grady nodded and picked up his crates. "Can never be too careful."

Grady didn't mind the teasing. Not if the charms protected his siblings even a little bit. He thought of what Ordellia had said, about charging them too often. But he just couldn't stand not charging them constantly, even if it wasn't needed.

What if he forgot one day? Or something happened to him that meant he couldn't charge them as needed?

No. He would keep charging them as he saw fit.

He supposed he could make the charms less complicated. But he didn't like the

thought of that either. A simple charm on the bakery or homes would keep out everyone except those who knew the deactivation incantation.

It would even work at the front door of the bakery. They could activate it at night to keep people out. And then deactivate it in the morning so customers could come in. Then the other doors would just always need someone to know the deactivation incantation to get in.

That sort of straightforward magic would take less energy to create and maintain.

Grady glanced at Cas, his adopted pixie brother. He dressed all in silver, the self-proclaimed Christmas pixie. One night years ago, Cas, an orphan living on the streets, had wandered into the bakery because he saw Christmas decorations in the window. He'd just opened the door and walked in.

A simple charm would not have allowed Cas in. The pixie boy would have remained starving in the snow. He'd have never become part of their family.

And the dog Briar currently cared for would not have been able to seek shelter in Briar's cave if he'd used basic protection charms.

So Grady made them complicated. They kept out most, only welcoming family and also those in need of help, as long as they meant no harm to the family. No deactivation incantation needed. Just a lot of energy.

Cas and Grady made their way down the alley in the direction of the Christmas markets. Jack, Lacy, and Trent had gone ahead a while ago. As he walked, Grady glanced up and spotted the gargoyle, exactly where he'd been the last time he looked.

That night, Grady worked until the Christmas markets closed. They packed up, and Grady sent the others home. He'd stayed back, as the oven had been playing up

towards the end of the night.

He'd tried to work out the issue. But in the end, he'd given up, since he could barely think straight. Tomorrow, he'd just have to come in before the Christmas markets opened to check it out. Hopefully, he could fix it himself and wouldn't need to spend money on repairs.

After taking the earnings from the day and tucking them into his coat, he walked the streets back to the bakery. His body aching with exhaustion, his feet trudged through the recently fallen snow.

Fuck, I want my bed.

And it was only the first of December, the first day of the busiest season for the family. He had the rest of the month to get through.

Maybe after he fixed the oven tomorrow, the rest of the day would run smoothly. Maybe there would be no problems with supplies, nothing forgotten, no siblings unable to work, no broken equipment, and no issues whatsoever.

Grady huffed. Probably not. At least it wasn't snowing too much tonight.

Briar would hopefully be all right in his cave. Hopefully, the feral dog hadn't attacked him. But Briar said he'd found the dog in the cave, so the dog probably wasn't a threat; otherwise, Grady's protection charm would have kept him out.

His limbs dragged. The muscle beneath his left eye wouldn't stop twitching. Thankfully, he'd be home in a couple of minutes. Then he could sink into his bed.

He passed a goblin and a cyclops in a side alley. They spoke in low voices and glanced his way.

Grady's stomach grumbled, gnawing at his spine. He'd managed a few bites of food during the night. But he needed to eat more. He needed to eat and get a good night's sleep. Then his body would stop hurting, his brain wouldn't feel like mush, his head would stop throbbing, the muscle would stop twitching, and everything would be fine. Just fucking fine.

Grady shook his head. He might be able to manage to get enough food when he got home. But he knew he'd not get enough sleep. He'd probably not get enough sleep until after Christmas, and maybe not even then.

Footsteps sounded behind him. He glanced into a window he passed. In the reflection, he saw the cyclops and goblin walking behind him.

Are they following me?

The cyclops pointed at Grady's back. A tendril of panic unfurled in his gut. Grady lengthened his strides.

The cyclops and goblin increased their pace.

Grady ran.

So did they.

### CHAPTER 4

U zoth turned his head, staring over the rooftops. He'd heard a cry. Wings unfurling, he straightened his legs and stood. With a flap of his wings, he launched himself into the air, heading in the direction of the cry.

A few apartment buildings over, he peered down into a dark side alley. The witch Grady lay on the ground. Two attackers loomed over him, a goblin and a cyclops. The goblin kicked Grady in the stomach.

Grady cried out, curling in on himself.

Rage flooded Uzoth's body.

The cyclops leaned down and grabbed something from inside Grady's open coat. Grady didn't even try to stop him.

Uzoth dived. He snarled, and the goblin and cyclops turned towards him, eyes widening as he opened his clawed hands.

Giving them no time to react, he gripped the cyclops by the neck and the goblin by the front of his coat. He lifted them into the air as his own taloned feet pressed into the cobblestones.

He bared his fangs. The goblin cried out. The cyclops feebly struggled against Uzoth's clawed grip around his neck.

“Drop whatever you took,” Uzoth’s voice rumbled as he spoke for the first time in months. He stared into the cyclops’s single beady eye.

The cyclops dropped the bag.

Uzoth looked between them. “If I have to intervene and stop either of you from harming another again, I promise you will not survive.”

The stench of their terror filled his nostrils. Growling, he cast them aside onto the ground. They stumbled to their feet and ran away. Uzoth watched them disappear from sight. Then Uzoth turned towards Grady.

The witch lay propped up on his side, one arm across his stomach, staring up at Uzoth. His mouth hung open, but he did not seem to fear Uzoth, unlike all those Uzoth had saved before.

Uzoth reached down and picked up the bag the cyclops had tried to steal from Grady. He stepped forward. Grady kept his gaze on Uzoth’s face, still no fear filled his grey eyes.

Uzoth held out the bag.

“Thank you,” Grady said, voice hoarse. He rose to his feet. Then stumbled forward.

Uzoth reached out and caught him by the waist. Grady’s hands gripped Uzoth’s bare arms. The warmth of Grady’s palms and fingers penetrated the cold of Uzoth’s skin.

Grady swayed. Uzoth tightened his grip.

After a second’s consideration, Uzoth said, “You are unwell and incapable of walking home. I shall carry you.” Then he bent down and lifted Grady into his arms.

Grady made a noise as Uzoth flew into the air. Grady stared down at the buildings below, eyes wide.

“You are all right. I have you,” Uzoth assured him.

A moment later, Uzoth landed in the alley behind the apartment. He marched up the stairs. When he glanced down at Grady’s face, he was surprised to see the man had passed out.

Humans truly are such fragile creatures.

At the door, Uzoth could feel the protection charm. “I mean him no harm. I mean to help. Allow me to enter so I can take care of him.”

The charm seemed to consider. Then the door swung open. Uzoth entered.

Uzoth glanced around the room. None of the other witches could be seen in the main room. They must all be asleep in the rooms behind the doors. Humans tended to sleep at night. That was what most creatures did at night.

Uzoth stepped into the room. The door shut behind him.

He counted five doors. Should he wake someone to assist Grady? He did not know the correct way to proceed. Several chairs and a long settee clustered around a fireplace. Only dying embers burned within.

Uzoth strode to the settee and placed Grady down. He then set the bag down on the floor. He stared down at Grady for several moments. The man’s chest rose and fell. Not dead, then. Just sleeping.

Now what do I do?

Several blankets lay scattered on chairs. He collected them and placed them over Grady. Humans must be kept warm. They did not like the cold and could even die from it.

With that thought in mind, he went to the fireplace and got the fire going again. When the flames danced and licked along the logs, he stood.

But what else did humans have need of?

Sustenance. They needed food and water.

Uzoth had no experience with either. Not really. He did not need to eat or drink to survive. Although, he had drunk from a fountain once.

Uzoth spotted a jug of water on a table, along with a couple of cups. He filled a cup with water, then brought both the jug and cup and placed them next to the settee. He then found some bread and a pouch of salt mixed with bits and pieces of things Uzoth did not recognise. He placed those on the floor beside Grady.

Having located and provided food and drink, Uzoth took a step back, staring at him.

Will the witch be all right?

Uzoth did not wish to leave the human alone. He could hear snores from behind the doors. Still, no one stirred. He considered waking someone again. But he felt strangely reluctant to give up protecting the man.

I will watch him until he wakes. I will guard him.

The minutes ticked by. Uzoth did not move. He just stood and watched the man sleeping. Grady's cheeks flushed in sleep.

Uzoth stood completely still, gaze fixed on Grady.

Finally, after a couple of hours, Grady's eyes blinked open.

### CHAPTER 5

Grady's stomach ached. His ribs ached. Sweat covered his body.

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

Horny hexes and witch's tits!

The gargoyle loomed over Grady, filling his vision.

Grady couldn't think, couldn't make sense of anything. All he could do was stare at the gargoyle in his home.

Grady was by no means a short man, but the gargoyle would have been almost a head higher than himself. The glow from the fire flickered on the gargoyle's chiselled jaw. Sharp fangs peeked out from dark lips. Thick horns protruded from his forehead, twisting upwards. Long black hair framed his face, ending mid-chest.

He remained completely motionless, thick arms crossed over a well-defined torso and stomach. He wore nothing but a loincloth over his groin and upper thighs, the rest of his grey muscled legs on full display. Taloned claws pressed into the wooden floor.

The gargoyle's wings remained tucked behind him right now. But Grady had seen those dark wings open wide, flapping as the gargoyle carried Grady through the air. Then what had happened? Grady had grown dizzy and then...nothing. He must have passed out, and the gargoyle must have looked after him.

The gargoyle's black gaze fixed on Grady. But Grady remembered those eyes glowing bright red in the alley when the gargoyle saved him from the goblin and cyclops who'd attacked him.

"You saved me," Grady said when he finally found his voice.

Slowly, the gargoyle uncrossed his arms and lifted his chin.

It was the first time he'd seen the gargoyle move despite all the times he'd stared up at him on the rooftops above.

But of course, that wasn't true. He'd just seen the gargoyle move as he'd defended Grady in the alley.

"You were attacked and in need. I intervened," the gargoyle said, his voice deep and rumbling. Grady imagined the gargoyle sounded like what stone would be if it came alive and spoke. It sent a shiver down Grady's spine.

"Thank you," Grady said, still in shock.

The gargoyle bowed his head, the movement glacially slow. So different from the lightning-fast attack on the goblin and cyclops.

"You are not afraid of me," the gargoyle stated.

"You saved me," Grady pointed out. "Why would I fear you?" He tried to prop himself up. But his stomach spasmed with pain, and all the blankets on top of him weighed him down.

"I have saved many in this city. They still fear me afterwards when they look upon my terrifying countenance. I am monstrous to behold," the gargoyle said, tone

measured and devoid of inflexion.

“Well, you can definitely be scary, especially when you are fighting someone,” Grady acknowledged. Then he shrugged. “But I’ve always found your presence kind of reassuring, seeing you up there looking down on us, watching us. That’s what gargoyles are meant to do, right? Watch and protect.”

Grady felt sure he’d heard that before. Of course, he couldn’t remember where. “Or is that just a myth or something?”

The gargoyle didn’t speak for several moments. “It is true. Gargoyles were called into being to act as sentinels and guard those within our protection. That was my purpose.” The gargoyle straightened his arm and pointed down. “I located food and drink.” He paused. “I believe humans require such things for sustenance.”

“We do.” Grady glanced down at the water, bread, and...the mix of salt, flour, ash, and spices they sprinkled when performing magic rituals.

Grady suppressed a laugh. He didn’t think it wise to laugh at the gargoyle who’d rescued him for mistaking that mixture for food. And it wasn’t a completely ridiculous assumption; after all, it did include mostly foodstuff.

“Thank you,” Grady said.

Once again, Grady realised how hot he was. Sweat clung to his skin. His cheeks and whole body flushed. And no wonder—six blankets lay on top of him, a small fire flickered and burned in the fireplace, and he still wore his coat. And boots.

The gargoyle must have carried him in, placed him on the settee, then covered him in blankets and brought him food. He looked at the gargoyle, touched to think of this intimidating, powerful being showing him such care.

Grady froze as panic flared in his chest.

“How did you get in? The charm should not have let you in.” Grady stared at the door, heart racing. What if it failed at other times? What if it let in someone who might harm his siblings?

His protection charms should have kept the gargoyle out. The spell on the apartment should have only let in those in the family or made an exception for those in great need and who meant no harm.

“Your charm worked fine,” the gargoyle said. “I told it I meant to help you. Then the door opened.”

Grady sat frozen for a moment, trying to think that through. He’d not written that into the charm. But he had designed the charm to adapt.

Though he was still feeling a little unsettled, his body relaxed. After all, if it had been one of his siblings who was injured and rescued by the gargoyle, he’d want the apartment to let them in.

“I can leave, if that is your wish,” the gargoyle said.

“No!” Grady shook his head. “No, stay. I just want to make sure my charms aren’t defective.” Grady tugged some of the blankets off himself. He paused, his head swimming with the movement.

Was I hit on the head? He didn’t think so. His ribs, shoulder, and stomach hurt the most. He’d fallen hard on his shoulder. And they’d kicked him in the ribs and stomach. He imagined he’d passed out from a combination of exhaustion, lack of food, and being overcome by the attack.

He reached down and took off his boots, dropping them onto the floor. Then he tugged off his coat. He struggled, the action taking far more effort than it should. The movement sent twinges of sharp pain where he'd been injured. But it felt a lot better once he'd removed his shoes and jacket.

Feeling less encumbered and sweltering, he reached for the water. He took several deep gulps, wetting his parched throat. Then he grabbed the bread. He noticed the bag of today's earnings on the ground. A wave of relief washed over him as he realised his attackers had not stolen the money.

He glanced at the gargoyle. He'd not moved.

"What's your name?" Grady asked. "I've seen you around a lot. But I don't know your name."

"Uzoth," the gargoyle said.

"Well, thanks for rescuing me, Uzoth. I would have been completely fucked if you hadn't arrived when you did. I'm Grady." Grady took a bite of the soft buttery bread and chewed. His stomach gurgled as if now that food was imminent, it awoke with a raging vengeance.

He gobbled the bread down and drank more water, filling his cup from the jug. "Fuck, I needed that."

"Humans are fragile beings. How do you fare now?" Uzoth asked.

Grady chuckled, lying back down. "I suppose we are fragile. Especially compared to you." Grady looked at the gargoyle, his grey skin looking rough but also smooth, like polished stone.

He thought of what the gargoyle had said, of his countenance being terrifying. About him being monstrous. Grady could definitely see him as terrifying. But he didn't find him unappealing to look at. In fact, he kind of liked looking at the gargoyle. "I'm feeling better now."

The food and water settled in his belly. The overbearing heat of earlier had turned into a cosy warmth. He yawned as weariness tugged at his spine. "I am bloody tired though." His eyelids felt heavy.

"Then rest," Uzoth said.

Grady stared up at him, feeling surprisingly comfortable beneath his intense, unblinking gaze. "Maybe I will."

Grady should tell Uzoth he could leave; after all, Grady was safe in his apartment now. Still, he didn't say anything. Strangely, he liked Uzoth here, watching over and protecting Grady.

He let his eyes drift shut for just a second. He'd open them in a moment.

But when he opened his eyes, Uzoth was gone.

Grady glanced around the room but saw no sign of the gargoyle. The fire had almost died. Darkness still lay beyond the window.

And another loaf of bread sat beside him.

Smiling, Grady reached down and grabbed it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:09 am*

### CHAPTER 6

Motionless but ready to swoop into action should the need arise, Uzoth gazed into the alley behind the bakery.

The snow fell and settled against his skin. The warmth from the apartment bled from his skin as the cold returned, sliding its fingers deep into his core.

After a while, the door to the apartment opened. Lachlan and Kit came out and walked down to the bakery. The sky began to lighten. A couple more of Grady's siblings, the twin brothers, left the apartment and also went into the bakery.

Uzoth remained still and watchful.

Then Grady stepped out of the apartment.

Uzoth's skin prickled. Grady pressed his hand to the closed door, whispered, and charged the protection charm.

Grady looked up. He saw Uzoth. He smiled and gave a small wave.

Uzoth stared down at Grady, uncertain how to respond to the gesture.

Should I wave back?

Uzoth considered. But whilst he pondered whether he should wave in return, Grady dropped his gaze, ran down the stairs, and entered the bakery.

A sense of disappointment settled inside Uzoth's chest. He'd never been greeted with a wave before. It had not been the gargoyle way. Nor had it been the way of the great sorceress who had created him.

What was the appropriate way to respond to such a greeting? He supposed the human way to respond, which was also the way of many creatures, would have been to wave back. But Uzoth was not a human or a being that waved.

So what should he have done? And if Grady waved again, what should Uzoth do?

Uzoth did not wish to offend the witch.

Uzoth watched those who walked through the alley, continuing to ponder. After an hour of thinking, Uzoth decided he would wave back if Grady greeted him in such a manner again.

After a while, Grady exited the bakery. Uzoth prepared to wave. But although Grady glanced up and smiled, he did not wave.

Had Uzoth offended him by not returning the first gesture? Uzoth hoped he had not.

Uzoth had been alone and without any true contact with anyone for so long. He did not wish to have offended the first being he'd had contact with in all those years.

Last night, Uzoth had spoken. He'd used his voice, and not just for a couple of sentences to warn off an attacker or to tell the victim they were safe before said victim then fled him in terror.

He had spoken full sentences to Grady. And Grady had spoken to him with no fear or terror in his gaze. He'd thanked Uzoth. And when Uzoth offered to leave, Grady had protested. He'd wanted Uzoth to stay.

A strange feeling bloomed in his chest, a loosening of tension he'd not known was there.

Throughout the day, Grady passed below Uzoth a few times, always glancing up and smiling. But not waving again.

Had Uzoth missed his chance?

The sun moved low across the horizon until the darkness grew and the sun set completely. Fewer pedestrians walked the streets. Several of Grady's siblings returned home.

Grady had not. Which was not unusual. Still, considering what had occurred the previous night, Uzoth remained on alert.

Finally, he spotted Grady coming down the alley. He looked up and stared at Uzoth. He smiled. When he had gotten close to the stairs to his apartment, he didn't go up like he usually would. He paused in the alley below, staring straight up at Uzoth.

He waved.

This time, Uzoth was ready. He lifted his hand into the air and moved it from side to side.

Grady's smile widened. Then he gestured differently. Uzoth recognised it as a beckoning gesture. Uzoth's hand remained motionless in the air.

Did Grady wish for him to come down? Truly?

Slowly, Uzoth rose from his squatted position. He stretched his wings. He flew down, landing before Grady.

“Good evening,” Uzoth said, feeling uncertain.

“Hello, Uzoth. You were gone when I left this morning, and I wanted to say thank you again for saving me.” Grady placed his hands on his waist. “If you hadn’t come along, those guys would have taken the earnings from the Christmas markets yesterday. I would have been completely fucked if they’d managed that. So thanks.”

“I am glad I was of assistance.” Uzoth bowed. “And how do you fare today?”

“Better.” Grady rubbed his shoulder. “My shoulders are still a bitch. And my ribs and stomach ache, but it’s not too bad. I’ll be fine in no time. It would have been a lot worse if you hadn’t come along.”

The human did look better. He stood straight and did not appear too badly injured. And unlike last night, he spoke faster and clearer. Dark smudges still marked the skin beneath his eyes, but he did not waver on his feet.

“It’s pretty cold out here, you want to come up?” Grady asked.

“I am used to the cold.” Uzoth had gotten used to so many things over the years. With his brethren gone, he had been alone for so many years. He had gotten used to that aching loneliness. But now here he was, speaking to Grady, a human witch.

“Well, do you want to come in anyway?” Grady asked. “I’m fucking wrecked. but I still need to eat something before I drop into bed. I could make us a hot cup of tea and scrounge up some food. It’s not much, but it’s a bit of a thank-you for saving me.”

“I do not require food or drink for sustenance,” Uzoth said. “The magic that created me sustains me still.”

“I see,” Grady said slowly.

“But I will accept the invitation to come into your home.” The thought of being with Grady in that warm room appealed. “Thank you.”

### CHAPTER 7

Grady felt dead on his feet. He wanted to shovel some food into his mouth and collapse into bed. Still, Grady was glad he'd invited Uzoth into his apartment. He'd wanted to thank him properly. He pushed the door open and moved aside, allowing Uzoth to enter.

Uzoth took two steps in, stopped, and gazed around the space.

Grady closed the door and took off his coat and heavy boots. "Make yourself comfortable."

Uzoth looked at him. "I am well at ease."

Grady's lips tugged up into a smile. "Take a seat, then."

Uzoth stared at the chairs for several moments, as if not sure what to make of them. He walked towards a backless chair by the fire and sat. Uzoth did not look particularly comfortable; he leaned forward, clawed hands braced on his knees as if he'd spring forward into action at a moment's notice.

"I'll put on some tea."

The fire had almost died out now that Grady's siblings had gone to bed. He brought it back to life with a couple of logs. He heated water in the cauldron and added valerian root and dried chamomile, which would assist with relaxation and sleep. Although, Grady assumed he'd be out in a split second when he finally lay down.

Then he went to the sideboard and collected two cups and a plate. He piled on some different pastries and a couple of pies, leftovers from the bakery that day.

He brought them over and placed them on the tea-table in front of the chairs. Then he strained their tea into the cups.

“I know you said you don’t drink or eat. But I’d be a rude host not to at least provide you with something. After all, I am a hearth and kitchen witch. My parents would have scolded me if I were a bad host.” Grady gestured to the tea and food. “So help yourself to some tea, pastries, or pie. But no harm if you don’t.”

Then Grady collapsed onto the chair and let out a relieved moan to finally be off his feet. He cradled the warm cup of tea in his hand. Lifting the mug, he inhaled the fragrant brew and took a sip of the soothing blend. He let out a deep sigh.

Uzoth stared at the cup of tea on the table. Then he reached out and lifted it in his massive hand. He peered into the liquid surface and then took a sip.

“How is it?” Grady asked.

“Hot.” Uzoth paused as if considering. “Pleasant.” He took another sip. “I have not drunk in many years. The last time I drank was at the command of the Great Sorceress Rassala to drink from the enchanted waters of the Fountain of Life in order to obtain immortality.”

“Oh.” Grady didn’t quite know how to respond to that information. “I see.” And honestly, he was too tired to do anything but make the simplest of small talk. Discussions regarding a great sorceress, enchanted waters, and immortality were beyond him at present.

Grady let out a laugh. “I suppose this tea is very different from the waters of the

Fountain of Life.” Grady reached forward and took a pastry. He bit into the flaky, buttery layers. Sweet strawberry jam slid across his taste-buds as he chewed and swallowed.

“This tea is far more pleasant.” Uzoth drank some more. “The water from the fountain tasted sour, bitter, and metallic.”

“Well, I’m glad the tea is nicer than that.” Grady ate another pastry, this one filled with apricot jam.

He stared at Uzoth sitting by the fire in his apartment, on a faded floral chair, and drinking tea. He almost laughed at the surreality of the situation.

Uzoth turned and stared into the flames. The orange-and-gold fire blazed in the fireplace, and it reflected on Uzoth’s well-defined cheekbones, jaw, and dark eyes. Uzoth was actually kind of handsome, in a strange, terrifying kind of way.

“Is the fire too hot?” Grady asked.

“No. The warmth seeps into my skin.” Uzoth paused. “It is pleasant.”

Grady grabbed a meat pie and bit into it. A comfortable silence filled the air. Grady’s body sank into the chair as the weariness of the day caught up with him. And tomorrow would no doubt be another busy day.

He’d even slept in later this morning. He’d gone to his room after he woke alone on the settee. He’d only planned to sleep a couple more hours. But he’d slept late. As a result, the day had been even more hectic. He let out a groan.

Uzoth turned towards him. “Does something trouble you?”

Grady huffed. “Something is always troubling me. But it’s nothing I’m not used to handling.”

Uzoth stared at him. He didn’t speak, just stared as if waiting for Grady to continue. And something about that patient, steady gaze prompted Grady to talk.

“It’s nothing really. Just every day there is so much to do. Especially at Christmas. We’ve got the Christmas markets, and the bakery is so busy. And if everything ran smoothly, it would be fine.” Grady shook his head. “But nothing ever runs fucking smoothly. And I’m always the one to fix the problems.

“Like today, our oven at the Christmas market is playing up. I think I managed to fix it. I hope I did.” Grady sighed. “But who knows? Maybe it will be fucked tomorrow. Or something new will be wrong with it. And Briar, he’s staying out in the forest again tonight to look after some wounded dog he found.”

“Briar,” Uzoth said. “The one with the pigeon familiar.”

Grady frowned. “You know him?”

“I see much when I am watching from above.”

“That makes sense. Well, Briar asked for tomorrow off to care for the dog. So I’ll need to make sure we’ve got his shifts covered. And Lacy is out at a party tonight with her new girlfriend of the week.” Grady stared into the flames. “She’s only nineteen, and I worry about her being out so late so often. But she’s a hard worker.” He paused. “She deserves some fun.”

Then Grady turned and faced Uzoth. “Sorry, you don’t want to hear me prattling on like some whiny cockhead.”

Uzoth lifted his chin ever so slightly. “I am pleased to hear you speak, Grady. It has been a long time since someone spoke to me.”

Grady stared into Uzoth’s black eyes. Was Uzoth lonely? He’d not considered that the gargoyle could be. He’d always seemed so strong and intimidating in his solitude sitting on the rooftops. Grady had not once considered the formidable gargoyle might long for company.

“You are the eldest of your siblings,” Uzoth said. “You are their protector.”

Grady made a face. “I try.”

Uzoth must have worked out he was the eldest from watching them. Which should have been creepy. But honestly, it felt kind of reassuring to know Uzoth kept an eye on him and his kin.

“I see much. And I see you. You do more than simply try, Witch Grady,” Uzoth said in his deep voice.

Goosebumps appeared on Grady’s arms despite the warmth of the fire.

“Your protection charms are strong,” Uzoth said. “You keep your siblings safe. You care for and watch over them. Your siblings listen to you. They respect you.”

Grady’s throat tightened, and his lungs constricted. Was that what this powerful being saw? Because most days, Grady felt like he failed his siblings constantly.

“You exhaust yourself to care for others. You work early. You work late. Your protection charms drain you.” Uzoth paused. “You always look out for your siblings. I wonder, who looks after you?”

Grady let out a laugh, shaking his head. “I don’t need looking after.”

The gargoyle’s eyes bore into him. The fire crackled, filling the silence. “Witch Grady, I hope it eases some of your worries to know I will watch over you and your kin from above.”

Grady sucked in a breath. “It does.” Grady’s fingers on the teacup tightened at Uzothe’s words. “Thank you.” But the words felt inadequate on his lips.

### CHAPTER 8

The next day, Uzoth remained on the rooftop above the bakery. He watched the siblings come and go. He watched Grady. Each time Grady passed, the witch smiled and waved up at him. Uzoth waved back.

And of course, each time Grady left the bakery or apartment, he charged the protection spell on the door. The heat of the apartment had left Uzoth shortly after he'd left the apartment the night before. At first, he'd found the cold less bearable than it usually was.

The previous night, they'd spoken until Grady could barely keep his eyes open. Uzoth had risen. "You must sleep," he had said, though he felt reluctant to leave Grady's company.

But before Uzoth had left, Grady asked, "Will you come down again tomorrow night?"

And that invitation kept the warmth steady in Uzoth's chest despite the cold of the air and the snow resting on his skin.

His talons pressed into ceramic tiles as he squatted on the roof. Time moved slower than usual. But eventually, night descended. And finally, hours later, Grady made his way home with several of his siblings from the Christmas markets.

Grady didn't look up as he walked down the alley. For a few long terrible seconds, Uzoth thought Grady would not look up at all. Perhaps he did not remember the

invitation he'd extended to Uzoth. Maybe he no longer wished to spend time with a monstrous gargoyle.

But then Grady stopped walking. The siblings walked on ahead, as if not realising Grady had stopped. But then Jack, Grady's brother, called back, "You coming, Grady?"

"In a moment," Grady said.

Jack entered the apartment and closed the door.

Then Grady looked up. He smiled. Relief unfurled inside Uzoth, and he flew down.

"Ready to come in?" Grady asked.

"Will I disturb your siblings?" Uzoth glanced towards the apartment door.

Grady laughed. "Not at all." He walked up the stairs.

Uzoth followed. "My appearance may frighten them."

Grady glanced back. "They'll be fine," he said, smiling softly.

When they entered, Grady's sister Lacy rose from the cauldron over the fire. "There is some peppermint tea left over if—" She turned towards them and broke off. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as she stared at Uzoth. "Oh!"

Uzoth tensed, ready to leave. He would not cause her to be afraid.

But then Lacy broke into a smile. "You're the gargoyle I see around so often. I'm Lacy." She wrapped her hands around the steaming cup of tea.

“My name is Uzoth.” He inclined his head.

“It’s wonderful to finally meet you. Welcome to our home!” She glanced between him and Grady. “Well, I was just saying there is peppermint tea if you want.” She held up her cup. “I’ll take this to bed and leave you two alone. Have a good night.” Her gaze lingered on Grady. Then she turned and left. But before entering her room, she glanced back at them and smiled.

Grady shook his head. “Good night, Lace.” Grady gestured to the chair. “Sit.”

Uzoth lowered himself onto the seat as Grady grabbed a plate of food and poured them some tea. Uzoth admired the Christmas tree in the corner, decorated with shiny ornaments and tinsel. Several wooden figures decorated the mantel over the fireplace. He’d never been in a home with Christmas decorations before. Actually, it had been a long time since he’d been in anyone’s home.

Grady smiled and sat on the chair beside him, closer than the previous day. Grady leaned back in the chair, hands holding the mug. He took a sip and let out a sigh. Uzoth picked up his cup and inhaled the refreshing steam.

Grady grabbed a roll and took a bite. Uzoth took a sip of his tea, enjoying the way the warmth slid down his throat into his belly. Meanwhile, the heat of the fire soaked into his skin. For several moments, neither spoke as they both drank tea and Grady ate.

There was no awkwardness. Or at least, he felt none. In fact, Uzoth could not remember the last time he’d felt so content.

Grady wiped away the crumbs with the back of his hand against his mouth. “I was wondering, how old are you exactly?” Grady reached forward and grabbed a tart.

“Exactly?” A rumbling laugh escaped Uzoth. When had he last laughed? “I do not

count the years. I do not think I'd be able to if I tried. But I flew through the skies long before Anorra was built." Uzoth gazed into the fire. "Gargoyles were called from the stone into being by the powers of the Great Sorceress Rassala." It had been an age since Uzoth spoke of this, years and years, too many to count.

"What happened to her?" Grady asked.

"It is a tale of betrayal. She died, slain by a blade wielded by her own daughter." Uzoth turned and stared into Grady's intense grey eyes. "Our purpose was to defend her, her kingdom, and those who served her. We had done so for many years. But we had not been created to protect her from her own. And so she died. And our purpose died with her."

The fire danced along the logs.

"After that, we flew over the lands, we split from one another, searching for those to watch over and protect. Searching for a purpose. For a time, we would find those to guard. But most creatures will die of illness or old age if not from the sword. And we are not all-powerful, especially when we are not together." Uzoth's jaw tensed as all his failures over the years washed through him. "It is difficult to watch over others when I am alone."

A log split and embers skittered in the fireplace.

"And several years ago you came here?"

Uzoth nodded.

"Where are the rest of the gargoyles?" Grady took a sip of his tea.

"Even with the magic of the fountain, the lack of purpose wore away at the souls of

myself and my brethren,” Uzoth said. “We do not sleep. But we go into a sort of stasis, where our eyes remain open and we watch and wait. Sometimes, though, without a reason to live, we sink deeper and deeper into despair. Our hearts slow. Our blood stops pumping. Eventually, we turn completely to stone. We become nothing more than statues on top of buildings, staring down with unseeing eyes.”

“Fuck,” Grady whispered. “How many gargoyles are left?”

Uzoth stared down at his hands that held the small teacup. “I believe I am the last. I have not seen a living gargoyle in many years.”

Flashes of memories of statues he’d come across over the years flickered through his mind. His brethren. His kin. They would protect and watch no more.

“I’m so sorry.” Then Grady reached over and gripped Uzoth’s wrist, his skin warm, soft, and so alive. Uzoth felt the steady pulse of Grady’s heartbeat through the touch.

If Uzoth could weep, he imagined he would. Weep for the loss of a reason to exist, weep for the loss of his brethren, weep for the simple touch after so many years without.

Uzoth lifted his gaze. “I wish to convey my thanks to you, Grady.”

“For what?”

Uzoth did not speak for a moment, considering his words. He wanted to get them right. “I have been alone for a long time. I have gotten used to the loneliness of existence. I wish to thank you for your companionship and for speaking with me. I had not truly talked with anyone in many years until you came along.”

Grady squeezed his wrist, and despite the gentleness of the touch, that small pressure

almost brought Uzoth to his knees.

“I am honoured to be your friend, Uzoth.”

Friend.

The word stuttered in Uzoth’s chest.

Friend.

Uzoth had a friend. His heart beat a little faster in his chest.

### CHAPTER 9

Where the fuck was Briar?

Blood rushed through Grady's veins. He strode through the streets, gaze flicking around for any signs of his younger brother.

When Grady had turned up at the Christmas markets, he'd noticed the lack of baked goods Briar should have brought with him.

"Where's Briar?" Grady had asked. But his siblings hadn't seen their brother.

His heartbeat raced as panic flooded his body. The muscle beneath his eye fluttered rapidly. Grady had seen Briar set off from the bakery with two crates.

So where was he now? Had he been hurt en route? Had he been set upon and attacked like Grady had been a few nights ago?

Grady quickened his pace before breaking into a run as he made his way through the streets in the direction of the bakery.

Forest spirits, please let him be there! Please let him be safe.

Despite the frosty air, sweat clung to his skin. Grady didn't know why Briar would be at the bakery. But he prayed he was. Or maybe he was back in the forest with the dog. Who knew?

This was just like when Briar had been fourteen, when Grady hadn't been paying enough attention and Briar had gone missing for a week.

What if something happened to Briar?

The metallic scent of blood tingled in his nose and throat. A crunching sound resonated in his ears.

No. Grady shook his head. Briar would be fine. Grady just needed to find him. Then everything would be fine.

But where the fuck was he?

When Grady reached the bakery, the door swung open for him, sensing his urgency. But the bakery remained dark; no one was inside at this time of day.

"Briar!" Grady yelled, running around. "Briar!" But he saw no one.

Panting, he ran out the back and almost straight into Uzoth, who had just landed in the alley.

"What is wrong?" Uzoth tucked his wings behind himself and stepped towards him.

"Briar is missing." Grady strode towards the stairs to the apartment. Then he spun towards Uzoth. "Did you see him? Did you see what happened to him after he left?"

Uzoth's brows furrowed. "I did not. I was overlooking your sister's home earlier. I have been trying to keep an eye on all your siblings. I apologise that I did not see him."

Grady had turned before Uzoth finished speaking and sprinted up the stairs. Uzoth

followed. The apartment door flung open. When he reached Briar's door, he opened it.

Despite the darkness of the room, he could see movement in the bed.

He's here. He's safe. He's not lying dead in the street in a pool of blood and broken bones.

He sagged with relief. But a moment later, his fists clenched as anger roared inside him.

"Briar, where the fuck were you tonight?"

The shadow in the bed stirred. "Ummm," Briar said sleepily.

"I saw you leave the bakery with the crates. What happened?" Grady couldn't hold in his annoyance. "And now I find out you've just been lying in bed whilst we've all been worried and looking for you? What is wrong with you, Briar?"

Suddenly, a figure that was not Briar rose from the bed and strode towards Grady. "Don't you talk to my mate like that!" the figure snarled.

Grady stumbled back.

What the fuck?

"Wulfric!" Briar called out. "It's all right. It's just?—"

Uzoth stepped in front of Grady, wings unfurling, blocking Grady's view of the room.

“Stand down, puppy,” Uzoth said. “I have fought far greater enemies than you.”

Stumbling, Grady rushed to grab and light a lantern from the main room. Then he raced back into the bedroom, holding up the lantern.

“Cauldrons and cockmonkeys! What the fuck is going on in here, Briar?” He stared at Briar, who stood naked except for a sheet he held over his dick. He had a hand placed on a tall naked man’s chest, holding the man back from Uzoth.

But if Grady were a gambling man, he’d put his money on Uzoth to win a fight between the two of them.

Grady stared at Briar. It didn’t take a genius to work out what Briar had been up to when he had been meant to be working at the Christmas markets.

Grady set the lantern down on a side table. “Briar, who is this man and why is he in your room?” Then he saw the bite marks on Briar’s neck. He froze, playing through what had been said.

Mate. Puppy.

Grady groaned. “Briar, did you fucking mate a werewolf?”

A short while later, Grady left his younger brother with his werewolf mate, Wulfric, in his room. Grady dropped onto the chair by the cold fireplace.

“Fuck me.” Grady rubbed his temples. Then he gave an exhausted laugh. “Fucking Briar and his fucking large sick dog that turns out to be a werewolf. And he promised me just a couple of days ago that he’d try and be less reckless and more responsible. And now he’s mated. My little brother is mated to a werewolf.”

Closing his eyes, Grady dropped his head back against the chair. “Maybe it is a good thing. I’ve always worried a lot about Briar. He can be absent-minded. He forgets the time and where he is meant to be. He gets lost in a book or just gets lost. Now he has a werewolf looking after him, so I can worry less.” Although, he doubted it.

Then he thought of what Briar and Wulfric had told him. Briar had been attacked earlier by Isaac and Kevin, the men who worked at the butcher not far from them. Grady gripped the armrests. Thankfully, Wulfric had saved Briar. He’d scared those arseholes off and seemed certain they would not trouble Briar again.

Still, he wanted to go around and thrash the shit out of those bastards.

“I am sorry,” Uzoth said. “I failed you.”

Frowning, Grady looked at him. “What?”

“I believe I have seen these...butcher boys,” Uzoth said. “They speak to Briar sometimes. He does not stop to speak with them.” Uzoth paused. “I considered they bothered him. But I do not understand human body language so well, so I was uncertain.”

Uzoth lowered his gaze. “I should have put a stop to it. I should have told you. I should have ensured your brother was safe.” His hand clenched. “I should have protected him. I should have been watching out for him.”

Grady leaned forward and gripped Uzoth’s arm. “Hey. You can’t be everywhere at once. You were watching over Ordalia’s place, right?”

Uzoth nodded. His gaze was on Grady’s hand. “I have been trying to look out for you and your kin.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. But I have nine siblings. You can’t look after all of them.” Grady gave a harsh laugh. “Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“It used to be easier,” Uzoth said. “When I protected alongside my brethren, we could keep watch over larger spaces. Now it is just me. It is not so easy.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself.” Grady’s tan skin contrasted with the grey of Uzoth’s. “And thank you for defending me against the werewolf.”

Uzoth raised his gaze. “I would not have let him harm you. I pledge that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Grady’s throat tightened. Grady always looked after others. And here Uzoth was, looking out for him. His gaze focused on Uzoth’s lips with the fangs peeking out. What would it be like to lean forward and kiss those dark-grey lips?

### CHAPTER 10

Grady couldn't draw breath. He couldn't move. He felt held in place. All he could think of was kissing the gargoyle. Grady's heart hammered in his chest.

"You are exhausted and perhaps hungry. And it is cold in here." Uzoth rose.

Grady dropped his hand.

"I will light a fire." Uzoth moved to the fireplace.

For a second, Grady considered going back to the Christmas markets. But they'd be almost closed by the time he got there. Normally, that would not stop him, but Grady wanted to stay with Uzoth.

Grady watched the gargoyle. He'd wanted to kiss Uzoth. He'd not wanted to kiss anyone in a long time. Recently, he'd spent all his time and energy watching his siblings. He'd fucked a few people in the years after his parents died when the opportunity arose. But over time, he'd felt his libido and any attraction he'd felt to others go into a deep hibernation.

Did he want Uzoth now? He stared at Uzoth's features in profile. He knew Uzoth thought himself to be terrifying and monstrous. But Grady didn't think he was. He liked his chiselled features and horns. Even his fangs intrigued Grady. And his wings and tail—he felt a definite curiosity to touch them.

He'd touched Uzoth's skin a few times. It felt much tougher than human skin. What

would Uzoth's hands feel like stroking Grady's body?

A burning log rolled off to the side of the fire. Uzoth reached his hand straight through to grab it.

"Uzoth!" Grady sat bolt upright.

Uzoth placed the log directly back on top of the fire. Then he held his hand, palm down, directly in the flames. He turned and looked at Grady. He smiled. "It does not hurt me. Do not worry."

Laughing with relief, Grady leaned back in the chair. "Don't scare me like that!"

"I will try not to," Uzoth said, voice serious. He set about making tea in the cauldron. Then he grabbed a plate and filled it with pastries, tarts, and cookies and brought it over along with two cups. He strained the tea and placed both cups on the table.

Grady remembered the first night when Uzoth had brought him the bag of salt, flour, ash, and herbs to eat. It seemed like he'd been watching Grady the past few nights and learning some basic human hosting skills. Grady smiled as he picked up his tea and inhaled.

Uzoth sat and drank in silence.

"Briar went missing when he was fourteen," Grady confessed.

Uzoth turned towards him. He didn't speak. He just waited for Grady to continue. That was something else Grady appreciated about Uzoth. Grady never felt rushed. Uzoth just gave him all the time he needed to find the words he wanted to speak.

"I've tried to be a good older brother. But so often I feel like I'm failing them."

Grady swallowed. “You know our parents died, right?”

“I did not,” Uzoth said. “I wondered, as I know they are not present.”

“It would have been about thirteen years ago. Before I started seeing you around. When they died, Jack, Ordella, Cas, and I were the eldest.” Grady let out a breath. “I was seventeen. Jack fifteen. Ordella thirteen. Cas, we don’t actually know his age, since he was adopted, but we always guessed he and Ordella were a similar age. Shit, we were so young.

“Anyway, I kind of became the head of the family.” Grady paused. “I was the one who had to tell everyone our parents died.” His throat tightened at the memory. Their parents’ blood had still stained his hands and clothes as he’d told his siblings in this very room.

And in that moment, he’d become responsible for all of them.

Grady stared into the fire. “Anyone who could worked in the bakery. But it struggled after my parents died. So Jack and I took on extra jobs to make more money. Ordella and Cas raised the younger kids. Trent, the youngest, was five. Fuck, I don’t know how we managed.”

The flames flickered and danced before him. Grady leaned towards them. The heat licked his skin. He remembered working in the bakery the whole day before heading to work overnight in a cotton mill.

“I barely paid any attention to the younger kids, Briar included. I barely spoke to him the first couple of years after our parents died.” Grady rubbed his finger against the side of the cup. “I was just so consumed with trying to make enough money to keep the apartment and bakery and keep us together.”

Grady's jaw clenched. "Then Briar went missing. He was fourteen. Apparently, he'd taken to walking in the forest a lot." He gave a bitter laugh. "I'd had no fucking clue. He went missing for a full week. We couldn't find him. He came back fine. Said he got lost."

Grady shook his head. "But I felt like I'd let him down through my neglect. I felt like I'd let all my siblings down. And my parents." His throat squeezed.

"Maybe if I'd been paying attention, I would have noticed something or been able to prevent it. I should have been looking out for him. That was my job." Grady's skin stung from the heat of the fire. "I should have done a better job looking out for my younger brother." His hands trembled around the cup. "I should have done better."

Suddenly, Uzoth was there, standing beside him. "You expect so much from yourself. Too much." He took the cup from Grady and placed it down. Uzoth knelt beside him. "You are only human. Only skin and bone. You push so hard. You work so hard."

Grady shook his head. "I?—"

"You barely sleep. You barely eat. You are not a gargoyle. You need both." Uzoth's hand pressed against Grady's shoulder, a heavy, comforting pressure.

Grady let out a shaky breath.

"I watched you when I first came here. And I have watched you for years since." Uzoth's dark eyes remained steady on his.

Grady's skin prickled at the thought of the gargoyle watching him all these years.

"I watched you care for your siblings. I did not know a human so young could protect as well as you did until I saw you do it."

Grady placed his hand on top of Uzoth's, squeezing. "I tried," he said, voice hoarse.

"Your siblings were fed. You kept the bakery and the apartment. Your siblings are all well and all adults," Uzoth said. "You succeeded in looking after them."

Grady's lungs constricted. "Thank you."

"You are welcome, Grady." Then, after several long moments, Uzoth dropped his hand. He then handed Grady back his tea and sat on the chair.

Uzoth picked up his own tea and took a sip. Grady gazed at Uzoth. Slowly, his breathing returned to normal. Grady let himself relax.

Uzoth didn't prattle to fill the silences. When he did speak, it was because he wanted to convey something important. He had such a steady manner about him that it calmed Grady. And since his life usually felt so chaotic and exhausting, he found these snippets of time alone with Uzoth precious.

They were his moments. They didn't belong to his siblings. His time with Uzoth was just for him. And how long had it been since he had something just for himself?

He and Uzoth were friends. That was what he'd said to Uzoth. Friends. For years, he'd only had his siblings as companions.

Grady sipped his tea.

It seemed it wasn't just Uzoth who needed a friend.

### CHAPTER 11

Grady hoisted his nephew into his arms.

“Are you sure you can take him?” Ordella sniffled. “We can make do. It’s just been a tough day with both Tony and me sick. I’d ask Tony’s parents, but they are sick too.” Tony’s parents often took Michael and Ruthie to help Tony and Ordella.

“It’s fine,” Grady said. “Briar and Wulfric are working the Christmas markets tonight, so I can take tonight off.” He could have used tonight to go over the inventory or check the finances and books. But he could do that later. When he should be sleeping.

He wanted to be there for Ordella. He wanted to be a good uncle.

“Oh! I haven’t met Wulfric yet and—” A coughing fit broke off her words. “When I’m better I’ll meet him,” she said when the coughing subsided. She considered. “I’m sure I’ll be better tomorrow.”

Grady nodded. “You’ve eaten?”

“I made some stew.” Ordella gave a weary smile. “Thank you for this. I really do appreciate it.”

“No problem. It will be nice to spend some quality time together with my nephew. Won’t it?” Grady asked Michael.

Michael nodded vigorously.

“Well, we should get going and let you rest,” Grady said to Ordalia.

“I’ll try. Ruthie is down right now. But who knows for how long.” Ordalia sighed. “Poor darling. Her horns are coming in. I put some salve on them that Tony’s father gave us. It helps, but she still struggles to sleep.”

Carrying Michael, Grady walked the short distance to the apartment.

“What do you think we should get up to tonight?” Grady asked. “We could read a book. We could play a game. We could bake?”

Michael considered each option. But when Grady mentioned baking, Michael’s eyes lit up, and he nodded. “Let’s bake a cake!”

“Sounds good.” They approached the bakery. Grady glanced up and saw Uzoth above. A smile broke out on his face. “See the gargoyle up there on the roof?”

Michael pointed. “Him?”

“Yep. That’s my friend Uzoth.”

Michael tilted his head. “He looks scary.”

“Well, he might look a little tough. But he is really nice.”

Michael stared up at Uzoth, a considering expression on his face.

“Do you want to meet him?” Grady asked. “I promise he is friendly. Maybe he can even help us bake.”

Michael tilted his head. “Okay.” He smiled.

Grady gestured to Uzoth.

For a second, Uzoth didn’t move. Then he flew down, landing further away than usual, as if worried he might scare Michael. But Michael did not look scared, just curious now that Grady had told him Uzoth was in fact friendly.

“Michael, this is Uzoth.” Grady walked towards him.

Uzoth gave a slight bow. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Michael stared at Uzoth with obvious interest.

“We’re going to bake a cake,” Grady said. “Want to join us?”

Uzoth’s gaze moved between them. “As long as my presence is not a hindrance.”

“Of course not. Come on.” Grady led the way into the bakery. “Ordelia and Tony are sick, so Michael is staying over tonight.”

“I hope she is not too unwell,” Uzoth said.

“She’ll be better tomorrow.” Grady glanced at him. “She has a healing affinity. Means her baking heals those she cooks for. But it also means she can sense how long an illness should last.”

“I see.” Uzoth stood to the side.

Grady placed Michael on the counter. “What sort of cake should we make?”

“A chocolate cake!”

Grady began to pull out equipment and ingredients. “Yum.”

“Do all witches have an affinity?” Uzoth asked.

“Not all do. And it’s not really understood why some witches develop an affinity and others don’t. Some believe a witch’s affinity is a reflection of their character. But no one knows for sure,” Grady said. “Out of my siblings, about half of us have an affinity. Mine’s protection. Ordellia’s is healing. Cas’s is spreading joy. Jack’s is nourishment. And whilst we are all hearth and kitchen witches, Lachlan has a strong affinity for it.

“But the others might find their affinity still. They also might not have one.” Grady placed the last of the equipment beside Michael. “All right, let’s bake.”

Grady talked Michael through the steps. Michael threw himself into baking with gusto, although he ended up covered in ingredients and dough. Grady smiled at him, pleased to pass on the skills that had been passed down through generations. Maybe one day, Michael would pass the knowledge on to the next generation.

Most of the time, Uzoth just silently watched them. He did not seem bored or impatient. And anytime Michael was done with a wooden spoon or ingredient, he handed it to Uzoth, who cleaned it and put it away.

“And how is it?” Grady asked when they had finished.

Michael chewed, crumbs and frosting on his lips, cheeks, and chin. “Is good,” he said through a mouthful of cake.

Grady and Uzoth packed up as Michael continued to eat. His hooved feet swung back

and forth as they hung off the table. He hummed a Christmas melody.

“All right.” Grady surveyed the kitchen. “I think it is time to go upstairs and get ready for bed.”

Michael wiped his dirty hands on his trousers and lifted his arms. Grady picked him up, and they left the bakery.

In the apartment, Grady unrolled a mat for Michael to sleep on in his room.

“Will you read to me?” Michael asked from the main room.

Grady rose and walked to the door, words forming on his lips. But Michael held the book up to Uzoth. Uzoth stared down at the boy. Grady held his breath.

“Yes. I can do that.” Uzoth took the book and sat in his usual chair.

Michael climbed into his lap. Uzoth stared down at the crown of Michael’s horned head for several seconds, as if uncertain what to make of this young faun child on his lap.

Then Uzoth turned away, opened the book, and began to read, “One must always remember to respect the forest spirits...”

Grady’s chest tightened at the sight of the two of them together. For several minutes, he just watched. He didn’t want to intrude. The sight of Michael leaning against Uzoth’s chest whilst Uzoth read in his deep, rumbling voice made Grady’s insides soft.

When the story ended, Michael asked, “Another?”

Grady stepped forward. “That’s enough for tonight. It’s bedtime.”

Michael sagged but hopped off Uzoth's leg.

"Don't forget to thank Uzoth," Grady said.

"Thank you, Uzoth!" Michael yelled as he ran to Grady's room, and Grady put him to bed. After several minutes, Michael lay with his eyes closed as he breathed heavily. Grady returned to the main room. Uzoth had prepared tea and a plate of food.

"He likes you." Grady sat and grabbed a cup of tea and a slice of cake.

"He does?" A brow raised ever so slightly.

Grady nodded. "He finds you interesting."

"Not terrifying? I worried I might have scared him."

"He was a little nervous at first. But then I told him you were nice." Grady laughed. "He wonders how strong you are. He asked me how many rocks you could pick up. He had a lot of questions. I told him to ask you. So expect lots of odd questions next time you see him. He is a very curious child."

Uzoth inclined his head. "I will try and answer as best I can. I had never interacted with a child before."

"Well, you did very well." Grady took a sip of his tea.

Honestly, he'd been unsure how Uzoth would be around his nephew. He knew Uzoth would pose no threat. But he thought Uzoth might be a bit uncomfortable. Yet it had all been fine, and Michael even seemed to have taken an interest in the gargoyles.

Grady smiled into his tea. The fire flickered in the hearth, and Grady admired Uzoth

in the shadow of its golden flames.

He found himself returning to thoughts of kissing and touching Uzoth. The more time they spent together, the more he felt his desire for the gargoyle grow. But he hadn't seen any interest on Uzoth's part.

Uzoth liked Grady and wanted to spend time with him. They were friends. And Grady appreciated his friendship more than he could express. He did not want to risk losing it by propositioning Uzoth.

Still, Grady kept wondering if there was an opportunity for something more between them. His lips tingled. He pressed a finger to his lower lip, once again imagining kissing the ancient gargoyle.

Grady just wished he could tell what Uzoth felt for him.

### CHAPTER 12

U zoth stared down from the rooftop.

Cas's wings flapped as he flew down the side alley. Graal the orc prowled after him.

Uzoth had seen Cas, Grady's pixie brother, in and out of the bakery over the years. And Graal was a regular customer of the Magic Bakery. According to Grady, the two had recently been spending time together.

Uzoth had also seen the two of them together several times outside the bakery back door before they headed off to a side alley. But this was the first time he had a view from directly above the side alley so could see the reason they'd come down this way. Although, Uzoth had guessed.

When Graal reached Cas, he pressed him against the wall beside a pile of crates. He lowered his head and kissed Cas. Arching his body, Cas clutched at Graal's shoulders.

This was not a new occurrence for Uzoth. Over the years, as he'd sat on top of buildings, watching and protecting, different beings would fuck in the lanes, alleys, and streets beneath him. He'd never sought it out. But often others didn't look up.

And even if they did see him as they passed, they didn't seem to care if a gargoyle watched them. After all, too many gargoyles were just like statues, still, silent, and unseeing. As such, he'd never bothered to move. After all, if they did not mind fucking beneath the gaze of a gargoyle, he saw no reason to mind. It was not like he

cared.

Uzoth himself had not fucked in an age. Not since he'd lost his fellow gargoyles. And over the years, he'd gotten used to the lack of touch. Just as he'd gotten used to so many other things. Now the desire to unite his body with another's was nothing but a distant memory.

Cas dropped to his knee. He pulled Graal's cock free. Graal growled as Cas licked the head. Graal stroked Cas's hair, and Cas took the length into his mouth.

Did Grady ever perform such actions?

Heat pooled in Uzoth's lower abdomen.

Uzoth tensed in shock.

Even though he'd seen many fuck, he'd not felt a sliver of arousal at the sight. But the thought that Grady might partake in such activities brought the blood pumping to his dick.

After several moments, Graal gripped Cas's arm and hauled him to his feet. He turned Cas so he faced the wall. Then he yanked Cas's trousers down to his knees. Cas gasped.

For the first time in an age, Uzoth's cock grew hard. Uzoth had never known the touch of anyone who was not a gargoyle. What would it be like to take a non-gargoyle lover? What would it be like with a human? What would it be like to be Grady's lover?

His dick reached full hardness.

Graal moved in behind Cas.

“Fuck!” Cas cried out as Graal pressed his hips forward, burying his cock inside Cas.

“Yes! Oh. Please! Yes.”

Uzoth imagined burying his cock deep inside Grady’s warm body. What sort of sounds would the human make? Would Uzoth need to be gentle taking a human lover? After all, they were so fragile.

But then again, he’d thought pixies were fragile. And as he watched Graal clamp his hand over Cas’s mouth and piston his hips to roughly fuck Cas, he wondered if maybe he would not need to be as gentle with Grady as he imagined.

Uzoth’s cock tented his loincloth. Uzoth reached down and pressed his hand against his rigid length. A shiver of pleasure spread through his body at the contact.

Muffled cries of pleasure escaped Graal’s hand. Using the wall for purchase, Cas shoved back to meet Graal’s hard thrusts. Pixie dust sparkled in the winter air as Graal continued to fuck Cas with powerful thrusts.

Finally, Cas shuddered as he came, his cry lost in the skin of Graal’s hand. Graal’s hips stuttered. He growled, burying himself inside Cas.

After a moment, they separated, cleaned themselves, and righted their clothing. Cas pressed a kiss to Graal’s cheek. Graal smiled as they walked back the way they’d come, not glancing up at the gargoyle above.

But Uzoth remained on the rooftop, the palm of his hand pressed against his aching dick. Slowly, he reached beneath his loincloth and drew himself out. He wrapped his hand around his throbbing cock. He stroked.

He groaned. Up and down he moved his hand, teasing the bumps along the sides of his dick. Images of Grady filled his mind. He imagined undressing Grady and looking over all that smooth skin. He imagined Grady and himself before the fireplace, Grady on his knees, pleasuring Uzoth's dick with his tongue and mouth.

Uzoth's hand moved faster.

Would Grady wish to kiss him?

That had not been something Uzoth had done with the other gargoyles. It had always been rough fucking. But he'd seen it over the years. He'd just seen Cas and Graal kiss. Kissing seemed to be enjoyed by many races. Honestly, he'd always thought the practice strange.

But now he thought of kissing Grady. A groan escaped him.

He imagined Grady straddling his lap, guiding Uzoth's hard cock to his hole. He thought of Grady's tight heat as he buried his cock inside Grady. Then, their bodies locked together, Grady would lean in and kiss Uzoth with his soft human lips.

Uzoth pumped his cock harder.

Next, with his body wrapped around Uzoth's cock, Grady would rise, letting Uzoth's cock slide from his body before lowering himself. He'd do that over and over again. And all the while, they'd continue to kiss in front of the blazing fire.

Uzoth growled as his pleasure reached a crescendo. His balls throbbed, and his cock jerked. His cum shot through the air in an arch before landing on the snow in the alley below. For several seconds, Uzoth remained completely still. Finally, he tucked his dick away into his loincloth.

The arousal had come on as such a shock. So had the desire to kiss Grady.

He stared ahead unseeing. Gargoyles had not been made to mate, find a partner, or love. They'd been a clan. Fucking had strengthened their bond. That was it.

But what if he wished for something different now? What if he wished for Grady as a lover? A partner?

Warmth swirled in his chest at the thought. His heart beat faster as he thought of their moments by the fire, the talks and gentle companionship, the friendship.

But what if he could be more than friends with Grady? His lungs constricted as he thought of the soft touches of Grady's hand on Uzoth's skin. Would Grady be interested in him as a lover?

He could not imagine Grady wanting that with him. After all, why would he want a gargoyle as a partner? Grady was so alive and vibrant. So beautiful. What could Uzoth truly offer such a man?

Uzoth was more than content with his friendship with Grady. The friendship was more than he'd ever hoped or dreamed for. He cherished his time with Grady with every inch of his being.

Still, as he sat and stared ahead, he fantasised about Grady being his lover and partner. He imagined Grady holding his hand, hugging him, and kissing him.

### CHAPTER 13

Grady stared at the closed door to Cas's room through which Cas and Graal had just entered.

"Do you have enough space for an orc to live here with all of you?" Uzoth asked him.

Grady sighed. "We'll make do. We always make do somehow." Grady leaned back in his chair, turning his face to the fire.

Cas and Lacy shared a room. But thankfully, he didn't think she'd be home tonight. He heard her say something about a party with Orim, and recently she'd been staying at Orim's quite a bit. So hopefully that would be a problem to deal with tomorrow.

"Cas has always had such a big heart. It's no surprise he invited Graal to live with us if Graal was in need." The flames flickered in the hearth. "Cas is so much like our mother. Huge heart and always so giving." It sometimes made their lives more difficult, but Grady couldn't fault him. "You want more tea?" Grady stood.

Uzoth held out his cup. "Yes, please."

Grady refilled the cups. "And it's good that it is going well between him and Graal. Cas had a break-up pretty recently. Cas and Xavier had been together a long time. So I worried." Grady laughed. "Nothing new, right?"

The corner of Uzoth's lips lifted.

Uzoth was not particularly expressive, but in the time they'd been meeting, Grady had gotten better at reading the minute movements of his facial features. For example, Grady knew that a slight lift of the corner of Uzoth's lips was practically a full-blown smile.

"So it's nice to see Cas with someone new. Especially because his last partner was an arrogant prick." Grady handed Uzoth his tea and then retook his seat. "I like Graal better." Grady frowned. "Although, Cas has moved on rather quickly. I hope he isn't rushing himself."

Grady shook his head as new worries began to take shape. He really didn't have the energy to deal with new worries. But when had that ever stopped him?

"Cas seems to like Graal a lot." Uzoth lifted the cup of tea and inhaled.

"He does." Grady took a sip of the tea. "And Jack had a date with Avery, another customer. So that's good. Nice to see him out and about and meeting people. For years a lot of my siblings didn't have much of a life. They just worked or cared for our younger siblings."

Uzoth's dark gaze fixed on him. "Like you."

"Yeah." Grady glanced at Uzoth. He smiled. "And now I have a friend to drink tea with at night."

Both corners of Uzoth's lips lifted into an actual fucking smile. Grady grinned, pleased to have elicited such a strong response.

These nights spent talking with Uzoth had become the highlight of Grady's day. He'd been sleeping less, which wasn't great, as he stayed up later to spend more time with Uzoth. But he felt lighter in spirit in Uzoth's presence.

Sadly, there always came a time each night when he had to ask Uzoth to leave. Or more commonly, Uzoth saw Grady nodding off and rose, saying he needed to leave so Grady could sleep.

A few times, he'd wondered what would happen if he invited Uzoth to stay the night. Not even for sex, although that had definitely been on his mind of late, especially because Grady kept looking at Uzoth's muscular body that was always on display.

But mainly, he'd just like to spend more time with Uzoth. He'd like to lie beside him as he slept. Maybe even hold him through the night. Grady took a deep breath and looked at Uzoth. He'd gotten much better at reading Uzoth. Still, he couldn't tell if he saw attraction or anything more than friendship in his eyes.

Grady worried that if he asked, he might offend the ancient gargoyle and lose this precious connection they had.

"May I ask you a question?" Uzoth asked.

"Of course." Grady took a sip of his tea.

Uzoth stared at the cup he held in his hands. He didn't speak for several moments.

Grady furrowed his brows, wondering why Uzoth hesitated.

"You do not have to answer if you wish." Uzoth paused. "But I am curious about what happened to your parents?"

Grady's hand on the cup spasmed.

Uzoth leaned towards him. "I had only wondered. But I do not wish you to speak of anything that causes you any unnecessary pain. I would not want that."

“No,” Grady said hoarsely. “I want you to know.”

And Grady realised he did. Grady wanted Uzoth to know all the parts of him, including the dark painful parts that lay buried deep inside his core. It was such a large part of him. It had made him who he was. He kept it always hidden. But he wanted Uzoth to see.

Grady dropped his gaze. “It would have been thirteen years ago. My parents needed to pick up some supplies. Dad asked me to come along and help them carry stuff.”

Grady placed the cup on the table and stared at his hands. “That morning, Mother showed me how to make a protection charm. I wore it around my wrist.” Grady lifted his hand. He tugged back his sleeve to reveal the worn woven band around his wrist. “I still wear it. Last thing she ever made for me.”

Grady’s throat tightened. He pushed on. “I asked if she and Dad wore one.” His eyes burned. “She said I could make them that night. She laughed.”

Grady’s hands shook. “We were crossing the street. There was a runaway carriage.” He let out a breath. “I was right beside them. I was right there.” The muscle below his eye twitched. “Somehow, I got knocked back. But it ran straight over them.”

Horse and human shrieks had pierced the air. Bones had crunched beneath horses’ hooves and carriage wheels. The metallic tang of blood had filled his nostrils.

Grady closed his eyes, trying to push away the sight of their mangled bodies, mutilated beyond recognition, from his mind. He’d clutched at them, holding his parents.

He’d screamed. He’d wept.

And Grady had not had a single scratch on him. Not a single fucking scratch. The only evidence of the accident had been his parents' blood and insides covering his clothes and skin.

A choked sob escaped Grady.

And suddenly Uzoth was there, wrapping his arms around Grady. His wings unfurled and curled around them as if protecting them from the world and all the pain and hurt that had ever touched Grady.

For several seconds, Grady held himself still, body rigid. Then he sagged into the embrace.

"I am sorry." Uzoth's voice rumbled. "I should not have asked such an invasive question."

Grady hugged Uzoth back, clinging onto his shoulders. "No. I want you to know." Tears streamed down his cheeks. "I want you to know." He rested his head on Uzoth's chest. Tears dripped onto Uzoth's tough skin. "I haven't spoken of this in years."

He'd not cried since leaving the scene of the accident. He'd never had time to process his parents' loss. He had to look after his siblings.

But here in the protective embrace of Uzoth, he wept for his parents, for their loss. And for all he had lost with them. For the first time in his life, Grady grieved his parents.

Grady wept and wept. Time slipped past. But Uzoth didn't move, didn't release him; he just held Grady tight in his arms.

And Grady had never felt so safe.

### CHAPTER 14

The snow fell and fell. It piled on Uzoth's wings and legs until it slid off under its own weight. It covered his tail and talons that rested on the tiled roof. And it kept falling harder and heavier.

A snowstorm.

Uzoth kept an eye out, watching Grady and his siblings moving around throughout the day, trying to keep aware of their movements. A short while ago, he'd seen Grady head in the direction of the Christmas markets.

The man had looked up and waved at Uzoth but then continued at a brisker pace than usual. No doubt the snow worried him.

Should I have followed and made sure he was safe?

A snowstorm could mean death to a vulnerable human.

Soon after, he spotted Grady's brothers Trent, Jasper, and Leo returning from the Christmas markets. It was not yet dark. But he supposed with all the snow, they might need to close the markets early. That was good. They would be safe in the warmth of their home.

The twins, Jasper and Leo, ran up the stairs. Trent popped his head into the bakery but then continued in the direction of Ordella's home. Uzoth wished to remain here and wait for Grady to see him return safely home. He often returned after the others.

So there was no reason to worry yet. But he knew Grady would wish to know Trent reached Ordellia's safely.

Uzoth's wings unfurled, and he took off into the sky, following Trent from above until Trent reached Ordellia's door and entered. Then Uzoth circled back towards the bakery. He landed on the roof. Soon after, the bakery door opened. Ordellia, holding Ruthie, came out and headed in the same direction Trent had gone.

Uzoth followed her, and once he'd seen her safely home, he returned. A couple of djinns made their way down the alley. A moment later, Lacy, Cas, and Lachlan exited the bakery. Cas and Lachlan went upstairs.

"I'm going to Orim's," Lacy called out to them as she headed off through the snow.

Uzoth followed her to make sure she arrived safely. When he returned, a warm glow remained in the bakery window downstairs as well as in the apartment window.

Had Grady arrived home whilst Uzoth had been away?

If he had arrived whilst Uzoth followed Trent, Ordellia, or Lacy, Grady would be in the apartment right now and Uzoth would not know.

But if he had not arrived home...

Uzoth stared down the alley at the snow that kept coming. What if Grady were out in this? His poor human, so fragile, so frail, so mortal. The idea of harm befalling Grady tore at Uzoth's guts. His taloned claws scratched at the tiles.

But Grady could also just be inside the apartment, safe and sound. Then he spotted a dark figure moving down the alley.

Immediately, Uzoth took flight. As he grew closer, the outline became clearer through the fat snowflakes. The tension around his bones released.

Grady. It is Grady. He is safe.

Uzoth dived and landed beside him, opening his wing to protect Grady from the snow.

“Thanks.” Grady laughed. He had his arms wrapped around himself. He trembled.

“You’re cold.” Uzoth’s gaze flicked over Grady as alarm flared in his chest.

“I’ll be fine. We’re almost home, and then I’ll get changed.”

They walked silently. They passed the bakery window and spotted Jack inside.

“Oh, good.” Grady’s teeth chattered. “Jack is packing up. Looks like they closed early for the day. No point staying open in this weather.”

They walked up the stairs. The door to the apartment swung open, and they entered.

“Everyone here and safe?” Grady’s eyes darted around.

Lachlan sat on a chair with his familiar, Kit, in his lap. Briar sat beside Wulfric. Archimedes, Briar’s familiar, perched on the back of a chair, preening himself. Cas knelt by the fire.

“The twins are in their room.” Lachlan pointed at the door.

“So that leaves...” Grady frowned.

“I saw Ordella, Ruthie, and Trent reach Ordella’s home.” Uzoth tucked his wings behind him. “And Lacy went to Orim’s. I saw her safely enter the apartment building.”

“You saw them?” Grady asked.

Uzoth nodded.

Grady’s shoulders relaxed. “Thank you, Uzoth. Thank you so much.” Grady licked his pink lips. “And Jack is downstairs. So everyone is safe and accounted for.”

Lachlan, who was the only sibling present he’d not officially met, stared at Uzoth.

“I am Uzoth.” He inclined his head in greeting.

“I’m Lachlan.” He waved. “Nice to meet you. And this is Kit.” He patted his sleeping familiar.

Then Uzoth turned to Grady. “You should change. You are too cold.” Uzoth did not like the sight of Grady shivering.

“Right.” Grady took off his boots and coat.

Then Grady walked towards his room. After a moment, he glanced back at Uzoth. He paused. Uzoth realised Grady wanted him to follow him. So he did. In his room, with his back to Uzoth, Grady immediately began to undress, casting his wet clothes aside.

“It’s been a fucking day,” Grady grouched.

Uzoth stared at the sight of all Grady’s tantalising skin being revealed until Grady wore only his undershorts. Uzoth’s heartbeat picked up. He watched the muscles

moving in Grady's back. Grady bent over to remove his trousers. His plump arse stretched the fabric of his underpants.

"At least everyone is safe. Thank you so much for ensuring everyone got where they needed to all right." Grady turned towards him. He froze.

Uzoth realised he had been caught ogling Grady. He tried to think of what to say. But no words formed. They stared at each other.

An apology sprang to Uzoth's lips.

But before he could speak, Grady stepped towards him. "Fuck it," Grady muttered. Then Grady lifted his hands, cupping Uzoth's cheeks.

All Uzoth's words fled his brain. Grady lifted and pressed his soft lips to Uzoth's. Uzoth held completely still, so aware of the gentle pressure of Grady's lips against his.

A knock sounded on the door.

Grady jumped back, staring up at Uzoth with wide eyes.

"One second." Scrambling, Grady quickly tugged on some dry clothes.

Meanwhile, Uzoth's brain failed to function.

Grady kissed me. He kissed me.

Grady opened the door. "What is it?"

Cas stood before him, holding a note. "Jack has gone to Avery's to give him scones."

Grady took the note.

“Should we do anything?” Lachlan called out from the other room.

Grady stared at the note. After a moment, Grady shook his head. “He should be all right. He should be able to get there, at least. He can stay until the snow stops. And even if they’ve ended things, Avery doesn’t seem like the sort of twat who would force Jack out into this snow.”

Grady paused, and Uzoth could sense the tension radiating from his body, revealing he was more worried than he let on.

“And it isn’t like we can do anything other than wait and see. We don’t know where Avery lives.” Grady lifted his head and looked at his brothers. “Jack isn’t an idiot. He will get cold, but he should be fine.” He gave the note to Cas. “I wouldn’t worry.”

“You’re right.” Cas smiled. “Jack can handle some snow.”

Grady nodded and closed the door. Grady didn’t move for a second, his hand on the door-knob. Then his hand tensed, gripping the door-knob tight before releasing it. Grady paced back and forth in the small room.

“Clitweasels and cockmonkeys!” Grady whispered. “What the fuck is Jack playing at? He’s meant to be responsible. Normally I don’t have to worry about him. But now he’s out running off after some dragon in this bullshit snow.” Grady strode to the window and stared out at the white beyond. “Fuck!”

“I will go check on him.” Uzoth stepped towards him.

“What?” Grady turned to him. “But we don’t know where Avery lives.”

“I followed him home once,” Uzoth said. “After he and Jack went on their date.”

“Really?” Grady sagged. “Thank you. I really don’t know what I would do without you.”

The words warmed Uzoth to the core. “I will go now.” He turned to the door but stopped when Grady grabbed his wrist. He looked back.

“And when you get back, we’ll talk, yeah?”

Uzoth gazed down into Grady’s intense grey eyes, uncertain what Grady meant. “We always talk.”

Grady laughed. “I mean about this.” Then Grady kissed Uzoth’s lips, just a quick brush of lips before pulling back.

Uzoth felt the urge to touch his lips. “Yes. Yes, we will talk about...that.” Because Grady had kissed him. Not once. But twice.

They would talk. And Uzoth also hoped there would be more kissing.

### CHAPTER 15

What is taking him so long?

Grady paced between the two rooms, stewing and worrying. Uzoth had been gone for hours.

At first, Grady's thoughts had been consumed by the memory of Uzoth gazing at Grady's half-dressed body and their two brief kisses. Uzoth hadn't pulled away from either kiss. Nor had he looked at Grady in disgust afterwards. Although honestly, he didn't know what Uzoth looked like when disgusted.

Still, it gave Grady hope that perhaps Uzoth felt something for Grady and that maybe he might want more kisses. And more in general.

Fuck. I hope so.

Grady thought of the massive gargoyle, of those broad shoulders, of all those muscles, those dark intense eyes, and that sizeable bulge beneath his loincloth. Grady kept playing over the kisses in his head, thinking of the feel of Uzoth's lips, which contrasted with his fangs.

Grady shivered at the memory.

Usually, Grady didn't have time for this sort of thing. But right now, it snowed with no sign of stopping. The bakery below and the stall at the Christmas markets had closed for the day. Maybe they would be closed tomorrow. And once Uzoth returned

and told him Jack had made it to Avery's, then all his siblings were safe and accounted for.

Then Grady would have time, time for just he and Uzoth to explore what this was between them.

But an hour passed, and Uzoth still hadn't returned.

Grady's mild concern morphed into genuine worry. Had something actually happened to Jack on the way to Avery's?

He'd assumed Jack would get there fine and Grady was just fretting. Like usual. But the longer it took for Uzoth to return, the more worried Grady became.

After a couple of hours and Uzoth still had not returned, he began to consider that Uzoth had left and did not plan to return. Grady's stomach twisted. Perhaps Uzoth had been disgusted by the kiss after all. Perhaps Uzoth wanted to get away from Grady as quickly as he could.

But Uzoth wouldn't leave him in the lurch like that. He wouldn't pretend to check on Jack to get away from Grady. He wasn't an asshole. So then where was he?

Grady paced and kept glancing out the window. The falling snow rustled against it.

Cas and Graal had gone into Cas's room a while ago. They'd gone in before Uzoth left. From the noises coming from the room, it was pretty clear what they had been getting up to. But all had been silent within for a while.

Lachlan, Briar, and Wulfric remained in the main room, watching Grady pace. They spoke to one another, but Grady didn't pay attention. The muscle beneath Grady's left eye kept spasming. He rubbed at it.

What if something had happened to Uzoth? What if he'd been hurt or injured?

But that was foolish. Uzoth was an ancient gargoyle. He could defend himself. Snow didn't affect him. Surely he would be all right. The idea that he could be injured was ludicrous. Still, fear's icy fingers slid into his blood.

A shadow passed in a blur before the window. He raced to the door and opened it. Uzoth landed, dark wings tucked behind him. Grady stepped back, allowing Uzoth in.

"Jack is fine," Uzoth said before Grady could speak.

Grady let out a breath.

"He reached Avery's safely. Although, he looked very cold."

"Thank you." Grady closed the door behind Uzoth. "But what took you so long? You've been gone hours."

"I waited on the rooftop to see if Jack remained inside or attempted to return to your apartment." Uzoth lifted his chin. "I planned to escort him back if he decided to return. But after several hours, I thought it clear he would be remaining the night."

Grady frowned. "Why didn't you just knock and ask?"

Uzoth stared blankly at him. "I did not think to knock." His brows lowered ever so slightly. "I am used to waiting and watching."

Grady huffed a laugh. "Well, next time you can knock rather than wait outside. I started to worry something had happened to you."

"You worried for me?" Uzoth frowned. "I am sorry for worrying you, Grady."

“It’s fine.” Grady smiled. “But seriously, thank you. I’ll be able to sleep soundly tonight knowing everyone is safe.”

“You are welcome.” Uzoth inclined his head.

Lachlan and Briar added their thank-yous to Grady’s.

“If this snowstorm continues, I can go and check on your siblings again.” Uzoth paused. “I will knock and ask how they fare.”

Grady chuckled. “I think that would be more comfortable than waiting outside in the snow.” Grady took Uzoth by the elbow. “Now come.” And Grady led him to his room.

Now that Grady knew Jack was safe, his mind returned to their kiss. They entered his room. His pulse raced, and his palms began to sweat.

Grady closed the door, and they faced each other. Grady tried to read Uzoth’s expression. But despite having improved in reading Uzoth, he could not guess what the gargoyle felt or thought.

Grady swallowed. “Thank you again for checking on Jack.”

“Think nothing of it. I am pleased to be able to help you and your kin in any way I can.” Uzoth took a step towards him. “You kissed me.”

It seemed Grady was not the only one with the kiss on his mind. His gaze fell to the gargoyle’s dark-grey lips. “Yes. I did.”

“Why?”

A surprised laugh escaped Grady. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I am...” Uzoth trailed off. “I am not desirable or handsome. Gargoyles are intimidating. We were created to be feared. I know I am hideous.”

Grady shook his head. “No.” He reached up and touched Uzoth’s jaw, cold from the snow. “I mean, you are intimidating as all fuck.” Grady’s gaze ran over the horns and the fangs. “But that doesn’t make you hideous.” Grady slid his hand from Uzoth’s jaw, down his throat, and to his collarbone. “And I can’t speak for others, but I find myself very attracted to you.”

Uzoth’s dark eyes watched Grady’s every move.

“I want you, Uzoth.”

### CHAPTER 16

“T ruly? You want me?” Uzoth asked in disbelief.

He stared at Grady. He could not fathom that this man, this vigorous and handsome witch, could want someone like him, a frightful monster.

Grady stepped in close. “I want you,” he whispered and slid his hand up to Uzoth’s lips, running the pad of his thumb over them and his fangs.

Uzoth couldn’t move, captivated by the human before him.

Then Grady leaned up and pressed their lips together. Uzoth’s body thrummed. Blood raced through his veins, and his heart pumped faster than it had in an aeon.

Softening his lips, Uzoth lifted his hands and placed them gingerly on Grady’s shoulders, terrified that at any moment, Grady might change his mind and pull away.

But he didn’t. Instead, Grady moved his mouth against Uzoth’s. Uzoth opened to him. Grady’s tongue pressed forward. Their tongues entwined and danced together. A rumble vibrated in Uzoth’s chest.

Uzoth lost himself in the gentle kiss. Lust flamed in his belly, and his cock began to fill. After several moments, Grady pulled back, gasping for air.

Staring at Grady in awe, Uzoth stroked a hand along Grady’s shoulder. “I cannot comprehend why you would want me. But I will not cast aside such a precious gift.

May I undress you? I wish to look upon your beauty once again.”

“If you want.” Grady laughed, his smile vulnerable. “Although, I’m really not the beauty you seem to think I am.”

Uzoth shook his head. Just the thought of Grady had awakened the dormant desires within his body. “I disagree.” He gripped the hem of Grady’s shirt and tugged it over Grady’s dark hair. His fingers skated over the soft skin and hair on Grady’s torso.

Grady’s breath caught.

“You are stunning to behold. I am truly honoured that you want me and would share your body with me.” Then Uzoth lowered himself to his knees and reached for Grady’s trousers and the promising bulge that lay beneath.

“You should probably know, it has been a while since I’ve been with anyone,” Grady confessed with a wry smile.

Uzoth’s hand paused. He looked up at Grady. “I guarantee it has been longer for me. I have not fucked anyone since long before you were born.”

“Bloody hell.” Grady laughed. “Well, you win, then.”

Uzoth hesitated. “Will you tell me if I do anything to displease you? I have never been with a human. Only gargoyles. I would not wish to do something that didn’t bring you pleasure.”

“Well, I’ve never been with a gargoyle. But I’m sure we’ll work it out together.” Grady’s gaze skittered along the horns sprouting from Uzoth’s forehead. “Can I touch...” He gestured to the horns.

Uzoth's chest tightened. Why would Grady want to touch those? Uzoth knew what he was. He was a grotesque monster. Plain and simple. His visage had been formed with the intent to strike fear into the souls of his creator's enemies.

"Only if you want," Grady rushed out. "I don't have to."

"It's not that." Uzoth's brows furrowed. "I am only surprised that you would desire to touch those parts of me that are hideous and mark me so clearly as a monster."

Grady gave a shake of his head. "How about we stop describing you as hideous, all right?"

"It bothers you?" Uzoth studied Grady's face.

Grady reached out and touched one of Uzoth's horns, sliding his hand along the smooth, hard surface. Uzoth shivered at the gentle caress.

"I don't like to hear you speak so poorly of yourself." Grady stroked the horn to the base. "Because I think you're magnificent to look at." Then he threaded his fingers through the long dark hair.

Uzoth let out a breath. He had never been touched like this before. He'd fucked many times during his existence. But it had always been a rough, rushed fuck. A quick fulfilment of needs. He'd never had a lover. He'd never had gentle kisses and sweet caresses.

His heart skipped. Grady wanted to be his lover. He didn't just want to fuck. That knowledge floored him. It all seemed far too much for a monster like him.

"I'm kind of looking forward to exploring all of you, to learning your body." Grady's gaze flicked to Uzoth's wings.

Uzoth frowned. It seemed his wings did not bother Grady either. But how could Grady find him attractive? It seemed incomprehensible. Grady not finding Uzoth terrifying would have been shocking enough. But appealing? It was a lot to come to terms with. However, he would not deny Grady anything.

“Then explore me as you desire.” Then Uzoth’s gaze fell to Grady’s trousers. “But you have distracted me. I believe I was meant to be undressing you.”

“Whoops.” Grady chuckled. He dropped his hands to his sides. “Better hurry up before I distract you again.”

Uzoth unlaced Grady’s trousers and removed them along with his undershorts. He stared at the proof of Grady’s desire, his long hard cock. The head flushed, and thick veins ran beneath the skin.

Amazed he’d been granted permission, he caressed the skin from Grady’s stomach, over his hips, and down his thighs. Goosebumps broke out in the wake of Uzoth’s touch.

Uzoth paused for a second, then he ran his clawed fingers gently along the outside of Grady’s thighs. Not enough to draw blood or even leave a mark, just enough to cause the skin to slightly redden.

Grady trembled at the light scratching sensation.

“Does that feel all right? Does it hurt?” Uzoth glanced at Grady’s face.

“Feels fucking amazing,” Grady murmured.

Uzoth carefully scraped his claws against the skin once again. Then Uzoth used the pads of his fingers to stroke the same path. Grady bit his lip, and his dick jerked.

Uzoth stared at Grady's hard cock. The scent of his musky arousal filled the air. Uzoth wrapped his hand around the hard length and stroked.

"Fuck!" Grady cried out. His hands grasped Uzoth's shoulders. "Fuck. I forgot how good someone else's hand felt."

A sense of satisfaction settled in his chest, and Uzoth stroked Grady from base to tip, up and down, over and over, pumping Grady with his big hand.

"I am glad I am able to please you." Uzoth watched the pleasure play out over Grady's features.

I am doing that. I am bringing him bliss.

Grady's hands gripped Uzoth's horns. Uzoth's muscles tensed, but he forced himself to relax as Grady thrust into Uzoth's grip. Grady closed his eyes. He groaned as pre-cum spilled from the tip. Uzoth rubbed his thumb over the flared head, collecting the fluid before stroking faster. Grady's balls pulled up tight against his body. His stomach quivered.

"Stop," Grady cried.

"I'm sorry." Uzoth's hand froze on Grady's dick as the panic rushed in. He released Grady. What had he done wrong? He'd thought Grady was about to reach his peak. "Did I?—"

"You're amazing," Grady rushed out. "I just don't want to come too quickly. I at least want to see your dick first before I shoot."

The tension inside Uzoth released, and he rose. "If that is what you wish."

Grady eyed the hardness tenting Uzoth's loincloth. "Yeah. That is what I wish. I want to see you in all your glory." Then he untied Uzoth's loincloth. The fabric dropped to the floor. "Fuck me dead." Grady's eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open.

Uzoth glanced down at his dick before returning his gaze to Grady's face, trying to read his expression.

He was much larger and thicker than Grady, firmer too. And like his horn, ringed ridges encircled the length. A series of bumps ran up along either side of his dark-grey dick. From long ago experience, he knew those bumps caused pleasure when being fucked.

Grady wrapped his hand around Uzoth's dick and stroked. "I think I'm going to struggle to take this cock inside my hole."

Uzoth groaned. "You don't need to. I am content with other...methods." Uzoth gripped Grady's waist as he tried not to come apart under Grady's firm touch.

"I'd like for you to fuck me. But I think I'd need to work up to it. So probably not tonight."

Not tonight. That meant there would be more nights.

Grady stepped in close and lined up their cocks. Uzoth's breath stuttered as their dicks pressed together. Grady wrapped his hands around them both and jerked. His other hand splayed on Uzoth's hard pecs, squeezing the muscle.

"You'd truly let me fuck you?" Uzoth would have to stretch Grady a great deal.

"Yeah. I want you to fuck me." Grady pumped their cocks faster. He grunted. "Would you like that? Want to fuck me with this monster cock?"

Uzoth growled. "I can think of nothing I'd desire more." A spurt of pre-cum spilled from the tip.

It smoothed the strokes, and Grady increased the pressure and pace. Pleasure built inside his belly. His cock throbbed in Grady's grip. Uzoth's tail slid towards Grady and wrapped around his calf. Grady jumped, hand stuttering as the tail touched him.

"Sorry." Uzoth began to withdraw the tail. It had been on instinct. He'd just wanted to touch Grady. But he should have expected Grady to dislike his tail touching him.

Grady shook his head. "It's fine. Just surprised me is all." Grady continued to stroke them. He smiled a wicked grin. "Feel free to touch me with your tail."

Uzoth hesitated. But Grady wasn't one to lie. So after a second, he slid his tail up Grady's calf and around his knee and thigh. The tip grazed his balls.

Grady gasped as he continued to stroke them. "Shit! I'm close."

So was Uzoth. His body tensed, hands tightening on Grady's waist.

Grady cried out, body jerking. His cock spurted.

Immediately, pleasure slammed into Uzoth. He growled low. Then he lunged forward and kissed Grady as he, too, began to spill his seed, pulse after pulse covering their dicks as Grady stroked them through their orgasms.

Still kissing, they clutched at each other as their peaks ebbed. A languid warmth spread through Uzoth's limbs. After several moments, Grady broke the kiss. Heavy breathing filled the room. Uzoth stroked Grady's back with his hands, up and down, in a gentle motion.

Grady's stomach growled. "Sorry." Grady chuckled as he released their softening dicks. "I haven't eaten in a while."

Uzoth stared at him a moment. "Then we better get you something to eat."

Still, they just stood in the middle of the room, holding each other, neither willing to pull away.

### CHAPTER 17

Uzoth still couldn't comprehend what had passed between him and Grady. And with Grady's touches and kisses, Uzoth felt like his body had awakened after an age of hibernation. He'd forgotten what true pleasure felt like.

Afterwards, they'd gone out into the main room, and Grady had eaten and spoken with some of the others. But soon they'd retired to bed, and Uzoth and Grady had retired too.

"I'm sorry. I think I'm way too tired to get up to anything more tonight." Grady gave him a weary smile and pulled down the sheets. "But I'm looking forward to getting a good night's sleep with you."

Uzoth stared at the bed. "You want me to sleep with you in your bed?"

"I know the bed isn't big. So it'll be a bit tight. We'll have to be close." Grady paused. "Where did you plan to sleep? Not out there in the snow, right? Not in this."

Uzoth looked out the window. A blur of white existed beyond. "I do not sleep. When I sit and watch, I enter a lower level of awareness. It allows me to continue watching to some extent, but it conserves energy. It is not sleeping, however."

"Oh. That's right." Grady scratched at his beard. "You told me about that. Then I suppose you don't want to lay in the bed with me all night. I imagined it'd get pretty boring. You can?—"

“Perhaps I can lie with you,” Uzoth interrupted. Because although he would not sleep, the idea of lying beside Grady held so much appeal.

“You sure? It’s fine if you’d rather not.”

“I wish to lie beside you.” Uzoth yearned to. He took a step towards him. “I think that would be...extremely pleasant.”

“I think so too.” Grady smiled softly. Grady stripped to his undershorts and climbed in, looking at Uzoth expectantly. “But I won’t be offended if you get up during the night if you get bored.”

“I will not be bored lying next to you.” Uzoth could not fathom that occurring. He sat on the bed. It sank beneath his weight. “I have never lain in a bed before.” Uzoth swung his taloned feet up. They hung off the end.

He lay down on the mattress. “It is very soft.” His body pressed against Grady’s. They did not really fit on the small bed.

Grady chuckled. “I imagine it is much comfier than squatting on a rooftop in the snow.” Grady tugged the blankets over them.

“Yes. It is much comfier.”

Grady leaned over him and turned off the lantern. “Would it be all right if I...”

“If you what?”

“If I...cuddled with you?” Grady asked softly.

Uzoth’s throat tightened. “That would be more than fine, Grady.”

Grady lay down and snuggled close. He rested his head on Uzoth's chest. After a moment, Uzoth wrapped an arm around Grady. Within a couple of minutes, Grady's breathing deepened. A few minutes later, Grady began to snore.

Even if he could, Uzoth did not wish to sleep. He would not want to miss a single second of Grady asleep in his arms. He wanted to cherish every passing moment. After all, he had no idea how long Grady would want him around.

Unfortunately, during the night, they were woken by a commotion.

"Grady!" Lachlan screamed. And they raced to Lachlan's room. It appeared that Kit, Lachlan's familiar, was in fact a cat shifter, and he had shifted into his human form.

Lachlan stared at Kit in horror. Confusion and hurt radiated from Kit as he desperately tried to touch Lachlan. Whilst Grady tried to suggest Lachlan take Grady's bed to sleep, Lachlan decided to share a room with Kit but not a bed.

Afterwards, they returned to Grady's room. Grady paced and fretted.

"Bloody broomsticks! I'm just not sure what to do!" Grady said. "Should Kit even be sleeping in the same room as Lachlan? I mean, there are two beds, and it's Lachlan's choice, but..." He trailed off. "I just don't know."

Back and forth he strode across the small room.

"I am just sorry I cannot be of assistance in this situation." Uzoth had no clue how to help Lachlan or Kit and thus could not help Grady. "It is beyond me."

Grady gave a harsh laugh. "It is beyond me as well."

"I do not think Kit is a threat to Lachlan's safety."

“I don’t think he is either.” Grady sighed. He stopped pacing and stared at a spot on the wall. “Well, it’s not like we can do anything else tonight. I should probably just try to sleep. Although, I doubt I will.”

But Grady was wrong. When they returned to bed, Grady slept long and deep. No doubt he needed the rest.

Uzoth heard noises in the main room. Still, Grady slept. He slept, and Uzoth just lay there holding him, thinking himself the luckiest being in the world to be able to hold Grady and watch over him in his sleep.

“Shit. I slept late,” Grady mumbled as he woke late in the morning.

“The snowstorm still rages outside.” Uzoth stroked the soft skin of Grady’s arm. “I do not believe you can work today.”

“I should probably check on Lachlan.” Grady rose from his arms and climbed from the bed.

Uzoth missed his warm body resting against his.

“I will go and check on your other siblings,” Uzoth said. “I will ensure they are all well.”

Grady smiled. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

Uzoth flew and checked on Lacy. Then he checked on Jack. He even knocked on the doors as Grady had suggested. He asked how they fared. He flew to Ordellia’s apartment last. A sense of satisfaction filled him at the knowledge that he was helping Grady.

It felt like his life once again had a purpose. And with that, his heart beat stronger in his chest. The strongest it had beaten in many years.

Uzoth stood in front of Ordelia's door. He knocked. Uzoth stared at the door. Such a strange thing to knock instead of just waiting on rooftops.

The door opened, and Ordelia stood there. "Hello."

"Good day, Ordelia. I am Uzoth. On behalf of Grady, I have come to check on you and your kin." Uzoth bowed his head.

"Oh." Ordelia gave a shocked laugh. "Grady sent you? In this weather?" She shook her head. "He shouldn't be sending you out in this! Come in. Come in. It's so cold."

Uzoth stepped forward, and she closed the door. "Do not worry for me. I am used to the cold."

"Yes. I believe I've seen you out in it before. Many times." Ordelia tilted her head. "How do you know Grady?"

"I am his friend."

"A friend, are you? Really?" Ordelia asked. "That's so good. He could definitely use a friend. He hasn't had one in years!"

"Neither have I."

Ordelia smiled. "Well, I'm glad you have each other. Although, I'm still not loving him asking you to come out in this weather." She tsked.

"I offered." Uzoth did not want Ordelia to think poorly of Grady. "I am honoured to

be able to perform this task for him.” Uzoth straightened his shoulders.

Ordelia’s eyes danced. “I see.”

“Are you, Ruthie, Michael, and Tony well?”

“We are. You can thank Grady for his concern. We are all doing fine,” Ordelia said.

“Grady will be pleased to hear that.” Uzoth turned towards the door.

“Do you want some tea or cake whilst you are here? I’ve got some soup on too.” She gestured into her home.

Uzoth shook his head. “I should return. Grady might worry if I am gone too long.” Like he had worried the previous day.

Ordelia laughed. “Yes. He does worry. But we must talk later. I’d like to learn all about Grady’s new friend, all right?”

“If you wish.” Uzoth inclined his head.

Ordelia grinned at him. “I’m truly glad Grady has you as a friend.”

“I am glad to have Grady as a friend.” Uzoth paused. The night before flashed before his eyes. The kisses, the touching, sleeping together in the bed. “He is an excellent friend.”

When he returned to the apartment, the needs of Grady’s family meant they did not spend any time alone that day. Although Uzoth did help Grady, Lachlan, Leo, and Jasper fix the bakery chimney.

At the end of the day, Grady yawned as they entered the bedroom. Uzoth assumed Grady would once again be too tired to engage in any sexual activities.

Honestly, Uzoth did not mind. He looked forward to holding Grady in his arms through the night once again. He'd been looking forward to it all day.

But then Grady turned towards him and smiled. "Pissing potions, today has dragged on! I've been thinking about you naked all day." Then Grady stepped in close and reached for Uzoth.

### CHAPTER 18

Warm lips wrapped around Grady's cock. A hint of fang slid against the side of his dick as Uzoth sucked him.

Grady bit the back of his hand, trying to muffle the cry as the bliss reached a crescendo inside him. His dick jerked, and he filled Uzoth's mouth with his seed. Uzoth drank down every drop. Then he released Grady from his mouth.

Still panting, Grady rose. He pushed Uzoth onto his back on the bed. Grady moved down Uzoth's body, fingers caressing all the lovely muscles on display.

Uzoth's clawed hands stroked his back. Uzoth's tail slithered around his leg. Grady smiled. In the past few days, Uzoth had grown much less cautious in bed, no longer doubting Grady's desire for him.

Grady wrapped his hand around the thick base of Uzoth's cock and squeezed. He licked the tip, tasting the musky pre-cum before running his tongue up and down the length, along the ridges and bumps. Uzoth's hands threaded through Grady's hair.

Uzoth growled in his throat as Grady sucked the head before swallowing as much of Uzoth as he could. Grady's lips stretched around the girth. He tried to relax his throat to take more of Uzoth. His eyes watered.

But even though he'd gotten better in the last few days, he'd still not managed to take all of Uzoth's enormous cock down. Grady's cheeks hollowed.

Uzoth grunted. Up and down, Grady bobbed his head. He closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of Uzoth's thick cock, heavy on his tongue. Then Uzoth's dick throbbed, and hot, salty seed flooded Grady's mouth. Grady struggled to swallow all Uzoth's spend, and some spilled from his mouth, trickling down his chin.

Uzoth's fingers retreated from Grady's hair.

Breathing heavily, Grady collapsed beside Uzoth, wiping his face and pulling the blankets over them.

"Thank you," Uzoth said. "You are truly magnificent."

Grady grinned, stroking Uzoth's toned chest. "You weren't too bad yourself."

Uzoth smiled. He wrapped his arm around Grady's waist and pulled Grady close, claws stroking back and forth over Grady's skin.

Grady shivered. Sighing, Grady closed his eyes and rested his head on Uzoth's chest. His breathing and heart rate slowly returned to normal. They'd been snowed in for a few days now. He'd not been able to rest like this in fuck knew how long.

Grady heard his siblings' voices out in the main room. In a while, Grady would go out and check on them. But not yet. Thankfully, after Grady had talked with Lachlan, he and Kit seemed to be working through their strange situation. Grady guessed they would settle on being a witch and familiar as well as being lovers.

Grady dozed. For the moment, his siblings were safe. Grady could take a moment to breathe. No doubt once the snowstorm ended, he'd be busy and exhausted once again.

He and Uzoth had spent a lot of the past few days in this bed. Although, Grady had yet to be fucked. But hopefully soon. He really wanted to take Uzoth's dick inside

him.

Uzoth's tail lazily stroked Grady's hip. Or maybe he could take Uzoth's tail first.

His arsehole clenched at the idea of that tip sliding inside him, growing thicker and thicker as it pressed deeper. Of course, he wouldn't take all of Uzoth's tail. That thing was longer than his fucking leg, and he didn't want to be ripped open. But a bit of Uzoth's tail might be fun.

Horny hexes. When is the last time I had fun?

The snow batted against the window. Would he have days like this with Uzoth after the snowstorm?

No. He wouldn't.

But they could go back to nights together. He could try to find time to be with Uzoth in the cracks of all the pressures that always bore down on him. Just the thought of all those pressures caused the contentment to drain from his body. But surely they could find some time together.

Because Grady was certain he cared for Uzoth and not just as a friend but as something far more.

Grady's chest tightened.

Could this be love?

Grady wasn't certain. He'd never had time for a love life before. But the idea of Uzoth permanently in his bed, in his life, sent a buzzing sensation through his veins. They could have many more nights sitting by the fire, drinking tea and talking before

stumbling into bed together.

Grady smiled as he snuggled closer to Uzoth and pictured a future with the gargoyle.

Vaguely, he was aware of voices in the main room coming and going. The light in the room shifted. The snow kept falling outside. But for now, he was warm in Uzoth's protective embrace, and he had time to rest.

Finally, Grady opened his eyes. He blinked up at Uzoth.

"Bored watching me sleep yet?" Grady asked.

"Never." Uzoth stroked his hair.

Grady pressed a kiss to Uzoth's chest. "As much as I want to stay in bed all day with you, I think I need to eat." Grady began to sit up.

But Uzoth put a hand on his chest and pressed him back into the mattress. "Allow me to get something for you. Then you can continue to rest."

Uzoth rose, and Grady admired his firm round arse. Fuck, Grady wanted to sink his teeth into those cheeks.

"I am capable of getting myself food," Grady said, eyes still fixed on Uzoth's arse.

"I am well aware." Uzoth put on his loincloth. "But it gives me pleasure to care for you."

Grady grinned. "Well, if it gives you pleasure, then who am I to stop you?"

Uzoth smiled and left. Grady heard Uzoth speaking to the others in the main room.

When have I ever been looked after before?

Probably not since before his parents had died. His stomach tightened at the thought.

His sister cared for him. But Grady had never really let her look after him.

A few moments later, Uzothe came back into the room, and Grady's heart beat faster at the mere sight of him.

Uzothe shut the door behind him with his tail. He carried a plate of food, a bowl of stew, and two cups of tea. "Which do you want first?"

Grady sat up. "That fruit bread roll looks good."

Uzothe handed him the roll and placed the rest on the side table before climbing into bed beside him. The bed creaked. Uzothe grabbed his cup of tea.

"You're good at looking after me." Grady took a bite of the soft buttery roll. He chewed, savouring the taste of the dried fig, apricot, and cherries with a hint of cinnamon.

"That is good. Because I enjoy looking after you, Grady." Uzothe reached out a hand and slid his fingers along Grady's shoulder.

Grady hummed with contentment. He wished the snowstorm would never end, that his siblings would never need his help, and that the bakery would always run smoothly.

But that would never happen, so he'd just enjoy this brief respite from his life in his room with Uzothe.

### CHAPTER 19

U zoth listened to Jasper and Leo sing.

The twins' voices filled the main room.

“Snow blankets Anorra, our dear old town,

The winter sprites fly the streets,

May all the sweet children be?—”

“No.” Briar groaned. “I hate that song. Choose another.”

Briar gulped his hot chocolate with more than a dash of almond liquor. His cheeks flushed red. He set down his cup and picked up his crochet hook and needle.

“What’s wrong with it?” Leo laughed, smiling at Briar.

“It’s so slow and boring.” Briar sat beside Wulfric on the settee. Both crocheted. “We need an upbeat, cheerful song.”

“You pick one, then!” Jasper said.

Grady chuckled at his siblings’ bickering, which Uzoth could understand. The family was amusing. And even when they disagreed with one another, an undercurrent of affection ran beneath their interactions. They could even call each other names,

swear, or insult one another in a playful, jesting manner.

Although the bond between Uzoth and his brethren had looked very different—they'd never laughed or joked like the Berry siblings did—the strength and close connection between the siblings reminded him of the relationship he'd had with his gargoyle kin. A wave of sadness rolled through him at the memory of what was lost.

He looked around the room, his gaze resting on Grady. But at least tonight he was not alone.

Grady glanced up at Uzoth, who stood beside him. "Do you have a favourite Christmas song you'd like us to sing?"

"My knowledge of Christmas songs is too sparse for me to have preferences." Uzoth smiled. "But I have found tonight very informative."

Grady laughed. "I can imagine."

Tonight all the siblings and their partners who'd been staying in the apartment gathered around the fire in the main room. Uzoth stood because of the lack of chairs.

They'd spent the last hour singing Christmas carols together. Uzoth hadn't sung. But he'd found it lovely to listen. Now it seemed the siblings could not decide on the next song.

"No! No! No!" Cas perched on Graal's knees. He wobbled, and Graal's hands steadied him. "We are not singing a song about fucking Christmas elves. No Christmas elves in this home. Ever!"

His wings flapped, and one smacked Graal's face. The orc narrowed his gaze at the offending wing before pushing it away gently.

“Only Christmas pixies allowed in this apartment!” Apparently, Cas hadn’t noticed his wing attacking Graal. But the pixie had drunk quite a few mugs of hot chocolate with peppermint liquor. Uzoth noticed he’d gone quite heavy when pouring the liquor.

“No Christmas elves.” Cas took another drink from his mug, and everyone laughed.

“How about we do something else, then?” Grady suggested.

“Like what?” asked Leo.

Jasper perked up. “A ghost story! I love ghost stories at Christmas.”

“Yes!” Leo agreed.

Cas clapped.

“Is it weird to read ghost stories at Christmas?” Lachlan asked. “Why do we do that?”

Kit sat on the floor in his human form in front of Lachlan. He leaned against his witch’s legs, gazing up at him with affection.

“Well, it is a way to keep us entertained through the long, cold winter nights.” Briar pushed his glasses up his nose. “And although no one is certain, some believe we tell ghost stories to remind us of how lucky we are to be within the home, sitting by a blazing fire, protected from the elements and the dangers that lurk in the dark outside,” Briar explained. “And that contrast makes us feel all cosy and warm.”

“Did you read all that in a book?” Wulfric smiled at his mate.

“Of course,” Briar laughed and leaned over to kiss Wulfric on the cheek.

Uzoth's gaze took in the room, the sparkling Christmas tree, glowing candles, coloured paper stars, garlands of dried oranges and lemons, and wooden figures decorating the mantel. Those decorations, combined with the heat of the fire, and the people gathered, made it truly feel like a cosy space. A magical space.

Grady rose and went to the bookshelf. He selected a thin tome. "All right, who wants to read first?"

"You're holding the book," Jasper pointed out.

Grady took his seat. "All right, then." Grady opened it. "The Wails of the Banshee," he began. "There was once a banshee..."

Uzoth listened to Grady's voice as he read. The tale told of the banshee's curse and the poor soul Lizabeth who got caught up in it. Despite trying to get away, the curse caused her to go mad and fling herself from a cliff. It was not a pleasant story. And it did not have anything to do with Christmas.

But it did make Uzoth appreciate his warm and cosy surroundings.

After half an hour, Grady closed the book. "Well, that was bloody terrifying."

"I'm definitely going to avoid cliffs overlooking the ocean for a while." Lachlan shivered.

"What are you talking about? We don't live anywhere near the ocean," Leo said. "I've never even been to the seaside. Have you?"

"No! And now I definitely don't plan to." Lachlan smiled.

Laughter filled the room.

Grady reached out and picked up a spiced cookie. He took a bite. “This is really good, Kit and Lachlan. You guys really work magic in the kitchen together.”

The two smiled at the compliment. “Thank you,” Kit said softly. “I enjoy working in the bakery with Lachlan.” He touched his witch’s leg.

Grady picked up the plate and passed it around.

“Let’s have another story!” Jasper snagged two cookies. “The one about the wili and the asshole who betrayed her!”

“Yes! I like that story,” Cas said. “Do you?” Cas turned to face Graal.

“I don’t think I know it,” Graal said. “I don’t know many ghost stories.”

Grady flicked through the book. Then he turned to Uzoth. “Would you like to read?”

Uzoth stared at the book Grady held open towards him.

“You don’t have to.” Grady rushed out.

Uzoth took the book. “I do not mind reading.” At the top of the page was a picture of a woman’s wispy figure dancing with a man beneath the moon.

“ The Wili’s Revenge ,” Uzoth read the title. “There was once a young woman, beautiful and innocent, who lived in a small village at the edge of the forest.”

The tale was that of a man who travelled to the village and seduced the young woman, promising her marriage and love. She became hopelessly enamoured before he left her, breaking her heart. She died and became one of the wilis, creatures betrayed by their lovers and fuelled by the need to seek revenge.

“One night, beneath the moon in the field where they’d met, the man came upon the wili, the woman he’d abandoned,” Uzoth read. “He began to speak to her. But she did not listen. She lifted her hands above her head and began to dance, hips swaying from side to side. She tempted him to dance, like he had tempted her.”

No one in the room spoke, just listening to Uzoth read.

“The man grew tired after hours of dancing. But he could not stop, no matter how he tried. His limbs ached. Sweat drenched his body. His feet bled within his shoes. He shook with exhaustion.

“‘Just one more dance,’ she pleaded.

“Then she smiled at him with the smile that had captivated him when they’d first met. And he continued to dance.”

The fire crackled.

“Finally, just before the dawn, his body could take no more. He fell to the dew-drenched grass, the exhaustion too much. He died on the field where they’d met. Then the wili turned her back on him, just as he had turned his back on her. The wili’s revenge had been satisfied.” Uzoth closed the book.

“Shit,” Leo said. “I’m definitely not going to betray any young women.”

“A young woman has to want you first.” Jasper laughed.

Leo shoved his twin, grinning.

“Excellent reading.” Cas leaned forward, almost falling off Graal’s lap, but Graal gripped his waist. “Uzoth, your deep, gravelly voice is perfect for ghost stories.”

The others added their agreement.

Uzoth bowed his head, unused to such compliments. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to put on some more hot chocolate. Who wants more?” Lachlan rose, and so did Kit.

“Oh! And I’m going to put some chestnuts on the fire.” Cas smiled back at Graal.

Grady turned to Uzoth and took the book. He slid his hand into Uzoth’s. “Thank you. You did very well. Sorry for putting you on the spot like that.”

“It is fine,” Uzoth said. “I enjoyed reading the story and being a part of the festive traditions.”

Grady smiled. “So are you enjoying yourself, then? I know my family can be a lot.”

“I am.” Uzoth swallowed. “I have watched many celebrate Christmas over the years. I have never been a part of them. Thank you for including me.”

Grady squeezed his hand. “You are very welcome. I am glad you are here.”

Uzoth smiled. “And are you enjoying yourself? You are smiling a lot.”

Grady laughed. “Yes. I spend so much time running around, being responsible and taking care of everything, I don’t usually have time to just enjoy Christmas and be with my family. It’s nice to take a moment and have fun with them.”

Lachlan and Kit came around, taking their mugs. They filled them with hot chocolate and shots of liquor for those who wanted them.

Uzoth did not eat. But he found drinking pleasant. Uzoth sipped his warm hot chocolate, letting the sweet taste coat his tongue and mouth. “I think I have decided I very much enjoy hot chocolate. Perhaps it is my favourite hot drink.”

Grady grinned. “That is a good choice.”

Uzoth smiled.

For a long time, he’d not smiled. Truthfully, he’d never smiled a lot in the past. But at some point, he’d stopped entirely. Until now. At first, the expression had felt so foreign on his face. Like the muscles around his lips had atrophied completely. But now with Grady, he found he had something to smile about.

Uzoth took another sip of the hot chocolate, letting the warmth of the drink, the room, the company, and Grady’s steady presence wash over him.

But even as he savoured this moment, Uzoth wondered how long until he was out in the cold on his own once again.

### CHAPTER 20

U zoth took their cups and plates down to the bakery to wash them and put them away whilst Grady slept. For a moment, he paused on the stairs on his way back. A powdery white covered the entire alley. He tilted his head back and stared up at the snow that continued falling. He glanced at the rooftops, where he so often sat and watched.

How many snowstorms had he sat out in the cold? And now he spent this storm in Grady's apartment, much of the time in Grady's bed. Even if Uzoth did not know how long this would last, he was grateful for the time they had together and for this brief reprieve from the cold.

He returned to the apartment above. Uzoth froze when he re-entered Grady's room.

Grady no longer slept.

"I know you like to watch me." Grady gasped. "So I thought I'd give you something to watch."

Grady lay naked, sprawled on the bed, hand wrapped around his cock as he stroked himself. He held a wooden dildo in his hand, plunging it into his body.

Where did that come from?

Uzoth's dick quickly filled to complete hardness. With a tug, he untied his loincloth and let it drop. Grady moaned at the sight of Uzoth's erect cock. He fucked himself

faster with the dildo. A flush spread up his chest and throat.

A growl escaped Uzoth. Grady's gaze flitted over Uzoth as if taking in every inch of him.

At first, Uzoth had held back during sex, worried Grady might fear him. It had taken Uzoth a while to realise Grady was not at all afraid of him.

In fact, Uzoth had been entirely wrong about that. It seemed that the parts of Uzoth he considered monstrous and thus had assumed would be hideous to Grady had the opposite effect on Grady. Surprisingly, Grady seemed to find Uzoth's wings, fangs, tail, and horns arousing.

Well, if Grady wanted to be fucked by a monster, Uzoth would gladly comply.

Uzoth unfurled his wings as he stalked towards the bed. Grady's breath caught and pre-cum splattered from Grady's dick onto his stomach as Uzoth loomed over him.

Uzoth's tail darted forward, wrapping around Grady's ankle. He tugged Grady down the bed towards him, a growl vibrating in his chest.

Grady cried out. He let go of the dildo and his dick as he gripped the sheets. He panted, staring up at Uzoth with wide grey eyes.

Uzoth's tail slid up Grady's calves and his trembling thighs. He wrapped the tip of his tail around the base of the dildo, still inside Grady. Slowly, he drew the dildo out so only the head remained inside. Then he shoved it forward.

Grady groaned. His chest heaved as Uzoth fucked him with the dildo. His fingers spasmed against the bed.

“Fuck!” Grady cried out as the wooden phallus slid in and out of his tight hole.

Uzoth hummed as he watched the dildo move. His dick throbbed. He tugged the wooden phallus free and threw it across the room. Then he slithered his tail up Grady’s stomach, chest, and neck. Grady reached out and gripped it. He tugged it to his mouth.

Uzoth narrowed his eyes, curious what Grady was doing.

Then Grady licked the tip, swirling his tongue around it. Uzoth’s mouth fell open. A shudder ran through him. Grady sucked on it, moaning and slurping, as if Uzoth’s tail were his cock.

Uzoth’s stomach clenched, and his cock jerked. Then, holding the tail, Grady lowered it down his body. He spread his thighs wider as he positioned the tail between his thighs.

Uzoth’s brows raised in surprise. “Is that what you want?” he asked, voice husky. Uzoth stroked his tail against the insides of Grady’s thighs, teasing his balls.

Grady let out a breath. Sweat glistened on his brow. He nodded.

“Hmmm. Interesting.” Uzoth pressed the tip against Grady’s hole. The tight ring of muscle clenched against him. “You really do want to be fucked by a monster, don’t you?”

“I—” But Grady’s words cut off as Uzoth slid his tail inside Grady, just the point.

Grady’s mouth fell open. His body arched, feet kicking at the sheets as Uzoth’s tail wiggled deeper inside him. Grady writhed.

Uzoth leaned forward, clawed hands gripping Grady's knees, holding him down and open as his tail plunged deeper inside Grady, curling and twisting in his tight channel.

"Fuck!" Grady squeezed his eyes shut. His hole stretched around Uzoth's tail. Grady's cock leaked against his stomach, the head flushed a deep purple. Uzoth pressed the tip against the pleasure spot inside him.

Grady whimpered, and the muscles clenched around Uzoth's tail.

Uzoth tugged his tail free. Grady whined and sagged against the mattress. He panted. Then Uzoth wrapped his tail around Grady's middle. Grady startled as Uzoth lifted Grady and turned him over onto his front.

"You don't want to come on my tail, do you?" Uzoth lifted Grady to the end of the bed, delectable arse presented to Uzoth.

Uzoth stepped in behind him. His tail tightened around Grady's waist, holding him in place as he gripped Grady's arse cheek with one hand and opened him to his gaze.

Then Uzoth guided his erect cock to Grady's hole. "You want me to fuck you with my monster cock? Isn't that right?"

"Fuck yes." Grady's head dropped forward.

"Good." Then Uzoth pushed forward into the delicious, tight heat of Grady's body.

Grady cried out, and Uzoth moaned as he slid steadily forward, inch by inch. Grady's channel stretched wide to accommodate him. Grady's body trembled, and still, Uzoth pressed forward.

"Shit! Oh shit!" Grady called out. "That's so good. So full. Fuck."

Finally, Uzoth was fully buried inside Grady. He held still for several seconds, stroking Grady's hip and back, urging him to relax and accept Uzoth's dick inside him.

Then Uzoth began to thrust, rocking in and out of Grady's tight body. One hand clutched Grady's arse. He slid the other up Grady's spine. He dragged his clawed hands along Grady's back, just hard enough to leave red marks.

Grady gasped, back arching. Uzoth pressed his hand between Grady's shoulder blades, pushing his chest onto the bed, holding him down whilst he fucked him. The end of his tail wrapped around Grady's rigid cock, jerking him in time with Uzoth's rough thrusts.

"Do you like being fucked by a monster, little human?" Uzoth growled as he pistoned his hips.

But words seemed beyond Grady. He babbled. He cried. He groaned. He swore. His hands scrabbled at the sheets as his body jolted with each of Uzoth's thrusts.

Uzoth could feel his balls tighten, the need to spend building.

He snapped his hips. "Come for me," Uzoth growled. "Come around my dick. I want to feel you spill your seed." His tail gripped Grady's dick tighter, stroking him faster.

Suddenly, Grady sobbed. His channel tightened around Uzoth's cock, body convulsing as he came.

Uzoth groaned. He threw his head, wings spreading wide as pleasure burned through his veins. He kept thrusting into Grady, emptying his seed.

After a moment, Grady slumped in his grip. Carefully, Uzoth stepped back, cock

sliding from Grady's hole. His seed trickled from Grady's entrance, and Uzoth released him. Grady whimpered, arse still in the air.

Using his tail and hands, Uzoth arranged Grady so he lay on his back in the bed. Uzoth cleaned them both before lying beside Grady.

"Are you all right? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Grady reached up and grabbed his horn, stroking it affectionately. "It was great. The best."

Smiling down at Grady, Uzoth placed a kiss on Grady's cheek.

Grady's eyes closed, and he murmured something. His hand slid off Uzoth's horn and dropped onto the sheets. His breathing evened out as sleep took him.

Uzoth stroked Grady's hair, tenderness swelling inside him. He'd never cared for anyone like he did for Grady.

He'd had brethren. He'd had a creator. He'd cared for them and protected them. But it hadn't been like this. It had not been this overwhelming sense of devotion and care that blazed within him.

He loved Grady. At least he thought he did. If this wasn't love, he didn't know what it was.

Grady brought warmth and light to what had been such a cold existence. Uzoth wanted to remain forever by Grady's side.

But could Grady return his love? Could someone this vibrant, this alive, love a monster like him?

Uzoth just didn't know.

### CHAPTER 21

Even if Uzoth might have wanted the snowstorm to last forever, he knew it could not. It had been a couple of days now since the snowstorm had passed. Normal life had resumed, which meant a frazzled, exhausted, and strung-out Grady.

“Shit. I have to go.” Grady sprung up from the bed, grabbed his clothes, and quickly got dressed.

Darkness lay outside.

Still, Uzoth got to hold Grady and watch him sleep through the night. Uzoth rose. He lit the lantern and put on his loincloth. “What do you have to do today?”

“A lot of the usual stuff. Bakery. Christmas markets.” Grady sighed. “And I’m having some trouble with a supplier. They raised their prices. Again.” Grady rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m going to go over there and speak to them. And the bloody oven at the Christmas markets is acting up again. Last night at the markets, it just kept smoking.”

Grady groaned. “Who the fuck will buy from us if they choke on smoke trying to get near the stall? So I’ll try and fix it.”

“Can I help with anything?” Uzoth asked.

Grady gave a shake of his head. “Nah. I can take care of it.”

Uzoth tried not to feel disappointed that he could not assist Grady. “Would you like me to make you some tea and breakfast?”

“I’ll eat something in the bakery.” Then Grady turned and pressed a quick kiss to Uzoth’s lips. He pulled back far too soon for Uzoth’s liking. “I’ve got to go.” Then Grady strode to the door and left.

Uzoth stared after him.

Grady was busy once again. He did not have time for lingering kisses or staying in bed.

Uzoth understood that. For years, Grady had worked hard. Uzoth would be a fool to think that would suddenly change. After all, why would it?

He looked around the room. For days, they’d been locked away in here. Their own perfect paradise. At least for Uzoth. But it could not last.

Uzoth left the room. He walked across the main room and exited the apartment, sensing the protection spell Grady had just charged. He stepped outside.

With nothing else to do, and knowing no other way he could be of use to Grady, he flew up and landed on the roof. He squatted, talons pressing into the tiles. He stared down at the bakery window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Grady.

For the duration of the snowstorm, he’d been by Grady’s side. He’d brought him food. He’d held him. He’d cared for him. He’d been useful to Grady. He’d been a part of his life. And for those few days, he’d felt like his own life had been filled with such brightness. He’d felt fulfilled. Being with Grady and caring for him gave him purpose once again.

Even though he knew Grady valued Uzoth watching over him and his family, Uzoth could not help but feel like he was once again an outsider, looking down on Grady's life from the rooftops above.

But Uzoth understood. He was not actually a part of Grady's day-to-day life. He did not know how to help Grady in the bakery or at the Christmas markets. He'd offered to help in different ways. But Grady did not want his help.

A sense of uselessness settled in the pit of his stomach.

But tonight, they would sit by the fire and drink tea and talk. He'd bask in the warmth of Grady's company, and they would sleep together. They had not had sex in the few days since the snowstorm passed. In fact, they did not stay up long before Grady collapsed into bed.

But that was fine. Grady had been exhausted.

The heat from the apartment seeped from Uzoth's body, replaced by the cold.

The bakery door opened. Grady stepped out. Uzoth perked up. Grady placed his hand on the sigil, whispering as he charged the protection spell. He turned, smiled, and waved at Uzoth.

But before Uzoth had time to return the gesture, Grady strode away in the direction of the Christmas markets.

Uzoth stared after him.

He is busy. It cannot be like it was during the snowstorm. This is fine.

Uzoth was just lucky Grady wanted him in his life at all. A light snow began to fall.

Uzoth stared out in the direction Grady had walked off. He didn't move. He just remained still, waiting for the man he loved to return.

### CHAPTER 22

Conjuring cockmonkeys! Could everything just back the fuck off and give me a chance to catch my fucking breath?

The muscle beneath Grady's left eye twitched. It had stopped during the snowstorm, but it had returned with a vengeance. Grady strode through the snow back to the bakery. They'd run out of sugar cookies, meat pies, dried plum tarts, and truffles at the Christmas markets.

With Christmas only a few days away, more and more visitors had descended on the markets. Perhaps everyone wanted to make up for the time they'd spent being snowed in and soak up as much of the festive season as they could.

As Grady entered the alley, he glanced up to see Uzoth above. The intimidating gargoyle stared down. Grady's heart squeezed in his chest.

Fuck. I miss being snowed in with him.

He waved as he rushed to the bakery door and entered. What wouldn't Grady give to go back to just being with Uzoth in his room? He couldn't remember a time in his life when he'd been happier or more relaxed.

But as the snow cleared, his real life came rushing back. All the responsibility, all the pressures, all the exhaustion, and all the lack of time smashed into him. Once again, he barely had time to breathe.

Guilt spread through him. Poor Uzoth.

Grady hadn't been able to give him any real time the past few days. He really wished he could. He wanted to laze about in bed with Uzoth, kissing and fucking. He wanted to talk for hours with no responsibilities shoving Grady down into the slush.

Shit! He just wanted to be with Uzoth.

The previous night, Grady had dragged himself home and collapsed by the fire. Uzoth had prepared him tea and food and served him.

Fuck. He didn't deserve Uzoth. Right now, Uzoth remained above, watching him and his family. He helped in any way he could. He supported Grady.

And what did Grady give him? Scraps of time when he could barely keep his eyes open. How long would Uzoth stick around when all Grady could give him were the leftovers of his life? And he really didn't have much left over.

Grady swallowed. The fear of losing Uzoth coiled inside his throat, choking him. He didn't want to lose Uzoth. He cared for him. But why would Uzoth stay with him when he was a mess who gave Uzoth nothing?

How could Grady ask for him to stay with him? It wasn't fair to Uzoth.

Last night, despite his exhaustion, Grady forced himself to remain longer by the fire. He'd eaten. They'd talked, although he struggled to keep his eyes open. They'd even jerked each other off. It had been great.

And today he'd woken even more exhausted. How could he manage? How could he keep the attention and affection of a magnificent ancient gargoyle whilst trying to keep up with the demands of his normal life?

Grady didn't know.

When they'd been tucked away during the snowstorm, he'd believed that with a bit of effort, he could make time for Uzoth. But as all the activity, worries, and responsibilities of life came slamming back into him, he just didn't know how he'd make it all work.

But he couldn't let Uzoth go. Still, Uzoth deserved so much more than what Grady could give him.

Grady just needed to stop and think for a moment. But he was so fucking tired. He had no time to think.

In the bakery, he began to pack baked goods into crates. He rubbed at the fluttering muscle beneath his eye, wishing he could collapse into bed.

"Do we have any more dried plum tarts?" Grady asked.

Kit looked up from mixing ingredients. "I don't think so. We tried to make some more earlier."

"But we are out of dried plums," Lachlan said.

"What?" Grady walked to the shelves and then to the supply closet. He looked through, and sure enough, there were no dried plums.

Pissing potions! He hadn't noticed. He'd not been paying enough attention. He'd been too bloody distracted. "I'll order some tomorrow."

The back door opened. Trent walked in, taking off his coat.

“Oh, good, you’re here.” Trent looked at Grady. “Ordelia was worried.”

Grady frowned. “Why would Ordelia be worried?”

“You were meant to stop by and pick up Michael to take to the Christmas markets today.” Trent pulled on an apron. “You said he could be your assistant.”

Grady closed his eyes and let out a breath. Shit. He’d completely forgotten.

And Michael had been so looking forward to it. He pictured the young faun eagerly waiting for his uncle to show up. And Grady had simply forgotten him. Grady gritted his teeth. How could he forget his nephew?

“You’re right. I’ll finish packing these crates, I’ll go pick him up, and we’ll go to the Christmas markets together.” Grady had fucked up. But he could still make it work. He could do this. He just needed to stop being such a shit-brained idiot and pull himself together.

Lacy walked into the back area. She’d been serving out front. A playful smile danced on her lips as she glanced at Grady. She began to collect some cookies and place them in a basket. “You’re getting so forgetful, Grady. It’s so unlike you. I wonder why? Is it because of the handsome Uzoth?” Lacy laughed.

Grady froze. Was that it? Was that why he kept fucking up and letting his family down?

Lacy grabbed another basket and continued to fill it with cookies. “And you forgot to come over and put a protection charm on my new apartment like you said you would.”

His blood turned to ice.

Lacy picked up a cookie and took a bite. “You know someone wandered straight into our apartment in the middle of the night,” she said, mouth full. “It was just a drunk neighbour who’d gotten the doors mixed up. But I thought that would never have happened with Grady’s protection charm. That would have kept our drunk neighbour out on their arse.” She shook her head, smiling. “You’re so distracted with your handsome gargoyles.”

“I’m so sorry, Lacy.” The words tore at Grady’s throat.

She spun, all mirth and teasing laughter draining from her face. “Oh, I’m just joking, Grady! It’s just a joke. We had a great time. Our neighbour is lovely, and they shared their mead with us. We stayed up talking for hours.”

Grady shook his head, staring down at the crates full of baked goods.

“Grady, she didn’t mean it,” Trent said.

What if something had happened to Lacy or her girlfriend? What if the person had come in with plans to harm them? His lips tingled. Numbness swept through his limbs.

“We’re really happy you’ve found someone.” Lacy came towards him. “And we have more help now with Kit, Wulfric, and Avery. You can take some time for yourself.”

The metallic tang of blood filled his nostrils. He could hear the horses’ shrieks mixed with his mother’s as the horses ran over his parents. Their bones crunched beneath horses’ hooves and carriage wheels.

Grady looked at his hands. Warm blood covered his palms and fingers.

He could hear his siblings speaking, but they sounded so far away. All he could see

was the blood on his hands.

Hands shaking, he gripped the sides of the crates, stacked them, and lifted them.

“I’m sorry. I’ll come by tonight to do the charm.” Grady’s voice shook. He felt light-headed. He couldn’t breathe. “I’ll go pick up Michael and take him to the Christmas markets. Then tonight, I’ll go to your place to do the charm. I’m really sorry.”

“Grady!” Lacy protested. “I was teasing. I didn’t mean it.”

Grady shook his head, not looking at her.

“And it’s already late afternoon.” Lacy placed a hand on his arm. “You won’t have time today. We can do it another day. It will be fine. Really.”

He kept shaking his head. “I’ll make time tonight.” He’d do it no matter the cost. He wasn’t going to lose his sister because he’d gotten distracted.

“Grady!” Lacy whined.

But Grady was already out the door.

### CHAPTER 23

U zoth stared down into the alley.

The door to the bakery flung open. Grady came out carrying crates. Grady fumbled with them, almost dropping them onto the cobblestones as he pressed his hand against the sigil and charged the protection charm.

Uzoth's gaze narrowed.

Something is wrong.

Grady started walking in the direction of the Christmas markets. He stopped. "Fuck!" he barked. Then he turned and walked in the other direction, towards Ordellia's.

Something is definitely wrong.

Unfurling his wings, Uzoth took flight and landed beside Grady.

Grady kept walking, and Uzoth fell into step.

"Are you all right?" Uzoth glanced at the crates. "Can I help you carry those?"

Grady gave a sharp shake of his head. "I keep forgetting things." He panted, the air fogging in front of him. "I forgot I was meant to pick up Michael earlier and take him to the Christmas markets. I was going to let him be my assistant today. I promised him! He was so excited. You should have seen him, and then I fucking forgot! I just

forgot.” A muscle below his eye twitched.

“And I was meant to put a protection charm on Lacy and her girlfriend’s apartment. I’d meant to do it a couple of days ago, and it just slipped my mind. Poof into nothing.” Grady gave a bitter laugh. “And then some stranger wandered into their apartment last night.”

“Are they all right?” Uzoth asked.

“It was just a drunk neighbour. But what if it had been an attacker? What if they had hurt Lacy?” Grady asked, voice strained. “I keep forgetting things. I’m fucking up all over the place.” His voice trembled.

“I’m sorry,” Uzoth said. “If there is any way I can assist to relieve some of the pressures?—”

Grady shook his head again. “I just need to think straight. To process and get my shit together. I just need time to breathe. But how can I? There’s always something.” His throat tightened.

“And now I’ve got you in my life. I’m trying to find time to be with you. I’m always distracted thinking of you. It’s making me forget my other responsibilities.”

It felt like a blow to the face. Uzoth stopped walking. “I am sorry, Grady. I do not wish to make your life more difficult.”

Grady paused and turned back. “I didn’t mean it like that.” He closed his eyes. “It’s just that I can’t get anything right at the moment. I’ve always been so busy, and now with you in my life, I’m even busier.”

Pain lanced through Uzoth’s chest. He wanted to make Grady’s life better. Not worse.

Grady's presence had upended Uzoth's life. Grady had brought joy, happiness, and warmth. Uzoth wanted his presence in Grady's life to have the same effect.

He did not want to make Grady's life harder than it was. But of course, he had. Grady was busy. And now Grady had to try to find time he did not have for Uzoth.

"I just need time to think and work it out. But when?" Grady groaned and opened his eyes.

"I do not wish to distract you." Uzoth swallowed around the burning pain in his throat. "I do not wish to make doing your duty to your family more difficult."

"I know. And I like being with you." Grady's shoulders sagged. "But it all just feels like too much."

Uzoth's heart stuttered in his chest. For several seconds, he held completely still. Then he drew his shoulders back. "I will not be a burden to you, Grady. I never wanted that." He'd only wanted to protect, care for, and assist Grady.

It stung that he'd failed.

"You care for your family. You are responsible for them. You must put them first before all else." Including Uzoth. He paused, drawing on all the strength he had within himself.

He would not hurt Grady. Nor hinder him in any way. He could not. He would not do that to the man he loved.

"I will of course continue to watch over you and your family. But I will keep my distance so as not to burden you with my presence." Then Uzoth stretched his wings and took flight.

“What? You’re not—” Grady said.

But Uzoth flew straight up. The winds tore at his body whilst the pain ripped at his soul. He flew higher and higher, through clouds and into the sky, the air growing colder and colder.

I will not be the cause of any pain in Grady’s life.

He circled in the air. After several moments, he turned and flew down. He landed on the rooftop over the bakery.

Surprisingly. Grady hadn’t moved. He stared for several long moments up at Uzoth.

Uzoth stared back, still as stone as his insides crumbled to dust.

Finally, Grady turned and walked away.

### CHAPTER 24

Mouth still open, Grady stared as Uzoth flew off into the air. He hadn't meant for that to happen. He'd not meant to end their relationship.

He'd just been venting, barely paying attention to the words he spoke as he tried to deal with his frustration, exhaustion, and guilt of letting down everyone.

Then suddenly, Uzoth had been taking off, saying he didn't want to burden Grady. But that was not what Grady had wanted or meant. Numb, Grady stood staring up at the sky as the minutes ticked by.

But Grady knew Uzoth would eventually return. Uzoth had said he'd continue to watch over him and his siblings, so that meant he would return. And when he did, Grady could call out and gesture for Uzoth to come down. They could talk. He could say it had been a misunderstanding and that he wanted Uzoth in his life. Grady could explain that he hadn't meant to end things.

Then they could return to the way things had been...with Grady working too hard, exhausted, and still without any time for Uzoth. But was that really the solution?

A few moments later, Uzoth landed on the rooftop, staring down at him. Grady gazed up at the beautiful, intimidating, magnificent gargoyle.

Truthfully, Grady didn't have the energy for Uzoth. Not really. Even if he wanted Uzoth with all his heart, he just didn't know how to make it work. So maybe this was for the best.

On shaky legs, Grady strode off, blinking back tears.

It didn't matter if Grady adored Uzoth. It didn't matter if Uzoth was the only thing in his life that was truly Grady's. It didn't matter if Grady loved Uzoth. His footsteps stuttered.

Shit. Do I love Uzoth?

Grady wiped at his eyes as he pushed on.

I do. I love him.

He let out a bitter laugh. What a time to work it out. But even so, it didn't change the fact that maybe this was still for the best.

He wanted Uzoth so much his teeth fucking hurt. And the idea of Uzoth sitting on the rooftop over the bakery, so close to Grady but not close enough, caused his whole body to revolt.

But the truth was, he just didn't have time for Uzoth. He didn't even have time for the responsibilities he already had. He was already fucking up.

And Uzoth deserved so much more than what Grady could give.

This is for the best.

But with every step, his feet struggled to continue. He shivered. He didn't want a life without Uzoth. He didn't want to return home at the end of the day and not sit and drink tea with the gargoyle. He didn't want to go to bed alone. He wanted to be held by Uzoth as he slept.

Grady clenched his teeth, fighting tears.

He didn't want to lose Uzoth. But what else was he meant to do?

And honestly, how long would Uzoth have waited around for him? How long would he have stuck around when Grady couldn't give him the attention he deserved? No doubt Grady had just brought them to their inevitable end earlier.

In a daze, he picked up Michael and took him to the markets. He smiled as best he could to customers and his family. Michael seemed happy. That was good.

Grady was behaving responsibly. He was looking after his family. He could do this.

The next couple of days passed in a blur as the pain burrowed deeper and deeper into his core. He did what was needed. All his focus was on his responsibilities.

He slept less. He found he could not sleep properly without Uzoth holding him. Strange how quickly he'd gotten used to Uzoth in his bed. He stopped sitting by the fire, drinking tea, and eating before retiring. Doing that just hurt too much. So he ate as he went. Probably not enough. But all his siblings had started giving him tea all the time.

He kept up with his duties. But it felt like the light inside him had died and all that remained was a gaping, empty darkness within.

As he walked down the alley behind the bakery, he glanced up at Uzoth. Often he thought of calling to Uzoth and saying he needed him. That he wanted him. That he loved him.

He wanted to beg Uzoth to be a part of his life again. Because right now, Grady's life felt like the scraps of garbage rotting in the streets.

But nothing had changed. He did not have space in his life. So he would just need to get used to the knowledge that he'd let the love of his life go so that he could look after his family.

He entered the bakery and got to work.

"Are you all right?" Lacy asked as she came into the back area.

"I'm fine." Grady gave an empty smile and went back to kneading dough.

She stared at him and frowned. "I haven't seen Uzoth around the past couple of days."

"He is up on the rooftop." Grady kept his gaze on the dough. "He's just outside."

"I mean in the house or anything." Lacy walked towards him. "He's not been around you."

Grady did not look up. "I've been busy."

"Well, I just—" The bell over the front door tinkled.

"You should probably help Cas serve," Grady said.

Lacy lingered. Then went to the front.

The past couple of days, Grady had gotten good at avoiding questions. Although, he had told the truth to Lacy. Uzoth watched over them. Grady was busy.

What more was there to say? That he was heartbroken? Lonely? Had given up the gargoyle he loved?

“Do you want a sugar cookie, Grady?” Cas asked, coming around the back. He held one out, decorated like a snowflake.

Grady took a bite. “Thanks.” The buttery, sweet cookie with hints of vanilla melted on his tongue. “It’s good. Really good, Cas.”

Cas’s wings fluttered. “I just hope it cheers you up a little.” He smiled. Then he glanced to the front. “I need to help serve, but I’ll put on some tea for you when I have a moment. Ginger and lemon with lots of honey, I think.” Then he flew off.

Grady ate the rest of the cookie.

“Mix it just like that,” Briar said to Wulfric as he taught his werewolf mate to make the fillings for dried plum tarts.

Meanwhile, Jack and Avery stood by the shelves of ingredients.

“This here is cinnamon.” Jack pointed. “We have it ground and in sticks.”

Avery nodded, hanging off Jack’s words as he explained how the different forms of cinnamon could be used.

At the moment, Lachlan and Kit were upstairs after having worked that morning. They’d come to terms with being lovers whilst also being a witch and his familiar. Cas was happy with Graal. And Lacy was happy with Orim. All his other siblings were well and happy too.

Grady let out a breath. If he had to sacrifice his own chance at love so he could provide his family with the stability and time to find happiness for themselves, it was worth it.

Taking a deep breath, he placed the dough in a bowl, draped a cloth over it, and allowed it to rest.

### CHAPTER 25

Grady was cornered in the bakery the moment Ordella took one look at him.

“You look miserable!” Ordella whispered so the others couldn’t hear. “I spoke to Trent and Lacy earlier. They told me how you freaked out over forgetting to put a protection spell on her apartment. And now look at the sight of you.”

She gestured to him. “Your eyes are red. The bags under your eyes have bags. And what’s going on there?” She pointed at the twitching muscle beneath his left eye. “And have you been eating?”

“I’m fine.” Grady tried to step past her.

But she wasn’t having it. “And what’s this I hear about Uzoth not being around? Or being around but on the rooftop?” Ordella gestured vaguely in the direction Uzoth usually sat. “They say he hasn’t moved the last couple of days and hasn’t come inside. What happened?”

Grady glanced past Ordella. Most of his siblings worked or played with Ruthie and Michael. Ordella had brought them with her to the bakery. No one was paying Ordella and Grady any attention.

“I just don’t have time to be with him,” Grady said. “I can’t do it all.”

“Then don’t!”

“What?” Grady frowned.

“We don’t want to see you miserable,” Ordellia said. “We love you and want you to be happy. Uzoth makes you happy. Don’t give up on happiness and love to sacrifice yourself on some made-up bullshit family altar.”

Grady scoffed. “Who’s meant to run the bakery, then? Who’s meant to fix things when they go wrong? Who?”

“Witch’s tits! You’re such a fucking arrogant piece of shit sometimes, Grady,” she snapped.

Grady reared back. “What?”

She let out a breath. “Look, I get it,” she said, voice softer now. “You were seventeen. You were the oldest. We’re all very grateful you took charge, ran the bakery, kept a roof over our heads, and kept us all together. I will never be able to express how grateful I am for that.” She paused. “But I was thirteen when Mother and Father died. I am not thirteen anymore.”

“I know that!”

Ordellia raised an eyebrow. “Do you? You act like you’re the only one who can run anything. You never ask for help or let us take over things. Sometimes I feel like you think you are the only capable person in this family.”

“That’s not true.” Grady frowned.

“When was the last time something went wrong and you asked someone else to handle it? Why are you the only one who does the books, sorts supplies, and keeps track of the work roster? Why do you have to do everything all the time?” She shook

her head. "I've offered to help. I know the others have too. But you always just brush us off. Why does it have to be you?"

"Because it has to be done right!" Grady snapped.

She stared at him blankly. She pursed her lips. "I know you are having a hard time at the moment, so I am going to be generous and not be pissed at you for saying that." Then she shoved a finger in the middle of his chest. "Do you actually think you're the only one who can do anything right in this family?"

Grady swallowed, trying to sort his thoughts. "You're busy enough working here and looking after the children. You can't take on more!"

"I can decide for myself what I can and cannot take on. I don't need you to do that for me." Ordellia crossed her arms over her chest. "And in case you've forgotten, we also have eight other siblings who can also take on more."

"Most of them are too young!"

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You're as stubborn and dumb as a bloody rock sometimes. Even Trent is eighteen now. Older than you were when Mother and Father died. We're all adults. You need to learn to let go and stop being in control all the time. You need to trust us that we won't fuck up everything."

Grady tried to argue. He tried to think of some comeback. But he kept coming up with nothing. She just didn't understand!

"And maybe you could also stop charging all the protection charms every single time. You know they don't need to be charged so often."

"I like them to be fully charged," Grady said, voice tight.

“But it drains you. And maybe you should focus on taking care of yourself for a bit.” She sighed, giving him a pitying look. “I know it’s hard. You’ve looked after us for so long. You learnt to be responsible. You held yourself together through all our struggles with pure determination and an unwillingness to bend. I, and everyone else, will always be thankful you got us through.”

“I just did what was needed,” Grady muttered.

“I know.” Ordellia placed a hand on his shoulder. “But it isn’t needed anymore. You don’t need to push so hard. You don’t need to carry every burden on your shoulders. You’ve always shown us how to be responsible. How to be strong. Maybe it’s time you show us how to be happy. Mother and Father would have wanted that for all of us, you included.”

“You don’t understand.” It was his job to look after everyone. It was his responsibility. He couldn’t just give that up now.

“I probably don’t. But I know I want you happy.” Then Ordellia reached out and pulled him close. “And to do that, I think you need to let go of some of that responsibility you’ve clutched onto for so many years.”

After a moment, Grady hugged her back. “I’ll think about it,” Grady muttered.

“That’s all I ask.”

### CHAPTER 26

U zoth squatted, his wings tucked behind him and his talons gripping the roof tiles. His tail lay curved around him. His unshifting gaze remained on the alley below.

The day he and Grady had ended, Cas flew up. “Are you all right?”

Graal stood in the alley, gazing up at them.

“I am fine,” Uzoth lied.

“Are you sure? Can I help with anything?”

“Thank you for your concern,” Uzoth said. “But I do not require assistance.”

Cas glanced down. “Grady seemed a bit off this afternoon. And you’re still up here. I thought I’d just check.”

Uzoth did not know how to respond to that. He did not like to think of Grady as “a bit off.” But he could not help Grady. He had made Grady’s life worse by being a part of it. No doubt he’d be well again soon now that Uzoth no longer was in his life.

Cas stared at him for several seconds. “Well, tell me if you need anything. All right?”

Uzoth had given a slight nod, and Cas had flown down and joined Graal on the ground.

Since then, he'd spoken to no one. Uzoth had no one to speak to.

Grady came and went. Grady's siblings came and went. Many of the siblings paused and stared up at him, often with frowns. Once, Lachlan and Kit spoke in the alley for several minutes whilst they kept glancing up at him.

Uzoth remained still.

Now it had been two days since he and Grady had ended. Since then, he'd not changed his location. He'd kept watch over the bakery and apartment. His wings had not unfurled once. His tail had not slithered an inch.

Uzoth had no reason to move. So he didn't.

Snow gathered on his limbs. He did not brush it off. He just sat and watched the lives of the family below, knowing he was not a part of it.

Uzoth did not blink. He tried to keep alert. He tried to be ready to protect. But for some reason, everything seemed to have become glacially slow. Vaguely, he was aware that he was shutting down in a very short period of time. Perhaps because he no longer felt any reason to keep moving at all. Uzoth did not dwell on why. He found he did not really care.

His eyes remained open, but his vision grew blurry.

A figure walked beneath him. It looked up.

Grady. It is Grady.

Strange. It had taken him several moments to recognise the familiar figure of the human he loved.

Unsurprisingly, Grady did not wave. He did not do that anymore.

If he had, Uzoth might have waved back. But since Grady did not, Uzoth remained motionless.

Archimedes, Briar's familiar, circled ahead. He landed on Uzoth's knee, disturbing the snow. He peered into Uzoth's face. After a while, with a flutter of wings, he flew away.

The moon moved behind the clouds. Darkness fell. The lights in the apartment below glowed. Uzoth barely noticed the shifting of time.

He could remember the heat of the apartment and how it had warmed his bones. His bones felt frozen now.

Is Grady in the apartment? Is he eating enough? Sleeping enough?

Snowflakes drifted down.

Uzoth's heartbeat slowed. Blood pumped sluggishly through his veins.

Vaguely, Uzoth wondered if he was turning into stone, into a statue. He wondered if he would join his brethren and wake no more.

Uzoth did not care.

### CHAPTER 27

Grady stared at Avery and Jack, who stood together. Jack had his arm wrapped around Avery's waist, smiling at the dragon with adoration in his eyes.

Grady's throat tightened at the obvious love between them.

Avery wore only a coat that reached his thighs. It was Grady's spare coat, since Avery had flown in his dragon form to the bakery to claim Jack. There, he had shifted into his human form. And he had been very naked.

Grady and several of his siblings crowded around the couple. Half the neighbourhood also congregated, keen to be closer to the dragon they'd just seen in flight.

"Congratulations." Cas's wings fluttered. "I'm so happy for both of you."

"Yeah. Congratulations!" Trent added.

Lacy clapped. "I knew you two would be the perfect pair. I just knew it!"

Lachlan held Kit, in his cat form, in his arms. Wulfric stood behind Briar, arms wrapped around his waist. All smiled at Avery and Jack. But Grady's smile felt brittle, like it might crack and he might shatter into a million pieces at any moment.

"Thank you," Avery said in his polished voice. He grinned at Jack. Happiness glowed around the two of them.

So many of Grady's siblings had found love in the past month: Jack, Lacy, Cas, Briar, and Lachlan.

Grady had found it too. And he'd lost it. No. That wasn't true. Grady hadn't lost it. He'd cast it aside.

Just before Avery turned up in his dragon form, Avery and Jack had been experiencing some relationship problems. Grady had found Jack in the alley behind the bakery sulking. With some advice, he'd helped pull Jack's head out of his backside. But Grady had been far less patient and gentle in giving advice than he usually was.

Maybe because Grady knew it wasn't just Jack who needed a swift kick up the arse. A wave of regret rolled through Grady as he thought of the past few days.

"We're going to head off now," Jack said. "We want to spend Christmas Eve at Avery's."

"Do you need some shoes, Avery?" Grady asked.

Avery glanced down at his bare legs and feet. He wiggled his toes. "I'm fine. My dragon's blood keeps me warm."

With smiles and waves, Avery and Jack left. Grady watched them go. Around him, the neighbours dispersed and his siblings re-entered the bakery. He stood in the middle of the street until Avery and Jack disappeared from sight.

Grady had always been the one to dole out advice. What advice would Grady give himself? He imagined it would be similar to what Ordellia had said to him the previous day.

Because Ordelia was right. His siblings had all grown up. After the talk with Ordelia, he'd watched his siblings, shocked to consider they were all older than he'd been when he'd become head of the family.

They were adults now. They didn't need him like they once had. His lungs constricted at the thought. Maybe he needed to be needed by them. After all, since his parents died, all he'd done was look after his siblings. If he didn't look after them, who was he?

Then he remembered the snowstorm and days of being in his room with Uzoth. He'd been someone else then. He'd been Uzoth's companion. His lover. He'd been happy and content.

He breathed out, and the air in front of him fogged.

And maybe if he worked less, he could uncover other parts of himself that he'd sacrificed. But could he actually step back and let go of some of his responsibilities? Could he really ask his siblings to do more?

He could ask Ordelia to help with the books. She'd always been better with numbers than him. She could also do quite a bit of that from home. Jack could help handle the roster. Cas could take over dealing with the suppliers. After all, he was good with people.

Just the idea of releasing some of that control made his skin crawl. But Ordelia was right. He didn't need to be like this. He'd just gotten so used to it to the point he didn't know how to be anyone else.

Maybe he didn't need to be the one always in charge in the bakery. Maybe he didn't need to use so much of his energy charging the protection spells constantly. Maybe he needed to learn to let go. Then maybe he could have time for a life of his own. A

life that involved Uzoth.

Taking a deep breath of frosty air, Grady walked to the alley behind the bakery. He stared up at the guardian gargoyle. Uzoth squatted on the rooftop, gaze fixed on the alley.

Grady's heart swelled with affection.

He wanted a life that involved Uzoth. Like his siblings, Grady wanted to love and be loved.

Grady and Uzoth had spent so much of their lives looking after others. They'd both sacrificed themselves. They'd asked for little in return. It was who they had become.

But his siblings had grown. And those Uzoth had protected had disappeared from the earth. This could be a new stage for both of them.

Grady lifted his hand and gestured for Uzoth to come down.

Uzoth did not move.

Grady dropped his hand. He frowned. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Uzoth," he yelled.

Still, Uzoth did not move. The gargoyle's gaze did not shift. Nor did he rise or his wings unfurl.

"Uzoth!" he yelled again.

Why wasn't Uzoth responding? Was Uzoth too hurt and angry with Grady to respond? But no, surely if he were done with Grady, he'd have left. So why did he

not move?

The blood drained from his face. A memory of something Uzoth said came to him. “We turn completely to stone. We become nothing more than statues on top of buildings, staring down with unseeing eyes.”

Terror burst in chest. “Uzoth!” Grady screamed as he took a step closer.

Still, Uzoth did not rise.

Fuck! I have to get to him.

Grady glanced around. How did someone get up there? Then he remembered each building had a ladder that led to the roof.

Palms sweating, Grady sprinted and searched. He spotted the rusted metal ladder. Gripping onto it, he ascended. Uzoth couldn’t have turned to stone. Not yet. It had only been three days since they’d last spoken. Surely that couldn’t be enough time!

One hand after the other, he climbed. The ladder shook beneath him. Or maybe that was just him.

I’ll never forgive myself if he turns into a statue.

Heart pounding in his throat, he reached the top. He spotted Uzoth further along the roof. He was not that far away. But Uzoth was still too fucking far when they were this high up. Taking a deep breath, Grady released the ladder and stepped onto the snow-covered roof.

Cauldrons and clusterfucks!

He glanced at the alley below. His belly somersaulted. For a split second, he considered climbing back down to the safety of the cobblestone alley below. But no. He couldn't. He couldn't abandon Uzoth. He needed to wake the gargoyle.

Steeling himself, he made his way carefully and slowly across the rooftop. His legs wobbled like beaten egg whites. Grady forced himself not to look down again.

Keep your eyes on Uzoth. Nothing else matters. I just need to get to him.

Suddenly, his legs slipped out from under him, breath knocked from his lungs as he landed flat on his stomach. He slid toward the roof edge. His hands scrabbled at snow as he gripped the tiles.

Mere inches from the edge, he stopped sliding. He lay flat, whole body shaking violently. For several moments, he didn't move, terrified he'd fall to his death.

Uzoth was so close now. He had to keep going. He had to reach Uzoth. Grady crawled towards him. He gripped Uzoth's tail, which was far too cold and hard.

You can't be a statue. Please don't be a statue.

Tears stung his eyes.

Gripping Uzoth's tail, he pulled himself towards Uzoth. He clutched at Uzoth's calf, his thigh, climbing around the gargoyle. He gripped Uzoth's arms, gazing into grey eyes.

Grey. Not black. Uzoth's eyes should be black.

"Uzoth?" Grady whispered. Warm tears burned his icy cheeks. "Uzoth, wake up."

Still, Uzoth wouldn't wake.

"Please, Uzoth. Please wake up." His voice trembled. "I need you. I love you. Please."

Why wasn't Uzoth waking?

"Uzoth!" Grady's fingers grasped rock-hard arms. Were they stone? "Uzoth!" he screamed. "Wake up!"

This couldn't be happening. He couldn't lose Uzoth like this.

"Uzoth! I'm so sorry."

He tried to shake Uzoth, but suddenly his fingers slipped free. With a cry, he tipped backwards. His feet kicked out. He began to fall.

### CHAPTER 28

U zoth's hand snapped out and gripped Grady's chest, clawed fingers digging in, stopping the man from plummeting off the roof.

Grady cried out. His arms flailed, and he clutched at Uzoth's wrist with both hands. His nails dug into Uzoth's skin. He made a choked noise, drawing himself towards Uzoth and casting a glance at the ground below.

"Grady?" Uzoth blinked slowly as awareness came back to him. "What are you doing up here? It is dangerous. You almost fell."

He pulled Grady to him, holding him firmly with both hands around the waist. He tried to comprehend what had come to pass and why Grady was here.

Tears streaked down Grady's cheeks. His Adam's apple bobbed.

"What is wrong?" Uzoth frowned. "Has something happened to your siblings?"

Grady shook his head. His lips moved. But no sound came out.

"Grady?"

"You wouldn't wake!" Grady said hoarsely, voice quivering.

Uzoth stared at him. "Oh." Over the past few days, Uzoth had felt himself slip deeper and deeper into stasis. "Yes. I have been moving slower the past few days."

“I kept calling you. I yelled.” Grady’s eyes flicked over Uzoth’s face before fixing on his eyes. “But you wouldn’t wake. I thought you’d turned into a statue.”

“I apologise if I scared you.” Uzoth had not realised he’d stopped moving entirely. If he had not responded to Grady yelling out to him or climbing out on the roof, then Uzoth truly had been in the process of turning to stone. “But I am awake now.”

His heart beat far slower than it should in his chest. Blood still pumped. But it moved languidly through his veins.

Grady let out a breath. He nodded. “You are awake.” He closed his eyes, breathing heavily. “You are awake. You did not turn into a statue,” he said as if trying to reassure himself.

“I am sorry I distressed you.”

Grady took another deep breath and opened his eyes. He licked his lips. “Will you come down to the apartment?”

“Is something wrong?” Uzoth asked. “Do you or your family need my assistance?”

Snowflakes began to float down. Uzoth opened his wings, but at first, he struggled to unfurl them. He managed to wrap his wings around them, protecting Grady from the falling snow.

“No. Nothing is wrong.” Grady’s grey eyes stared into his. “Well, one thing is wrong.”

“What? If I can help in any way, I of course will.” No matter what had occurred between them, Uzoth would always assist Grady.

At least until he turned to stone and would not wake again.

Perhaps he should fly away so Grady would not have to see him as a statue. It would distress Grady to stare up at Uzoth's ghastly frozen figure. But the idea of leaving Grady had no appeal to Uzoth. Even if he no longer lived, Uzoth wished to stay close to Grady.

But he would not condemn Grady to see his lifeless form gazing down at him for the rest of his life. He did not want to cause Grady that pain.

"What's wrong is that you are not in my apartment. You belong in my apartment. With me, not out here in the cold." Grady reached out and cupped the side of Uzoth's neck, his thumb stroking. The warmth of Grady's hand penetrated his skin.

Uzoth's chest clenched. Could Grady mean what Uzoth thought he meant? Could he want Uzoth in his life? "I am used to the cold."

"Well, maybe it's time you got used to something else. Maybe you need to get used to the warmth of a hearth, and someone to love and be loved by." Grady stepped in closer. "Maybe we both need to get used to that."

Uzoth's cold heart cracked open in his chest. "Do you mean that? Truly?"

"I do. I'm so sorry, Uzoth," Grady said. "I shouldn't have let you fly off like that. I was confused and exhausted. It was a fucking stupid mistake. And I hurt you. I'm so sorry. I want you in my life. No. I need you in my life. Everything is bullshit and garbage without you. I don't want to be apart from you."

"But what about your family?" Uzoth asked. "I do not wish to stop you from protecting them."

Grady huffed. “They are adults now as has been recently pointed out to me. They can look after themselves a little.” He paused. “They don’t need me like they once did.”

Uzoth thought he detected a note of sadness in Grady’s voice.

“I mean, I will always look out for them. I won’t stop doing that,” Grady said.

“And I will also look after and protect both you and them,” Uzoth pledged.

“And who will look after you, O ancient gargoyle?”

Uzoth straightened his shoulders. “I don’t need looking after.”

“Everyone needs to be looked after sometimes. And I’d like to be the one to look after you if you’ll let me.” Grady smiled softly at him.

A feeling of lightness unfurled inside Uzoth. “Then we shall look after each other.”

Then Uzoth wrapped his arms around Grady’s waist and kissed his human as Grady’s words sank in. Grady wanted him in his life. Uzoth had not lost his human after all.

Grady’s warm breath brushed against Uzoth’s cheek. “I love you, Uzoth.”

“I love you too, Grady.” In Uzoth’s chest, his heartbeat quickened and returned to normal. His blood sped through his veins.

### CHAPTER 29

“Now let’s get off this roof.” Grady wanted his feet firmly on the ground.

But rather than flying him down, Uzoth turned his head and stared at the rooftops. “I have an...offer.”

“What?”

Uzoth turned back to him. “You have shown me so much of your world, would you like to see a part of mine?”

Grady frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Would you like to fly with me? I could take you up over the city.” Uzoth stretched his wings wide behind him. “But only if you wish.”

Grady’s mouth dried. He gazed down at the street below. If Uzoth flew him up into the sky, he’d be even higher up. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. Beneath his coat and layers of clothing, sweat broke out.

But Uzoth would hold him. He would not let harm come to Grady. Grady knew that to be true, even if he felt like he was about to vomit.

Grady met Uzoth’s gaze. “You won’t let me fall, right?”

“Never.” Uzoth gave a sharp shake of his head. “I would never drop you.”

Grady inhaled. “Then all right. I trust you.”

Uzoth smiled. He rose, turning Grady in his arms, holding him securely against Uzoth’s strong body. Uzoth’s tail wrapped around Grady’s waist twice.

“So you feel extra secure,” Uzoth whispered.

Grady stared out at the rooftops, trying to breathe evenly and ignore the panic spreading through his limbs.

Suddenly, they launched into the air with a flap of Uzoth’s massive wings.

“Shit!” Grady screamed, hands clutching at Uzoth’s wrists.

“It is all right, little human. I have you.” Uzoth’s arms and tail squeezed him.

Grady’s mouth fell open. A cold wind rushed past. They flew up, not that high, just above the tops of the buildings. Still, his whole body shook as the rooftops whisked past.

At first, Grady remained tense within Uzoth’s grip. But as they glided, bit by bit his muscles relaxed and the shaking subsided.

Uzoth had him. He would not let Grady fall. His arms and tail remained firmly around Grady, and Grady’s back pressed against Uzoth’s powerful torso.

I’m safe. I’m safe in his arms.

Grady let out a bark as wonder and awe replaced the terror. He recognised nothing, not from this viewpoint. They flew over shabby dwellings and worn streets. Then over large and immaculate apartment buildings. He spotted statues, winding alleys,

and people moving about.

His gaze darted around, trying to take in everything.

Then they approached the palace. He sucked in a breath as they glided over the gates. A large marble fountain stood in the middle of a massive courtyard. He glanced around, examining those below.

Were any of them royalty? Or the king? They flew over the palace itself, the fucking palace! He stared at the shining copper roof.

“This is incredible!” Grady cried, mirth bubbling up inside him.

Uzoth chuckled. “I’m glad you are enjoying yourself.” Uzoth pressed a kiss to the back of Grady’s head.

Grady glanced back at Uzoth. Uzoth smiled at him, and Grady returned the smile.

They left the palace grounds, and once again they flew over the city where Grady had lived his whole life. They approached the edge of Anorra. Snow-covered trees and shrubbery replaced the dense cityscape.

“This is exhilarating!” Grady yelled. “As exhilarating as sex!”

“Really?” Uzoth asked. “I wonder what would happen if we combined the two.”

“What?”

One of Uzoth’s arms loosened from around his torso. “Don’t worry. I promise I will not let you fall.”

Then Grady felt Uzoth undo his trousers.

Shocked, Grady glanced down, watching as Uzoth tugged his cock out. Laughter burst from Grady. He was flying, dick out, above the city!

The laugh turned into a groan as the hand gripped him, stroking his cock from base to tip. His dick thickened quickly to complete hardness. He groaned.

How is this happening?

Uzoth's hand pumped him. Grady's stomach tensed.

"Fuck!" Grady cried out.

"That's it, cry out your pleasure," Uzoth growled in his ear. Uzoth thrust his hips against Grady, and Grady could feel the sizeable bulge rubbing against his arse.

"Shit." Grady thrust into Uzoth's tight grip.

Then the tail slid from around Grady's waist, not releasing him completely. But it half unwound so that the tail wrapped only once around his waist instead of twice. Again, Grady looked down. He saw the tip slide past his dick, which Uzoth continued to stroke.

Grady gasped. The tail slid beneath his trousers and caressed his balls, fondling them gently. "Oh!"

The tail moved onwards, pressing along his taint, massaging it. Pre-cum dribbled from his cock over the forest below.

"Uzoth!" Grady screamed.

“That’s it. Let me hear you.”

The tip of Uzoth’s tail nudged Grady’s entrance.

Grady’s asshole clenched as the tail teased his rim, pushing against the tight ring of muscle. Squeezing his eyes shut, Grady sobbed. Uzoth’s grip tightened, stroking Grady’s member faster. Grady’s whole body trembled as his pleasure peaked.

Then the tail slid into his hole, wiggling inside him.

Grady screamed. He convulsed as his dick jerked in Uzoth’s grip. Uzoth’s arm and tail tightened around him, holding him securely as his cum spilled in spurts over the trees below. Uzoth kept jerking him, wringing every drop of his seed from him.

Grady’s whole body tingled. Finally, Uzoth’s tail withdrew. He tucked Grady’s dick away and did up Grady’s trousers. Grady sagged in his arms. They circled and flew back towards the city.

Despite flying up so high, Grady now felt completely relaxed.

### CHAPTER 30

With his feet firmly on the ground, Grady let out a breath. He laughed. “I have to confess as amazing as that was, I’m glad to have my feet on the ground.” Reaching out, Grady slid his hand into Uzoth’s and tugged him. “Now let’s go up into the apartment.”

Despite that incredible flight over the city, he now needed to touch Uzoth and prove to himself the gargoyle hadn’t turned to stone, that he was fully flesh and blood. Grady’s gaze kept flicking over Uzoth before settling on his black eyes. Black eyes. Not grey stone. Uzoth’s eyes had returned to normal.

He is not a statue. He did not turn into one. He is alive. I have not lost him.

But Grady had a sense that Uzoth had come very close to turning into a gargoyle statue, never to wake again.

Grady glanced at the bakery window. He could see movement within. “But I have to do something first.” He strode forward, pulling Uzoth along.

He opened the bakery door. In the front area, customers lined up. Lacy and Trent served. Meanwhile, Wulfric, under Briar’s supervision, opened the oven door and slid a tray within. Cas picked up a basket of cookies to take out front.

“Cas,” Grady said.

Cas’s wings fluttered, his feet hovering above the floor as he turned to face Grady.

He saw Uzoth. A smile lit up his face. He glanced at Uzoth and Grady's entwined hands.

Pixie dust burst into the air. "Oh! I'm so happy. I worried about the two of you!"

"Well, you don't have to worry anymore. I've realised I've been a dickhead and come to my senses." Grady smiled at Uzoth.

Uzoth smiled back.

"Good!" Cas said. "I'm so glad."

Grady took a deep breath and turned back to Cas. "I'm taking the rest of the day off."

Cas laughed.

Grady lifted his brows, smiling wryly. "I'm not joking. I am taking the rest of the day off."

Cas's laughter died. "Really? But you never take any time off. Ever."

"Well, I am today," Grady said. "I'm going to spend it with Uzoth. Can you organise someone to cover for me? I know we aren't open much longer here. But I was meant to close. And the markets are still going." His heart raced as he tried to think through everything that needed to be taken care of. "Jasper, Leo, and Ordella are there at the moment, but it's the final day of the—"

"We'll be fine." Cas flew towards him. He took a hand off the basket of cookies and placed it on Grady's shoulder. He squeezed. "For the rest of the day, we can manage without you."

Grady's throat closed up. Without you. They could manage without him. It shouldn't hurt. But it did. His siblings didn't need him like they once had. He really did need to be needed by them.

"Good. That's good." Grady nodded. Because it was good, even if his feelings indicated otherwise. His siblings had grown up. That was right. And it meant he could be with Uzoth. "I'll be in tomorrow for the Christmas morning rush."

"We'll be fine until then." Cas glanced between them. "Enjoy your time off. I'm really happy for you both."

They left the bakery. Grady closed the door and stared at his sigil carved into the wooden door.

He'd charged the protection charm earlier that day. "It always takes energy," he murmured. "It doesn't need to be charged all the time, but I charge it constantly. It makes me feel like my family is more protected even though that isn't true. That's not how the charms work." He sighed. "It drains me. But still..." His fingers twitched.

Uzoth stood silently beside him, patiently waiting and supporting. He squeezed Grady's palm as if lending him his strength.

The incantation rose to Grady's lips. He wanted to press his hand to the wood. He wanted to charge the charm.

Holding Uzoth's hand tightly, Grady strode away and led Uzoth to the stairs. Grady intentionally did not look back. They entered the apartment, and he slumped against the door. "Pissing potions," he muttered.

"I'm proud of you," Uzoth said.

“That was surprisingly fucking hard.” Grady shoved a hand through his hair as he walked to his room. He let out a shaky breath. “Who knew it would be so hard to take one afternoon and night off?”

Uzoth followed him into the room and shut the door. He placed his hands on Grady’s shoulders, rubbing gently. He stared down at Grady. “It is an adjustment for you.”

Grady nodded. “And I didn’t charge the charm.” His hand tingled, as if needing to go down and recharge it. “They probably only need to be charged once a week.” He paused. “I don’t think I can do that yet. I’ll start with charging it just once a day. Then I’ll try and work down until I’m only charging as needed.” He opened and closed his hand. “Fuck! Why is this so hard.”

“Change is hard.” Uzoth pulled him into his arms. “But you did well. You did very well.”

Grady relaxed into Uzoth’s strong embrace. “You give me the strength to change,” Grady murmured. “And I’m doing it for us.” He wrapped his arms around Uzoth’s waist. “I need you. I don’t want a life without you. My life has felt empty without you in it. So if I need to make changes to keep you in my life, then I will make changes.”

Uzoth pressed a kiss to Grady’s hair. “I have missed you these past days. Seeing you, watching you but not being able to touch or be near you, has hurt me more than I thought possible.”

“I’m sorry,” Grady whispered. “I’m so sorry for causing you pain.”

Uzoth smoothed his hair. “I think that is enough apologies for one day. I am happy knowing you love me and wish me to remain by your side. That is all I want to focus on at present.”

For several minutes, they stood holding each other.

Finally, Grady pulled back. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Are you tired?” Uzoth stroked his cheek.

“I probably should be. I’ve barely slept without you holding me. But I find I’m not tired at all. Not even a little bit.” Grady trailed a hand down Uzoth’s chest, fingering the edge of the loincloth. It hadn’t gone unnoticed by Grady that Uzoth hadn’t spent earlier. “I want you in me.”

### CHAPTER 31

The room had started to darken with the waning light. Uzoth watched as Grady lit the lantern. Then Grady began to undress, dropping his clothing to the floor.

Uzoth's gaze flicked over his body. A low rumble escaped him as Grady revealed more of it.

"You truly are lovely to behold." Blood rushed to Uzoth's cock, filling it quickly.

"Yeah?" Grady stroked a hand up his bare chest, a smile playing on his lips. "Well, are you going to come closer? Or are you just going to stand there and behold me?" He chuckled.

Uzoth surged forward, and the laughter died on Grady's lips. Uzoth's hands gripped Grady's shoulders as he lowered his mouth to Grady's. Teeth, fangs, and tongues clashed as they kissed.

Grady groaned. His hands clutched at Uzoth's back. Uzoth's hard cock throbbed against Grady. With a gasp, Grady broke the kiss. Uzoth pressed kisses along his neck, and Grady tilted his head back, welcoming Uzoth's lips.

"Fuck," Grady breathed.

Uzoth smiled against his neck. "What do you wish for?" Uzoth murmured. "I will give you whatever is in my power to give."

“I want your dick.” Grady fumbled for the tie of Uzoth’s loincloth, letting the fabric fall. He wrapped his hand around Uzoth’s shaft, stroking it.

Uzoth groaned as he thrust forward.

“I want your cock,” Grady whispered as he pumped Uzoth’s dick. “I want to feel it alive and pulsing inside me. I want to ride you.”

Uzoth shuddered. “I am more than happy to oblige.”

Locked together, kissing and clutching, they stumbled to the bed. Uzoth lay down on his back, Grady straddling him. Uzoth’s hands glided over Grady’s body.

Grady grabbed for the bottle of oil by the bed and uncorked it. He upended it, pouring the slick oil over his palm before dropping the bottle onto the bed. He stroked his hand over Uzoth’s cock. Uzoth gasped. He gritted his teeth as his claws dug at the sheets.

Grady then poured more oil on his fingers and reached behind himself. Grady groaned as he slid his fingers inside. Uzoth’s gut clenched with arousal as he imagined his cock where Grady’s fingers were. Grady didn’t tease himself; he shoved three fingers in. Grady’s cock bobbed, once again erect.

Uzoth licked his lips as he imagined himself plunging into Grady’s willing body.

A moment later, Grady tugged his fingers free and lifted himself. Grady guided the tip of Uzoth’s cock to his entrance. Uzoth’s hands held Grady’s hips. His tail slithered up Grady’s leg, over his arse, and wrapped around Grady’s waist.

“I love you.” Then Grady slowly lowered himself, taking Uzoth inside him, inch by delicious inch.

Their groans filled the room. Grady's asshole stretched to accommodate Uzoth's massive girth. Grady leaned forward, hands pressing to Uzoth's chest as he kept bearing down. Uzoth's hands and tail tightened on Grady as Grady continued to lower himself.

Grady's brows furrowed. Sweat broke out on his skin. He bit his lower lip.

"That's it, take all of me," Uzoth whispered as Grady's body enveloped his length in a tight heat.

Grady gasped when he finally settled onto Uzoth's lap. He took deep gulping breaths. Uzoth's hands stroked his thighs and stomach, claws gently scraping Grady's skin. Grady shivered.

"You are so tight around me, sweet one," Uzoth said in awe. "Until you, I did not know sex could be so glorious. I love you, Grady. And I will love you for the rest of my existence."

Grady leaned forward, fingernails digging into Uzoth's chest. "I love you too. Now kiss me. Please," he whispered, desperate and needy. "I need you to kiss me."

Uzoth lifted to kiss him, hands gripping his face. Grady cried out into the kiss.

Grady rocked back and forward, letting Uzoth's dick slide from his hole before pressing himself back down.

Uzoth moaned. He pressed kisses to Grady's jaw. "You are so beautiful. You feel so incredible around my cock," Uzoth whispered against his skin. "So glorious." Then he dragged his fangs along Grady's throat.

"Fuck!" Grady cried out. Grady moved up and down on Uzoth's cock.

Uzoth growled low in his throat as Grady rode him. Uzoth wrapped his hand around Grady's cock and stroked him.

"Oh!" Grady's dick jerked, spilling pre-cum onto Uzoth's abs.

Grady began to bounce on Uzoth's dick. He angled himself. He cried out as Uzoth's shaft hit his prostate.

Uzoth pumped his hips, shoving his cock deeper into Grady as he gripped Grady's arse.

With the force of Uzoth's movements, Grady lost his balance. But Uzoth tightened his tail around Grady's waist, holding him in place. Then he lifted Grady with his tail before slamming him back down onto his cock.

Grady's hands clutched at the tail wrapped around him. His dick bobbed and leaked.

Uzoth tightened his hand, stroking Grady's cock faster. And all the while, he kept lifting and lowering Grady onto his dick to meet his hard thrusts.

"Come, sweet one," Uzoth growled. "Come for me."

"Uzoth," Grady screamed, and pulse after pulse of spend shot from his dick, splattering onto Uzoth's chest.

Grady's channel tightened impossibly around Uzoth. Uzoth tightened his hands on Grady's arse as he shoved himself up into Grady. He roared, and his seed flooded Grady's insides. Uzoth shuddered, fingers twitching as he held Grady in place.

After a moment, Uzoth sagged against the bed. Grady collapsed onto his chest. They lay still for several long moments. Uzoth's fingers threaded through Grady's hair.

“I love you,” Uzoth whispered.

“Love you too.” Grady closed his eyes. He sighed. “I’m glad I took the rest of the day off.”

Uzoth smiled. “Me too.”

The warmth of the bakery seeped into Uzoth's soul.

He held Ruthie in his arms, carefully rocking the sleeping baby back and forth. Everyone moved around the bakery, preparing for the Christmas feast.

Meanwhile, Graal set up the dining table in the front area of the bakery. The rest baked, fried, chopped, kneaded, and took part in all sorts of preparatory cooking activities Uzoth did not fully comprehend, since he did not consume food. Uzoth silently watched them, curious but doing his best to keep out of the way whilst rocking Ruthie.

Briar's familiar, Archimedes, sat in the bird box above the door. He, too, watched over everyone.

Should he ask to help in some way? But beyond making tea, he did not know how he could be of help. And he thought that perhaps taking care of Ruthie was enough for now. Something rubbed against his leg. He glanced down. Kit, in his cat form, circled him.

"I cannot pat you at the moment, Kit," Uzoth explained. "I apologise, but Ruthie is asleep in my arms, and I must be careful to not disturb her rest. Ordellia said she has not been sleeping well of late."

Kit blinked up at him. Then prowled towards his cushion beneath a table and curled up.

Uzoth glanced at Briar and Wulfric, who chopped vegetables. It had been revealed

earlier that day that Briar had unintentionally cast a siren spell that summoned romantic and sexual love. Because of that, Uzoth and Grady, as well as several of the others, including Briar and Wulfric, had found love this Christmas season.

Whilst Grady had been disturbed by Briar casting a spell he'd not comprehended, Uzoth felt a surge of gratitude towards Briar for his foolish but wonderful mistake. After all, if not for that spell, perhaps he would still be watching Grady and his siblings from above.

Voices, laughter, and the sounds of food being prepared for the feast filled the room. Uzoth let the noise wash over him. He glanced at Ruthie. Her eyes remained shut. "I am glad the noise does not disturb you, little one."

Ordelia walked over to him. A light sweat dampened her brow. "Do you need a break? You've been holding her for a while now."

"It is an honour to protect and care for your offspring, Ordelia." Uzoth continued to steadily rock Ruthie. "In fact, I find her steady presence comforting in my arms."

Ordelia's eyes twinkled. "Well, you're welcome to take her whenever you wish."

"Thank you. I will take you up on that. I enjoy guarding her." Uzoth looked down into her relaxed face. "She is sleeping very well at present."

Ordelia gave a hearty laugh. "She is, isn't she? That must be all you, since she has been struggling to sleep." She pointed at the two knobs on Ruthie's forehead. "See, her horns are coming in. It keeps her awake. But look at her sleeping now! She must like her Uncle Uzoth."

Uzoth's heart seized in his chest. "Uncle...Uncle Uzoth?"

"Of course. You're with Grady. That makes you part of the family and therefore her

uncle.” Ordellia placed a hand on his shoulder. “And I’m so glad everything worked out between you and Grady. He was being a complete cockhead.” She smiled. “But he’s come to his senses.” She glanced at Grady, who rolled out some sort of dough. “I’m happy for him. And you.”

“I am very happy with Grady.” Uzoth paused. “And I am happy and honoured to be part of your family. I will do all I can to protect you all,” he vowed.

She laughed and squeezed his arm. “You’re sweet.” Then she glanced behind her. “I need to get back. Give a yell if you need me.”

“I will.” Uzoth bowed his head.

Grady placed a pie in the oven and walked over to Uzoth. “You all right?” He smiled at Ruthie.

“We are both well,” Uzoth said. “And you?”

“Good,” Grady said, although he drew out the word. “But it’s hard. I’m trying to step back, give fewer instructions, and let the others lead.” Grady wiped his hands on his apron. “I’m so used to being in control. But I’m still doing it.”

“That is the important part,” Uzoth said.

“Yeah.” Grady’s gaze ran over his siblings. “But it’s a little painful to realise I am not as needed as I thought I was.” He gave a smile. “But it’s good. I need to allow them to grow up. For their sakes as well as for mine.”

With Ruthie in his arms, Uzoth could not touch Grady with his hands, so he reached out his tail and stroked Grady’s back. “They will always need you. You took care of them for so many years. They may need you less as they grow, but they will always need and look up to you.”

Grady let out a shaky breath. He smiled at Uzoth. “Thanks.” He kissed Uzoth. “I need to keep cooking.”

“Then go. Ruthie and I are fine.” Uzoth continued to rock the baby.

At one point, Tony, Ordalia’s husband, came over and asked, “Are you sure you’re still okay holding Ruthie?”

Ruthie had woken now but seemed happy to be in his arms, playing with his tail.

“I am fine.” Uzoth smiled. “I am content here with Ruthie.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Let me know if you get bored.” Tony clapped him on the shoulder before going off to fry something.

Uzoth was not bored. He was amongst the witches he’d silently watched over for years. They bristled with activity and noise. How could he be bored whilst amongst these individuals?

After a while, Jack came over. “Can I take her for a bit, Uzoth? I haven’t had time with my niece in a while.”

“Of course you may.” Uzoth handed her over, although he missed her weight in his arms. He enjoyed being her guardian.

After handing her over, he watched Jack smile down at his niece. Then Uzoth walked to the back door. He stepped out, closing the door behind him. Snow fell and landed on his skin. Craning his neck, he stared up at the spot where he had squatted all those times before.

The door opened. Uzoth turned.

Grady came up beside him. “Are you all right?”

Once again, Uzoth gazed at the rooftops. “For so many years, I watched you all from up above.”

Grady took his hand. “And now you are one of us.”

Uzoth nodded, throat tight. “Ordelia said I am part of the family.”

“You are.” Grady squeezed his hand. “How do you feel about that?”

“Honoured.” Uzoth faced Grady. “I have been alone for so many years. It is a great blessing to be part of your family and be able to protect you and them. For so long, I have wished for a true purpose, for those to guard.” Uzoth stepped closer to Grady, gazing down into his face. “And I have wished for someone to stand beside me. With you, I have found that. With you, I am not alone.”

Grady smiled softly at him. “Your wish came true, then, like a Christmas wish, a gargoyles Christmas wish.”

Snowflakes continued to fall. In the bakery, voices, laughter, and the clatter of kitchenware could be heard.

“Come inside.” Grady tugged his hand. “Come be with me and let’s celebrate Christmas. That’s where you belong. Not out here in the cold. Not anymore.”

Uzoth smiled and followed Grady into the warmth, leaving the snow and the cold of the alley behind.