



The Manticore's Fire

(Collided Realms #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The world is filled with the threat of monsters and other worldly beings, and Abby Sinclair knows she can become a monster-hunter extraordinaire if given the opportunity.

Despite her training and being raised within a family of hunters, she is denied the opportunity to hunt at every corner.

When the opportunity to prove herself, and the coin offered is too great to resist, she finally sees her chance even if she's not yet technically a member of the hunter's guild.

Her employer is less than trustworthy but it seems like easy enough coin—all she needs to do is slay the manticore that has been raiding the desert caravans.

when she is offered a job to slay a manticore.

But no one warned her that a manticore wasn't just any monster.

When she becomes the one who is hunted and captured, it is not her life but her heart that she risks losing... and perhaps her own humanity.

Who is the monster and who is the man? And is there a monster lurking within her, too?

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Chapter

One

A bby B. Sinclair, monster hunter extraordinaire, defender of humanity and slayer of all things unimaginable and imagined. Abby rested the end of her pen against her bottom lip and chewed on the wooden casing and considered striking out the last word. She couldn't. It just felt incomplete without it. She didn't want to limit any of the possibilities of landing a paying job. Stress on the paying part. That she didn't precisely have experience in said monster slaying was immaterial. She came from a lauded family of hunters and was trained accordingly... and that had to count for something while her parents and elder siblings were away making their names and fortunes. For her, she just needed to get her foot in the door and a little exaggeration was exactly what she needed to get the job done.

It wasn't like there wasn't a call for her particular training. She just needed to capitalize on it. Especially since, with the long absence of her family, there was no one around to refill the rapidly depleting coffers. She was going against her parents' explicit directions, but she was getting desperate. The simple dinner at her elbow in fact was a sad testament to what little coin she possessed. Surely if they knew how dire her situation was becoming, they would have agreed to let her go out for her first solo hunt. Sure, she had passed out during the bloody gormin hunt, and had been practically useless, motion sickness aside from the long trip by wagon, but she'd learned a valuable lesson about never traveling long distance in wagons. And then there was a small incident when the entire family had been employed to travel to a far-off kingdom to root out a drake from the hillside that had resulted in half the village being burned down. But that had been years ago when she was nothing more

than a kid.

They were merely small setbacks to learn from. Or so her parents had assured her at the time. After all, her technical ability with her weapons exceeded that of any of her brothers. She was also faster and a superior marksman. She just needed a little more time to get over some of her unnatural squeamishness.

Abby snorted softly to herself as she sprinkled ash over the ink to dry it. Whoever heard of a squeamish monster hunter with a weak stomach? Her brothers certainly had been quick to remind her at every opportunity. It wasn't like she physically got sick, but she couldn't deny that there were some monsters that it disturbed her to see die. Still, her brothers had taunted her mercilessly about it for years. And despite her parents' reassurances, the offers to go with the rest of the family to hunt also dried up after the incident with the drake.

The only reason that she wasn't currently tormented was because her parents and brothers had been called away on a hunt, and, as usual, she was left behind to mind their headquarters. messages and meet with potential clients. She had somehow become the family's PR person and without her first supervised solo hunt she couldn't even apply for the regional hunter's guild. Not that she could currently afford the eight-day trip to the headquarters. Unfortunately, it had been two months since her last letter from them and three weeks since anyone had stopped by with a job offer, which certainly didn't help her position now that she was desperate and trying to drum up her own work. She still got a little motion sick, but overall, she was certain her constitution was far stronger now to deal with whatever creature was thrown at her.

Unfortunately, there was one small hang up. As of yet, simple word of mouth over the last few weeks wasn't working the way it had for her brothers. In fact, those that she told had given her skeptical looks, and those who did not had verged on condescending as they made it obvious that they were only humoring her by hearing

her out. It pissed her off because she knew that if she was a man, she would have been hired on for work almost immediately to deal with the burrowing bowthie, a local species of horned rockworms that infested the area by desperate town leaders with fat pockets. Surely someone needed help dealing with those with her brothers gone. The pests were the bane of their region that not only damaged the roots of the orchards under which they tunneled but preyed on livestock and anyone that fell into their pits. There was always at least a few dozen annually that had to be cleared out since their nesting sites were nearly impossible to find and they reproduced rapidly.

Perhaps they were giving the work to one of the local guilds. She grimaced at the thought. Not only was the adventurer's guild not one that specialized in monster extermination, but they were certain to do a hack job of it. No doubt next year they would have double the number of bowthie to deal with after the hatching season that followed the spring rains. She could have hired on with them, of course, but she knew that they generally snubbed the women among their numbers, giving them the least profitable and least desirable jobs while still taking sixty percent of their earned fees.

No thanks.

She sighed heavily and shook the ash from the advertisement, giving it one last critical look. It was fine. Once she got her advertisement circulating, her situation was bound to improve, and she would prove to her family that she had what it took to be a Sinclair Hunter. Then it would be her name on their lips. She would be fined for monster hunting without license from the guild, but it would be worth it, and she doubted anyone would complain. Afterall, with all manner of creatures running about since the human and those worlds of the fae and monstrous merged two centuries ago, there was never a lack of some sort of woe-begone occurrence happening. Mostly this was due to said innumerable monstrous creatures that they now shared their world with, but also partly due to the collapse of human civilization which took fun things like electricity and most tech humanity possessed with it. With little protection against the creatures, the community leaders couldn't afford to be so

damned picky. They would eventually come, happy to have her aid.

Giving the advertisement one last shake, she rolled it up to deliver to the magistrate's office where it would be copied and distributed. She slid it into a leather tube as the bell above the door chimed, drawing her attention to the stranger who stepped inside with a burst of hot air. Her eyes widened as she stared at him, the advertisement in her hands forgotten. He was wrapped entirely in a heavy cloak with a deep hood that obscured not only most of his face but the majority of his upper body, revealing just a hint of a long, knee-length tunic over leathers. His pale green eyes visible over a scarf wrapped over his mouth and nose scanned the room, landed on her, and narrowed while somehow looking past her at the same time as if she were something completely inconsequential. He stepped toward her, and she could hear the faint clatter of something metallic hidden beneath his cloak. She had little doubt that he was well-armed but what was someone who was obviously quite capable and menacing doing there?

"I'm looking for Tomas and Beatrice Sinclair. It's quite urgent that I speak with them—Immediately." His voice was pitched low but had a whip of authority to it that made her frown.

While she would normally go straight into her well-practiced apology on part of her parents, something about this guy rubbed her the wrong way. For one, it was clear from his dismissive and yet demanding demeanor that he expected her to jump to her feet and rush off to fetch them like a good little dog. But there was something else about him that she couldn't quite define that made her want to escort him quickly from the building. Like his presence alone was tainting the atmosphere that always felt comfortably like home to her. As desperate as she was to acquire her first client, she had no intention of trying her sales pitch on him.

Pasting a polite smile on her face, she slowly set the scroll aside and folded her hands on the table in front of her.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. At least not right now,” she amended as his gaze sharpened on her. She spread her hands wide in a mock apology. “As it happens, they are out of town.”

“And when do you expect them back?” he replied, each word clipped angrily from between his teeth.

She shrugged without demonstrating even a modicum of concern. “I couldn’t quite say. It’s been a few months so the optimist in me says that they could arrive tomorrow, whereas the pessimist in me says that it’s just as likely that I will go another few months without word from them.”

And possibly starve in the meantime. No, she couldn’t let herself think that way.

“Damn it all. I cannot wait. That could be too long,” he growled with frustration, and she felt her lips curl with satisfaction. She caught herself and fixed a polite smile on her face before he could notice.

“It’s indeed a gamble, I would say,” she replied as she inwardly asked forgiveness of the gods of prosperity and abundance. She would be sure to be extra cordial to the next customers who stepped inside. She worked hard to smother her smile as he took a frustrated step back from her table and angrily turned away. “But you know how these things are, and as it’s been weeks since I’ve heard from my parents,” she added. “You could be in for a lengthy wait.”

“Parents?” He paused and then whirled toward her, his eyes focusing on her with something more than a bored disinterest by her mere presence. “Ah, I see it now. You have Tomas’s dark hair and eyes but Beatrice’s face and complexion. An interesting pairing... and may I assume that you have your parents’ skills?”

“They trained me,” she confirmed reluctantly. As much as she wanted to hurry him

out, she didn't want rumor to get around that the Sinclair daughter was useless. "I excel in marksmanship, tracking, and some minor magic."

"Naturally," he murmured, his eyes gleaming with far more interest than she was comfortable with. "With Beatrice's sorcery, there is no doubt she would've taught any child born of her a few useful tricks. But you are your father's daughter, if your skills are as you say. I never met any other male who could hunt with such agility and silence to catch his prey entirely by surprise. Nor any other who could strike so quickly and unerringly. You can do this?"

She frowned at the note of challenge in his voice. "Of course. My father trained me himself since I was small and claims that I may even surpass him now in every technique he drilled into me."

He just wouldn't let her actually practice them out in the field.

"Excellent," he murmured. "If that is the case, then I believe you may suit my needs."

Abby blinked. That hadn't gone at all how she had planned in her head. She'd assumed that he would scoff at her forthright claims and take himself out to look for other options rather than a far too-bold girl with too much attitude. That's what she'd often heard boys complain when she'd become old enough to notice them and why they summarily dismissed her as a difficult female not worth their time. She had assumed the same given the bearing of the man in front of her, and yet his words had completely taken her by surprise.

"Pardon me?"

"You shall travel back to Dezia with me, a glorious country in the heart of the Sanna Desert, your father's birthplace."

“The Sanna Desert?” she squawked, hastily rising to her feet. Oh no, no, she didn’t want to go there. There were venomous things in the desert, and she would fry in the sun. “I think you misunderstand?—”

“There is no misunderstanding here. You are here and you have the skills I need. And you need work, do you not?” he added, plucking the leather tube from the table. He tipped it, dropping the rolled advertisement into his hand. He partially unrolled it, read the first few words and snorted softly before tossing it onto the table where it spilled open in front of her. He gestured to it loftily. “You are a monster hunter, and my people are in desperate need of your service.”

“But the desert,” she argued weakly, feeling as if a trap were closing around her that she hadn’t even realized that she’d spun for herself. As she was currently advertising her availability, she couldn’t refuse without disgracing the reputation of her family and ruining any prospective career for herself. Not without a good reason. “I have never been exposed to that sort of sun. I could burn, get heat-sickness, then there are the scorpions...”

Her voice faded as he chuckled and shook his head. “Nonsense, Tomas Sinclair is from the Sanna. As his daughter, you will adjust quickly enough. I will arrange your passage. I will be by to pick you up tomorrow—be ready. In the meantime, send whatever missives you need to your parents so that they are adequately informed of your imminent departure. Our boat leaves tomorrow at noon. Oh, and here is an incentive for your trouble. There will be more to come once the job is finished.”

The bag he dropped on the table was heavy enough with coins that its thud and the clank of metal within it halted any further protest on her lips. He whirled away with a flare of his cloak, but she barely noticed because her eyes widened further as she picked up and opened the pouch. It was more than they’d ever been offered for any job. She could take enough to see her through with supplies and food for months and still have enough to leave in the family coffers for when they returned. Surely, they

couldn't object to that. Especially if that was just a small amount of what was to come. They could be comfortably flush with gold even if her family returned empty handed.

She licked her lips, picturing the pride on their faces when she returned.

"Sure," she whispered to the empty room. "I'll do it." Her head lifting, she gave him a curious look. "Who are you?"

"You may call me Zayman Bibal, the king's trusted servant and your guide for the time being."

Abby nodded mutely, half unable to believe what she had just agreed to. She was actually going to the Sanna desert. Gods help her. At least her excitement at finally being able to hunt was a nice pay off.

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Chapter

Two

The trip by boat across the sea was an exercise in misery but it was nothing compared to the endless heat and sand when it came to traveling across the Sanna. Abby's stomach lurched with every sway of her mount. She'd already privately wretched a multitude of times between embarking on the boat and their strike across the desert, but if Zayman Bibal had taken any notice of it, he had refrained from remarking upon it so long as she kept her complaints to herself.

Not that it improved her situation any. After seeing her supplied and seated uneasily on a bindwik feathered camel, she was sent off into the desert on her own with nothing more than a guide to help her get to her destination and abandon her forthwith. And that was exactly how she came to be standing outside a massive cave, with sand uncomfortably accumulating in places she didn't even want to think about, as she considered her next step.

The trouble was that she had been left to hunt a manticore completely alone, and such a creature was not any ordinary beast or monster. Creatures of ancient desert fire, apparently manticores were terrifying man-eaters with the body of lion, the face and cunning of a man with which it lured human prey, and a scorpion's sting which it would discharge at its prey in a foot long barb. And even if one managed to evade the first barb, it quickly grew another in its place. If she had known from the outset that was what sort of monster she was being sent out for—alone, she might add—she would have told him exactly what he could have done with his king's offer.

She almost felt bad for Zayman that the task of informing her had been left to him except that he had purposefully waited to do so until after he had gathered the camels and was preparing to leave her there. Her choice had been clear without it even needing to be said—do the task for which she had been paid or find her way across the desert alone. He hadn't said as much but the casual way he reassured her that he would return for her once she lit the flare and had the evidence of her kill prepared and displayed from a visible distance told her all that she needed to know.

Rat bastard. May the gods prepare a special place where the vermin of the underworld could feed upon his bowels.

Abby eyed the cave speculatively from where she crouched behind one of the jagged rocks near the mouth of the cave. Normally she would be making a rush for it, eager to get out of the blistering sun, but the murderous predator dwelling in it sort of put a snag in her plan. Even with a simple light spell, the monster would have the advantage of tight quarters and better eyesight. Unfortunately, she wasn't any safer outside either if they were on equal ground. This wasn't just some beast, which would be dangerous enough out in the open, but an intelligent and cunning predator. Which meant that she was putting herself within eating distance regardless. She also had to consider that, with evening quickly approaching, the manticore would emerge soon. At least her guide had been useful enough to inform her of the creature's hunting habits before dumping her with nothing but her supplies, a farewell, and a reassurance that he would return in a few days to collect her if she was still alive.

She pursed her lips as she rolled the weight of her javelin in her hand. When it came down to it, she had to decide whether she wanted to be on the menu trapped underground, or outside where she had a lot more maneuvering room. She snorted softly to herself and jabbed her javelin into the sand. That was obvious. While she could use the cave to her advantage as well, it was infinitely in her favor to wait outside the cave and attack it from a stronger position when it emerged. But then again it would just be very bad for her if the manticore managed to actually get

outside where it also had more room to attack.

Glancing up at the glaring sun, she estimated that she had a few hours at best. According to said guide, the creature emerged in the early hours of the evening and could be seen prowling in the desert at any time until near midday. She would have to make camp close to the mouth of the cave and remain on watch so that she would be able to quickly strike. She would get only one shot. When he emerged, he would be aware of her presence long before he even came out of the cave and on the attack.

She scratched her ear and blew several strands of dark, curly hair out of her face as she squinted at the entrance. On the other hand, when it came right down to it, there really wasn't much to lose by simply just going in. She might even be lucky enough to catch the creature off-guard and asleep.

Decided, she yanked her javelin free and thumped the butt of it on the sand as she stood. Drawing her cloak around her she edged her way toward the mouth of the cave. She paused for only a moment as she listened for any signs of the creature before taking her first cautious step inside the dark interior. Her breath immediately escaped her in a sharp exhalation as the sudden bite of cool air coming from the cavern's depths. It was startling but a relief after being out in the blistering sun all day.

Drawing a brass scarab from her pocket, she whispered the spell of the rising light that had been one of the first spells she'd learned in her youth. The brass insect began to glow with just enough light that she could see the walls of the cave and the downward sloping floor. The light didn't penetrate far but it was serviceable for a hunter. Smiling grimly, she descended into the cavern, noting the way the walls grew narrower with her every step. At some points she had to stop and shimmy sideways through passages or drop to slide along her belly on the cold, damp, stone floor. She didn't have to go far before she began to encounter the stalagmites and stalactites that began to dot some of the larger caverns the system opened into.

Abby paused as the channel opened to a new cavern that contained a large, green pool of water that extended from the banks ahead of her. Stalagmites jutted like dozens of teeth from the cold water, the moisture on them shimmering in the light of her spell. Abby pursed her lips as she inwardly whistled in appreciation. The cave system was far deeper and more impressive than she initially thought it to be.

Stepping to the edge of the pool, she glanced down and noted the steep and abrupt drop of the cavern floor beneath its clear surface. Wading across definitely wasn't an option. That left the stalagmites. She squinted across the surface of the water at them. They were strange in that their peaks were not tapered but worn into a smooth, flat surface. Each was wide enough that they appeared to form an odd bridge with their wide flared edges just above the water that disappeared in the darkness. Each stalagmite edge seemed to be wide enough to easily hold a person... or a monster. Gods, she hated trusting the unknown.

Whispering a levitation command to the brass scarab, she opened her hand as it sprouted shimmering wings and fluttered roughly a foot away from her. It was a shame that she didn't have any equally convenient way to deal with her javelin. Shedding her cloak, she ignored the way her skin prickled at the sudden shock of direct exposure to the cold air and slid her javelin home into the leather slots attached to the harness. The temperature and humidity within the cavern were miserable but the cloak was a small sacrifice to keep her weapon at hand while keeping her hands free as she carried it across the water.

She gave an experimental bounce and was satisfied that, though her tits jiggled far too much for her liking, her javelin remained secured. With a nod of satisfaction, she tightened the bracers around her gloves as she stepped toward the nearest stalagmite. It was close enough to the embankment that she was able to hop onto easily. The progressing stalagmites proved to be a little more difficult. She was forced to take leaps, often fueled with the forward momentum of her previous jump to clear the distance between some of the larger and more imposing stones. Sweat quickly began

to slick her skin and gathered in the most inconvenient places as she made her way across. It was finally with one last perilous leap to an embankment heavily shrouded with darkness that her feet landed on the firm cavern floor once more, sending tiny stones scattering.

Brushing back the dark coil of hair that had escaped her ponytail out of her face, she didn't hesitate to strike off immediately for the yawning darkness ahead. The scarab zipped in front of her as she walked, always keeping within a couple feet radius as she made her way down the long, dark tunnel to whatever lay within. In contrast to the coolness of the rest of the cave, she began to become aware of a noticeable heat emanating from below and her heart sped up in reaction to it.

“And there in the darkness, Abby Sinclair steps into the mouth of the beast's den. The monstrous manticore awaits in the unnatural heat fueled by the flames of its infernal breath,” she whispered. “A creature of such appetite that it has been the ruin of towns; and it might be the ruin of our heroine, our monster hunter, yet.”

A snort echoed up the tunnel and for a moment she froze, her eyes widening. The scarab hovered, however, seemingly undisturbed. Abby frowned and pulled her javelin free as the shadows seemed to move and retreat further inside. Keeping her breathing light, she remained frozen in place for several minutes as she listened for any signs of movement... or anything at all. When no other sounds immediately came, she started forward again, albeit at a more cautious pace as she delved deeper.

The further she went the more, ever following the elusive shadows in an effort to claim her victory, the more the cavern heated until it possessed a balminess that was equal to the night air outside the cave system but minus the threat of the sun's boiling intensity during the day once it rose into the sky. It was no wonder that the manticore preferred to sleep away the days down there and hunt at night. But where was it? She had been so certain that it was nearly within her grasp. Her brow furrowed... was that light up ahead? She squinted, blinded by the unexpected brightness of the

illumination.

She knew that it was part of the creature's trap and yet she still was prepared for the growl that trembled in the air. It was far too close when it came, and she was nearly a hair too slow bringing her javelin up in front of her when the creature burst from out of nowhere. Planting her feet, Abby instinctively thrust upward but found herself knocked back off her feet for her effort as her javelin was shoved back at her with surprising force. With a shout of alarm she rolled, barely evading the swiping claws extending from something that was as much a hand as it was a paw. They scored the rock with a loud shriek, and she rolled back, slamming the wooden length of her weapon into the creature's head.

A curse split the air that gave her a momentary pause, but it was followed by a monstrous bellow that made her blood run cold. Readjusting her grip, she stabbed blindly as the scarab fluttered too erratically for her to see as the magic's attempted to follow her movements. A heavy masculine grunt echoed through the cave as claws scraped across the floor as her javelin's lethal tip was neatly evaded.

"Fuck me," she hissed beneath her breath as she attempted to push herself up from her ass only to find her knocked back again when her javelin was wrenched brutally from her hands.

Her breath exploded from her as her back hit the rocks, followed by the thump of her head cracking against the ground, but that was nowhere near as painful as hearing the splintering shatter of wood echoing around her. Her javelin was gone.

Hot breath scored her skin as the weight of the creature prowled over her prone form. She blinked rapidly in an attempt to clear her vision. Deep golden fur and a roughly carved feline face and maned in crimson rose above her. Green eyes, the dark pupils of which contracted into thin, slitted diamonds, stared down at her. The manticore. His mouth opened wide, revealing sharp teeth and fangs and just behind him she

could see the shadow of his enormous scorpion's tail rising for the killing strike.

What remained of her breath shuddered out of her and she dragged in a quick, painful gasp of air as she wrenched a dagger free from her harness and pressed it against the thick neck that bulged beneath the heavy mane that fell over her arm. There was a pause and the creature's green eyes blinked slowly, its fangs just inches from her face. A thread of saliva dripped from its mouth onto her cheek, and she grimaced.

"Disgusting," she muttered to herself. The eyes narrowed further in insult, and she smirked at it. "Understood that didn't you? Well, perhaps you understand this, you bite down, and I will ram my blade into your damned throat."

Its breath fanned her in a growl. "Attempt to slit my throat and I will not hesitate to bite off that pretty face."

It... talked? She attempted to shake the revelation off. After all there were many monsters that spoke and had a clear sentient language that they were still hired to deal with. Raiding orcs and trolls, minotaurs that attacked towns, centaurs... talking did not make an exception but sentience was always something that was carefully weighed and the cause of the attacks thoroughly researched.

"Look you... you. If you dare bite my face... the moment those teeth come down my dagger goes up."

The creature's brow furrowed and, as her vision cleared, she became aware of the fact that the leonine face bore distinct human characteristics. In fact, it seemed slightly more human than feline with only the slight exaggeration of the lion around the rise of the muzzle around the lips, the mane, and the conical ears that peaked out from it. The mane itself almost seemed absurdly styled in ringlets. Its lips closed over its teeth as it regarded her, and its nostrils flared in its broad almost humanoid nose. The corner of the mouth quirked faintly.

“Strange thing,” it muttered. “It seems we are at an impasse.”

“Only for the moment,” she countered. “I’m bred for the hunt. I can be patient.”

Its gravelly chuckle filled the cave, startling her. “As am I, little one. But I can outlast a tiny human...” it breathed in again, “female.” There was a slight note of wonder in its voice and its head lowered closer to blink down at her with its luminous green eyes and its nostrils flared again as if drawing in her scent. “Very masculine in trade and garb but definitely female. How curious.”

“Nothing curious about it,” she bit out, infuriated once more that her gender had anything to do with it. “A woman can kill you just as well as a man,” she pointed out hotly.

Another chuckle filled the cavern, this time with considerably more warmth and interest even though the creature did not give her even an inch more space. She felt something brush her leg in a lazy tap that reminded her of cat’s tail, and she froze, her eyes widening as she recalled just what sort of tail the manticore was equipped with.

“Only a man blessed by the gods would be successful in killing me,” he purred. “Perhaps a female might fare better, but it would be sad to find out and lose such delicious company when it has been so very long since I’ve laid eyes on a female’s rounded cheek.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously at his wording. “What do you suggest then?”

“Tea,” he rumbled, rising from her abruptly. “Or coffee you prefer. I have plenty of both. The caravans that come close to my cave keep me well stocked.”

Abby blinked, her gaze following the manticore as he prowled from her on all fours before rising onto his hind legs like a man. It was then that she noticed that his build

was very much like a man though his chest was broader and structured a bit different and his shoulders less defined and set further back, but he walked with ease without a glance back at her as if confident that she would either follow or that he could deal a killing blow if she dared attack.

So, what was she to do? Go back? If that was even an option, she would have already set across the desert hours ago. There was no chance of Zayman making a return for her so soon. And she had a suspicion that the manticore wasn't just going to let her flee.

“Are you coming or do I need to fetch you myself?” he called back, affirming her suspicion.

Gritting her teeth, Abby pushed up to her feet. She absolutely hated being at a disadvantage.

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Chapter

Three

Abby followed the manticore through the long cavern hall and around the bend, enjoying the warm bath of golden light as it intensified enough that her eyes were able to adjust to it. The cavern that it emptied out into, however, struck her with wonder. This was no mean lair of a beast but was plush with furnishings and brightly colored rugs, and there over a fire burning an enormous hearth, was a kettle.

“Coffee or tea?” the manticore repeated in its deep, gravelly voice and Abby jerked to attention, a blush of embarrassment rising to her cheeks that she had been caught gawking.

“Uh, tea, please,” she replied. She wasn’t about to tell him she hadn’t a clue what coffee was.

He turned toward her, his heavy leonine brow raising. “Do you care for mint?”

A flicker of a smile tugged at her lips before she squelched it. “Yes. I love mint actually.”

The tip of its dangerous tail curled, and she swore she saw a hint of a smile on its face. “You will enjoy this. Green tea and mint. I do not have sugar, but it is pleasant enough without it for the human taste, I believe.”

“Thank you,” she replied automatically and then gave herself a brutal inward shake.

What was she saying? She was tasked with killing it and she was thanking it as if she were taking tea with a lonely neighbor. She frowned as she watched the manticore move toward the hearth with a clay pitcher. Fur covered its entire body, but its hide was very much like that of the lion it resembled, which meant she had more than eyeful of the darker sac and genital sheath as the manticore turned that brought a blush to her cheeks. She tore her eyes away and stared at the kettle.

“I really don’t understand what we are doing,” she pointed out to his back as he passed her on his way to the hearth.

“We are being civil,” he replied. “We may be designed to be enemies but there is no reason to let civilization slide further into the abyss than it already has.”

Removing the lid from the kettle, he tipped the pitcher in his hand and a stream of water filled the metal vessel. She shifted impatiently on her feet.

“Right. I’m going to be honest here, I wasn’t exactly trained for... this,” she countered helplessly, drawing the manticore’s green gaze back to her.

His furred brow rose once more. “Not trained to take tea? I did not realize that it required such aptitude.”

She scowled back at him. “You know that’s not what I mean,” she countered. “Right now, I’m supposed to be finding a way to murder you and chop off your stinger so that I can take it back to Dezia and claim my reward. Not having tea.”

His tail swayed menacingly. “If it makes you feel any better, I can simply kill you now and spare you the duress of the unfamiliar.”

“No,” she amended quickly and the corner of his feline-esque mouth pulled up as he nodded to a thickly upholstered chair.

“Then, please, sit,” he rumbled, turning his attention back to the kettle. “I dislike hovering guests.”

“I can’t imagine you having many to worry about,” she muttered in reply but quickly took a seat in a deep purple chair embroidered with gold thread in a tapestry of exotic floral designs that bore just a hint of the geometrical.

To her surprise, the manticore chuffed his amusement and inclined his head, granting her sally as he turned and settled into an enormous wingback chair in a similar shade of deep plum. He stretched out comfortably, the firelight casting heavy shadows over him. He regarded her with luminous, slitted eyes and seemed to smile with a hint of mockery.

“I have more guests than you might imagine, but none quite as charming, and all were fleeting visitors.” His head turned and she caught a glimpse of skulls stacked neatly in a corner as he glanced over at them casually. “They failed to be polite.”

Her mouth went dry as she stared at him. That was one detail that Zayman Bibal had failed to include. He didn’t say anything about the manticore keeping trophies of his kill.

“Oh,” she said weakly. “I suppose you can’t have that.”

“No. I cannot. I despise poor manners,” he retorted.

Abby wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to that, so she fell silent, her eyes following his every movement. It was strange, although he bore a humanoid face, there was very little about him that resembled a human beyond that. His build was too massive and too predatory, bulky in ways that a human was not, and he was lean in places where a human and those species similar in shape to humans would be a bit more filled out. The odd position of his shoulders and shape of chest aside, his hips

were exceptionally narrow and his belly almost possessing a caved-in appearance with its sudden and extreme dip from his chest creating a strange slope of his abdominal muscles.

He was built like the perfect predator and possessed a sleek, powerful presence that she was very aware of. Certainly, his legs were better suited to a quadruped predator giving him a unique design for speed and agility and had a distinctly leonine appearance. Unlike his hands, his feet were wide, padded paws with large claws that pressed randomly out from their sheaths as he pensively regarded her in turn. Even the fingers on his large hands were thicker than those of humans with wide fingers that likewise were padded and lethally clawed.

Truthfully, the velvety pads on his palm at fingertips were slightly distracting and Abby found that her gaze returned to them frequently as he stroked the fur along his jaw and absently played with his long mane. She was mesmerized by their movement and the power within his hands that made her mouth go even drier yet as they conjured fantasies of what they might feel like stroking her skin in that same way. Her belly trembled with a hint of rising arousal and the kettle whistled, breaking the tension of the atmosphere between them and he sighed as he stood and walked back to the hearth.

“If I had any sense at all I would destroy you as I do any other intruder who comes here to kill me,” he pointed out, pouring the water from the kettle into an ornate little teapot. “The human king who believes himself master over the great expanse of this desert was clever to send a female. No doubt he thought it would lure me into a false sense of safety, allowing you to easily slit my throat.” He huffed with grim amusement. “As if I am that easy.”

“I doubt it,” she replied with a hint of annoyance. “I was hired because I was the only member of my family who happened to be there. My brothers and parents were occupied. And I’m hardly a seductress.”

“You give yourself far too little credit,” he purred, and the sound ran up her spine with an odd tingle that sent a strange sensation down between her legs.

She clenched her thighs together and flushed.

“But no,” he rumbled thoughtfully. “I do not think you came here with that in mind or else I would have already killed you. But you did willingly enter my home on your own accord—gifting me with your life however I see fit to use it since you failed to accomplish your means.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, her fingers biting in the thick upholstery of her chair.

He grinned at her lazily. “First, we have tea. Afterward, you will have one chance to escape my den. If you succeed you return home and live your life as if this encounter never happened with the provision that you never return and seek to hunt me again.”

She swallowed hard. “And if I fail?”

His grin widened into a feral, hungry expression as he looked at her over his shoulder and hung the kettle back over the fire. “Then you will remain here as mine. It has been long since I enjoyed a female’s company. Your soft little body will be mine and you will spread your thighs, little human, as I can scent that you wish me to do, so that you may be filled completely with my cock.”

Abby choked on her own spit, shocked and horrified that he could so easily determine her body’s willingness and need. If anything, his words sent a dark, forbidden flame scorching low within her belly. He chuffed again as he took in her expression, his nostrils flaring as he prowled toward her, teapot in hand.

“Oh yes, I will fuck you long and hard I will fill you with every drop of my seed. I

will breed and rut and you will know my pleasure while you scream for your own release and beg me for more. And I will continue to fuck you. If you are to escape this fate, then you must successfully find your way out of my den before I catch you. If you cannot, then you shall be mine and pinned on my prick. And you will be pinned for certain because you will find that it is not so easy to dislodge a manticore buried within your tight, hot cunt,” he rumbled, turning toward her.

Her eyes dropped and widened. His cock had extruded within those brief moments, and the shaft rose upward as a slightly curling angle, the tip of it broad and triangular in shape but bearing a number of rising bumps that continued in greater number down the length of his cock. A clear bead of precum welled at the tip and dripped from it and he hissed softly. Wrapping his hand firmly around his length, he squeezed, sending a stream of precum trickling free.

“Tea first,” he rumbled as if to remind himself and pressed his cock back into his bulging sheath as a deep growl rolled through his chest.

That growl did something to her. There was something so primal within it that something achingly raw within her responded instinctively to it. A wet gush dropped from deep within her, her arousal trickling steadily into her panties. She shifted in place at the sensation and squeezed her thighs tightly together as her eyes followed his every movement.

The manticore shivered in the grip of his own desire but he managed to walk calmly back to her with the teapot. Despite the tight control he was displaying, it was all she could to keep from springing to her feet and fleeing. He clearly had nerves of steel that allowed him to ruthlessly toy with her, but she was terrified that she was coming close to embarrassing herself with an inescapable demonstration of just how lacking her own self-control was. She was mortified and confused at her strange, uncontrollable response, and suddenly very sympathetic to cats in heat. Was this the same sort of suffering? Just the idea of being rammed full of all that dick made

something within her clench with an instinctual excitement.

Gods she was sick, she knew she was, but she couldn't help it. Caught helplessly within in a tidal wave of desire, her eyes followed him as he leaned forward and set the teapot among the teacups on the small table between them. His nostrils flared and he shivered again, this time more violently. His eyes pinched close for a moment and then sprung open, their green depths suddenly far more luminous than before as his pupils constricted tightly and then flared wide.

“Tea can wait,” he snarled, and his tail lashed, the stinger slashing through the air. “I can scent your desire. Fuck civility. I will have you now.”

He lurched forward causing Abby to spring to her feet with a squeak. Spinning away from the chair so that she was certain to keep the furniture between them, she pivoted toward the entrance and sprinted for it. An embarrassing flood of arousal wetted her panties as she ran, and the cotton of her underwear rubbed against her clit as if excited by the chase. Even with her mind screaming in denial, her body was priming itself to be fucked... to be rutted by a monster... to be pinned beneath him, her ass up in the air and filled up and stretched with the primal slam of his hips.

Her arousal was insane. It was as if her body was trying to incite the monster even as her mind attempted to secure her escape. She could hear him, his roar chasing after her through the winding cavern tunnel as she fled blindly through them, with not even her scarab to light the way since the magic had since dissipated while she had endured her capture. She could hear his claws scraping as he charged after her. She could nearly feel the fanning heat of his breath upon her as her pussy continued to weep with its own primitive eagerness.

Abby turned down another corridor and her eyes widened in shock. Just ahead the path terminated in a smooth wall. She had somehow gone the wrong way and was now trapped. Skidding to a stop, she slowly began to turn but a large body barreled

into hers, sending them both crashing to the ground. She landed on her belly hard but didn't have the time to push herself fully onto her hands and knees before one large, clawed hand slapped against the ground within view and she felt the other wrap around her waist, hauling her back as a growl vibrated through the air between them.

Despite the shocked screech of her mind, her hips instinctively went up and she moaned out loud when something large pressed frantically against her crotch as he panted and growled. She shivered blissfully as she felt her sex pulse and open further in preparation for him. Her hips did a needy little jump so that the crotch of her pants slid along his length from its tip to his pelvis in a way that made him snarl with pleasure. The fabric must have somehow weakened because she heard the first sound of fabric shredding as he gripped it with his claws and pulled. The fabric yielded and she felt him more acutely through the rapidly splitting material separating them, every strike against her clit sending stars shooting behind her eyes.

Gods she wasn't even trying to fight him off. She didn't want to. The logical part of her that cared about the fact that this was considered unnatural among those of her profession and strictly prohibited—and would get her expelled permanently—had shut down in surrender to the pleasure and need that was coursing through her as his flat, textured tongue rasped gently against her neck.

This was it... she was going to let herself be defiled by a monster, and she wasn't the least bit sorry. In fact, she wanted nothing more. It was a forbidden sort of excitement that rose within her demanding to be embraced. And gods help her, embrace it she did.

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Chapter

Four

The manticore's cock was as thick as it had appeared in the firelight. Abby could feel every inch of it as it battered against, somehow shredding through the crotch of her pants and panties little by little until finally he gave an impatient huff and lowered a hand between her thighs to pet her pussy in long dragging strokes before tearing a gaping hole with one quick movement of his claws. There was a tease of cold air but then heat from his scorching hot cock as it glided against her slicked-up pussy that made her eyes roll back with pleasure.

On a final pass, the head notched in place and slid in just enough to encompass the tip and even that was girthy enough to have her pussy stretched tightly around it. The manticore froze as if only suddenly realizing that he was in and with an excited huff retreated only slightly before thrusting forward, his cock sliding through her wet channel, stretching it snugly around its massive length in one hard jolt that nearly sent her off her knees.

Crying out, she felt her pussy tighten instinctively around the invasion and then gush rapturously around his cock as it squeezed repeatedly along the textured girth filling it. The manticore shuddered over her, his head dropping beside hers until they were pressed practically cheek to cheek and from the corner of her eye, she could see his fanged mouth gaping open as he moaned. Abby trembled at the sound, her pussy clamping down around him again without her say-so and she whimpered as his cock slowly began to drag from deep within her the wide, angular flare of its head. The manticore grunted deeply and shivered. His claws scraped the stones, and his pelvis

slammed forward, driving his cock back into her.

She wheezed quietly as it stole her breath in all the best ways. Her internal muscles squeezed around him as he began to shuttle in and out of her clasp depths. His growl trembled against her ear as he began to thrust and she lifted her ass higher, needing him deeper. The warm, velvety pads on his fingers palm buffed against her skin as his hold tightened. It was an erotic contrast to the very faint prick of his claws against her skin as his hold tightened. She felt him tease the flesh of her hip where he grasped her, and the sensitive skin of her stomach where one of his hands was currently flattened. Something cooler and harder in texture brushed along the length of her thigh, the long, pointed tip scraping as it passed, leaving a damp trail in its wake.

“What?” she gasped, and he thrust deep and held as his blunt nose nuzzled her.

“My sting can give you great pleasure,” he rasped. “As much as it can deliver a painful fate for my enemies, for you the fire would be indescribable. Just a tiny prick. The barb would not even loosen with such a gentle tab.”

Abby trembled beneath her, her channel tightening around him like a vise as she attempted to make sense of his words through the pleasure-dense fog that had fallen over her mind. He wanted to prick her with that monstrous stinger at the tip of his tail? It was horrifying... and faintly intriguing. But not enough to get her to agree. She shook her head, and his chest vibrated with his quiet laughter.

“Not ready for that? A shame. There is nothing better than a cunt choking my cock rapturously in response to my venom.” His tongue stroked her neck again. “Are you certain that you will not change your mind?”

She blinked rapidly as her body twitched beneath his hold in frustration with his sudden lack of movement as tension spun deep within her. Gods, what did she need

to do to get him moving again? And what was the question? Was she supposed to answer with a yes or a no? Her breath burst from between her lips in a ragged, insensible moan and he chuckled again.

“Poor little female. Very well... next time,” he rumbled.

He rolled his hips then at that moment, grinding his cock deep, shifting in such a way that she could acutely feel the strange, pronounced texture of his cock caught within her. She gasped at the feeling as her channel clenched around his shaft, certain that the texture felt more pronounced. That became more apparent as his cock started to withdraw, and she felt an unusual dragging sensation inside of her that had her gasping at the sharp intensity of the pleasure rising within her. Overwhelmed, she instinctively attempted to jerk away and scramble out from beneath him, but his massive body flattened against hers, pinning her in place. A deep purr rumbled in his chest, its resonance sending tiny bursts of pleasure crackling in response within her.

“Something’s... strange,” she panted, and his teeth gently nipped her shoulder in reply.

“Nothing is strange. It is perfectly normal,” he groaned as he held her firmly, his cock dragging slowly more and more until just the flared triangular tip remained caught within her.

Snarling softly, the manticore’s pelvis rocked, changing its angle, and thrust once more. Abby cried out, her pussy pulsating around his sex as a hot coil within her snapped and released, gushing over the cock buried within her. He growled softly with pleasure as she twitched around him, her fingers spasming against the cavern floor. With her every gasp and moan, his pelvis slapped against her ass, jolting her slightly with every thrust.

Every push of his body against hers and every thrust of his cock filled her pleasure

that tightened and spun through her as she climbed to the peak of ecstasy and fell again and again. Her pussy was drenched with her successive climaxes and gripping around his sex. The loud and rapid squelch of his cock burying in and out was obscene, reminding Abby that she was allowing a monster to mount her, and it sent a titillating thrill through her. It was forbidden to do such a thing, but that taboo made her desire it even more as she widened her stance and tipped her ass up for more—to which the manticore obliged with a feral snarl.

He drove deeper than before, the tip of his cock striking erotically at the deepest spot within her. A new sound started within his chest, a grating purr as he adjusted his grip and the stance of his legs behind her and began to pick up his pace, every thrust hitting her just right deep inside, over and over again. He was barely withdrawing more than half of his length before surging forward once more, but as he continued to thrust, she gradually became aware of the fact that the spiny texture on his cock was catching sooner, keeping him buried within her. Each catch of those textured spines with her made her hips jerk with pleasure and was accompanied with a throaty rumble from the manticore as he urgently buried his cock all over again.

Stroke after stroke, his cock seeking her womb with each thrust, Abby became aware that their bodies were rocking violently together. Claws scraped against stone and his stinger sank itself repeatedly into the floor of the cavern as he buried himself within her. She shook beneath him as she began to crest again, this time far more violently before, her pussy pulsating around his length, gripping and milking his cock, desperate for release. Her belly trembled as the heat rose and shot through her, bathing her in an internal torrent of fire that exploded through her. She spasmed around him with wave after wave of her release as his cock jerked violently, sending a new current of pleasure spiral through her as the spines caught anew, and suddenly began to spill within her hot streams as the manticore grunted and moaned his pleasure.

He fucked her deeper as he continued to fill her with his seed, dragging out her

pleasure as the spurts never seemed to taper off but filled her until it spilled out from between them. Even then he continued to moan and bathe her insides with his hot cum until she was shaking beneath him, and half collapsed.

When he finally dragged his cock from within her, it was with a pulling sensation that made her gush and moan again, her body shivering and twitching in the aftermath as he dismounted. A deep, moaning purr erupted from the monster and suddenly she was plucked up from the cold ground and drawn up against the heat of his furred chest. His musculature felt strange against her cheek, but she had to admit that it wasn't unpleasant. His body temperature was higher than a human and it actually made him far nicer to be snuggled against.

She had to be out of her mind to snuggle with a monster but that was where they were, and she didn't have the energy to resist or put up a fight after what she had just done.

"We shall return home now, little human," he purred.

"Abby," she mumbled. "Considering what we've just done, you might as well use it. It's better than just being called 'human.'"

He rumbled with amusement, but she felt his nod. "Considering that you no doubt have a variety of unpleasant things at hand to call me, I will likewise insist that you call me Samir."

"Pity, asshole monster fitted you so well," she mumbled, and his chest shook as it rumbled again with his laughter.

"Perhaps so, my little assassin, but time for us to take our rest, I think. I will want you again very soon as it has been long since I've had such satisfaction breeding a tight little cunt and would prefer it to be in my bed this time."

Abby sighed heavily. She guessed she couldn't complain of getting good and fucked while she worked out a way to get away from him and do her duty.

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Chapter

Five

The female deeply amused and intrigued Samir. Perhaps that was why he had allowed her to live, and why he had brought her home until her delicious scent drove him half-mad with desire. He did not normally enjoy having any kind of weakness, but he decided that Abby was one that he could both tolerate and truly want.

She was certainly entertaining as well. He watched her lazily through slitted eyes as she wandered around his home. Her sneaky attempts to pry into things made him shake with silent laughter. She was truly adorable, and so very determined. But she also had a good heart, which was what truly solidified his interest. He could tolerate a certain amount of foolishness but not something twisted or spoiled within. And Abby was like a breath of fresh air to him when he had spent so long breathing in the dank air of the caverns.

He did not count going out into the desert at night. As beautiful as the desert it was, the experience had long lost its magic. Prowling the land had become a matter of necessity more than anything—a way to find food and procure whatever he required. It was not about pleasure. At least his cavern was a restful refuge when he did not have ridiculous humans invading it. Yet, they had sent Abby to him, so he could not be too angry at them this time.

But the humans of Dezia, especially those who caravaned across the Sanna and who dwelled in within the city, Veldala, were exhausting. As much as he enjoyed what luxuries and goods the caravans provided, he would rather not go about his business

with them in such an uncivilized way. He disliked enduring the shrieks of fright from the terrorized merchants and those humans that their king sent across the desert for him. Abby was the only human who, despite her attempt to kill him and repeated attempts at escape, did not vex him. She was as charming as she was conniving and it amused him to watch her while the wheels turned in her head, working out how to escape him. Was that not the reason that he was lying in wait for her—eager to catch her once more in their delightful little game. As if that was even possible

Except she did not come, and he found that irrationally disappointing. He knew that she wished to escape and was busily plotting, but why had she not made another attempt? He doubted that she had any inkling on how futile such an effort would be. That was part of what amused him about the entire situation. He had anticipated and looked forward to putting down every single escape attempt as he luxuriated in her scent every time he dragged her beneath him. And that sweet perfume was the very reason why she would never be able to escape.

Although he did not put any further sexual demands on her since their first encounter, he did insist that she share his bed with him, and he was now so familiar with her scent that he could likely find her anywhere. Her scent was unequivocally delicious. Even thinking of its sweet fragrance made him more aware of her perfume drifting through his cavern. The musk was quite tantalizing, and he lifted his lips to draw it more fully into him until he could practically taste it, a low purr rumbling through his chest.

It was truly decadent. It was not quite as delicious as the scent and taste of her that he had enjoyed the day before when he had her pinned beneath him, but he knew that nothing would ever be able to compare to the velvety flavor of her desire. Just thinking of it as he breathed in her scent made his cock ache within his sheath. He wanted to mount her again but this time properly with her full cooperation. He wanted to rut her in earnest without worrying about escape and until she mewed like a kitten with unfettered pleasure beneath him before shrieking her pleasure to the ears

of the deep-dwell gods.

His breath shuddered from him in a broken pant. His hands fisted as his claws sank deep into the thick pads of his palms. As much as he pleased to tear apart the humans who threatened him, he wanted Abby with an instinctive demand that was difficult to ignore. Why did he not just take her again and slake his need? It would be as easy as before. The first time was a game and a test, exploring the limits of her arousal. This time he could fully slake his need upon her, rutting her until his seed was entirely spent from his sac. Perhaps then he would finally drive the aching need from his loins that had been unwelcomingly sprung on him.

If he no longer desired her, could he be capable of killing her then?

Grumbling with disgust at his internal reflections, Samir stalked restlessly through his cavern. He needed something to take his mind off such terrible ruminations. While he understood many of his brethren in ages long past had felt otherwise, he did not enjoy killing humans. He certainly could not stomach the thought of eating them. That it even crossed his mind that he would be capable of killing Abby when she tormented and amused him so much for no other than just because his lust would be satiated disturbed him. That he considered forcing himself on her at all made him ill. She was not currently aroused and intoxicating him with heavy doses of her pheromones. He would not touch her again unless she invited him to.

He most definitely needed a distraction.

Biting back a growl he stormed into the main chamber and came to an immediate halt at the sight of the female sitting in his chair with one foot propped against its arm while the other swung lazily from where her leg was draped over it. He had never seen furnishing treated so carelessly. He considered how to deal with it, but his ire rose rapidly when she turned her head to peer at him smugly as she ground her foot against the chair's intricate weave. He bit back a snarl of annoyance as he stared at

the offending foot as her chuckle tripped over his frayed nerves.

“Is there a problem, Samir?” she cooed. “All you have to do is let me go and you would never have to deal with footprints on your favorite chair ever again.”

His eyes narrowed at her. She was very perceptive. Although the main chamber had only two chairs, that was his favorite. His mouth quirked as he caught on to her intent. Instead of trying to sneak out, she was hoping to force him into driving her out. A deep chuckle rolled from his chest, immediately drawing a frown from his lovely captive.

“No problem other than having to discipline an unruly kitten,” he observed as he bent and plucked her up.

Abby squealed within his arms as she attempted to wriggle away but it was a short trip to the other chair into which he unceremoniously dumped. She sputtered as she brushed her curly hair from her eyes to glare up at him, but he merely grinned in turn as he settled once more into his chair. This was more like it.

“Now,” he purred, “for your bountiful consideration for my welfare, I can do no less but reward you. There is an ancient song that praises the beauty and charm of females, and I shall sing it for you now in demonstration of my thanks.”

He grinned at her, baring his sharp teeth briefly before launching into song. It was truly evil, but it amused him too to see her look of dismay when he rumbled the first verse. The poor little kitten. Though he knew the lyrics of many ancient poems and songs by heart, there was not a manticore alive who was capable of reasonably carrying a tune. He growled and moaned through the lyrics, growing increasingly satisfied as she shrank further into her chair. She did not put her hands over her ears, however. He had to give her credit for that. But the way her lips were twisted in a grimace and her eyes wide with a look of panic as if she was struggling to contain her

distaste nearly made him ruin his performance with a snort of laughter.

She was adorable, entertaining, and polite. How charming.

He ended the song on a long growl, and he hid a smile as she promptly clapped hands in a weak show of feigned enthusiasm. His eyes glinted at her as he leaned forward and grinned.

“Did you enjoy it, kitten?”

“It was marvelous,” she baldly lied. “I am truly impressed by your unexpected skill. I never knew feline species could sing so well. Truly, you’re a credit to your species.”

Samir grinned in response. “Ah, perhaps you would enjoy another song. I know a great many.”

Abby froze and warily looked up at him. “How many... exactly?”

“Hundreds,” he purred. “I would be delighted to entertain you with them to demonstrate my great appreciation.”

She shot to her feet, and he nearly lost control of himself as the look of panic on her face. “Not necessary!” she practically shouted before schooling her features in a faint smile. “That is to say... I intended to explore the cavern a bit more, if that’s okay?”

He inclined his head graciously and stood. “That sounds like an excellent idea. I would not mind a small stroll around the caves to accompany you.”

Her smile fled at his statement. “Oh. That’s really not?—”

“Do you really imagine that I will not know when you venture from my cave?” He

blinked at her guilelessly. “Do you imagine that you will get far? Do you believe that you will do better than last time? Or any of the other times I cut off your escape route, though I saved you the embarrassment of making it appear as a coincidence?” His lips inched upward into a knowing smile. “Or did you truly delight in the hunt as much as I?”

Face going pale, Abby shook her head and took several steps back from him. “That’s okay. On second thought, I think I saw some paper and ink. I may just go amuse myself for a while.”

“Excellent idea,” he rumbled and chuckled when she fled deeper into the cavern toward his study.

He did not know what he was worrying about earlier. He was never going to tire of his little kitten. Purring softly, he followed behind her and took a seat at his desk as he pretended to busy himself with looking at his ledgers while she sprawled on the floor like a youngling and began to paint images. Ink was costly and hard to come by as not every caravan carried it, but he did not mind. Watching her slowly relax and forgetting her discomfort in his presence as she sank deeper into her own pleasure at that moment was worth its weight in treasure.

Treasures he had plenty of, but his coffers were empty of moments like these. So, he watched her contently, wrapping himself up in the moment. It granted him a surprising amount of peace and for a moment he imagined how she would look, her expression softened and entirely at ease as she lay at his feet playing with a cub or two or painting her little pictures with them.

He shook his head and laughed quietly.

Cubs? Since when did he ever desire such? Besides, it was far too soon to be caught in whimsical fantasies. Offspring meant mating. Mating was not some mere lark.

Mating for a manticore, like many species, was forever. Abby was amusing and he hungered for her company in a multitude of ways as he was slowly discovering. But mating? And cubs?

No. He would not entertain such considerations. He did not hunt out a mate in the ancient way. She was a female who was sent to slay him, not a bride, and he was no young male to be caught in flights of fantasy. He would enjoy his huntress just as she was. It did not need to be anything more.

Chapter

Six

Although escape was foremost in Abby's mind as she crept through the cavernous den of the manticore—because what rational person wouldn't want that?—she wasn't altogether able to ignore the fact that in doing so she would be abandoning her task. As things stood, however, she didn't really give a fuck. Her job assignment was not how Zayman led her to believe. Not to mention that it was unlikely that she would be able to bring down the manticore when her lance was broken and all her weapons confiscated to some unknown part of the cavern. She could search for them but the chances of getting caught and suffering repercussions for it wasn't something an intelligent person would risk.

There was another small issue, namely that she didn't know if she could actually go through with killing Samir. She couldn't identify the source of her reluctance as he was certainly a formidable predator who had killed many humans and was determined to keep her captive, but she just couldn't do it. It wasn't just because he was capable of thought. While trolls, orcs, goblins, and various creatures were considered very careful prior to the hunt, she had never felt guilty about doing what needed to be done to protect communities. But then, those same creatures would have killed her in a heartbeat. But Samir had not. Was that the source of her discomfort the fact that he showed pity for her and made the decision to keep her, all the while treating her gently and with a measure of respect? Or was it because she was held down and fucked by him?

That whole incident should have made her feel violated and pissed off and yet she

had been excited by the chase and some part of her wanted to be caught and fucked to satisfy the desire that had risen and burned within her. Had she formed an unhealthy attachment and become compromised because she had enthusiastically yielded to him and allowed a monster to rut her?

Whatever the case, she doubted that she could actually stomach harming him. She didn't want to harm him. The truth was, she wanted to run far away from Samir. She certainly didn't want to return to Veldala to resupply and carry out her assignment, even if that was the lie that was going to aid her escape. Presuming he bought it. But that was a worry for later. Right now she needed to actually get out and far enough away from the caves to light the flare and wait for Zayman to return for her.

To get to Veldala, she would tell him whatever he wanted to hear. She doubted that he would refuse if they were truly so anxious to remove Samir. For them to travel so far to recruit her parents they had to be pretty desperate, but she wasn't so naïve to believe that she wouldn't be threatened with imprisonment for her failure, which she could possibly talk her way out of with promises to go back and finish the job. She would lie, of course, to save her own skin but then she was booking passage on the nearest ship to take her back home. Fuck the desert and Veldala's king. Even if she could manage to convince herself to be okay with the idea of someone hunting Samir, it couldn't ever be her. Not only could she not do it but she would have to be suicidal to return after escaping Samir, much less try to kill him.

No, she decided as she crept along the wall, she just needed to lie and cheat her way back home, whatever it took. The need to run far, far away was thrumming a fast and steady tempo, whispering to her with every pound of her heart.

The hair rose on the back of her neck, and she paused at the edge of the common room. Her breath stilled and she strained to listen. The cavern was silent, but an icy dread worked its way up her spine and her breathing faltered. She felt like eyes were on her—watching her—but though she saw no tell-tale glow of Samir's gaze, she

couldn't say for sure whether she was merely paranoid or not. But she couldn't escape the feeling of eyes on her.

Abby shook her head to clear her thoughts. Drawing in a deep breath, she found her center and moved forward quickly, keeping her steps light and swift. All the while her heart was beating a whisper of warning. Faster. Faster. He was right behind her. Her breath was growing uneven as something uncomfortably like panic began to crawl through her belly. She caught sight of the exit leading out into the main passage.

Her gaze swept over the room. It was dark except for the soft glow of the coals that cast a small amount of light and heavy shadows on her surroundings. There was no sign of Samir, but, then again, just after escorting her to the sleeping chamber with orders to stay put and sleep while he saw to things, he had locked himself in his study. The cavern was just beyond the sleeping chamber he forced her to share with him when they slept through the hottest part of the day but close enough that she was able to silently open the door and spy on him as he entered the room and closed an actual door behind him. The entrance to his home and bedchamber didn't have doors, nor did most of the other rooms, but it seemed that these did, and the passageway was intentionally carved to adequately fit each door. As far as her limited vision could ascertain, there were several more doors that were visible along the passage that branched off from there. As curious as she was as to what was contained behind those doors, she wasn't going to waste her chance at freedom.

It seemed that he was still in his study as far as she could tell. Good.

Keeping low, she ran in a half-crouch across the room, keeping to the darkest parts of the shadows. Excitement leaped in her breast as she crossed the halfway mark. She was nearly there. Just a little further and she would be inside the main passage and one step closer to freedom. She smiled in the dark as she drew closer to it and, belatedly, she registered the soft sound of a scrape directly behind her.

She was nearly free when something dropped heavily on her, drawing a yelp from her as the weight dragged her to the ground. Her breath exploded from her as she hit the floor, but her training kicked in so that she was able to recover and draw in a short breath rapidly before her lungs began to burn from the lack of oxygen. She tried to pivot to dislodge the weight, but it merely sank further onto her so that she could feel the heat emanating from it... from him. Samir.

“Samir,” she whispered.

He did not reply other than to press his weight more tantalizing against her. Heat unfurled deep within her belly as his face leaned close to her ear so that she could feel his breath on her cheek. She whimpered as his hot tongue snaked out and dragged along the outer edge of her ear. Was he going to claim his reward for triumphing over her yet again? Her arousal thickened within her at the thought, and she bit back a cry of disappointment when his weight suddenly lifted from her and he rose to his feet, taking her with him.

“Abby, Abby,” he tsked as he carried her effortlessly through the common room and back to the sleeping chamber. “There is really no place for you to run to. Do you not hear it?” he murmured, and his head cocked, his leonine ear shifting to catch some far-off sound.

Abby frowned and listened. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Humans have such dull senses,” he observed. “You would have walked out and been caught in that sandstorm brewing not far from here. The winds have not arrived at the cave yet so you would have likely noted nothing of it heading our way until it was too late. Had I allowed you to leave, I suspect that I would have found you in the evening with your skin abraded from your body.”

Her eyes widened. Gods, if she had gone out in that... she sagged in his arms, weak

with shock. Her stomach flipped queasily and not because of the way he unceremoniously dumped her on the bed. She clutched her gut with one hand and swallowed thickly as her nausea threatened to overpower her. She jerked back in surprise, sputtering, when an old, stained bowl suddenly was shoved beneath her nose.

“If you are going to be ill, then do it in this,” Samir grumbled, though not unkindly.

She took the bowl gingerly from him, grateful to have it, and peered up at him thoughtfully. “You saved me.”

His bright green eyes narrowed on her for a moment and then he chuckled. “Naturally. I own your hide now. I would not like to see it damaged.”

Whatever kernel of gratitude she felt vaporized, and she glowered up at him. “So kind of you,” she bit out.

“No,” he rumbled, his smile growing wider. “I am not kind, little Abby. But you are very much mine and I will always protect what’s mine. Even from yourself.”

Her brows lowered into a scowl, her nausea forgotten as he leisurely climbed into the bed and settled beside her. She was going to ignore the way her stomach fluttered a little at his protectiveness and possessiveness. She was too busy fuming over the fact that her value was only being measured in terms of being conceived of as property. What was more, she couldn’t believe that actually said that to her face. It was infuriating and her determination burrowed deeper into her consciousness. One way or another she was going to get out of there, and when she did, she just might reconsider her stance on hunting down his mangy hide.

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Chapter

Seven

S amir observed Abby discreetly while simultaneously pointedly acting like he was not even looking at her. It was amusing to take note of her thoughts as they passed over her face. She was becoming increasingly easy to read. As far as he could tell she was busy glaring a hole through his head when not intently scrutinizing his home. Looking for another escape route as she aggressively chewed the meat he had offered. Of that much he had no doubt.

The corners of his mouth curled. She was turning out to be an entertaining companion. Thank the blessed and merciful gods that he had made the decision not to kill her. He glanced down at the candied nut in his hand, and he marveled at how like the almond she was. She desired to be hard and bitter like naturally grown almonds, capable of producing lethal cyanide, and yet it served as a remarkable and inspiring contrast to the candied honey coating them. Sweet and potentially deadly. It was addictive.

He popped the almond into his mouth as he regarded her, unnoticed, and smirked when she suddenly released a loud, annoyed sigh.

“How can you sit in here day after day?” she demanded. “I feel as if I’m about to go out of my mind with boredom.”

“Perhaps you would like a nut,” he offered, extending the candied almond to her.

She rolled her eyes in response, but her lips twitched reflexively, and he nearly purred at her unconscious response. How delightful. Her defenses were not quite as sound as she seemed to believe.

“That’s quite alright,” she replied. “I don’t think this situation calls for more nuts when I’m already feeling like I’m about to come one.” He regarded her blankly in confusion and her lips twitched again. “You know... a nutcase... crazy ,” she emphasized, making him chuckle.

“What an amusing idiom,” he purred. “But if you insist then I will be happy to eat your share.” He popped it into his mouth, aware of her eyes following the motion.

He smiled inwardly, onto her game. He knew she was hungry but other than eating a small amount of smoked meat, she seemed determined to refuse anything he offered her. Did she really believe that refusing sustenance would force him to release her? It was quite silly. Why should she not enjoy what he has to offer when she was held hostage there as his “guest.”

“Are you certain you do not want one?” he inquired in a velvet tone as he held another candied almond up between them. He held it between his claws so that it was more visible and he smiled when he watched her swallow in response. No matter that she hid behind her lies, she wanted it but was determined to suffer instead. He did not understand such masochism. “Rejecting my hospitality does nothing for your situation other than make you miserable. If you decline what I offer, then you merely go hungry and unsatisfied. I will not release you.”

Irritation flashed within her eyes, and he smirked inwardly to himself when her annoyance was quickly eclipsed by longing. She licked her lips, indecision in her eyes.

“I will not think less of you. What I have is yours, so I wish for you to enjoy it.”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say because her face darkened, rebellion brightening her eyes. She looked wild, unbreakable, and absolutely breath-taking. It inspired his need, not to conquer her but to tame her into accepting him. She would be a glorious queen of his desert—if that was what he was looking for.

“I’m not... your... pet,” she hissed from between her gritted teeth.

He gave her an amused look. “Of course you are not. Manticores have little use for pets. You are a delightful captive guest whom I wish to treat well while I have you.”

“Keyword being captive,” she muttered but he could see that much of her ire had already fizzled away. She sighed heavily and gave the almond a disparaging look that such a sweet treat certainly did not deserve.

“I mean no offense,” he replied, his hand closing around the almond. “But if you truly do not want it?—”

“No, wait,” she said, her hand rising in the air between them. Her tongue swiped over her lips again, her gaze fixed on his hand. “Something sweet actually does sound good.”

Samir beamed in response and immediately opened his palm and extended his hand with the almond in it out to her. She plucked it from his hand, her fingertips briefly grazing the thick pads that covered his palm and fingers, sending a shiver through him. He showed no reaction, however, and merely smiled when she quickly put the candied almond in her mouth and began to chew, a look of pleasure filling her face.

“This changes nothing,” she said as she scrutinized him. He found her assertiveness charming. She was certainly making a point in informing him. “I’m not your willing captive.”

“Perish the thought. I would never imagine that you would,” he agreed pleasantly.

Her eyes narrowed on him briefly, but she nodded. “I’ve just decided that you are right and there is no point in refusing when I do not benefit from doing so. I cannot see it benefiting you either if I eat them. Not unless you are trying to fatten me up to devour me.”

“That is a possibility. I do imagine that I would enjoy leisurely devouring you. Tea?” he inquired as he poured mint green tea into a cup and gestured to it in offering to her.

She nodded, a scarlet blush racing across her cheeks. Picking up the cup, she brought it to her plush lips to sip from the rim. He pushed the bowl of almonds toward her with a smile.

“Please, have as much as you would like. I have plenty,” he added, gesturing to the large, lidded container that he had painstakingly filled from the sacks he had acquired.

Abby froze and lowered her teacup. “How full is that?”

He considered the jar curiously. “I have had it for a couple cycles of the moon now. I think it has dropped four fingers from the top,” he said, demonstrating with his own large, padded fingers.

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “How did you acquire so much? Wait...” she groaned aloud, “please tell me that you didn’t acquire them from attacking a caravan as they say.”

“Why should I say that when it would be a lie?” he inquired curiously. “It is not like they did not scream in terror and abandon their wares when they saw me coming. No

one was offering trade and a few tried to pierce me with their arrows as they hid like cowards. I never harmed them, merely took what I wanted and left.”

“Gods,” she groaned in dismay but quickly popped an almond into her mouth. “At least they are good. If you are going to terrorize humans and commit crimes against Veldala, at least it is for something decent.”

“Naturally,” he agreed with a satisfied purr, his eyes following every motion as she ate the candied nuts. “As I can provide much for myself, I would not take something of inferior quality.”

She nodded absently as she ate another nut. “Is that what you do in your free time, then? Track caravans.”

He lifted his hands in a shrug. “At times. You asked how I can sit here day after day, and the truth is that I usually do not once the sun begins to set. The caravans attract very little of my attention unless there is something specific that I want or need. The night, however, calls to me. It is made for prowling and enjoying and catching the subtle scents of the desert flowers of the desert during the rainy season before the heat reclaims the last of them.”

“Perhaps you can show me?” she suggested.

She leaned forward and smiled in a way that was far too beguiling. He wanted to both laugh and applaud her tenacity. She was still trying to trap him. He grinned back at her, noting that she did not flinch this time at the sight of his sharp teeth.

“Perhaps,” he purred. A look of excitement rose victoriously in her eyes, and he chuckled. “But not on this night.”

Frustration and disappointment darkened her gaze, but she did not act on it. Instead,

she shoved another candied almond into her mouth and chewed it far more vigorously than it needed. His poor frustrated little kitten.

Chuckling to himself, Samir sipped on his own cup of tea and popped another nut into his mouth. He wondered just how long she was determined to extend this particular dance between them.

Watching should prove interesting.

Chapter

Eight

A bby scowled as she paced restlessly along the passages of the part of the cave that Samir claimed for his home. She couldn't believe that he was really going to keep her trapped inside his cavern with him at all hours of the day and night. He never left and he seemed to hear every move she made within the cave. How the hell was she going to get outside and set off the flare at this rate? What was worse was that being stuck in close confines with the manticore was beginning to mess with her head. She was constantly in a state of semi-arousal that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with no relief in sight. That alone was enough to make her supremely annoyed.

She was a hunter not a trollop for fuck's sake!

That comingling of frustration and annoyance was what had her pacing along the passages of the manticore's den. While she was not permitted past the outer edge of the common area into the main passage of the cave system, Samir seemed to care little about where she explored within the passages contained within his den. Perhaps that was in part due to the fact that the passages and chambers were open to her exploration except for the furthest passage that she had seen from his bedchamber—and that was solved by locked doors. And locked they were. But everywhere else she was permitted if she had the temerity to explore it. Abby considered herself brave enough but not foolish to explore parts of the cave that remained unlit. For whatever reason, Samir only kept a portion of the passages lit with torches, leaving the remainder ensconced in darkness.

The part of the passage that remained lit boasted even more brightly illuminated chambers. The first two chambers were quite practical and somehow unexpected to see in a monster's lair despite the fact that she'd been clothed and fed by the manticore for days. Both were cool and dry and filled with supplies, one with all manner of preserved foods while the other contained woven linens and other fabrics shelved neatly among piles of leathers and hides. Just beyond that was a library that made her parents' resources look laughable, which was saying something since her family was known to possess a magnificent collection of books pertaining to geography, medicinal and obscure sciences, as well as any other book imaginable that could be of some use to their trade. It surpassed any other hunting family in the kingdoms, rivaled only by the great universities of the arts of magery and sorcery. And yet the chamber that housed Samir's collection was an enormous gallery with shelves that rose to the ceiling, much of it only accessible by the rolling ladder.

She shook her head, impressed in spite of herself. She never would have guessed that the manticore's den would hold such treasures. She had assumed that the bookcases in the common room held the entirety of his collection and had truly believed that he acquired most of them by accident. She hadn't believed he could even read until she witnessed him leisurely reading one evening. But this... this defied expectations.

Her fingers twitched with the desire to touch the books in the nearest bookcase. She was tempted to linger and explore the contents of the numerous shelves that filled the chamber, but she reluctantly backed out from the room to continue to the next one, her footsteps echoing on the stone floor beneath her.

The next chamber, though considerably further from the others, was far from disappointing, however. Her eyes lit up upon entering, a small gasp escaping from between her parted lips. A bathing chamber! At least that was what she assumed it was. Hot spring water burst from between a crack in the limestone, filling a blue pool. It wasn't bubbling but this room was a bit warmer than the others, which was enough to lead her to believe it was thermally heated. The pool itself almost appeared to be

artificially carved and expanded from its natural state to provide a deep, rounded basin that was positively inviting.

She stared at it with longing. Her skin was already beginning to itch with the reminder that she carried the dirt and dust accumulated over more than a couple days on her skin. She swallowed a groan. She would give anything to be clean right now but luxuriating in a bath seemed pretty self-gratifying when she was supposed to be exploring the further recesses of the manticore's den. What if there was an emergency exit somewhere back there? She should at least find out first.

"I will be right back," she promised before slipping back out of the room into the passage.

She jogged a short distance but there, just beyond the entrance of the bathing chamber, the lamination continued for several more feet before stuttering out completely in a stark fall of darkness. Abby crept forward as far as the light allowed and then stopped.

Standing at the edge of darkness, Abby gnawed her bottom lip as she considered the black pit ahead of her. If Samir wasn't going to keep it lit, then she would need to take some form of illumination with her. Her eyes drifted upward in a leisurely path back along the walls before resting on the torch held upright in its sconce.

"That should do it," she murmured and hurried back.

Taking the torch in one hand, she attempted to lift it free but was nearly set completely off balance when it did not so much as budge. She gave the torch a glance of disbelief and tugged harder. When that failed to work, she turned toward the torch, wrapped both hands around it and began pulling for all that she was worth. She lifted her foot and braced it against the wall for extra leverage. The torch wiggled slightly, and she grinned in response.

“Yes!” she whispered. “Come on baby, come loose for mama?—”

“What are you doing?” Samir purred from a spot so close behind her and so unexpectedly that Abby lost her grip on the torch and went crashing to the ground.

Her butt absorbed most of the impact, but it didn’t save her from much of the pain that immediately shot through her backside. Rubbing it, she turned and shot a look of accusation toward him, to which he grinned mildly in reply.

His gaze drifted back to the ensconced torch, his brow raising. “Were you trying to disassemble my den?”

“Not exactly,” she muttered as she pushed to her feet and winced at the sharp pain that shot through her. She immediately rubbed at her rump again. “I just wanted to see what was down there.”

His gaze drifted over to the dark point, and he grunted quietly. “Nothing of interest. Empty and unused chambers for the most part. Unfortunately, the torches cannot be carried that far... or be removed at all, as you can see. I seldom have a reason to go that direction myself.”

“Perfect,” she muttered as pushed by him.

An exit wasn’t going to do her much good if it was beyond her means to access. The manticore might have special abilities that allowed him to travel to those parts of the cavern unassisted, but Abby was just shit out of luck unless she could perhaps devise something to provide what she needed. As far as what she could do at that moment, she was out of ideas except for one particularly appealing plan that had nothing to do with her escape and involved a whole lot of hot water.

Samir’s head turned, his amused gaze following her as she passed. “Where to now?”

“I have been stuck here and haven’t been clean for days,” she replied testily. “What else but go and drown myself.”

His laughter followed her as she made her way back to the bathing chamber. She sighed happily at the sight of the blue water and immediately began to strip off her clothing. Tossing them to the cavern floor, she walked to the edge of the pool. Her toes curled with her eagerness as she stood there, staring down into the smooth surface. Just below the water she could make out smooth walls and carved out shelves for sitting. Her suspicions were apparently correct. Samir had definitely refashioned the hotspring’s pool into something luxurious. She dipped a toe in the warm water and smiled. It was very warm but thankfully not intolerably so.

Biting back a moan of pleasure, she stepped down onto the carved-out ledge that served as a seat and slowly lowered herself into the warm water. Abby leaned back against the wall of the pool, allowing her eyes to flutter shut. Being stuck in the cave with Samir was a pain in her backside but at least there was some compensation for it. Dropping her head back onto the pool’s edge, she allowed herself to luxuriate in the heat. Even as relaxed as she was while reclining in the pool with her eyes closed, she could never completely tune out her surroundings. Because of that the scrape of claws against stone was loud to ears, alerting her to the fact that she was no longer alone in the room. She waited to see if he would announce himself in some way. It seemed that was not the case, however, and she smiled when the manticore remained silent.

Was he embarrassed? Or did he believe that her senses were so dull that any mistakes he made would go unnoticed?

“I know you are there; you might as well cease stalking me and come out,” she called, not even bothering to open her eyes.

“Ah,” Samir rumbled with a chuckle, “very good.”

Opening one eye, she glanced toward him in disbelief. “Are you really going to tell me that you were just testing me?”

“Perhaps,” he purred as he padded on all fours toward the pool. “Would that not be plausible?”

Abby snorted in amusement. “Believable as a possibility—sure why not. But it is unlikely. If you were testing me then you wouldn’t have made such an obvious mistake. You would have retained your stealth—which was very good, by the way. If you hadn’t made that mistake, there is a good chance I wouldn’t have heard you until you were much closer.”

“I am impressed regardless. Not many humans would be so observant to catch a mistake like that, especially when not distracted by my bathing pool.” He stopped at the water’s edge and stared down at her naked body beneath the water. An expression passed over his face, but it was so brief and unfamiliar that she was unable to guess at his thoughts. Still, a hot tingle swept through her as his eyes roved casually over her before finally lifting her face, his lips curling with satisfaction. “What do you think of my bathing chamber?”

“Very nice,” she croaked around the lump that somehow became lodged in her throat out of nowhere.

He rumbled in agreement before disappearing to a point behind her. “This hot spring was the reason that I chose to make my home here. It is a true luxury though it has been some days since I have been able to enjoy it.”

“Since you’ve put yourself on human-watching duty you mean,” she flippantly corrected.

Samir chuckled quietly, his laughter rolling through her from a point very close

behind her. A loosely clenched rag was dipped in the water beside her and the fluttering sensation in her belly increased as he drew it back and applied some sort of flower substance to it.

“I do not mind. Watching you is infinitely more interesting than staring at my own reflection in this pool,” he replied with a deep laugh. “Yet now there are perhaps more interesting things to explore.”

The sudsy rag dragged across shoulders, the perfume of the soap rising from her skin as he ran it down her arms and along the back of her neck, scrubbing away days of grime. He then proceeded to wash each arm down to her hands where he splayed her fingers for his inspection. She shivered as he gently ran the rag over every digit before lowering her hand back into the water again to tackle the opposite arm. Although he went nowhere near her breasts, there was an intimacy in what he did that made her breath catch and something unfamiliar awakened within her in wonder. That awareness expanded and encompassed her so that tiny electric bursts ran from every contact point he made with her. And when he made her lean forward so that he could wash her back, it brought an explosion of sensation as he ran the cloth along her back.

And yet his movements, while smooth, were almost mechanical. There was no sign of uneven breath from behind her that might reveal that he was just as affected as she was. The silence was a blow to her ego, even more so when he tossed the rag across her breasts with an order to continue washing.

Frowning down at her breasts, she complied and began to soap herself while something metallic scraped on the cavern floor just behind her. The water to her left rippled toward her and something was audibly plunged beneath the surface and lifted free.

“Head back,” he commanded, and she complied without thinking twice but instantly

regretted it when cooling water was dumped over her head.

Jerking forward, Abby sputtered as she rapidly swiped water and streaming locks of hair out of her eyes. “Samir! What the hell?” she snapped.

“Just helping you get clean,” he purred and there was a sound of something snapping open just as she began turning toward him.

Something thick and cold was poured onto her hair and she gasped at the unexpected sensation seconds before Samir moved forward and repositioned her so that she was facing forward again. Her fingers plucked at her washcloth with surprise and a soft grunt of satisfaction rose from behind her. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he began to work whatever that stuff was from root tip through her hair while paying special attention to scrub her scalp. A warm liquid sensation filled Abby, making her feel boneless as she completely relaxed under his ministrations. It truthfully felt so good that she abandoned herself entirely to the pleasure of allowing the manticore to wash her hair. She was actually a little disappointed when he commanded her to lean her head back again for the final rinse. Water doused over her again and it ran down her hair, plastering it to her skin. It was followed by a heavily herbal-scented liquid that was combed through her wet strands of hair as the manticore mumbled in a soft purr behind her. Giving her shoulder a firm pat, Samir rose and stepped away from her, his claws once more lightly scraping, this time intentionally giving away his location so that she was aware. She turned quickly on the ledge and her eyebrows flew up in surprise as she watched him stalk once more back to the entrance without a backward glance.

“There is a short pot just behind you,” he rumbled as he momentarily paused at the entrance to the passage. “It contains more of the soap for your skin. I will now leave you to your bath in peace.”

Without another word, he exited the bathing chamber, leaving Abby to stare after him

in confusion. Slowly she gathered her washcloth in her hand and turned just enough to pull the pot to her side. Scooping out a small handful of the creamy soap, she spread it across her washcloth and lathered it up. She shook her head, her lips twitching as she rose from the water and began to vigorously wash the rest of her body. He was so contrary that she could barely keep up. One minute he was determined to wash her, and in the next fleeing from the room like a juvenile. But of all the faces he had shown her, which was the real Samir? And why was she growing more fascinated with the monster beyond the drive of her instincts? That was a question that, if she was less rational, she might have been tempted to discover.

But since she was a sane woman, she promptly began to vigorously wash herself. She could enjoy these luxuries while they lasted, however, and perhaps in the meantime she could start teasing some clues as to the real Samir to take with her when she finally escaped.

Chapter

Nine

S amir's eyes glittered in the dark. He followed his sneaky little huntress as she flattened herself against the wall, her hood pulled up. His mouth curved in amusement. It seemed that once again she was making a bid for freedom. It had been some days since she last made the attempt that he had begun to wonder if she had given up. It wasn't until he felt her uneven breath betraying her wakefulness that he realized that the game was once again afoot. She had merely pretended to be sleeping. So, he too feigned sleep, but far more successfully.

Keeping his breathing light with all the outward signs of deep sleep, he had felt the twitch of body against his and then the shift of the bedding when she slid from his bed. The sound of her feet dropping to the stone floor in a light slap was louder than she had likely suspected and he was only just able to keep himself from smiling. Persistent little female.

He smiled to himself as he prowled behind her. A quiver ran up his spine as he watched her. He truly did enjoy these little contests between them. He suspected that she enjoyed it too. Every time he tracked, he observed the way her flesh trembled with excitement and there was a blatant perfume of interest clinging to her flesh when he finally caught her. He could have, of course, seized her effortlessly at any time but he enjoyed watching her clever mind at work as she attempted to evade him. The chase was something that they both craved. The hunter and the hunted. He wondered how she, the huntress, enjoyed being the hunted. He personally found both roles stimulating.

But only her. Abby was the only one who was allowed to make him her prey. Anyone else who dared would be quickly dispatched and added to his collection. He rather missed being her quarry, truth be told. As he stealthily followed her, he wondered how he might engage her instinct to give chase. As riveting as it was to hunt and catch her, he wanted her single-minded focus back on him. Sure, it was with the intent of driving a particularly painful and potentially deadly weapon into his flesh—but that aside, while she was hunting him, he was all that she thought about and all that she desired.

And he craved that.

For so many years he had longed for something that he had been unable to define. Perhaps it was to be the irrational longing of another. The other hunters had wanted him, but they had been lazy and crass, too confident in their abilities and with no more interest in him than they would have for a gazelle brought down to satiate their appetites. They had possessed an erroneous belief that he would be easy to bag so that they could return to Veldala to collect their riches. But conversely, he had not wanted them. Each and every one of them had been a thorn in his hide whereas he had hungered for Abby and sought to lure her deeper and deeper into the caverns to the door of his den.

She did not realize it. She did not know that he had intentionally sought to cut off every opportunity for her escape. Once he had her where he wanted her, he was certain of victory. It had been a fair match between them in so much that they both brought the best of their hunting skills, he merely utilized his skills in playing the part of the pursued in order to successfully hunt and claim her. He had wanted her from the moment he had caught her scent in the desert air, but he had not pursued her. In the beginning, she could have left at any time before she invaded his home. She could have given up her pursuit and ended her hunt and he would have allowed it. If any of those who had hunted him reconsidered and decided to flee, he never gave chase since the hunt was abandoned. But like so many of the others she did not, and so he

consequently did not feel any guilt for what he did, not even days later.

But now Abby, weaponless and vulnerable, believed that she was fleeing him. It was adorable. She did not realize it, but the hunt was not over for her yet. It would never end now. He would continually stalk her and lure in. And the more he came to know her, the more certain he was of it. He would never let her go before he was ready to release her.

Perhaps some part of her did realize it and it was making her even more determined to defy him and fate. Little did she know, he adored that streak of stubbornness. Her determination charmed him. It seduced him and made him as playful as a cub even if there was nothing particularly cub-like to what he wanted to do with and to her when he finally caught her. The arousal in his loins was all a male Manticore in his prime, eager to breed and rut even as she aroused his mind and drew him in to play her game.

And she was deep in her game. He could see it in the way she tilted her head and the cautious way she observed her surroundings before moving forward even an inch. Her head cocked, listening, and then shot forward, her dark cloak unfurling and thickening the darkness around her. Samir came close to growling out loud as he shot after her, but he froze mid-step, his paw-like hand resting in the air in front of him, when she suddenly drew short, her head whipping as she scanned the room.

“Is he here?” she whispered, her voice barely audible to even his keen hearing. “No. Why do I not feel alone?”

Samir smiled in the dark. His angle prevented her from seeing the glow of his eyes, but his clever huntress had picked up on some clue to his presence that he had not even realized that he had divulged. Keeping his movements small and light, he crept toward her and slowly circled wide around her to position himself in front of her. Although she was not hunting him, it was a pleasant illusion. More than that it set

him up with the perfect opportunity for a fine capture.

Crouching low on a risen ledge near the entrance, he smiled down at her as he watched her approach. He waited patiently, silently, as she crept forward until she was so close that he could reach out and caress her cheek. Her eyes blindly turned toward him, and, for a moment, his entire world was captured entirely within her gaze and he forgot to breathe. She did not see him. It was impossible. And yet... Her brows slowly drew down, knitting at the center.

“There you are. Very funny, Samir,” she grumbled, drawing back away from him and the entrance. “Damn it all.”

His brows rose in surprise, and he straightened, not even bothering to hide himself any longer. “How did you know?” he inquired.

She huffed quietly. “Apparently, I’ve been around you too damned long. Good news is that I’m starting to become more sensitive to the energy of your presence when you are physically close to me.”

“And the bad?” he inquired curiously.

Her lips twisted in a grimace. “The knowledge that no hunter should become that close to their quarry. Or at very least not without utilizing it fully to strike that monster down.”

Samir chuckled and he hopped down from the ledge so that he landed close by her side. Abby backpedaled a bit to put some distance between them, but he purred and closed the distance between them. He twined around her, bumping against her ass when she would have thought to turn and flee.

“Do you wish to hunt me, kitten?” he rumbled.

To his disappointment, Abby's eyes went wide, and she quickly shook her head in denial. "Honestly, I just want to leave."

He gave her a somber look and shook his head. "You were given that opportunity."

"You mean that little chase that there was no hope of me winning?" she demanded, anger darkening her face as she attempted to nudge him away with her knee.

Again, he shook his head even though it infuriated her and pressed his side against her hip meaningfully. She still did not understand that she chose to be there, even if she had not understood at the time. "Before that. When you stood in front of my cave, debating on whether or not to enter, you made a choice. Every step you made as you progressed deeper through the chambers of my cave, you made a choice. You pursued me . And now—you have me. Is this not what you desired?" he purred.

The color drained from her face and her dark eyes seemed to grow larger in her face as they widened with shock. She swallowed.

"No. That was not personal. It was just hired for a job. I didn't want you?—"

"Liar," he chuckled. "You may have wanted me for what you perceived that it would give you. Fortune perhaps? Luxury? But you most definitely wanted me. I could hear it in your breath every time you caught a glimpse of my shadow moving—the excitement and hunger for what I would give you—even if indirectly."

He eyed as her expression changed from shock to clarity. She understood at last. He could see it in her eyes. Her chin trembled and her lower lip quivered. His tail curled in close against his body in alarm. No. Not that.

"Do not cry," he warned and the look she shot him was so full of venom that he was immediately relieved.

“I’m not going to cry, you ass. I’m pissed that I was talked into this job,” she snapped. “I could have been home, living above ground, and enjoying my days with pleasant breezes from the harbor and drowsy afternoons beneath the shade of my family’s trees. Instead, I get... you.” She waved a hand in his direction contemptuously and he immediately bristled.

“Yes,” he agreed, “you have me. So now is the time to come to terms with the reality of your situation.” Drawing in a deep breath to calm himself, he inwardly sighed when she bared her teeth at him in response. He had to be patient. There was nothing surprising about her reaction. “Come,” he grumbled, and he turned away from her as he straightened to stand erect once more.

“Where are we going?”

He almost smiled at the weight of suspicion in her voice. “To the kitchen. It is nearly morning. You can help me with the morning meal.”

Abby squinted at him speculatively. “Are you sure you trust me around that much open fire and sharp objects?”

He chuckled despite himself. “Yes. Perhaps it will give you some relief for your restlessness.”

She didn’t disagree but followed him to the well vented chamber that he had selected for his kitchen space. If she was surprised at its pristine appearance, she did not comment on it. Rather, she slowly looked around before leveling him with a curious look.

“I admit this kitchen is more than I expected. To be honest, I really didn’t expect you to cook at all, as I never saw anything in my research that indicated as much, but all of this,” she gestured to the room at large, “is a bit much.”

Samir shrugged with an awkward roll of his shoulders as he drew out a portion of salted meat from where it was stored. “Many do not. Really it comes down to a matter of personal preferences as it is easier to eat whatever you kill on the spot, but I long discovered that there is something to be said about the way humans go about preparing, preserving, and cooking their food. And it is all so delicious,” he observed. “It may not seem like so from the simple fare I have been providing, but I discovered a passion for cooking.”

With that he leaned forward, catching and holding her gaze as he belched a flame into the chamber of the woodstove. His little female jumped but then surprised him with her startled laugh as she stared at the flames in wonder.

“I did not know manticores could do this,” she exclaimed, momentarily forgetting her ire. “It is no wonder that you are taken with cooking then.”

He smiled at her observation, but it seemed that it was only then that she recalled that she was angry because she withdrew, her expression shuttering against as she eyed him. He pretended not to notice and instead sterilized his claws with sharp breaths of flame that drew another little jump from her and then a tiny gasp when he began to ribbon the meat with said claws. He paused for only a minute to glance up at her and nod toward a small sack of vegetables he had gathered in the early hours of the morning.

“Cut those, if you will.”

“Very trusting,” she mumbled under her breath but got to immediate work.

Between the two of them, they managed to create a perfectly pleasant meal, and Abby seemed to soften up as they ate together. It was only when they were finished that her expression seemed to shutter and she stood once more, eager to find something else with which to operate her time.

Samir sighed as he watched her leave the room. He had been rather enjoying the lighter mood and the rare sound of her laughter. He had not even realized until it was over, and she began to silently clean up, how much he enjoyed it. It filled an empty hole within his chest that he had never noticed before. But then she left the kitchen, taking the warmth of her presence and the musical sound of her laughter, and only then did he realize how much more there was to desire beyond the hunt.

How odd.

Chapter

Ten

Just looking at the manticore unreasonably infuriated Abby. Once again, Samir had caught her inching her way toward the exit of his den. And now he was just sitting there in his chair once more, looking as unnatural as could be like a trained creature perched on a chair but with joints and musculature caught somewhere in between species that allowed him to sit comfortably. And once again he was ignoring her in favor of the book held so casually between his hands. A book that Abby already knew that she couldn't make heads or tails of, like so many in his collection secreted away into a small antechamber off the main den.

Days of boring exploration of her surroundings while she attempted to find some hidden way out hadn't done much for her temper. Even less considering that she had been forced to spend hours that first day mending the rips in her pants to make them wearable. But finding a massive collection of books that she couldn't read, and that her captor seemed to derive a great deal of pleasure from, just annoyed the fuck out of her. All she could discern was that the script bore some very faint similarity to local writing, but it didn't help her since she couldn't read that either. Worst of all, his preoccupation with his books sent a clear message that he was distinctly unconcerned that she could take advantage of his distraction to bolt from the cave. Which in turn just pissed her off because it brought every single smug word he had growled back to her with infuriating clarity.

Abby scowled as he slowly turned yet another page without so much as looking up in her direction. "You do realize that you can't keep me here forever, right?"

“I would beg to differ,” he replied in a low rumble, followed by the rasp of yet another page turning.

The sound made her eye twitch, and she clenched her jaw with annoyance. She got that he somehow managed to crank out some magical seduction juice that turned her into a sloppy mess of desire and his ability to track her and run her down was far superior to her own ability to escape, but his confidence was entirely unfair and uncalled for. “Look, I don’t know what you think this is, but this is no Beauty and the Beast fairytale. I’m not going to just magically fall in love with you.”

He snorted in reply, the sound dancing on her last nerve. “You assume much and think far too highly of yourself. I do not require the love of a human. What I have from you is sufficient. You have nothing to complain about. I provide for you—you are fed and kept comfortably within my cavern safe from a world of men that would use you and bleed you dry.”

Abby grimaced. He wasn’t exactly wrong there. While there were any number of warrioresses and sorceresses out there carving out adventures, it was still a hard life for a woman alone in those fields. How many times had her mother cautioned that she would be better off waiting to begin her own adventure until the right partner came along. She knew exactly what that was code for... find a man with whom she could team up for her own safety and wellbeing as her mother had done. She wouldn’t be surprised at all if that was the reason that she wasn’t brought out on hunts despite the general completion of her training.

“With me you have some relative freedom,” he continued. “Your time is your own except for those rare occasions when my need will call to you. The inconvenience is a small sacrifice for such pleasure that we will both derive from our breeding. It is an agreeable arrangement for however long it pleases me to keep you here and it isn’t required to be anything more.”

“Breeding?” she squawked in alarm. “Who said anything about breeding? I can’t fall pregnant! This is my first hunt away from home, I can’t possibly...”

“Calm yourself,” he sighed with a hint of disdain evident in his voice. “It is merely an expression. Manticores are even slower than most to breed, mostly because we are largely solitary due to our territorial nature, but that does not mean that we do not have our desires. A male can easily control his fertility. The last thing I would desire to do is sire cubs on a female who has not proven herself as a worthy mate suited to my fire.”

Her curiosity piqued; Abby was dying to ask him what that meant. On the other hand, she really didn’t want to get drawn into a conversation about mating. It certainly seemed that he intended this to be a temporary arrangement to scratch some sort of itch for the time being, though he had not taken advantage of any opportunity to repeat the experience since his first hasty rut. Maybe the desire was just as slow to rouse as their desire to reproduce. That made a strange sort of sense, but it didn’t bode well for how long he expected to keep her on hand there. There was absolutely no reason to encourage him to consider things even remotely in the long term by questioning him. She might not be able to escape him, and he was rightfully confident in his ability to keep her there, but he wasn’t thinking of keeping her either, which was good news compared to the alternative. At least until she could find a way to escape without him noticing.

She eyed him for a long moment and huffed irritably. “Seeing how your books are all in another language, how is it that you speak northern common so well anyway?”

He glanced up at her, a mocking expression fleetingly appearing on his face. “I educate myself,” he replied drily. “You may want to try it.”

Abby’s face burned with a blush. Ok so she wasn’t exactly the most studious outside of tracking and weaponry. She had barely been able to sit still long enough to learn

the few spells she knew—much to her mother’s disappointment. She enjoyed reading stories of adventure and danger, but studying was just dull as hell and all the untapped magical gifts she inherited from her mother wasn’t going to make a sorceress out of her.

“I know enough for what I need to do,” she muttered.

“But not enough to be prepared and fully informed when venturing into a new land with a language that you do not know,” he replied, his attention once again returning to his damned book. “It is a miracle you were not swindled and left dead in a pit somewhere long before arriving here. Or sold to slavers.”

She winced. Perhaps she had run off a little half-cocked, but while Zayman had been a ruthless and relentless prick, he had also been convincing. She had been confident that she could get in, get the job done, and get out again with little fuss. The promise of a guide had made it all seem so simple. She had thought nothing of the way his companions chattered quietly around her when he escorted her through the city, or even the way some of the men had stared at her. It had been annoying, but she hadn’t been afraid. Now, however, she felt a chill of apprehension. They could have plotted anything, and she never would have known. And how much did she truly know to be able to survive after her mission was completed? Would she have even made it back if she had succeeded in killing the manticore? She wasn’t so sure now. Perhaps her mother was right to have misgivings about Abby striking out alone. She suddenly felt very vulnerable without a basic understanding of her father’s tongue. Why hadn’t she made more of an effort to learn it?

Probably because she had never planned to venture into the deserts. The far reaches of the northern lands had more than enough work to keep her family in business for generations. Yet here she was. She really was a terrible student.

Abby swallowed and cast a covert glance at Samir’s book. “Do you... do you think

you might teach me?”

His hand paused mid-page turn, and his green eyes lifted. He regarded her with a blank expression for a long moment but then his ear flicked and his head cocked in a faint expression of puzzlement.

“You wish to learn?” he drawled skeptically. “It is not necessary if you are merely bored. I can find the few books I have in northern common rather than waste both of our time with the tedious task of teaching you.”

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from snapping the first insult that came to mind. Acting on her wounded pride wouldn’t get her anywhere. Truthfully, she was a little shocked and more than a little grateful that he appeared to be seriously considering it. If nothing else, teaching her the local language would give her a tool that she could use to her advantage. He had to know that but was still willing.

“I would really like to. Honestly, though part of it is boredom, I’m also realizing that I’m at a huge disadvantage in ways that I hadn’t considered,” she admitted.

He inclined his head as he thoughtfully closed his book and set it on the table between them. “It is a foolish amount of trust to put in someone to come across the desert on the promises of a man.” He hesitated, his eyes narrowing on her. “And you would trust my instruction?”

Abby shrugged. “Sure. I can’t see you wasting time teaching me gibberish that I can’t use. I suppose you might even enjoy having a companion who could read and discuss these books with you,” she added, gesturing around her. “That is if you have any compelling stories and it’s not just a pile of academic tomes.”

His soft chuckle in response surprised her and sent a strange flutter in her heart. Something very small in his expression shifted and softened and he nodded.

“Very well, Abby, we will begin with some children’s tales, I think. It will help you learn some rudimentary words and grammar as these are written for very young children. I had kept the book to teach my own cubs when the day came. You will find the book on the first shelf near the hearth. It is small and thick; you cannot miss it.”

Nodding, Abby rose eagerly from her chair and went to the specified bookshelf. Just as he said, there was a book smaller than the rest but there was no printed lettering or any other professional detailing to it. In fact, it looked almost hand bound. Curious, she flipped it open to find each page scrawled with elegant, sweeping foreign calligraphy beside beautifully illustrated pages painted with what appeared to be some sort of quality water-color work. She ran her fingertip over the illustration of a manticore, admiring the beauty of the lines and saturation of the pigment.

“This is beautiful,” she murmured as she brought the book back to Samir.

The male glanced away in embarrassment. “It is satisfactory enough,” he replied and gestured for her to sit.

She looked over at him in surprise. “Did you make this book?”

His ears twisted back and flattened with discomfort. “It is nothing. Now, are you ready to begin or do you wish to delay your study to pelt me with your endless questions. If you are not serious about this, I will be happy to go back to my own reading.”

“No, no, please, let’s begin,” she said urgently, suddenly excited to delve into the book. A book created by a monster was such a novelty. She didn’t think anyone among the hunter’s guild had even heard of such a thing before.

With the book spread between them, Samir’s deep voice filled the cavern as his fingers traced over the markings, drawing her into a world she barely remembered as

a small child and her father's deep voice murmuring to her in his native tongue. The words rolled beautifully off Samir's tongue, some of them with a resonating purring sound that she knew was distinct to him. The words slowly came to life as he went over each of them.

More than once her eyes rose to him to watch the play of shadows and firelight over his powerful features as he spoke. Gods, he pissed her off and yet how strange that she found this image far nobler than those of any man she'd known? It wasn't because he had some great intrinsic kindness that shined through. She had known many kind people and hadn't found them the least bit compelling—and Samir wasn't exactly what she would call kind anyway. But there was a quality to him that seemed larger than life and yet intimately close to her at the same time as she attentively listened.

Chapter

Eleven

S amir supposed that every male had some weakness and perhaps due to his own fault, Abby had found one of his. The picture book he had crafted when he was young and still idealistic, and perhaps a little romantic. He had no thoughts of conquering a female to keep for his own back then. Instead, he had entertained ideas of finding a rare person, perhaps someone as alone in the world as he was, who might love him and wish to spend their life with him and raise some monstrous cubs together to whom he would pass down all of his knowledge.

And reading, it happened, was something that he had prided in himself from early on. It had opened up the world to him as he taught himself numerous languages over the long span of his life. And yet, as the years passed, that dream had faded slowly bit by bit. So he had set himself to the task of making several primers, dreaming of the cubs that he would someday have. He had never suspected that those same books would gradually come to weigh heavily on his heart. He had once thought he had found a potential companion to share his life with and have offspring, but he did not want to be reminded of that betrayal.

His gaze drifted over to Abby as she bent down to inspect the shelf that she had pulled the first primer from. Over the last few days, he had raided his library to bring out others that he had made since she appeared to appreciate them so much. Her fingers trailed over the handmade books slowly, her attention fully absorbed by the volumes on the shelf.

“You really made quite a few of these,” she observed.

The note of awe in her voice rushed over him pleasantly and he allowed himself a moment to bask in it before replying.

“It was a long time ago and, as you can see, a manticore’s day is not exceedingly demanding.”

Abby looked up at him then, her brow scrunching as she straightened. “True,” she said slowly as she rejoined him and sank into her chair. “But this is more than just some hobby to pass the time, Samir, yet you don’t want to talk about it. I’m curious as to why that is. Didn’t you want a family?”

Sadness rose abruptly, almost strangling him, but he released a dry bark of laughter, scoffing as he shook his head. “I would not even know what to do with a mate in my care much less cubs.”

“But obviously you thought about it,” she pressed. “So much is unknown about monsters. Sometimes it is easier to imagine that they sprung from darkness or from some pit in the ground rather than reproduce.” She made a face. “Actually, I’m pretty sure most hunters believe that.”

He chuckled at that as it was utterly absurd, yet he had the feeling that she was telling him the truth. “Are you planning to write a book, kitten?”

“Me? Write a book?” She giggled as if he were the one being absurd. She gave him a crooked smile and shook her head. “I’m afraid that I don’t have the patience to sit in one place that long, much less occupy myself with something so tedious as writing an education manuscript. I’m a hunter, sir, not a mage.”

The corners of his mouth quirked at the title she addressed him by so easily. He was a

sir now, was he? He knew it was meant in jest, but he hoped that it also meant that she was coming to see him as more than a monster but as a person, too.

“But I have to admit that I’m curious. You say that manticores have cubs. I don’t buy that you never once been tempted to have cubs of your own—even a little bit—otherwise you wouldn’t have done all of this,” she argued, gesturing to the bookcase.

His jaw clenched and his claws dug into the arm of his chair as the image of the scholarly male he had entertained rose within his mind as if conjured there by her observation. The male had seemed so soft and fragile by appearances—as delicate as the flowers that bloomed in the winter rains—and yet had been surprisingly strong and agile. His companion had possessed surprising contradictions that had fascinated him... to nearly his own peril.

He grunted softly in agreement. “Once.”

Her eyebrows winged up and she leaned forward in her chair, drawing closer to him. “What happened?”

“He betrayed me,” Samir replied flatly.

“Oh.” Abby murmured but she blinked, her brows knitting together in puzzlement. “Wait... he?”

Despite sinking into a grim mood with this topic of conversation, Samir chuckled. “I am a manticore. We are not like humans are many other species. Manticores are only male and this is largely because of how we reproduce.”

“I don’t get it.”

He settled back into his chair as he fixed her with a grim look. “The details are not exactly pleasant.”

“Spill,” she demanded.

Samir sighed. He did try to warn her. “We implant our offspring into our mates by way of a special stinger on our tails. Of course, this was not always the way. At one time, the ancients did not mate but merely chose a host to implant their offspring into—someone suitable to carry their young and whose flesh the cubs would afterwards feast upon. Much like some species of wasps.”

Abby gagged a little and his lips twisted in agreement. He did not blame her.

“Male, female, it didn’t matter. The only real difference was that a female had a convenient place to implant our young where her body would expel the offspring naturally. Those who lacked a womb would require the manticore to extract his offspring from their flesh. Either way, they were merely meat after the male retrieved his cub.”

“Gods.” Abby shuddered. “I sincerely hope that is something that will remain firmly in the past.”

His lips twisted with dark amusement. “It is far more advantageous to keep the meat alive for more cubs to be born,” he teased to which she hurdled a disgusted look in his direction. He sobered in the next moment, however. “I will not lie. There are some few manticores who keep to the old ways. They are usually destroyed the moment they are discovered.” He met her eyes soberly. “As it happens, we distribute justice upon our own without needing human intervention to take down the truly monstrous among us. Most manticores have fond memories of our human parent and would wish nothing more for a mate from the time that we are young.”

“And you thought you found that in him,” she murmured. “What happened?”

“I do not like to talk about it,” he growled, rising from his chair. He did not even want to think about it any longer. “I have satisfied your curiosity about my species, but I am not interested in digging into painful history for your amusement.”

“Hey, that’s not what I meant,” she protested as she jumped from her chair to follow him.

He did not know exactly what happened but that somehow her feet must have become tangled on something because she dropped to the floor with a loud enough crack that he halted and whirled around, his heart pounding with fear that she might have done serious harm to herself. Rushing to her side, he grabbed her beneath her arms and hauled her to her feet just as she was beginning to push herself upright and held her out in front of him as he ran his eyes over her frantically.

“Have you harmed yourself? Is there pain anywhere?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m fine. The only thing that hurts is my damned pride. I got up too quick and got tangled in my throw I keep here,” she grumbled.

Samir nodded, lightheaded with relief, and carefully set her back on her feet before releasing her. “I thought I heard something crack. I was afraid that it was your skull.”

Abby looked up at him and her eyes squinted faintly in genuine amusement as a quiet chuckle left her lips. “I’m afraid my head is a bit harder than that. You’re right, though. I heard something did crack, as well, but I can’t imagine.—” Suddenly her face paled, and a loud curse burst from her lips as she began to dig into the layers of her clothing. “Fuck! No, no, please!” A low, pained groan escaped her, and she pulled out the broken case of a flare.

“You were just carrying that flare around on you?” he inquired, impressed with her commitment and the fact that she had concealed it so well.

“Well, yes, I couldn’t just leave it somewhere where it might be found and I thought maybe—” she froze, her eyes shooting up to him accusingly. “You knew . You knew what this is and that I had this thing on me the entire time ?”

Samir stared at her, suddenly uneasy. Was there is a slightly shrill note to her voice just then? “Of course. I did search your clothing and body to remove all of your weapons if you recall. I know exactly what you had with you. Why wouldn’t I recognize a flare? Humans had these for quite some time in some fashion.”

For a moment it looked as if she might truly attack him and draw blood with her puny claws. And as angry as she appeared, Samir was not entirely convinced that she would not be able to do it. This was not part of the game. But, to his relief, she did not attack. Abby groaned as her head dropped, and she tossed the broken flare to the ground.

“If I had known I wouldn’t have been hiding it on me,” she grumbled. “This was my only way to communicate with Zayman and ask him to return for me. Now... I truly am stuck here.”

His eyes dropped to the flare.

“Ah,” he replied and immediately gave her a capitulating smile when her head shot up so that she could glare at him. “I mean nothing by it, kitten. I had not realized that your plan depended on something so... fragile,” he concluded, diplomatically settling on that word rather than his first choice.

Foolish was more accurate and he wondered whose plan that was... hers or this Zayman. He had little doubt it was the latter. Abby would not have trusted her safety

to a single flare if she had been the one arranging things. She was far too intelligent for that. There was a good chance that this Zayman did not even care if she died out in the desert, and that did not set well with him. Not at all.

A low growl rose to his lips and Abby quickly skittered away from him. His gaze shifted to her and, upon seeing her unease, he felt an immediate pang of regret.

Closing his eyes, he fought for his calm and did not dare open them until he found it. He did not know if it was because she trusted him or because of her fear that she did not take that opportunity to flee but he was grateful regardless.

“Thank you for not running,” he murmured.

“Where am I going to go?” she asked with a bitter laugh. “Without that flare I would likely die on that desert going by foot and without adequate supplies. Just tell me if you are planning on killing me now or not.”

“Not. I have no intention or desire to harm you. That was not because of you,” he assured her. “I was thinking of what could have happened to you if you had been successful escaping and the flare had failed or simply been ignored.”

That was apparently not something that she had thought of in her haste to get away from him because her face went deathly pale and he edged closer so that he would be in position to catch her if she fainted.

She shook her head. “I... I’m okay. The flare... it was to signal him to return once my mission was completed so that he could bring back a trophy or your entire corpse if the king desired. I had decided to use it to trick him into returning for me but none of this had occurred to me. Gods, even if I had succeeded, he might have just left me here for dead!”

He nodded grimly, his heart going out to her. He did not like seeing her so distressed now that she was confronted with the reality of her situation. He needed to do something... something to ease her heart a little. The idea came to him then that made his stinger curl against his back and vibrate with delight.

“Come with me,” he murmured. “There is something I would very much like to show you.”

Chapter

Twelve

A bby didn't know why it felt so natural to just trust him but in retrospect hadn't she always trusted Samir on some level? Although she hadn't had much choice on the matter in terms of sleeping arrangements, she had slept deeply and easily at his side every night and managed to live with him without being in a constant state of anxiety. It was for that reason she didn't hesitate to slide her hand into his and she nearly smiled at the sensation of the pads on his palm and fingers against her hand. Like the toe beans of a cat but even better because it was bigger and all Samir.

Sure, for a moment she'd been afraid but even before he spoke, she knew that her worries were boundless. Not even when she had tried to flee, had she once truly been afraid when he caught her. Instead, it was kind of... fun, in a twisted sort of way, as much as it was maddening. It was Samir. Samir with his biting wit, playful humor, and gentle words. Samir who took delight in infuriating her but never pushed it too far. She couldn't even hold onto her anger against him because she knew deep down that her decisions were all on her. It should have occurred to her that he would have known but she'd made a terrible miscalculation by assuming. She'd orchestrated her own mess. Samir was her jailer perhaps, but he was also... heartbroken and lonely. That realization hit her heavily.

Of course he did not want her to leave. He at very least found her amusing and a barrier against his own shadows, even if he had loudly scoffed at the idea of love. It forced her to look more clearly at the male standing in front of her. This was Samir with all his hidden pain of betrayal that she couldn't even begin to imagine. She'd

caught a glimpse of the real male hidden beneath the veneer he kept over himself—a romantic male whose dreams were crushed—and she wanted to see more of that.

So of course, she would go with him and see whatever he wanted her to see. Abby didn't even hesitate to take his hand.

Samir smiled, happiness softening his blurred leonine features as his fingers curled around her hand. With a gentle tug he drew her with him and led her toward the entrance of his den. Abby's eyes widened at the realization that they were leaving.

"Samir?" she murmured uncertainly.

His eyes gleamed with warmth as he glanced over at her. "Do not worry, Abby. You will like this surprise. And the sun is just setting so you will be comfortable, and your delicate skin will not burn. Ah, but here, perhaps this might make you more comfortable." He pressed something cool into her hand and Abby glanced down at it curiously.

Her scarab!

She nodded and with a whispered spell to the small metal beetle, it lit up and left her hand with a hum of metal wings flying in the air ahead of them. With the scarab providing its soft light, she wordlessly accompanied him through the winding passages of the cavern. Passages that she hadn't stepped foot in since she had entered with her lance, determined to slay the beast at her side. She was seeing the cave with new eyes this time, noting the beauty of the natural column formations among the stalagmites and stalactites in the galleries. When they came at last to the path of little islands of stalagmites that led across the pool that she had previously made her way precariously across, Samir gathered her up into his arms. He crossed them with such sure-footed speed that it almost seemed that he glided across them before gently depositing her on the cavern floor at the other side.

They stood facing each other for a moment, Abby's heart thumping, and it seemed like something was shifting between. She could feel it like a static in the air and a twist deep within her belly as she stared up into his luminous eyes. His hands were still lightly touching her hips and his gaze slowly dropped to them. A look of surprise crossed his face as if he hadn't realized that he was still holding her and quickly released her while taking a step back in an obvious attempt to be polite and not crowd her. Her lips twitched with amusement. Despite being rough around the edges—of which he seemed to have many more than anyone else—it struck her how considerate he was.

Taking the initiative, Abby reached and took his hand before he could offer. He blinked down at their hands and his expression softened with unmistakable pleasure. Her great beast wasn't so terrible.

“You had a surprise for me,” she reminded him with an impish smile.

Samir cleared his throat and quickly nodded. “Yes. It is close. Just this way,” he replied as he led through the remaining passages until they were at last stepping out onto the desert sand.

Abby squinted as the light of the setting sun hit her eyes. It stung a little after spending so many days below ground, but she blinked away the tears and smiled as she breathed in deeply the evening air. The sweet fresh air and the view were well worth it. The sky was ribboned with color in vibrant oranges, pinks, and gold in contrast to the desert sand which rapidly grew darker except for a faint glimmer of where it caught the light. She didn't recall everything being so beautiful when she traveled across the desert following Zayman.

“This is incredible,” she said in awe as she summoned the scarab back to her hand, its light putting and the magic leaving it once more, but Samir chuckled at her side.

“This is not the surprise. It gets better,” he replied.

Her gaze shot to him in surprise. “Better?” she echoed, intrigued.

“Better,” he confirmed with another nod. “This way.”

Her brows rose but she followed as he led her further from the cave. Her feet made soft impressions on the sand, but she noticed that it was not as loose and soft as it had been the last time she walked across it.

“The wet season has arrived since you joined me,” Samir said conversationally, answering her unspoken question. “It is a blessed time of the year as it causes certain changes to the desert.”

“Oh? What’s that? Please don’t tell me that everything molds,” Abby said as they walked over a hill of sand. “I once went with my family to Guwari, a small tropical province and we just happened to be there working when their rainy season hit. My gods, I swore everything sprouted mold, moss, or some kind of fungus.”

“No, nothing like that,” Samir chuckled as they crested the hill. “Just look. The desert—she blooms,” he rasped as he gestured to the sand stretched out ahead of them.

Blooms? Abby’s gaze followed in the direction of his hand, and a tiny gasp escaped her as flowers dotted the sand. The flowers were small and would have seemed insignificant against the flowers that grew in her mother’s garden. But spread out across the sand with the moon slowly climbing in the sky under the waning light of the sun, it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

“Oh, Samir,” she whispered. “It’s like a page out of a novel, when the wearied hero, battered and bloodied from his missions, rises from the battle grounds and looks out

across the distance to see the promise of new life that makes everything he suffered worth it.”

“And you believe that you lack the ability to write,” Samir scoffed, bringing a blush of pleasure to her cheeks. His glowing green eyes focused on her, however, their luminosity brightening with the fading light in the sky. “Would you say that this is worth everything you suffered?”

There was a vulnerability in his voice as he asked but she knew that he spoke more of the hardships she had endured. She was certain that he wanted to be reassured that he was worth it and that vulnerability touched her heart in an unexpected way.

“Hmmm, well, it’s certainly not bad. It’s a good start at the very least,” she said with a cheeky grin that drew a smile from him in return.

“Come,” he murmured. “You haven’t even enjoyed the best part.”

Abby couldn’t imagine how exactly it could get better but allowed herself to be led down the slope until they were amid the flowers, the leaves and steams brushing her boots. Very gently, Samir drew her down to a relatively bare patch of sand amid the flowers and they lay down together, stretched outside by side so that there was nothing in their world but the two of them and the flowers encircled around them on all sides, their sweet, delicate perfume filling Abby with every breath. The perfume grew deeper, muskier, and she looked at the flowers with wonder as they began to fully bloom with the arrival of the night. Creamy, pale petals opened to reveal glowing golden stamen dusted with luminous pollen. These were not of the human world before the collision that had brought the worlds of the fae, spirits, and humans together as one. The flowers were as magical as the manticore lying beside her.

The darker it got, the brighter the flowers became as they bloomed as if to salute the moon until not a trace of sunlight lit up the desert. Samir smiled over at her as she

studied a flower between them, and he nodded toward the sky.

“Look up, kitten.”

Her eyes lifted and beyond the glow of the flowers the moon hung in a sky filled with stars more brilliant than she'd ever seen them, with bright dusty arms roping across the heavens. It was like existing in a sea of pure magic with the glow of the flowers around them and the stars up above. For the first time she felt like she was seeing all the potential of magic and beauty within the world which her mother had so often spoken of that existed beyond blood and dirt of the hunt. Seeing it all now for the first time, brought tears to Abby's eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and Samir's responding purr seemed to make everything dance and glow even more brightly around her.

Chapter

Thirteen

“So, this is your study,” Abby commented, her eyes wide as they moved over the room that Samir typically kept closed out of habit.

“It is,” Samir agreed as he followed her inside, warmth spreading through his chest at the way she looked around with rapt fascination.

It flattered him that she appeared to like it. He knew it did not fit the aesthetic of human comfort. There was not much wood in the place to give an illusion of warmth and ease, but every bench and table had been harvested from the natural stone of the cavern, and stuffed cushions made from lush fabrics and animal skins gave the chairs some modicum of comfort. The only real wood in his home was for the doors, and that he had acquired by apologetically tearing apart a wagon or two from caravans passing through.

Though perhaps he should be grateful that he had not felt compelled to do more. Wood was not always as forgiving as stone. Where stone could crack and fracture with the wrong force, it seemed that wood enjoyed splintering for absolutely no reason or develop cracks with the slightest change to the humidity, or lack thereof. Truthfully, the doors had been a special challenge that had dissuaded him from making anything else from wood and had required regular attention. He might have continued to forego them entirely, but that changed when the human, Jeriah, came to dwell with him.

Even though he had to carve the cavern walls themselves in order to fashion properly fitting doors, he had them fashioned and put in place within a short time after finding the male wandering back to the deeper passages of his home uninvited after numerous polite requests and warnings. Even when he had fancied himself in love with the male and was eager to share his life with him, he had been unable to fully trust Jeriah, though he had not understood why at the time. After observing the male for a time, he had somehow arrived at the conclusion that it was just a human's natural tendency to explore open spaces.

He had believed the doors would solve that issue.

The rooms of his study, his treasury, and his room of fire where he was able to bask in the hot flames drawn up from within earth, had all come under lock and key within weeks. In retrospect, the male's consternation about being blocked access to them should have provided him with some warning toward the human's ulterior motives. How many times had he complained about being locked out when something required Samir's attention? How many times did he put on a great show of wishing to gain access so that he could be of better service and help? It was so obvious, but he had been foolishly blind to it then.

Because of this, he had carefully watched Abby to see how far she was willing to go to pry into his secrets. He had watched with suspicion when she attempted to open the doors, and had witnessed how, upon discovering that they were locked, she had disregarded them. There were occasions afterwards that she had glanced toward the passage curiously, but she never again went near them, nor had she once mentioned them. She was content to let his secrets remain his own.

It was for that reason, paired with the warm glow that still filled him from their night basking among the flowers beneath the stars, that he had decided to show her what rested behind this door. He wanted to share more of himself with her and foolishly wanted to bring her more into his life. He wanted more after a mere couple of weeks

than he had wanted even after a century with Jeriah. There were times where, before the betrayal, he had wondered if things would have grown further between him and Jeriah if he had opened himself more to him, but he had not been able to make himself that vulnerable to the human. But now that he was doing so with Abby, he recognized the difference. Abby never pushed him to share his secrets—he wanted to share them.

He had come to trust her.

“Do you like it?” he murmured after several minutes of silence.

She looked up from a bookcase beside his desk and grinned. “It is incredible. I confess I’m surprised to see yet more books, but these appear more worn than any of the others in your possession.”

“That bookcase does not contain leisure reading nor that of academic curiosities. It is filled with my personal diaries and ledgers since I reached adulthood and settled in this cavern. The blue one there,” he said, nodding to the volume her hand rested on, “records the year the convergence... the collision as humans like to call it.”

“Wow,” she quietly exclaimed and turned hopeful eyes to him. “Do you think I might be able to read it? All of them actually?”

“Once you have become accomplished enough in your lessons, perhaps,” he agreed, secretly delighted that she wanted to.

“Oh... right. Not in common northern,” she said and grimaced.

Samir chuckled and followed her around the room as she explored, his stinger curling and extending with his pleasure so that the tip lightly tapped the floor. The sound startled her initially, and she had glanced at his tail several times before she was able

filter out the sound and ignored it.

Of course, such things were easy enough to ignore when surrounded by a trove of Samir's most beloved items. She ran her fingers over the larger harp that sat in one corner, the body carved in the representation of a bull, and she paused and bent to examine several little inventions and toys he had made that sat on the shelves lining one wall. He was especially proud of those. He had painstakingly folded the metal and learned the art of cog-making to enliven his little creations. Even without cubs of his own, they were amusing and a constant challenge to perfect his craft and do more. There were also shelves filled with jars of rare herbs and minerals that he utilized for various bits of magic, but also in making medicines as required. Medicine not only for himself but to treat those individuals he came across that were near unjustly at death's door. Abby marveled at them all until at last she arrived at the great wall that carried the trophies of his many triumphs.

Every weapon with which hunters had attacked him with was mounted on the wall. Plainly forged sabers, jeweled swords and daggers were mounted side by side with equal ceremony as blades and bludgeoning weapons of all kinds were neatly lined as a testimony to all those battles that he had overcome. At their center, however, Abby's lance hung in the place of honor, the broken wooden shaft fitted with a newly forged metal one. His triumph over her deserved the acclaim, and he knew that she recognized the significance of it because a small flush rose in her cheeks as she caught sight of her weapon. She moved closer to the wall, drawn to the display as he would have suspected. She was a warrior and hunter. It was natural.

"Trophies of my victories," he explained as he moved closer. "Each belonged to one who thought to take my life. Some humans, some of other races. A reminder of my victories."

"I did not think that there would be so many," she replied in a hushed voice. "There are a lot more weapons here than skulls in your parlor."

He chuckled in agreement. “I only keep the skulls of those who especially pissed me off.”

His words startled a laugh from her. “I see my lance is in the center. I’m honored.”

Warmth spread across his chest, and he smiled. “There has been no human like you. No one else deserves that honor.”

Her head cocked to the side as she considered her weapon. “What would you do if there were two weapons?”

He frowned at the question. “I do not under?—”

His words died in his mouth as Abby whirled around, slashing at him with a blade in her hand. Cursing himself for a fool yet again, Samir rolled, narrowly avoiding the blade for a second time. His heart crumpled, not only was she attacking him, but he recognized the ornate hilt and the flash of gemstones encrusting it as one of his treasured belongings.

Dodging, Samir thrust his arm out, slamming his palm between her breasts so that she was sent flying off her feet. She landed hard, her breath rushing out of her. She had somehow retained hold on the dagger, however. Sorrow filled him as he rushed her in a fast side-step and brought his stinger up, prepared to deliver the fatal blow. Killing her would destroy him. He might as well curl up in his flames and die as well but it had to be done. He swung his tail back in preparation to strike but for some reason his gaze shifted to her face. Her laughing face and eyes sparkling with far too much glee.

Shaking his head in confusion, he brought his tail but at the last minute he turned it away so that the side knocked the weapon out of her hand harmlessly, instead, before sinking the stinger against the stone floor beside her arm. Abby looked at it and burst out laughing.

Drawing close to her side, he peered down at her, a snarl on his lips despite the disbelief that shook him. “You tried to kill me... again !”

Abby grinned up at him shrugged unrepentantly, unimpressed and without the slightest hint of fear or anxiety as she giggled. “I figured it would be fun.”

Samir stared at her in bewilderment. “You attempted to slay me... to amuse yourself?”

“Well, I did feel a little guilty about it,” she said cheerfully. “But I figured I ought to at least give it another valiant go since I had plenty of time and saw an opening. I would be a disgrace to my calling if I didn’t even try,” she pointed out as she gave him a sweet smile but then ruined it by breaking out into laughter. “Come on, Samir, it was a joke! Of course I wasn’t trying to kill you. I didn’t even aim or put any force behind that swing.” Her smile slowly died as she took in his expression. “Okay maybe it was a bit too soon as a joke, but you must admit that it was entertaining. Not to mention that it gave both of us much needed exercise.”

He squinted down at her. She seemed earnest enough. He was struggling with it, however, and his mouth twisted with the agony churning inside of him. A look of worry crossed her face, her brows beetling as she slowly pushed herself up from the ground and rose to her feet.

“Hey, Samir, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was really just messing around. It was obviously ill-thought out on my part, but I swear I never would have hurt you. You believe me right?”

Sighing heavily, Samir ran a hand through his mane, wincing as his unsheathed claws scraped his head. With a concentrated effort, he retracted them and gave a wary nod. But he couldn’t let it go unpunished. He could have easily killed her in that moment. She did not realize how close to death she came. If it had not been for the need to

look at her, to look for any excuse to stop the killing blow, she would have been lost to him... all for a joke. He was going to have nightmares because of this.

Grumbling in annoyance, he grabbed her hand and led her silently from the room as she continued to ramble out apologies. He had to admit that he admired her cunning, and above all her gall, in executing her joke but that did not mean he was not above teaching her a lesson that she so badly needed. Drawing her toward the entrance of his treasure-room, he unlocked the door and led her inside.

Her mouth fell open at the sight of gold and jewels piled in boxes and urns throughout the room amid golden harps and flutes. Her admiration of the treasure was expected but it did not hold her captive for long. With her quick mind it did not take her long to understand his intention. He led her deep within the room and left her there, standing alone, as he stalked toward the door.

“You can’t be serious,” she protested with a laugh as she turned in place, her body rotating as he moved around her so that she could watch him with disbelief as he stepped back into the corridor.

“You will have plenty to amuse yourself with here. And more importantly, I will be able to sleep peacefully without worrying about any further mischief,” he pointed out. “Sleep well,” he rumbled as he turned away, ignoring her furious sputtered protests.

With the door locked between them, he briefly considered going to bed as he had threatened but the idea of lying in the bed alone had become distasteful to him. Instead, he returned to his study and picked up his ink pen as he opened his journal on his desk in front of him to record the recent events of the month. He wrote for a time, his mind returning over and over to the moment of her attack. The teasing note in her voice as she had asked him about a second weapon. There had been no maliciousness. She had been laughing all the while. And she was right, her swing had been sloppy, designed more to shock than to harm.

Damned fool of a female. He adored her but she was going to be the death of him yet. He dragged his hand over his face and his ears twitched as he gradually became aware of a terrible sound that was growing louder as time passed. How long it had been going on he wasn't sure, but at the octave it was at now, it was plucking at his nerves so that he could hardly concentrate.

What was that infernal noise?

The discordant sound of a harp badly thrummed echoed through the cavern in accompaniment to the lyrics Abby sang. At least that was what he assumed she was doing. Some silly song about lovers never parting. Never had he imagined singing to be a singularly painful experience and yet it brought a smile to his face. And she thought his singing was painful to listen to.

With a groan, he left his study, leaving the door unlocked behind him, and returned to the treasure room. Despite his earlier resolve, he unlocked the door and stepped inside, his heart flipping within his chest at the sight of his lovely female seated astride a chest overflowing with gold and jewels while a particularly expensive bolt of cloth was twisted around her middle and secured with a self-made harness from a string of pearls, and a dainty crown was askew on her head as her fingers struck the strings discordantly yet again.

“ Looooove, love is strange ,” she shrilled before dropping the song altogether to beam happily at him. “Oh, you’re back!”

A tired chuckle escaped him, and he opened his arms for her in a simple gesture of forgiveness and affection. He did not know what to expect. It certainly was not the delighted squeal that came from her, or the way she happily jumped into his embrace with so much eagerness and so little finesse that treasure spilled over the both of them, her crown smacking him in the face as it fell from her head.

“Oops, sorry. I swear that wasn’t another attack,” she whispered in his ear, drawing another chuckle from him.

“Very well, I believe you.”

“It would make an awesome addition to your trophy wall.”

He rolled his eyes on the observation and chuckled. “Come, kitten let us go to bed,” he rumbled tiredly around a yawn as he carried her off to bed.

And to his surprise no nightmares came that night, or the next. He had never slept better than when she was right there curled against his side. Perhaps even more so now that he had encountered his worst fear and conquered it. Abby had every opportunity to truthfully try to harm him—perhaps, he could admit to himself, that taking her to his study filled with so many weapons had also been a test—but other than a well-executed but more poorly timed joke, she had not betrayed him. And so, he slept even better as he curled around her, his chest thrumming with his purr in his sleep.

Chapter

Fourteen

S amir had been dreaming. He could not remember what he had been dreaming but he woke suddenly from it, his pelt quivering with his restlessness as the quickly fading dream followed him out of the depths of his sleep. He still trembled from the aftermath; his body hot as need crawled through him. His eyes fell to the female sleeping beside him, her legs entwined with his and his breath caught. He had sat beside her for hours the day before while instructing her and had felt nothing except a growing fondness and she eagerly absorbed everything he taught. True to her word, she was impatient and easily distracted as a cub and yet there was an iron determination within her that he had admired.

But since when did admiration and affection turn into such a terrible and raging need?

Coughing a deep growl, he withdrew out from beneath the leg wrapped around him, his eyes narrowed on her sleeping face. She looked so innocent and yet she ignited him into a state of burning frenzy that had him scrambling away from her, the curls of his mane tufting anxiously. With a quiet growl, he rolled off the side of the massive bed and landed with a heavy thump on the floor. His head shot up and he glanced at her warily, daring to not even breathe with the hope that he had not woken her. She did not stir other than curling deeper into the bedding. He exhaled a small sigh of relief and slinked away from the side of the bed on all fours so as to keep his steps as silent as possible.

He certainly did not wish her to be aware of how strongly he was affected by her.

This was a delicate game that they were playing between them. Even the smallest imbalance could adversely affect the outcome. Such knowledge could make her more afraid of him and convince her to renew her attack at the risk of her own life, or it could inflate her sense of power over him to where she might attempt something foolish. Neither outcome was one that he liked and both cases would likely lead to her death, which did not set well with him.

Unfortunately, the roused urgency within his loins was difficult to quell and it did not care whether or not he was interested in irrevocably mating with the female. Or, more pointedly, if she would ever accept him. Without an outlet, it had turned on him and tormented him. It was not just lust. Lust he could understand though it seldom became an inconvenience for solitary, unmated manticores once they reached a certain age. He could not recall a time when lust simply took hold of him. He had complete control over his desires since reaching adulthood.

This was different. It was an insidious instinct that rose up from some hidden depths within him, roaring its demands as it came to life within him. But he would not act upon it again. The next time they came together it would be because it was her choice to yield to him. He would not beg for, nor demand, her surrender.

Shivering in reaction, he prowled from the room, not bothering to rise on two feet until he had achieved some distance and stalked into the sitting room. He paced back and forth in front of the banked fire, his mind churning restlessly as it tempted to beguile him with twists of reasoning and outright fantasy as if it might convince him to return to his chambers and the female laying within his bed. He shook his head in an attempt to clear, a low growl vibrating in his chest. This was going to drive him mad if he did not resolve it.

Perhaps a good meal would settle him. If he was not mistaken, he reckoned that the hour was nearing sunset. Not only did he require considerable sustenance to maintain his health and vigor, but he would need to feed his female, as well. An oryx would be

ideal but it was an inopportune time to hunt one as it would take him much further from the cave than he would like and he still did not trust the female to not foolishly take it into her head to flee at the first opportunity if there was enough distance put between them. She was intelligent and now understood the dangers but after so many days keeping vigil due to her numerous escape attempts, he could not relax his guard quite yet. If he was patient, he could easily find a hare near his cave, but it would be time-consuming as he would have to catch several so that there would be enough to feed both of them and he did not wish to spend half the night hunting as he had often done just to feed himself.

There was an oasis, however. His head cocked in consideration. That was not a bad idea. It was not far for him to travel but it was far enough that it would be difficult for the female to escape alone, surrounded on all sides by desert as it was. It would also give them the opportunity to refill the water jugs. She seemed to require more water than he did and at their current rate of usage, his supply would not last long in providing for the both of them.

Samir grimaced at the thought of strapping into the harness he had devised that allowed him to carry four clay jugs back across the desert. It would not be an enjoyable experience. It would not only be uncomfortable for him, but it would make her seat precarious as he carried her on his back. Unfortunately, it could not be avoided. Drinking from the cavern pools was a risk he would be foolish to indulge in.

Settled on a course of action, he spun back toward his sleeping chamber, eager to be on his way. Samir returned to his bedside. Once there, he bent and rested a hand on her shoulder peeking out from beneath the blanket covering her. It was a slim but beautifully defined shoulder of a female of considerable strength and skill. He admired its graceful curve as his fingers curled around it... and vigorously shook her.

To his delight, Abby shot up with a sharply drawn gasp of breath, her eyes wide and her hands searching fruitlessly for some weapon or another. He immediately

withdrew as she abruptly rose to a seated position and smiled patiently when her eyes snapped to him in bewilderment. She certainly was a lively one!

“What the fuck?” she shouted as she pressed a fist against her chest. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

His own eyes went round with surprise. “That happens? Do you humans truly just die in fright?” He frowned as he searched his memories. “I recall much screaming, and many of them urinating on themselves in terror but I do not recall an instance of anyone dying before I actually delivered a blow.”

“What?” she replied, her brow drawing with confusion momentarily before she gave an impatient shake of her head. “No... I don’t know. I suppose if someone has a heart condition, maybe. And no, I do not. It’s more of an expression.”

Samir frowned. “That is ridiculous. Why ask that, then, if you would not be affected in this manner? Human expressions are tedious with the way they dance around truth with such exaggeration, not to mention that they seem to be prone to flying in the face of reason and accuracy,” he grumbled.

To his surprise, Abby’s lips twitched in response. “I suppose so. I never really thought about it.” She rolled her shoulder experimentally, as if uncertain if he wrenched something when he shook her, before stretching her arms over her head with a wide, jaw-cracking yawn. “Now do you mind telling me why you are waking me at fuck-off-o’clock instead of just letting me sleep? As far as I can tell there is no emergency—the cavern isn’t crashing down around my ears as far as I can tell. There’s certainly nowhere I need to be,” she added as she began to draw her blanket back around her, obviously preparing to lie back down again.

Grabbing the bottom hem of the blanket, he tore it from her grasp, earning him a surprised grunt and a look of disgust on the face of his lovely tormentor as he tossed

the blanket unceremoniously to the floor.

“As it happens, we do have someplace to be,” he corrected.

That caught her attention.

Abby’s expression shifted once more to confusion, but this time there was a hint of a suspicion in her eyes as she regarded him. “Oh? And just where would that be?”

Her question followed him as he pushed by the bed and headed toward the storage space to the rear of the chamber where he kept the harness stored. “It may have escaped your notice, but we are in a cave in the desert with very limited freshwater,” he purred as he pulled the harness over him.

“Actually, it hasn’t,” she replied, her eyes drifting toward the straps and then to the jugs he began to pull and secure, one by one, into place. “I did notice that the only supply of fresh water seems to be the large jug in the sitting room and that, as it dwindles, you have made no effort to refresh—which leads me to suspect that the water in the caverns is not drinkable.”

“You could drink it if you enjoy becoming ill and potentially riddled with unknown parasites,” he replied with a casual shrug. “As it happens I do not. The hot spring may be good for bathing, but I would never recommend drinking from it. This means that we must go and collect it.”

“Collect it,” she echoed in a slow drawl. “Collect it from where?”

Securing the last of the jugs into place, he turned toward her with a smile. “To the oasis of course. We will travel there, and you can fill the jugs while I hunt for our meal. Perhaps an extra beast or two that we can smoke before returning to the cavern. It will make for a long night, but I believe it will pass pleasantly enough.”

Her brows rose with unmistakable interest. “I don’t recall seeing an oasis around here.”

Samir shrugged again. “If you came by way of the human city, Veldala, you would not have seen it as it lies further across the Sanna to the south. It would be a long distance for a human to traverse on foot, but with my speed we would arrive at the edge of the oasis within a couple of hours if you are on my back.”

“So said the fox to the gingerbread man,” Abby replied lightly.

He gave her a puzzled look, but she shook her head with a wry smile that made him suspect it was another one of those human things. A suspicion that was quickly confirmed by her giggle.

“It’s just something from within a children’s book I grew up reading. The fox lures the little man made of sweet dough onto his back with a promise of safety, and then higher onto his snout until he snaps his teeth and eats him right up. Who knows what you intend dragging me out in the middle of the desert at night.”

A shiver of arousal raced beneath his pelt, making his fur rise but he ignored it to smile patiently at her. “My dear, if I wished to eat you up—which I admit is wholly tempting—I could have done so at leisure why you were reclining in my bed. And I daresay that you would enjoy it far more than that hapless little man of your fable,” he added with a wicked chuckle that brought a noticeable hint of pink to her cheeks.

“And what if I refuse to go?” she challenged, her lips smugly with a hint of challenge. “Frankly, I would rather just stay right where I am and go back to sleep. I swear we only went to bed a couple hours ago.”

His brows rose and his smile widened to mask the small measure of concern that resisting the urge to mount her was going to take every ounce of his will. He felt that

certainty rising from his gut. As well as the certainty that this conversation could prove to be a battle of will if she was determined to stay within the cavern. With that, however, there was the sense of a looming victory even if it gave him little true satisfaction. “As you like but you will be the one to suffer far sooner than I.”

Abby’s smile slipped and her brows beetled with uncertainty. “Just how long can you go without water?”

Samir made a show of gravely considering her question but answered her truthfully. “I do not know. I honestly have never tested my limits. Without a human to care for I have often forgotten to drink until after many days have passed, but I cannot say that I was suffering even then. Most of my regular consumption is less from need and more because I enjoy my regular cup of tea or coffee.”

He wondered if his meaning was clear enough that she would be able to deduce exactly how her situation lay. He did not have to wonder long, however, because she groaned and flopped on the bed.

“Well, fuck.”

It seemed that his lovely little human came to the correct conclusion.

A purr rumbled through him, and he smiled at her as she reluctantly swung her legs over the side of the bed. “Do take care as you climb up.”

Chapter

Fifteen

The way Samir's eyes glittered at her sent a quiver through Abby as she approached his side. His threat of eating her had toppled over the line of suggestiveness straight into lurid and it should have worried her. If she was the huntress that she'd been upon entering the cave, she would have found a way to put some distance between them while he was looking at her like that. Instead, it sent a tingle of warmth through her, betraying her interest, and her lips tipped in amusement at how much the dynamic between them had changed. She wanted to challenge and push him until he did what he threatened. Hadn't she just been dreaming about the warmth of his body curled over her as he mounted her, his cock plunging into her with all the fire of his passion.

It was so tempting, and she shivered a little from her barely suppressed longing. She needed to get herself under control. Trying to push him into a frenzied mating hadn't worked so well last time. Thank the gods he had believed her sincerity and came back for her. In any case, despite the lurid nature of his words, he obviously intended that they leave immediately and so waited patiently with the jugs harnessed to him. Abby groaned inwardly. This was liable to be torture. As it was, she bit the inside of her cheek to distract her as she climbed carefully over the jugs and seated herself awkwardly on his back. Her awareness of him was disconcerting.

Thankfully she had another distraction readily available as it seemed that there was nothing arousing or even moderately comfortable being seated on him and she grimaced at her unusual perch. Her legs dangled over his shoulders due to the way that she was forced to sit, which she couldn't imagine was terribly comfortable for

him. Not only was it not the image of high eroticism but it didn't escape her notice that seated that way put her calves and feet in convenient biting reach. She might have been worried about having them in such a vulnerable position if she wasn't confident that Samir wasn't going to harm her. On the other hand, it also put her feet in a convenient striking place, which he had to be aware of as her feet slid into position. A sharp blow to the back of his jaw, if delivered with enough force, could potentially do enough damage to give her the upper hand if she was of mind to. Sitting that way demanded a lot of trust from both of them.

Gods, it was a good thing they hadn't run out of water earlier.

Still, she couldn't help but be a little annoyed that he didn't give her legs more than the briefest of passing glances when they were right there in optimal viewing level. She had great legs, too, so it stung that he barely seemed to notice them. The way he looked at them didn't hold even a hint of desire. They might as well have been two sticks attached to her with how little interest he gave them. There was nothing in his expression except mild curiosity and assurance that she was properly seated on his back as he requested before he started off at a startlingly brisk pace that had her tightly gripping his mane to maintain her balance.

Samir had an easy, springy lope as he left his den and wound his way quickly through the cavernous chambers of the cave system. Very quickly. Her lips twisted in a faint grimace, recollecting how quickly she'd been caught when she had tried to escape, but she bit back a small giggle of amusement in spite of herself. She didn't know what the king was thinking by sending hunters after him. Anyone who had truly seen him in motion had to have reported back the superior speed of the manticore. Decort was just throwing hunters after him, wasting lives needlessly. Abby certainly couldn't blame Samir for lethally defending himself. There was rarely any other recourse to stop a hunter, as much as it pained her to admit it. What would she do if her own family was sent after him? Could she watch them be slaughtered? And if by some miracle they got the upper hand, could she sit by while they killed him? She knew

that they wouldn't stop, not even for her. Duty came before blood, and even before love. That was what she was bred and raised to believe, too, but it was impossible to go back to that now. If she'd ever truly believed that in the first place.

Looking back, it was hard to make a judgement on it, except she recalled all too vividly the look of worry on her mother's face and the insistence of finding her a partner to anchor her. Perhaps her mother had seen it and had known the truth even back then regarding Abby's heart.

She wanted to vent her frustration and pour out her words, but Samir wouldn't understand. Even if he could comprehend the strange position she was in having been raised as a huntress, he had already ascended from the cave and struck out across the desert at a speed that had the air whipping into her face and past her ears. It was impossible to speak much less hear, so Abby leaned forward, despite the uncomfortable angle, and buried her face in Samir's mane. His scent filled her nose, and she breathed in the spicy warmth, allowing it to settle deep within her, warming from the inside out as the desert air began to rapidly cool.

With her face concealed, she didn't know how much distance he covered, or really for how long he had run. She felt the slowing of his gait as his shoulders began to roll more pronouncedly, losing their fluid stretch as his pace slowed. Abby lifted her head from his mane and blinked the sand from her eyes as a green frond tickled her nose the moment the sand yielded to the green growth of the oasis. And it was... glorious.

The heat of the sun was cut by the palm trees stretching out their massive fronds overhead and everywhere she looked. Among the trees she saw those heavily laden with dates and fig bushes were visible within the near distance, their branches nearly bowing the weight of the fruit. There was so much potential there alone that she licked her dry lips and glanced down at the top of Samir's head.

"If we stay for a few days, we can dry those dates and figs to bring back with us," she

suggested.

Samir's mane swayed as he shook his head. "We did not bring any sacks to transport them back and they will mold if we try to fill one of the water jugs with them. Eat your fill while we are here, kitten. We can return another time, properly equipped, to do as you suggest."

Her mouth downturned in disappointment but she couldn't argue against his logic. She squinted at a nearby tree and sighed longingly.

"I think I see an olive tree, too, but I believe that this would be the wrong time of the year for them. But then again, I'm surprised to see ripe figs when it is far too late in the season for them," she observed aloud.

"Not for the desert," Samir gently corrected. "This is the beginning of the fig season. You will see different bushes full of ripening fruit for a few months yet."

"Oh," Abby murmured. "You know outside of dried preserves, I know how to make a good jam from the figs, and we can have them sugared and baked in a dessert, and?—"

"I shall leave it to you," he interrupted with a chuckle. "Just point me in the direction to assist next time we arrive, and I will help however you require."

"You are nearly perfect boyfriend material," Abby teased. "You know exactly the right thing to say and are eager to take directions."

Oh gods, did it sound like she was flirting with him? She bit her lip as heat filled her face, and it only seemed to get worse—but for entirely different reasons—when Samir purred as if in agreement.

“Do not go quiet now,” Samir rumbled playfully. “But as for your olives, you may get lucky. Some varieties ripen as late as into the beginning of the winter. Just be glad that you were not sent to murder me in the midst of the summer. You would not be able to enjoy such plentitude from the oasis then. At least not of these fruits.”

“I think you would not have needed to worry about anything in that case. The heat would have surely done me before I even got to your cave,” she joked lamely.

“Then I am doubly fortunate that you arrived to me in this time,” he purred, and Abby smiled privately as warmth filled her chest with pleasure.

“You may regret that when you see me making a pig out of myself,” she returned. “You have no idea what a glutton I can be.”

“I look forward to feeding you then.”

His words fell between them like a vow and Abby fidgeted, her fingers twisting within his mane. She didn't know what to say to that, but apparently, he did not expect a response because he said nothing further as he made his way among the trees, bushes, and tall grasses that sprouted from the sand. The route to the fresh water took them within such close range of the figs that branches hung within their path, giving all the opportunity she needed to pull a couple fruits free in passing. Pinching the bottoms to break open the skin, she peeled it back to slurp up the soft, sweet innards. She ate them slowly, savoring each bite as she watched the blue water get closer and closer until finally Samir lowered himself onto the grassy banks and waited patiently for her to swing her legs over and slide off his back.

Grass and sand shifted slightly under foot, but she found her balance quickly and turned to pull the water jugs from Samir's harness. Murmuring his thanks, the manticore freed himself with a groan and slowly stretched out his back as she peeled the harness off him.

“My thanks, kitten,” he groaned. “This is always such a chore to do by oneself. I am grateful for the assistance.”

Abby grimaced sympathetically. “I can imagine. You are at least more limber than I am, but it still looks like it would require a lot of awkward—and very careful twisting, especially once the jugs are full.”

“Indeed,” Samir agreed with a faint grin, and he collapsed leisurely in the grass. She went to pick up one of the jugs to fill it, but he waved her off. “There is no hurry. I will need to rest a while before attempting the return. Swim and refresh yourself for a while if you like. We can fill the jugs at the spring head just over there here in a little while.”

Sounded like a good plan to her. Without a word she began to strip and toss her clothing to the ground at her side. A strained look rose to Samir’s face, but he didn’t object. In fact, he appeared to be trying to ignore her. She smirked, unable to resist getting a rise out of him, so she slowed down and accentuated every movement until every muscle in his body was rigid. His control was really remarkable. Giving him one last sassy smile, she spun away with a little bounce that drew a strangled moan from her audience of one and she headed down to the water’s edge, walking with a bit more jiggle than was necessary.

Dipping her foot into the water, she recoiled with a screech. “Oh my gods, cold, cold, cold!” she yelped. “We are in the middle of a desert, how is it so damned cold?”

“The pool is constantly being fed by a cold spring that runs underground, before erupting from between the rocks over there,” Samir replied drolly from where he was stretched out on the grass. “You complain overmuch. It should feel pleasant against the heat of the evening.”

Abby gave him a dark look, but he smiled guilelessly as his tail curled at her.

“Of course, if it is too much, you are welcome to stretch out here beside me,” he purred.

A quiver shot through her belly. It was so tempting and yet, the desire to finally be completely cool and clean was strong and eventually won. Hardening her jaw against the anticipated shock of the cold water touching her skin, Abby splashed abruptly into it and waded in to about waist-deep before turning to look back at the manticore. His eyes glowed in the early morning light. Now that she was in the pool, the cold water was beginning to feel good on her stiff muscles and overheated flesh, and she moaned softly as her muscles gradually relaxed under the influence of the cold water. She sank slowly into the water, pausing for a moment as she released the softest of gasps when the water teased the sensitive flesh of her nipples. Samir’s ears tipped toward her and his gaze fixed on her chest. She smiled and sank further until her chest was below the surface, her hair fanning out in the water around her.

“Feel good?” Samir rumbled.

“Very. Why don’t you come in? Don’t you swim?”

“I can when the occasion calls for it,” he replied to her taunt.

“Then come swim with me,” she cajoled and proceeded to splash a little water in his direction.

His ears twitched at her, his scorpion tail curling in itself slowly as he regarded her. Was he considering? Perhaps he needed a push in the right direction. She didn’t want him safely on the outside watching her in a detached fashion. She wanted him there with her, in the water, splashing and playing—intimately connecting with her rather than being so restrained and aloof. She wanted another glimpse of the real Samir, and she was so certain that the moments of playfulness from the male hinted at something that there was a whole lot more of just beneath the surface.

“Come on,” she called again and finally, with a faint smile curling the corners of his mouth, Samir rose and rushed into the water with a growl that had her shrieking as she backpedaled through the water.

His thick mane flattened ludicrously to his head and neck, giving his face a slightly more pronounced feline appearance as more of its natural shape was revealed. Even with his fur plastered and sodden, Abby thought he was the most beautiful male as he splashed toward her. His playful snarl sent a tingle of awareness through as he lunged, and she gasped with laughter as she made a valiant attempt to escape. It seemed that he was just as quick in the water as he was on land, though because his long tail lashed the water as he propelled himself to her so that he was able to scoop her up effortlessly in his arms.

Abby choked a little on the water that splashed up into her face as she shouted her accusations. “No fair! I call foul on that damned rudder attached to your ass!”

Samir’s roar of laughter made her grin as a crazy giggle escaped her and then she screamed again, this time with laughter as he dropped backward with Abby firmly in his arms, plunging them both into the cold water. Their bodies sensually grazed each other as they twisted in the water and Abby shivered at the flex of his pelvis against hers. The contact was brief, however, before he shifted away and his big hands pulled her quickly back to the surface.

Abby broke the water sputtering, but she didn’t give up, instead she threw her weight as she jumped on him, dunking him into the water. On and on the play, wrestling in the water. She managed to break free, by fair means or foul, and swam away a few times but he always quickly caught her. They played until they grew too tired to play and dragged themselves back up onto the grass embankment where they sprawled.

She had to hand it to Samir. Not only was he stronger and faster, but he recovered quicker too, which presented some interesting possibilities that she was curious to

explore. Abby kept such thoughts to herself, however, as she rolled onto her side, her eyes following the manticore as he began to pull down large fronds.

“What are you doing?” she called over to him.

“Saving you from sun sickness,” he replied with a surprising amount of enthusiasm, his tail curling and swishing as he worked.

She watched him curiously, but her confusion melted away when the rough form of a lean-to began to take form. He was making shelter for her. She had made her own shelters since she was eight years old, as required by her father for her first lessons of hunter training. A hunter ultimately could only depend on themselves. That had been the hardest lesson that he made sure she had understood from a young age to the point where any coddling at all by those trying to gain her attention had felt like personal insults toward her capabilities as a hunter. From Samir, it just felt different. He wasn't coddling her. He wasn't making her a shelter because he believed that his performative actions would endear him to some primitive female need to be taken care of rather than fend for herself as a means to woo her. No, Samir was just made differently. He made her the shelter merely because he wished for her comfort. And that was seductive to her, right down to rolling and piling fronds and thick leaves inside to make for a comfortable bed.

Even his smile when he finally stepped back, satisfied with his work, was infectious and she found herself returning to it as he hurried back to her and helped her to her feet.

“Come rest in here,” he purred. “You tire more easily than I so allow me to provide for you. The olives are not good to eat directly from the trees as they require soaking for many months in brine to cure them but remain here and I will provide for you a small feast so that you can sufficiently recover from the day's exertion.”

Abby crawled into the lean-to and sank down onto the cool leaf beds with a small, content sigh. It seemed that Samir was intent on spoiling her, after all. Her eyes fluttered closed for a while but she awoke briefly to the smell of cooking food to find the manticore crouched just beyond their shelter, roasting some unidentifiable beast he had caught over an open flame. Piled on leaves there were figs, some sort of large orange fruit, and dates. He peered over in her direction and, seeing that she was awake, pushed the leaves toward her with a shy smile. She happily picked at the fruit, eating it as she watched him cook. She was proud to say that no matter how much she wanted to devour all the fruit in front of her, she didn't make a complete glutton of herself. She picked at it slowly, sharing bites of the fruit with him as he turned the spitted meat. It was only when the sun was rising higher in the sky that he finally finished and removed the meat from the bone to pile it on the leaf that he carried inside with him.

"I really shouldn't eat too much," she said quietly. "If I do, I will get sleepy, and we still need to fill the water jugs."

"Already taken care of," he rasped quietly. "You were very tired. I have not only filled the water jugs—which was no effort at all—but also hunted plenty of beasts to keep us stocked on meat for a few weeks. It is being smoked as we speak some distance away on the sand."

Abby frowned at that. "You needn't have done all that by yourself. What else am I here for?"

"You are here as my hostage, remember?" he rasped with a quiet chuckle that brought a smile to her lips.

"So, you are saying I should just lay back and enjoy it like a queen?" she teased.

"Certainly. Enjoy it while you can. I will work you hard in the future," he replied, his

eyes gleaming with his amusement. “For today, because necessity dictated your unwilling presence, you are the queen of this oasis.”

“Okay, I accept, though I cannot claim that this is a bad deal for me.” It was only fair to warn him that she had been far from reluctant since arriving.

“It is not a bad deal for me, either,” he rumbled enticingly as he squeezed himself into the shelter with her, their bodies intimately close. “Would it frighten you to say that I have enjoyed today?”

“Oh, I’m absolutely terrified,” she breathed. “Now queen me.”

Samir grinned as he lifted a piece of meat to her lips, and she nearly moaned at the rich, juicy aroma that wafted up from it. She opened her mouth, and he slipped it tantalizing over her tongue. They both moaned in unison and Abby lifted a bite of meat to his mouth. Surprise flashed in his eyes, and she smiled.

“A small token for my knight,” she murmured and then shivered as his tongue slipped of her fingers, and he took her gift.

They ate their small feast, feeding each other little bites until nothing remained. And afterward, when Abby was lying on her back with one hunger satiated and more than a little aroused, Samir curled toward her, his bright eyes gleaming with an internal fire. He held her gaze as his head dipped as he slowly drew down the length of her body until he was crouched at her feet. He rubbed her feet and then calves and thighs, giving her true royal treatment as he eased the tension from her muscles while taking care to keep his claws sheathed. Though her muscles eased beneath his ministrations, her belly tightened as hot arousal slipped from her cunt to paint her thighs.

Samir paused, his hands massaging her hips and his nostrils flared. He met her eyes questioningly and Abby replied by spreading her thighs. Hunger brightened his gaze,

and his tongue stroked along the inside of her thigh, its silky soft length that bore the texture of neither a cat nor a man, gathered up her arousal in long strokes. He licked one thigh and then the other before sealing his mouth over the core of her pleasure. His tongue bathed her and began to press into her, filling her with its girth as his humanoid mouth closed over her folds and sucked eagerly. Her hips rolled with his strokes, her body arching with the need as the heat of her climax consumed her. Pleasure rose and broke within her repeatedly as she offered her body's nectar to the male that greedily drank it down until she was limp and weak from pleasure. She barely had the energy to twitch anymore by the time Samir pulled away with a deep chuckle.

Through exhaustion and her lust-fog, she stared up at him as he wound himself around her, curling his body around her snugly so that his back faced the sun, casting the whole interior in shadow.

"Rest now," he murmured with a yawn.

Abby peered into his shadowed face, her brow puckering. "What about you? Don't you need to... you know?"

Another raspy chuckle rumbled from him, and he nuzzled his cheek affectionately against the top of her head, drawing her forward so that her head rested on his broad chest just above the powerful beat of his heart.

"Unnecessary," he quietly replied. "This was only for you, my queen."

A smile drifted over Abby's lips as she drifted into the best sleep of her life.

Chapter

Sixteen

Samir woke within the lean-to, his ears pricking as the fine, barely visible whiskers around his cheeks slowly lifted and expanded. Something was wrong. There was no sound. It was as if the entire oasis had gone silent in the very late hours of the afternoon. Even the drone of insects was significantly reduced. There was the bitter, somewhat sour, musk in the air that made his nose wrinkle.

Someone was out there. A human male from the smell of it. Samir bared his teeth, his frame nearly vibrating with the tension suddenly running through his muscles.

Abby stirred at his side, her head lifting as she blinked sleepily. “Samir, what is it?”

He shook his head and rested his hand on her in warning. “Shhh,” he whispered.

Rolling toward the opening, he remained on his side, listening before slowly rising to all fours, his tail hooking menacingly around him. He heard her move behind him as she likewise crept from their bed. The intense heat of afternoon beat down him and he glanced toward his female worriedly. He had not intended for her to be out in the sun. Abby frowned at him and shook her head slowly.

“I’ll be fine,” she whispered. “Don’t worry about me.”

He reluctantly grunted in acknowledgement and prowled through the grass and fronds concealing their shelter. He did not get far before a massive, long-handled battle ax

descended with a whistle before driving into the sandy turf and lodging there. Drawing his tail around in the direction of the threat, Samir snarled and snapped his tail, expelling two long barbs in the hunter's direction. The brush a short distance away suddenly swayed and tremored erratically as if something crashed through the growth to evade his attack. That and a hissed expletive gave away the male's position.

Samir locked onto it as Abby made her move and ran toward the ax. Her hands curled around its long handle, and she groaned as she set to work tugging it from where it was buried in the sand. Reassured that she was likely outside of range to be harmed, unless the human had another throwable melee weapon, Samir rushed forward toward the brush, stabbing violently with his stinger. The first strike did not land as the male rolled away, but on the second strike, a metal shield rose to counter his attack, and a short sword materialized as a tall human leaped up from his hiding spot to slash it at him in an all-out attack. Growling, Samir spun and snapped his teeth at the male's exposed side while striking again with his stinger in counterpoint which the human countered with his blade, the clack of the blows loud in the oasis.

Samir grinned mockingly at the male. While loud in their strikes against his tail and stinger, the hunter's weapon was nowhere near strong enough to penetrate the natural armor of his tail or break his stinger. With his massive, clawed hands, he knocked the shield from the male's grip and lunged as he went in on an attack. Unfortunately, he misjudged the effectiveness of a thin blade which the male pulled from a sheath strapped around his thigh. It was more a needle than a true blade though possessing one long sharp side. The hunter parried Samir's stinger with his blade, driving his tail to the side at the exact moment he stabbed the blade down, driving it between two segments of his tail's exoskeleton.

Roaring in pain, Samir dropped back from his attack to remove it, giving the male plenty of time to put space between them. The human stood, his chest heaving faintly as he stared hatefully back at him. A low sucking sound followed by that of sand and

grass giving way filled the vacuum between them, drawing the hunter's attention in the worst possible way. Samir froze, his heart growing chilled with an ice that spread through him as the male's gaze landed on Abby just as she straightened, the battle ax clenched tightly in her hands.

Recognition flared in the hunter's eyes for just a moment before his lips twisted with disgust. "So, you are the one they sent—the one that was supposed to save Veldala. Still alive?"

"Naturally. I'm not so easy to kill," Abby replied.

"So, I see," the male slowly replied, a scornful smile curling his lips. "Of all things I had imagined, it was not to find you with the manticore. Mangled somewhere to be brought back, that I had anticipated. I had even accepted that I might have to locate dismembered body parts to return you whole to the king. What have you been doing out here, hunter?"

"Surviving," she replied. "Go back. I do not need your assistance, hunter?—"

"Mesine," the male replied, his eyes narrowing speculatively as he glanced between Samir and his female. "I cannot go back, not once being dispatched. You know the code of the guild."

"But this is my kill," Abby argued, her hand tightening around the handle of the ax in her hands. "By guild code you are not allowed to usurp or interfere with another's hunt. Go back and report your findings to the local guild chapter and get your orders directly from them. But I have this handled."

"Do you? If there is no harm in it, let us work cooperatively," Mesine suggested. "Together we can dispatch the manticore and share the fruits of the accomplishment together."

“I don’t think so.”

The male’s brows lowered in annoyance. “And what, do you imagine, will stop me from just killing you here and reporting your death to the guild? This is what they expect, after all. You will be just another casualty of the manticore and will bring me even more acclaim when I kill him.”

Abby snorted in amusement, but Samir was not laughing. His eyes narrowed on the human as he prowled back to Abby’s side, looming protectively over her as he changed tactics from offensive attacks to forming defensive protection around his female. Mesine’s threat was all too real, and Samir would be cursed in the deepest pits of the numerous hells before he would allow the human approach any closer to his female. She was his weakness, a liability perhaps, but she was his greatest treasure, and his first concern was to make sure no harm came to her over dispatching the male swiftly and brutally. Her presence was a distraction that could weigh against him and result in a costly mistake. He had no regrets for himself. She was worth any handicap dealt to him. But he was under no illusion that any mistakes he made now would likely cost them both their lives. Abby would be dispatched merely for being with him. There was no likely no greater sin for a hunter than colluding with monsters.

As if sensing his worry, Abby shifted her weight so that her side brushed his. The contact was minimal but the solidarity within it swept through him and a small amount of his tension gratefully eased.

The hunter regarded them, and he smirked. “Ah, so that is the way of it. The monster hunter became the monster’s whore.”

A low growl vibrated through Samir, his mane rising and puffing out aggressively as his tail rose. No man would call his female that and continue to possess a tongue within his mouth. At his side, Abby swung the ax in a relaxed manner by her thigh as

she regarded the male thoughtfully.

“What bothers you more about that scenario. The fact that I enjoy being with Samir and being fucked by him, or the fact that he has better dick than what you could even hope to aspire to in your most vivid fantasies?”

Samir blinked, startled and suddenly very flattered by her unexpected proclamation. If it were not for the fact that they had company, he might have drawn her down into the sand to demonstrate just how much. The human, however, did not think so much of it. His face darkened with a flush of anger, his hand tightening around the pommel of his sword.

“Fucking bitch. Females should never have been let into the honored guilds. Your base nature is foul and corruptible. It was only a matter of time before a woman hunter debased herself with her prey. This will not go unreported, I assure you. How does it feel knowing that your corruption will bring down every woman in the guild?—”

Abby whipped the ax with such astonishingly unexpected speed that Samir tensed at the movement as if directly under attack himself though he watched the ax whirl toward the unsuspecting male caught up in his own monologue. Despite the length of its handle, it spun through the air with deadly precision, splitting the male’s head on impact like a ripe melon. Blood and brain matter splattered, and the hunter dropped, his look of shock immortalized on his ruined face.

Samir eyed her with concern, worried how she might react after killing another human. Before his eyes, Abby’s triumphant glower faded as she stared at the fallen male before she suddenly went pale and turned away, her body doubling over as she wretched horribly.

“Abby?”

“I’m fine. Just my fucking weak-ass stomach,” she groaned. “I guess I need to work on that more, after all.”

Slowly she straightened, and Samir prowled after Abby as she walked toward him and ripped the ax from the male’s skull.

“This would make a nice addition for the wall,” she observed. She inspected the blade before glancing down disdainfully at the dead human. “Some hunters always were too chatty and erroneously believe that monsters are too stupid to take advantage of it.”

“I did not take advantage of it,” he reminded her drolly but the grin she tossed him was nothing short of delightful.

“Only because I beat you to it. As I was saying about some of the stupid hunters out there, half of them do not recognize the monster until it’s upon them.”

“Are you saying that you are a monster now, kitten?” he rumbled as he rubbed against her side affectionately.

She shrugged but the smile on her face was unrepentant. “As far as the guild is concerned, I am.”

“But they do not know,” he reminded her. “None of this will ever leave this desert.”

“Perhaps so but I cannot lie to myself and pretend like I did not kill a fellow hunter for you,” she replied.

Samir quietly rumbled his agreement. No matter how anything was officially recorded, Abby had made her choices and was willing to remember and live with those choices rather than shy away from them or make excuses to herself. She was

truly the worthiest human he had ever met.

“May I queen you?” he growled, borrowing her terminology from the night before. In this way he could offer himself and give them what they both desired without making any claims or commitments that she was not ready for.

Abby looked at him, her soft lips parting with an expression of surprise before melting into a warm smile. “Well, I am already naked. But only if you plan on fucking me. As good as your tongue is, I want your cock this time.”

Samir nodded and he spun around to approach her from the back. “Down on your hands on knees and I will queen you quite appropriately.”

She swallowed back a strained sound that was suspiciously like a laugh but instead of complying, she gave him a curious look.

“Why that way? Do you not want to be face-to-face while your cock stretches and fills me?”

“I am uncertain,” he replied truthfully. “While we can stand and move a lot like creatures possessing a more humanoid form, breeding is more natural for a manticore’s anatomy if the female has her rump raised.”

“But wouldn’t you like to try it?”

“That sounds a little deviant,” he admitted with a chuckle.

“If you find it too uncomfortable, we can stop,” she promised in a sultry whisper. “But I would really like to try if you wish to please this queen.”

His eyelids partially lowered, and he nodded as he stepped back and waited patiently

as she lay in the grass. Mesine was only a few feet away but having a dead audience did not bother either of them. Flowers crushed under her weight and releasing a sweet perfume in the afternoon air, Abby stretched herself before him like an offering, her legs parting wide exposing the dark pink feminine flesh concealed at their apex.

The scent of her arousal mixed with the blooms, and he shivered with desire as he crept over toward her. Laying himself between her legs, he feasted on her cunt until she was rocking and crying out, her nectar gushing over his tongue as he slapped it against her most sensitive flesh and plunged it deep within to curl deliciously within her channel. Her cunt strangled his tongue whenever she came around and his cock grew heavier within his sheath every time she creamed for him.

Finally, he withdrew to peer down at her as he ran his tongue hungrily over his teeth and lips. He had seen and toyed with Jeriah's cock often enough to know how a human prick compared to a manticore's engorged cock. Still, he was caught for a moment as he crouched between Abby's legs and watched his thickened cock extrude from his sheath. It was longer, harder, and girthier than that of a human with a pointed, slightly upturned head designed to press against the female's womb in the best position for implantation and depositing his nourishing seed required for young to grow. Outside of the difference in shape, his cock was studded with short, soft, flexible spines designed to stimulate his mate from the inside.

Abby stared at it with fascination and a small amount of trepidation. Samir was not insulted. The first time he mounted her; she had not gotten a good look at it. He imagined that the difference would be intimidating.

"Are you ready?" he asked, not entirely sure himself of accomplishing anything at this angle, though he did admire the way her breasts rose prettily for him.

She nodded and he lowered himself further so that the tip of his cock tapped her folds briefly before slowly pressing into her heat. A gasp rose from her, and she moaned

her encouragement. Her fingers curled around the flowers and fragrant grasses on either side of her, clutching them tightly as his cock tightly plugged her little, tight channel. It squeezed him deliciously and he shivered as her cunt rippled around him, drawing on his length in a languid, deep pull. He was too large to enjoy her breasts at this angle, but he enjoyed the sensation of them rubbing against the rounded shape of his chest. Drawing his hips back awkwardly, he thrust and growled with pleasure as she tightened and clenched around his shaft. Pleasure tingled up its length and he knew that his bristles were expanding and lengthening by this and by the strangled moan coming from his female.

His tail curling lovingly and protectively against her, his stinger stroked her side as he rolled his hips and began to shuttle his cock in and out of the stranglehold of her sweet sheath. His head burrowed against hers, his breath panting against her neck as his pace quickened, his pelvis slapping against hers in a wild and erotic rhythm that set his blood aflame within him. Abby cried out beneath him, her body rolling to meet his every thrust, her wet cunt spasming around his cock, choking it with the urgency of her climax. It made his blood burn all the more until he was digging his claws in the sand as he rutted her, his hips moving in a fierce tempo.

He wanted to sting her, he wanted to implant his cub within her, but he did neither—not without her permission. Instead, he buried his face against her neck and gripped the tender flesh with his teeth. Not hard enough to break skin but enough to hold her in place and trigger her own pleasure as her cries of ecstasy wailed in his ears. Her cunt milked him so good, and he purred with pleasure even as he felt the tension rolling through his back, centering and tightening with the rise of his own climax.

Grunting he drove into her, his stinger digging slightly against her belly as his tails tightened its hold on her side. He thrust harder as his cock swelled, the tip pressing firmer as it aligned with the entrance of her womb. It jerked hard and his release rose in a tide, sweeping through him as his cock jerked repeatedly within her, splashing

the inside of her womb with his seed. And still he rutted, pressing harder and deeper on every thrust until she was shrieking her pleasure as her channel spasmed hard around his length, summoning every bit of his seed from his balls. He wiggled his hips until he felt the tip of his cock lock more firmly into place at her cervix. Growling deep, he gave one last thrust, and his hips tensed as the last and largest load of his seed sprayed from him. It flooded him and they cried out together as they writhed and ground against each other to extend the pleasure for as long as it could last.

Every twitch of her cunt set him off again, however, and he would begin rutting her again. He released within her no less than four times before they were done, and his sweet kitten was weak and slick with his offerings. She made a sound of protest when he pulled his cock free, but he gently shushed her.

“We must get you out of this sun. I fear you are already a little burned.”

“Totally worth it,” Abby mumbled and then groaned softly when she tried to move. He winced a little with guilt, but she ran her hand along his cheek lovingly, distracting him. “Okay handsome, get me over there. And don’t look so worried. I have been sunburned a lot worse than this.”

Purring, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her back into the shelter. It was only several hours later, and well after sunset when they were ready to set out again. His muscles labored under the combined weight of the water jugs and Abby across his shoulders and upper back, but he did not mind it. His spirit was high. He was more than a little eager to return home with his female.

One thing was for certain; he was utterly and undeniably besotted with Abby. There could no longer be any denying it. She had long earned his admiration, and now his trust so that he could finally admit that what she had possessed all along was his heart. He would get her a small treat to show her his caring. Surely there was a

caravan somewhere nearby. She slept so heavily that she would not even notice that he had left.

Chapter

Seventeen

A bby's gaze lifted from the page where she was practicing writing the simple sentences Samir had taught her. She frowned at the tea as he poured it into the cups, though she was grateful that the skin on her face no longer pulled with the tightness of sunburn when she did so. Lifting her own cup, she gave the oddly dark liquid a delicate sniff and grimaced. "I think there is something wrong with the tea."

"That's because it is not tea. It's coffee. A very good quality coffee that is highly prized in this region," he replied with a faint purr to his voice. "I just recently acquired a fresh batch while you were sleeping."

Her brows dipped lower as her eyes lifted from the dark, steaming liquid to squint up at the manticore. "Recently acquired? How...?" She groaned and set the cup down before lowering her head into her hands. "Please tell me you didn't raid a passing merchant caravan."

"Do not be ridiculous." He snorted mirthfully and lowered the ornate silver pot in his hands. Now that she was paying closer attention, she noticed that it wasn't the usual smaller pot he used for tea but taller and more fluted in shape. "Of course I did."

She peered up at him between her fingers and sighed, propping her chin on her fist instead. "You do realize that is why they sent me, right?"

He paused in the midst of placing a plate of some sort of sweet confection she knew

for certain that he didn't make. "Should I write them a thank you letter? I could stuff it into the wound of the next human I let flee."

She glowered at him, drawing a chuffing chuckle from the male.

"Do not look so cross, Abby," he purred, tapping her thigh gently with the side of his stinger. "I may wound those who are foolish enough not to get out of my way, but I seldom kill anyone who is not trying to kill me first. There are always some guards who are far more noble than what their pay warrants who try to make a stand, but a few strategic slashes change their minds easily enough."

"And you don't imagine that is the cause of people wanting to kill you?" she retorted.

"I do not," he said primly despite his grin as he nudged the plate toward her. "They should be leaving me coffee, tea, and various treats as gifts for all the good that I do them. Speaking of which, I have acquired gifts for you," he purred as he nodded toward a small stack of novels boasting adventurous titles penned to them that had her clutching them to her chest.

"I wanted to get you jewels and things of beauty, but it seems that coffee, snacks, and books was the best this particular caravan supplied."

"You say that likes it a bad thing when I can't think of anything else I would like better," she hesitantly admitted.

Holding her books within her arms, she eyed the plate for a moment. They did look good. She knew she ought to protest eating ill-gotten treats and the lavish present of books, but on the other hand it didn't do to let them go to waste. After a moment of indecision, she leaned forward and plucked up a puffed pastry dusted with large crystals of sugar. He certainly knew the way to a girl's heart. If he hadn't already captured it that was—not that he would be especially pleased to hear that either way

considering his apparent determination to remain unyoked to a mate, so she kept it to herself. Wouldn't he have said something by now, otherwise? It was a crushing thought but one that she was resolved to keep pushed back to the furthest recesses of her mind so as to not dwell on it and ruin her time with him.

Licking a bit of sugar off her thumb, she turned a skeptical look at him. "What do you mean by 'all the good you do for them?'"

He peered back at her. "Did you not happen to notice how this part of the desert is shockingly free of monsters—aside from myself, naturally."

Abby thoughtfully nibbled at the cookie as she considered it. He had a good point. Normally when traveling through the wilderness one could catch sight of any number of creatures—many of which preferred to scatter or hide when they were at a disadvantage but wouldn't hesitate to attack if the opportunity struck. Even still there were always signs of larger, more dangerous predators that passed through. Although she knew nothing of deserts, now that he mentioned it, the fact that they encountered no signs that she was able to detect was unusual. No one had even so much as mentioned other creatures that lurked in the region.

"And I suppose you are saying that it's due to you? What do you do, just eat everything in your territory?" she asked lightly, still uncertain of whether he was being facetious or not.

He snorted again as if she were a particularly silly child but inclined his head in agreement. "Yes and no. Yes, I'm responsible, yes, I eat most things, but no I don't eat any sort of being that I consider a person." His eyelids lowered sultrily. "As you know, I make an exception for you, little female," he purred.

Abby's thighs pressed together as heat flooded into her cheeks. Although he hadn't mounted her again over the last couple of days, the reminder sent a tendril of heat

stabbing through her. With promises like that, what was holding him back?

His nostrils flared and he smirked, letting her know that he was toying with her in at least one way. Coughing delicately, he picked up a twisted pastry sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon and his expression shifted to a more sober one once more with a flick of his ears. “I do, however, kill plenty that would have raided the towns and villages, razed cities and crushed caravans throughout my territory. It is because of me that these caravans, who threaten me if I so much as dare approach, are even able to safely travel through this part of the desert. Trust me, there are things I would rather be doing. And as picking bits out of my teeth of things I refuse to eat and removing it from beneath my claws is a foul task, I try to use my stinger as much as possible, depleting my venom which requires me to consume a large quantity of food. So why should I not have some sort of tithe for my protection when I can go into the mountains to the southeast and leave the humans to their own devices.”

She mulled over his logic. There was brutality to it given that he took what he wanted whether it was offered or not, but it was also clear that Zayman’s description of the situation had a lot missing. Unless the people were that ignorant, she didn’t know how they could miss it. She doubted that Samir went through the trouble of hiding bodies. He clearly expected some measure of appreciation and reciprocation.

“Have you considered trying to discuss it and offering a trade of service?” The moment the words were out of her mouth, Abby cringed at just how stupid that sounded. Of course, that wouldn’t work if they were trying to kill him on sight. He was a manticore—a dangerous monster as far as most were concerned. The flat look that Samir gave her just compounded her embarrassment and she winced. “Sorry,” she muttered as she picked up her cup and brought the coffee up to her lips.

The hot, bitter liquid hit her tongue, and she nearly choked before catching the delicate hint of spices... the distinct hint of sweetness from cardamom stood out from it, giving it an appealing flavor despite her initial recoil. Experimentally, she took

another sip, this time bracing for the expected bite and was pleasantly rewarded with another burst of mingled flavors. It was actually good.

“It would be infinitely easier if it could be that simple,” he muttered, his ears virtually disappearing into his mane as they flattened. “I cannot even approach a caravan or even a small contingent without weapons being hurled at me.”

“Considering that you are ambushing merchants, I can’t imagine why,” she replied drolly.

To her surprise, it drew a wry smile from the male, and he inclined his head faintly in acknowledgement.

“What you need is a representative,” she continued as she mulled it over. “Someone from the outside who can present your case to Zayman and bring the kingdom into negotiation.”

Samir’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully on her. His smile, when it came, was all sharp teeth and cunning as he regarded her.

“My dear Abby, what a fantastic idea.”

She smiled as she sipped her coffee. Of course it was. Although her family never really expressed any interest in her ideas, she believed that she was quite good at finding solutions. Humming in agreement she swallowed another mouthful of coffee before lowering her cup. “I’m glad you think so. Of course, it might be a little tricky unless you have friends hidden around here that you’ve captured over the years. You’re going to need someone brave enough to risk potentially being slaughtered just for being in your company.”

“That is no issue,” he purred. “I have you, after all.”

She sputtered on her next sip and coughed harshly, her eyes tearing up at the sting in her lungs. “Sorry? What?”

“You shall do it,” he said with a sharp finality in his voice. “We will go to the city, and you shall be my representative to negotiate for the safety of the desert.”

Abby stared at him for a long moment, not certain whether or not he was joking. “Surely you jest. No,” she laughed weakly. When he did not so much as crack a smile, her voice sharpened with denial. “No! Are you crazy? I was sent here to hunt you. I can’t be your representative. Hunters don’t represent on behalf of the monsters they were hired to kill, especially not to their employer. At minimum I could be fined with violating my contract... and then I would most certainly have to say goodbye to any chance of officially joining the guild. Worst case, I’m executed for assisting you.”

Samir sighed impatiently and sipped his own coffee. “You act as if I would truly allow that to happen. If they try to harm you, I will simply burn the city and all its inhabitants to the ground and reclaim my desert in its entirety. The villages and smaller towns may even thank me for ridding them of the ruler who has set his yoke around their throats.”

“We are not doing that either,” she replied flatly.

He blinked his bright green eyes guilelessly at her. “I am uncertain as to how you think I should proceed then. All I have is you. If you do not represent me, I will eventually be forced to level the city anyway. Here, with you by my side, they at least have a chance.”

She groaned, slumping in her chair. “You’re really going to make me do this, aren’t you?”

“It is your idea,” he purred.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t planning on it being me executing it,” she muttered. She rubbed her hand over her face. “You really don’t have a single friend who might be able to pass for human?”

He hesitated briefly. “There is a wind spirit that can make itself appear human- ish . So long as he keeps his magic under control... and does not become angry,” he amended. “Or get overly excited. He can be unpredictable when he is excited, and I fear that he is the excitable sort.”

“Perfect. I’ll just be blamed for a man-eating manticore and a deadly, ‘excitable’ wind spirit terrorizing the city then.”

“Again, I will remind you that I don’t eat men. That infers swallowing. At most I just chew as much as I absolutely must and spit them out.”

She snorted out a soft, somewhat hysterical, laugh. “Perhaps you should hang up the protector role and go around extolling the virtues of spitting over swallowing. Some men have a hard time following why anyone wouldn’t want to swallow.”

Samir gave her a puzzled look that she waved off.

“Never mind.”

She rubbed her brow and sighed heavily. She was most definitely not getting out of it, and he had a point. If Zayman was continuously sending hunters after Samir, sooner or later things would escalate when the manticore finally had enough and went on the offense. It was unconventional but this was her chance to save lives... and really wasn’t that a hunter’s purpose?

“Fine. Fine. But there are going to be ground rules,” she snapped, jabbing a finger in his direction, aimed straight at his nose. “Foremost of which will be no killing or destroying anything unless there is absolutely no choice. And absolutely no harming innocent people.”

His brow lowered, obviously not pleased with her tone, and his wickedly barbed tail swiped angrily but he nodded with a sharp tip of his head. “I would never harm an innocent, but I have conditions too if I must abide by yours. Such as allowing me to protect you even if it is all snarl and no bite. I will trust your judgment, but you will trust my control.”

“Well, we do all know that you are the king of control,” she muttered, thinking again of how long it had been since he had bothered to touch her.

How the hell did he simply turn all that passion off so easily? She was starting to feel a restless itch that was about to drive her mad and fueled her irritable mood. He gave her an arch look, but she again waved it off. She certainly wasn’t in the mood to explain the odd mechanics of her mind and libido when it didn’t even make sense to her.

“So, how are we going to get into the city?” she sighed.

The infuriating male met her question with one of his odd shrugs. “You are the hunter and accustomed to dealing with humans. How would you suggest that we gain entry without rousing immediate suspicion?”

An idea rose to the surface so unholy and so unlikely that it seemed both genius and supreme idiocy at the same time. She licked her lips nervously. What did she have to lose? Apparently, it wasn’t her life if Samir was to be believed, but if she failed, she wasn’t certain if she could face the repercussions.

“Well... do you have any chain?”

He blinked and then smiled. “Perhaps I should demonstrate the answer to that question.”

Chapter

Eighteen

For the first time, Abby was introduced to what lay behind the furthest locked door. She didn't even know what to describe. Half forge and half dungeon in appearance, there was something mildly threatening and yet not that sent a quiver through her. Samir had an assortment of metal cuffs of various thickness and sizes. Some were small enough to fit around the narrowest wrist, and some large enough to collar a bear. And the chain... never had she seen so many chains of various thickness and size of links. She studied it incredulously.

“But where did all of this come from?”

The manticore shrugged. “It is a hobby.”

She blinked and glanced at him over her shoulder. “Collecting chains and manacles is a hobby? That is the strangest thing I've ever heard—well not the strangest. There was a hunter who I heard of who obsessively collected claws which doesn't sound weird until he wants to show you a troll toenail.” She mimed gagging and Samir chuckled.

“No, it is nothing like that. As I live in a mineral-rich cavern and I am capable of producing fires of which I have the ability to control, I enjoy forging. A very long time ago, a human I captured demonstrated such an ability and thirsted for knowledge of it. So, we made a bargain. He taught me everything he knew, and once I mastered it—I gave him a portion of my longevity and let him go.”

There was something within his expression that tightened perceptively when he mentioned the human and she knew without a doubt that this was one he had spoken of. The betrayer. She wanted to poke more into it, but she held her tongue. Some wounds were better left alone.

“Mastered it, huh.” She squinted at him. “Just how long did it take?”

“Just a century or so,” he rumbled absently. “But I was good as my word and let him return to his home—such as it was. I had not expected that in the end he would turn on me.” The manticore let out a dry laugh. “He was not a mere scholar but a hunter and had used me to gain what he wanted before launching his attack.” Samir shook his head sadly. “I suppose you can say that we used each other, each getting what we wanted. I would have given him so much. I would have given him everything, but he insisted that I honor the terms of our agreement. I would never have predicted that he would have prepared a trap, nor that I would have ended up being forced to kill him.” He met Abby’s eyes. “I do not regret killing him for his betrayal, but—” he sighed, “I missed the company once he was gone.”

Abby genuinely didn’t know whether to be horrified that he kept a human who possessed an amusing skill he desired for a century—and what that could mean for her—or to feel sympathy for him. But she didn’t feel mere sympathy. She ached for him because she could see the betrayal and loneliness that was so obviously buried within the heart of the monster currently fiddling with a chain hanging from an anchor in the wall.

Her brow furrowed as she focused on the anchor. Why was there an anchor hook buried in the wall?

Samir struck, moving with unexpected speed. Abby’s skin jumped, flinching instinctively as she prepared for pain that didn’t come. Instead, a cold manacle slipped around her neck, the metal settling against her skin as the latch slid closed

with a click. A second click followed that she knew was the lock fastening in place.

A burst of adrenaline flooded her as the feeling of being trapped hit home. Samir stepped back with a soft purr and Abby instinctively lunged forward, the rattle of a chain following her and then pulling her short abruptly as she came to the end of its length. She tipped backward at the sudden halt to her forward momentum, her eyes widening with the realization that she was falling. Her arms whirled helplessly in a desperate attempt to regain her balance, but it was the warm, strong hands clasping her shoulders that steadied her and Samir's soft purr that settled into her mind, soothing her.

"Shh, do not be afraid Abby. I have you. No harm will come to you. You wished to see my chain? Well, here it is," he rumbled. "The collar that you wear was one that the human you feel such sympathy for crafted with the intent of capturing me. As was the chain that holds you so securely. These were crafted to contain a mantichora's strength while giving pretense of an honorable exchange and friendship with me, and he was the one who wore them in the end until I decided that I was through with him as a reward for his treachery. He thought he would bind me and bring me to his king as if I were a beast to be kept as a pet in a royal menagerie. In turn, I kept him here as my own pet until I became tired of him. I keep them here as a reminder of the duplicitous nature of humans, and yet for you I will wear them."

Abby's breath slowed as her panic receded, and she met her monster's sharp, green gaze. There was no deception in those eyes, no laughter at catching her, just a sober, warm regard that worked to calm the fear that rose instinctively within her. Her hands lifted and she ran her fingers slowly along the wide, heavy band all the way back to the overlapping clasp and lock that held it in place. From there the chain was threaded through, each link as wide as her first two fingers.

"How... how did he imagine that he would get you into this?"

“As I said, though I spoke to him in the common tongue, he thought I was nothing more than a beast and easy to trick.” His thick tail flicked unhappily but his hand moved to grasp the chain as he lowered his gaze to regard it thoughtfully. “I admit that I was foolish with him. At first, I was captivated by the skill with which he created them, employing me to use my magic fire to fashion the chain link by link and solder the collar. And then, eventually, I became infatuated and captivated with the male, himself. It was not until he suggested that I try it on to demonstrate its effectiveness that I realized his intention.”

“And what did you do?” she whispered.

The fleeting smile that curled his mouth was one that bore a hint of sadness. “I turned his trick against him, of course. I pled with the male to show me first how it was done and then I would try it. He was reluctant but finally agreed, blinded by his own determination and his own belief in his human superiority. He thought that I was a dumb beast and would blindly imitate him once he showed me. It was most satisfying seeing him caught in his own trap.”

A shiver ran through Abby as she imagined the man struggling with the magic-forged chain once he realized his mistake. She knew without a doubt that her family would have rushed to rescue the male and believed him worthy of saving despite his treachery. They would have seen nothing wrong with his betrayal but would have applauded him for his cleverness because they wouldn’t have seen Samir as a thinking and feeling being. To her family he would be seen as nothing but a creature to be caged or destroyed despite how intelligent he was and the good he did unasked. He was a monster, they would have reasoned, and regardless of his sentience, the moment he acted against a human, it made him a target for extermination—and rightly so as far as they were concerned. And Abby once would have blindly agreed with her parents because it had been what she had been taught from the time she was small. But now—her stomach turned, rebelling at the thought of senselessly snuffing out his life when he only sought to enjoy the same freedoms, and took his vengeance

as any person would have done. The thought of her family ever finding out about Samir made her feel physically ill.

Her hand closed around the chain just above his as she took a step closer, her eyes lifting to meet his. His pupils contracted into slits and slowly widened into diamonds as his nostrils flared, taking in her scent. The enormity of what was happening here struck her all at once. He would be wearing the same chains, and when he did so he would be surrendering completely to her control. She was wearing the chain now and could feel the weight and strength of it for herself and in doing so understood exactly what he was trusting her with.

“And you will wear this for me?” she whispered. “You will give up your control to me?”

“Will you give up all control to me?” he rasped, tugging very gently on the chain.

Abby shivered at the sudden curl of desire that rose up within her in response to his purred words and the heat suddenly warming his eyes. They glittered down at her as she leaned into him, trusting him despite having her chained and helpless. Was he looking for her to prove something? Perhaps he needed mutual trust to be shown and given in more ways than one. The question was, could she submit to him fully and trust him to hold power over her?

“Yes,” she whispered, the word sighing from between her lips.

His pupils blew out and a shiver ran over him. Samir’s hand tightened on her chain as a soft groan hissed from him, and he lowered his head so that his velvety soft lips brushed her cheek and trailed down to her jaw. His hand skimmed up the length of the chain until he was holding it level with her chin. Keeping the chain short, he held there against him as he explored gently, caressing her chin, lips, the tip of her nose and each eye with his oddly shaped mouth with its hint of feline muzzle. At times she

felt the corner of his lip lift as it rubbed against her skin so that his fang teased her flesh instead. Each time it happened, it caught her off guard and sent a small erotic ripple through her that made his purr ratchet up and he pressed closer, his powerful body rubbing against her through the thick leather and woven fabric that covered her.

Despite the sweltering heat of her clothing—something that she had become accustomed to since arriving in the desert—Abby found herself far more frustrated by how much they muted the sensual glide of his musculature against her own. She made an impatient sound and made as to step back to tug off her shirt, momentarily forgetting the chain until she jerked against its confinement. Samir smiled down at her but did not relinquish his hold. He merely moved his other hand to the lacing on her shirt and patiently worked at the ties, unthreading the length of fabric until it parted, baring her breasts, before falling away completely.

A soft pant burst from her as the cooler air of the cavern teased her skin, drawing her nipples into rigid peaks. Samir ran a velvety finger pad over one, rumbling with pleasure when she jerked and drew in a shocked breath in response to the sensation.

“So soft and vulnerable,” he rasped, the side of his claw flicking the tip of her nipple. “Your submission pleases me. It makes me hunger even more for you to see you quiver so sweetly and so trustingly within my hold.” Nuzzling her jaw, his textured tongue slipped out of his mouth and ran slowly along the sensitive skin of her neck. “Take my cock into your little human hands. I trust you to touch me.”

Shivering again at his words, her hands lifted between his legs, her fingers skimming over his firm, round sac before arriving at the sheath of skin that contained his sex. Her hands lingered there, and her eyes dropped between them in confusion before lifting once more to his face.

“I don’t... How?”

He chuckled softly. “Just slip your fingers inside. I would normally have extruded by now, but I want to feel you claim what you want.” He brushed his nose against the underside of her jaw. “I want you to take my cock for your own and claim it and desire it as much as I do your snug human cunt.”

Her brow furrowed slightly. Was that why he hadn’t tried to mount her again... he was waiting for her to show him that she wanted it? After pinning her beneath him and vigorously fucking her in the midst of her escape attempt, it hadn’t occurred to her that he would want or need anything more from her than to be an available pussy. Discovering that he wanted her to be the aggressor and lead with her desires as if they were natural and healthy rather than forbidden sent a burst of excitement through her and she felt her arousal slip through her belly, warming and wetting her sex. It was wrong and against every principle a hunter had, yet something hidden deep within her responded and was impacted by his words—by his permission to not only pursue her pleasure with him but to claim it. Still, his request gave her a pause. He truly wanted her to put her fingers inside his sheath?

“Isn’t that going to be painful?”

He groaned softly, his hips canting so that the fur of his sheath slid over her hand. “Only in the best way.”

She was still doubtful, but another tremor of excitement tore through her as the last of her resistance melted away. She slipped first two fingers and then three onto the slit of his sheath, encouraged by his low grunt of pleasure as his eyes slid shut. He was silkier in there than she expected, and even warmer. She spread her fingers, fascinated at the stretch of the skin and his breathy moan in reaction. Licking her lips, she pulled her fingers partially out and scissored her fingers wide at his entrance before slipping her whole hand inside. His hips jerked and he grunted again as his cock suddenly shot up within his sheath and filled her hand with its damp, velvety girth.

She stroked him for a moment before tightening her hold as his shaft and slowly pulling his cock out. Her manticore growled softly and his pelt shuddered as several drops of precum spurted into her palm. Abby smiled to herself and cupped her hand over the head of his phallus, rubbing slickness over the tip of his cock. Samir's hips began to rock instinctively, his breath bursting from him in ragged pants as she stroked him from root to tip. Precum continued to dribble from his tip, and she felt herself grow wetter with her own rising excitement heating her belly. A tingling sensation pulsed in the region of her clit and Abby squeezed her thighs squeezed together.

Samir buried his face against her neck, his tongue stroking over her skin in time with each tug on his cock, pausing only occasionally to sniff at her skin. With the spike in her arousal, however, his hand had dropped to the ties on her leather pants. Unknotting them, he tugged the ties loose, each yank bumping her belly against her hand fisted over his cock and drawing a growl of excitement from him. His hand on her chain tightened and suddenly he gave it a firm pull, turning her toward the wall, dragging her hand free from his cock in the process. Her hands slapped against the wall in front of her, cushioning her weight as he kept her pinned in place with one hand upon her chain while dragging her pants off her legs and tossing them aside with his other hand. The heat of his body brushed over her back as he mouthed her shoulder for a moment before he began to lower the bulk of his body in a crouch behind her. His hand slowly dragged down the length of her chain as his body lowered, keeping it taut while his nose traced a path down her back.

He sniffed at her skin, grumbling, and grunting to himself as he did so until his breath fanned over her ass. Her weight shifted against the wall, and she adjusted her arms to compensate for it as he lifted her leg up to the side, exposing her pussy to the cool air.

The first stroke of his hot tongue along her clit and down her slit made her climax with the intensity of the textured, slick surface against her most sensitive spots. The tremors of her orgasm continued to ripple through her with every stroke of his tongue

as he moaned and greedily lapped up every drop of her essence that slipped from her before delving into her channel, his tongue plunge and lapping alternatively until Abby was writhing and gasping, her pussy spasming as it gushed for his pleasure. The sudden prick of his claws on her leg was startling as he suddenly shot to his feet. His fur brushed over her back as his body covered hers and the damp length of his rigid cock brushed her folds as it lined up with her core.

“My sting... do you want it?” he rasped.

The chain rattled slightly as she shook her head, already overwhelmed by the sensations washing over her. Grunting in acknowledgement, Samir hips snapped, driving his cock forward, stretching her pussy around it, until it was buried to the root. His cock pulsed and Abby could feel the spines rising as he ground himself against her core, the head of his cock sliding and bumping along the mouth of her womb. Gasping, Abby trembled in place against the wall as she gushed again with a surprise climax that shot from that deepest place within her. He growled in satisfaction and drew his hips back, the flexible spines dragging in her channel, forcing soft cries of pleasure from her from rocking back in.

Samir’s growls filled her ears, his hand holding firmly to the chain and sliding up to where it met the collar as he rutted into her, his hips dragging back and snapping forward first with slow rocking motions but gradually growing in intensity as his cock pounded into her with a strength that would have thrown her into the wall if she wasn’t already braced against it. Abby lifted her ass eagerly and pressed back against the wall, meeting him thrust for thrust to the best of her ability as he held her helpless beneath him.

The spines on his cock inflated further as his cock swelled and jerked within her, making every drag of his cock within her channel increasingly difficult and more pleasurable for the slight sting of discomfort. Abby gasped, her cries growing louder as her fingers dug into the rock wall beneath her. A warm wash of pleasure rose

higher and higher within her as the tension within her belly and along her back and thighs continued to tighten with a deeper orgasm rising beneath the tide.

Samir growled in her ear, his mouth clamping on her shoulder as his hips jerked against her in a frenzy, chasing his own release even as he wrung orgasm after orgasm out of her.

“Come, female,” he lifted his mouth to growl as his shuttling cock filled her again and again, sparking her deepest points of pleasure repeatedly. “Squeeze my cock in truth so that I may spill within you. Milk me as a female’s cunt milks her male when she desires to be bred by him.”

Abby trembled and then cried as his cock drove deep and held, her pussy clasp tightly around his length as she came. They pulsated together, his deep growl filling the cave, as his cock spewed hot streams of cum deep within her and her channel rippled and convulsed greedily on his length, hungry for all that he had to give. She felt the side of his stinger slap her side as if, reacting on instinct, he had come closer to stinging her and turned his tail aside only at the last moment. That some threat was enough to send her crashing into another as Samir issued a guttural sound as he thrust deep and held, drenching her pussy with the final streams of his seed. He trembled against her for a moment and sighed heavily as his hand finally went lax on the chain.

She continued to remain braced against the wall for another moment as his cock pulled free, sending another burst of pleasure through her as a mixture of their combined fluids spilled from her body. His satisfied purr made her smile, however, as his hands unfastened the manacle from around her neck and let it fall once more to the cavern floor. His hand cupped her pussy, rubbing his seed into her mons as he pressed a kiss against her neck.

“Did you enjoy seeing my chain, Abby?” he purred.

She nodded weakly and grinned up at him when he lowered her leg and gently turned her in his arms. “Can’t beat a good demonstration. I hope that my turn holding the chain gives us an opportunity to try that again with roles reversed.”

He returned her smile with a sharp, toothy one of his own. “It would be my pleasure. Perhaps not on the open desert when I need to have control of my senses, but I will not be remiss at giving you your turn.”

Abby looked forward to it, even though the reminder of what was to come sent a tremor of anxiety through her.

Chapter

Nineteen

Despite his confidence that what they were doing was the only real resolution to the threat, Samir could not help but think that he was making a bad decision taking Abby into the desert and back to Veldala. While the desert was often dangerous and treacherous to the degree that she had yet to experience, the human city seemed a perilous place to take the female desired for his mate.

He shook his head at himself. It was foolhardy to consider Abby his mate. From the beginning she had been his captive, one that had repeatedly attempted to escape him until she lost the only thing that would help her regain her freedom. She had been with him only because she had no other choice in the matter. He had allowed himself to enjoy it and had allowed himself to become even more attached to her. Now that he was returning her to the humans, it was time for him to pay that price. He had to be the biggest fool. Perhaps even more so now that he had broken from his lope into a walk prematurely to rest but provided himself with an opening to think about the matter more than he wanted to.

“You’re quiet,” Abby served as she leaned forward over his shoulder to speak quietly into his ear. “Are you worried?”

He merely grunted in reply, but her fingers teased the ultra-sensitive edge and tip of his ear, sending a tingle of pleasure through him that repeated and vibrated until his ear began to flick so erratically that he nearly stumbled. Turning his head to look back at her, he gave her a peevish look.

“Why would I be worried? We are merely walking into a city full of humans who will either scream at the sight of me or attempt to kill me... and you just for being with me,” he pointed out.

Abby shook her head, a faint smile on her lips. “They wouldn’t dare if they see me with you. Guild business is not to be interfered with. Granted, I’m not technically a member of the Hunter’s Guild yet, but they won’t know that. You are safe with me,” she assured him. She rested her head on his mane, her fingers twisting restlessly in it. “Somehow, I doubt that is what’s really on your mind.”

“I am not worried about my safety,” he rumbled in reply. “A manticore is not an easy thing to kill, as you are aware. I am worried that you will be in danger for no other crime than being by my side.”

He sensed her frown, her mouth moving against his mane as it downturned. “If that is the case, then let’s go back. There is no need to do this.”

His eyes slid shut, humbled. Returning to the city would have given her the perfect opportunity to escape him and yet she suggested that they return to his cavern—where she would still be in danger from the next hunter sent after him. And another. And another. She would never not be in danger. He did not mind confronting the creatures of the desert with her as that was what she was bred and trained for, but if things remained as they were, she would be ceaselessly pitted against her own kind. He could not do that to her.

Burdened by his conflicted feelings, he did not answer right away. He trotted across the sand. Gods knew that the desert had enough dangers. He trotted a fair distance before a tingle rushed through the sensitive pads of his hands and paws of subtle vibrations from movement beneath the sand. He stopped short and hastily backed away as the sand boiled up and a giant sand viper rose from the sands. Abby jerked in surprise but allowed herself only the singular sharp gasp and tremor before flattening

herself against him. She clung tightly to him by her knees around his torso and her hands in his mane so that she moved easily with him, her weight naturally shifting with his as he danced out of its immediate striking zone.

“Fuck, that’s huge,” she whispered in awe, her hand tightening around the lance that he had retrieved from his trophy wall just earlier that morning.

She was not wrong. Its head was nearly twice the size of his head, and the long coil of its body that was exposed above the sand was nearly the length of one of his den’s passages. With its thick black and gold hide, it was, by its nature, impervious to fire, and his projectile barbs were nearly useless on it unless he was lucky enough to strike the creature’s small eyes. His claws could wound it, but he would only be able to bring it down with a powerful dose of venom from his stinger directly to its nervous system. Every moment spent within striking distance of the viper was risky. It required dispatching it quickly and giving as few opportunities to attack as possible.

“We need to move in close and strike fast to bring it down before it has the opportunity to envenomate either of us,” he hissed as he continued to weave away before it had the opportunity to strike. “There is no way to escape it other than perhaps by retreating.”

“We can’t do that. We can’t leave it for a caravan to run into,” Abby quietly replied as she adjusted her grip on her javelin. “Besides, I’ve waited all my life for this moment. Let’s do this.”

He rumbled in agreement, a sense of exhilaration shifting through him as he scented her excitement in the air and felt the tension of her muscles around him. He expected nothing less from a female born to hunt. Keeping low, he turned and rushed at the viper, taking care to keep his movements smooth so as to not accidentally unseat his mate. Sand sprayed up as he skidded close to it. Crouching low, he swiped out with his claws, raking deep furrows into its body that had the viper twist away at the same

moment Abby straightened and jabbed her javelin upward, landing a blow between the segments of its belly as the tip stabbed deep. The creature's mouth opened open with a violent hiss as it thrashed, its momentum yanking Abby from her perch.

As the trained hunter she was, she held tight to her weapon so that it dislodged as she dropped to the sand. Samir watched her fall closely from the corner of his eye even as he circled his prey to make another attack. A prickle of alarm rose through him but then eased when he saw her push herself to her knees. She was unharmed. Good.

As anticipated, the serpent recoiled, its body low as it coiled back, withdrawing to make another strike. That was exactly the opening he was waiting for. He leaped for the back of its neck, the claws of his hands and paws digging deep as he sank his teeth into the sensitive tissue just behind its skull. The force of his weight and the momentum of his leap drove the creature's head to the ground. It immediately writhed, its body twisting in an attempt to dislodge or crush him beneath its weight, frustrating his attempts to bring up his stinger as he was slammed repeatedly into the ground. The serpent's blood filled his mouth, but it was not enough. He was starting to feel lightheaded from the blows and half-blind from the sprays of sand every thrash of the serpent's coils sent into the air.

A shrill sound rose above the cacophony of his battle, and his eyes turned in its direction as his mate sailed through the air with a leap, her javelin stabbing deep into the viper's eye. Its head dropped and then whipped back into the air, rising him higher and higher with it. Elation filled him. He was no longer trapped uselessly against the sand! Snarling deep in his chest, he curled his tail high before whipping it in a sharp, downward motion. His stinger landed, stabbing into the center of the skull as he delivered a fatal load of venom directly into its brain.

The viper jerked wildly and then it fell, taking Samir with it, the sand exploding around them with the impact of the creature's body to the ground. His ears rang but he heard the muffled sound of Abby's feet racing toward him and the brush of her

hands over his fur.

“Samir, are you okay?” she shouted, worry thick in her voice.

Groaning, he gratefully unlocked his jaw and dislodged his claws so that he was able to slide free from the serpent’s neck. He lay in the sand, dragging deep breaths into his lungs as he rolled to his side to peer up at Abby.

“Fine. Just need... to catch my breath,” he replied. “They usually... are not so big.”

Abby laughed with relief and sank to his side. She had pulled her lance free from the viper’s head and gore dripped down the length of its sharp tip and onto the sand as she laid down on the ground beside her.

“It was a hell of a ride though,” she replied and smiled despite himself.

“That it was,” he agreed. “Was that your first hunt?”

She nodded. “My first real hunt. I had plenty of practice with my family in controlled situations but this... this was the real deal.”

“Was it as good as you imagined?” he rasped.

A shiver ran through her, and she nodded. Her gaze shifted to his. “Do you think that makes me a terrible person to say that I enjoyed killing it? I know it’s what hunters are supposed to do but I do not recall my parents ever saying that they enjoyed it. Not like that.”

He shook his head. “No. It is the nature of the predator to enjoy bringing down its prey. It satisfies an instinctive need within us. This is just who you are, and it is magnificent.”

Abby smiled and leaned against him. “We made a pretty good team, though, huh?”

He swallowed thickly and nodded. “There is no other that I would rather hunt with,” he replied honestly. “And until now, I have never before wished for a companion in the hunt.”

A smile lit her face, and she ran her fingers through his mane. “You never answered me before. Why not just go back?”

“I have already answered this,” he rumbled evasively.

“You have, huh. The last thing you said is that I would never be safe—” her voice trailed off, her hand going still. He felt her weight shift just before he became aware of her eyes on him. “Is that why you are suddenly doing this? You are worried about me being harmed out here? Haven’t I just proved myself?” she demanded.

“The creatures of the desert are not what I am worried about,” he spat as he lurched to all fours. She caught herself with one hand as she glowered up at him. “Do you not comprehend the situation? They will never stop sending hunters.”

Abby stared at him for a moment and then her shoulders slumped with a weary sigh. “You’re right. They will always be there, making the desert and the cavern a prison.”

“You have the opportunity to escape the prison, Abby,” he said gently, though he hated the words he had to speak.

Her eyes lifted to him curiously. “What do you mean?”

Samir drew a deep breath to fortify himself, needing that strength to push him to give her what she needed. “With your aid, I will consider your debt of life to me paid. You will be free to return home, Abby.”

She stared at him, her eyes round with shock. “What?” she whispered.

He nodded, silently affirming his words. “I will speak no further on this. It is a long way to the city still and the sun is climbing high. Let us rest.”

Turning away, he found a space among the serpent’s coils and dug out a protected shelter there. No one would come close enough to the viper to investigate so they would be able to lower his guard completely to truly rest and recover.

And perhaps he could pretend like his heart was not bleeding from the decision that he knew was to come.

Chapter

Twenty

The desert seemed larger than she remembered, though Abby admitted that the first time she had been distracted with her thoughts of her mission and the company of her guides. Or perhaps it just seemed to go on and on because her mind kept circling back to Samir's words. She couldn't believe that he was just going to let her go—just like that. They were amazing together in bed and as partners, and yet he was just going to free her after working so hard to keep her? She didn't understand it. She understood his gratitude if she could help him negotiate peace with King Decort but that seemed a little extreme. Even more confusing was the fact that she wasn't even remotely excited about the possibility. The thought of leaving Samir and the desert made her... sad.

Abby groaned inwardly. Gods, why was it so hard to admit to herself that she'd somehow fallen in love with the beast? Such things just were not done. Even close personal companionship with a monster was frowned on when seen amongst those outside their circle. Gossip abounded about the red-haired warrior from the north who traveled alone with a minotaur. A hunter choosing to stay with a monster would be met with outright disdain, if not an immediate threat to her life. And yet she welcomed it. She didn't want to be just another hunter fulfilling her duties and earning fame.

She wanted Samir.

But he was correct that they needed to sort out the matter with the king and Veldala

first. So, she did as he asked and said nothing more about it. There would be enough time to work this all out afterwards. Instead, she engaged with him in light conversation when not just enjoying the companionable silence between them as they made their way across the desert. She swore she still smelled the stink clinging to her from the sand viper rotting in the sun and she mentally added a long bath to her list of things to do. Until then, she was content enjoying the view.

Seated upon Samir's back as he alternately ran or slowed to walking a pace as they crossed the desert, it truly gave her an appreciation of just how big, beautiful and yet utterly desolate it was. The desert would mercilessly kill someone like her if she didn't travel across it well prepared. Even travelling at the speed with which they were going, they had to camp during the hottest part of the day as they slowly made their way to the capital. One day passed into a second and then a third, and it was on the fourth when they stopped for a rest and to share water that Abby reclined against Samir's side and decided that the desert at night was her favorite thing.

She certainly understood why Samir chose that time to prowl, hunt, and travel. Though with her human limitations, her own travel would have been restricted without him since he could navigate the desert expertly without the sun whereas she was practically night-blind. Despite this, she loved the night. The punishing sun was not only absent from the sky, but the desert came to life with insects and the distant sounds of nighttime creatures singing to each other. Logically she knew that many of them, like most wildlife that now occupied the world, were once native to the fae realms before the collision and yet she already couldn't imagine the desert without them. Would the desert have been much quieter in the days that preceded their fragmented records?

Abby stared up at the starry sky as she sipped from her water bottle, wishing that they could just stop and enjoy the tranquility that the night offered. The chain hanging from Samir's manacle rattled as he shifted positions and stretched tiredly on the sand, reminding her of their purpose. As much as she hated that he insisted that she put it

on him just that morning, it was a stern reminder that this wasn't a leisure trip for their pleasure. They had a purpose for all of this, and she couldn't forget that. At least not until they completed what they had set to do.

"Do you suppose that it is much farther to the city?" she mused.

Samir expelled a heavy breath, his sides heaving and shook his head, sending the collar and chain rattling. "Not much. It is why I insisted that you remove the chains from the pack and put them on me when we last rose. We are getting close enough that there is a chance that local travelers might catch a glimpse of us. If word of our approach gets back to the city, it cannot be any other than what we want to them to believe—that a hunter is arriving with her captured prey."

"Understood. Do you think we will arrive by tonight then?"

"We will likely crest the final hill and arrive some time following the dawn. You will need to bind my tail after we rest to complete the illusion."

She nodded and stifled a yawn. As much as she enjoyed the night and had rested during the midday hours in the hollow that Samir dug out that afternoon, she was a creature of habit and was battling against an undeniable urge to burrow down against the male and drift off to sleep. She must have given something away, however, because he made a soft sound in his throat.

"You are tired," he observed in a quiet rumble.

She chuckled and tucked her head against his shoulder. "Despite all evidence to the contrary since we've been together, most humans are not all that nocturnal. Our vision is poor in the dark and we would be vulnerable to wild animals, so we tend to stay indoors when the sun goes down. I like keeping odd hours to enjoy some of the night, and I have been awake far later than normal since being captured by you, but

this is late even for me. Especially with all the traveling.”

A soft purr rattled from him, and he shifted to brush to his cheek against the top of her head as his big, paw-like hand gently squeezed her thigh. “Then rest a little. We can spare an hour or two.”

A yawn sneaked by her defenses and she slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle it. “Are you sure?”

“I am certain. I will keep watch and make sure nothing tries to sneak off with you—seeing how your human flesh is such a tasty treat,” he teased, “but it seems that your kind requires more rest, and we are in no hurry.”

Inching up a little higher, she buried her face in his soft mane. “I would’ve thought you would be eager to get this finished so you can be pampered with chocolate, coffee and tea.”

His chuckle rumbled through her, causing her teeth to rattle slightly but she smiled into his mane enjoying just being there with him as the desert sang to them.

“It will come soon enough. Besides, as delicious as chocolate, coffee, and tea are, nothing is as great of a delicacy or gives me more joy than you.”

The confession was whispered lightly, quiet enough that she might have missed it if she were not pressed up against him.

“You make me happy too,” she admitted. “All I thought I ever wanted was to be a respected hunter like my parents and my family... but being with you I guess just slowed me down and made me really take into consideration what makes me happy.”

“And I do that?” he rasped, a note of wonder in his voice.

“Between all of your insults, prodding, and reluctant if genuine praises... yes,” she agreed with a chuckle. “I’ve enjoyed having coffee and tea with you as we read and taking little strolls around the pools deep within the caves. Even the trip outside to the oasis to fetch supplies. I’ve enjoyed living day to day with you without worrying about when or how I’m going to make my reputation but just enjoying every moment in your company.”

“Would you... consider staying after all is done?”

She blinked in surprise and straightened. “You are asking me?”

His ear flicked and a disgruntled look crossed his face. “I know I said that we would not speak on this, but I admit that I offered to free you mostly because I had already decided that I do not fancy having a female with me any longer if you are just my prisoner. It lessens the moments I enjoy with you knowing that you are there only because I captured you. I intend to release you after we concluded our bargain but now, I wonder if you would stay?”

Her lips parted to blurt out the answer rising readily to her lips, but he shook his head. “Do not answer now. Just consider it for when the moment comes. If you stay... it will mean forever. You will never be able to return to the life you once had. I am aware that this is a tremendous sacrifice.”

Abby’s lips twisted faintly in private amusement. He did not understand. He had freed her in so many ways; she was ready for this last opportunity to experience true freedom... with him. But if he wanted her to wait and “think about it,” so be it.

“You are saying that you want me?” she whispered teasingly.

“More than anything,” he growled. A faint smile curled his mouth, and he inclined his head. “Of course. If you are slow to decide and are not eager to flee from me

when all is said and done, then I would be pleased if you would remain with me as my guest while you think it over.”

She wrapped her arms around his thick neck and hugged him, loving his warmth and hating the brutal collar pressed between them simultaneously. She couldn't wait to free him once more and toss the damned collar into the sand. It was wrong to her on so many levels that they were going to be entering the city with Samir tethered to her like a beast.

“Do not fret, Abby,” he rumbled soothingly as he scooped her up and tucked her against his chest. “Rest. I will wake you when it is time.”

Sighing softly, she nodded and snuggled against him, the tempo of his heart thumping beneath her ear slowly working its magic as she drifted to sleep.

In her dream her two choices before her danced within her mind, showing the alternate futures that lay before her. One where she was a huntress, alone except for her crew and hunting dangerous things within the depths of the woods as she always imagined that she would do, and the other where she was nestled within him in their comfortable cave. Perhaps they would have a brood of offspring, but in her dreams, she saw her hunting by his side, protecting the people who depended on them when not spending their days comfortably together. It was that future that gave her a sense of contentment and warmth deep within her heart.

She wasn't sure if what she felt for him was the sort of love to base one's future on, but she loved him nonetheless and wanted to spend the years figuring it out with him. It sounded like the start of a new adventure to her. Yes, Samir was a monster—and he made no pretense of being particularly human-friendly and he was, in fact, in possession of very violent tendencies—but never once did he use them against her. At least, not beyond chasing her in pinning her in place which was more foreplay between them than anything. And gods how she wanted to be with him in every way.

Abby smiled in her sleep and rubbed her cheek against a soft pelt of fur, a rattling purr carrying her deeper into her dreams where he waited to take her on new adventures.

Chapter

Twenty-One

The city was busy and alive with foreign sights and sounds that were typical of most large cities, but Veldala's activity was fraught with a different kind of energy. The populace shied away from them as Abby walked with her leashed manticore down the main street that ran through the city to the palace rising above the public buildings on the other side of the market. Despite the distance the people kept from them, they watched fearfully as if they expected at that moment that Samir would break from Abby's control. This was despite the precautions that they took to render him harmless in appearance.

Smaller manacles bound his arms and legs as he prowled on all fours to keep his stride checked. There were short chains running between his bound wrists and another between the manacles on his legs and both chains were connected in turn by a longer chain so that he had no hope of successfully running or leaping. There was also an enchanted golden band that ran across his mouth, held in place with a leather strap, stifling his fiery breath and blocking his ability to bite. Even his tail was bound to his back where it couldn't inflict damage.

He was rendered as helpless as possible and still people stared at him as if he were about to strip their flesh from their bones. It annoyed her more than it ought to have. She knew that people were afraid of monsters and had every reason to be—elsewise her family and many other hunters wouldn't be necessary—but her hand tightened on his chain, and she gritted her teeth tightly together as they made their way down the street.

She noted that word appeared to spread rapidly of her arrival. Not surprising all things considered. The moment she stepped out of the market, an armed escort surrounded her, blocking off the crowd. They made a show of forming a barrier to protect the populace from “the beast.” This much she knew from the bits of language she was able to decipher shouted from the guards. They were warning people to remain back for their protection, that they had arrived to secure the beast and bring it before the king for the reckoning of the gods. It was not the first time Abby heard of a king being referred to as a vessel or even a half-divine descendant of a deity, even if it was utilized to justify their absolute authority no matter how deplorable they were as a ruler, so she kept her expression flat as she followed the men who took position in front of her.

Samir did not appear to even react to the guards, not even when Zayman finally joined them at the palace gates, a look of shock flitting across his face. His gaze briefly shifted away from them and appeared to search someone out before returning to her. Abby’s eyes drifted away from his displeased expression, noting the considerable height of the palace walls and the luxurious greenery and gardens just inside them. Only the palace was walled and possessed greenery. It was a stark contrast to the rougher buildings of the city itself, signs of suffering among the populace, and open vulnerability of the city beyond the palace. It seemed that the king was well fortified against anything that the desert could throw at him, including his own people.

Zayman edged in closer to her side, keeping her in between him and the manticore, drawing her attention back to him—and Samir’s sharp glare as well, though he didn’t notice—as he leaned in with an unwelcome familiarity. “This is not what we agreed upon. You were not paid to fetch a monster but to do what your people do—hunt it.”

“I saw an opportunity and took it. A generous king will reward someone well who can bring him fabulous sights,” she murmured.

Zayman scowled but sighed, his eyes rolling upward. “As it happens, you are correct, and the king is beside himself with a chance to include a fabled mantichore to his menagerie.”

Abby made a non-committal sound, choosing to ignore the part about the menagerie. She had said she would show the king sights to draw him out to negotiation, not with any attention in allowing him to keep Samir. But that seemed like a detail that she would be wise to keep to herself for the time being. Instead, she watched avidly as he waved away the guards and gestured for her to follow him as they proceeded beyond the gates. The path beneath their feet was paved with literal gold that wound through the blooming courtyard garden to the ornate palace rising at the center of the royal complex.

The elegance of the courtyard gardens was breathtaking. She didn’t recognize most of them and yet was surprised to see that there were a number of flowers included among them that she recognized from the northern lands where the weather tended to be temperate and wet. Fat roses bloomed forming long, graceful hedges and she wondered in passing just how much water was needed to keep the heat from killing them. The lush scent of the roses mingled with other fragrances from the numerous flowering plants that were displayed in fine urns and rode up trellises. It was a fantasy garden of delights that she was certain likely hid away more than one courtier absconding with their lover. She was suddenly glad for Zayman’s company as her escort. She certainly had no interest in coming across any trysts. Although she considered herself far from a prude, it was just one other thing that added to the carefree decadence of her surroundings in ways that made her distinctly uncomfortable. It was as if no one within the walls had a care for anything happening beyond them and she found that highly concerning.

“His majesty Vincent Decort has a great love for splendors,” Zayman continued dryly. “He spares no expense on his vast gardens, as evident before you, nor on his menagerie off the north-eastern wing where he explores his various entertainments.”

“I see,” she murmured. “And is his majesty expecting us or...”

“He has cleared his schedule for you,” he interrupted sourly, his lips pinching as if he were sucking on one of the lush lemons hanging from the citrus trees, the branches of which they were currently passing under. “Nothing competes with his love for his entertainments.”

“I see,” Abby murmured as a twinge of uncertainty struck.

If he valued his amusements over his affairs of state, she suddenly had a bad feeling that the king would be less than willing to release Samir even after she presented his offer. If he insisted on adding the manticore to his “collection,” there was little doubt that things would get volatile quickly. Samir was willing to be humbled by removing his defenses to get his audience with the king, but he would not take kindly being caged like a beast. The manticore’s thought seemed to be heading in a similar direction because the chains binding his legs rattled louder, and his steps became warier and more resistant the nearer they came to the palace door.

“We aren’t meeting him in the menagerie, are we?”

“No, thank the blessed gods,” Zayman retorted, his nose wrinkling. “The king may love his collection, but he at least spares his loyal subjects from being subjected to the deplorable stench of his beloved creatures. We will be meeting him in the throne room.”

The throne room, it turned out, for all its extravagance and obvious indulgences put on display and enjoyed by the courtiers, was nothing short of chaos. Laughter filled the room along with the overly sweet smell of the burning, sticky residue gathered from the sap of the sweetwell weed. A woman, clothed in nothing but gold chains fastened ornamentally around her wrists, ankles, belly, collar, and head, lay stretched out on a table in the middle of the room as men drizzled a thick, honey-like substance

over her sex and breasts. The woman's pupils were blown out, likely due to the sweetwell, and she seemed oblivious to the raucous laughter or what the men were doing to her as they rubbed the liquid onto her breasts and between her legs.

"What... what are they doing?" she whispered.

"Impromptu entertainment," Zayman casually replied. "The manticore has some semblance to a man and monsters are known to have a fondness for honey and milk like many other creatures that came to our land during the collision. In short, they want to see if the manticore will feast carnally upon the woman and take his pleasure on her before devouring her whole."

Abby gaped as she came to an abrupt halt. "Excuse me?"

"I know. You don't need to say anything. I am glad that they at least had the consideration to dope up the poor girl first," he said with a grimace. "It's one thing to enjoy witnessing creatures degrading themselves and those we had selected for our pleasure, but the manticore is far more unusual than what we usually submit criminals and servants to. No doubt it's one of his majesty's 'experiments' that he so loves to conduct with his monstrosities."

She blinked rapidly and swallowed back her nausea. She felt as if she were going to be sick. At her side, Samir snarled and backpedaled, his tail tugging violently against the chain holding it in place. Zayman stepped back, giving the monster berth as he stared at him nervously.

"And you just... let this happen?"

His gaze snapped up from the manticore to her once he was certain that Samir wasn't going to break from his bounds and gave her a churlish look. "I don't allow anything. I follow orders. It is how I've risen so high in the court to become the king's trusted

right-hand man. It is a lesson that you should learn as well,” he retorted coolly. “If you had done as you were paid to do—as your family would have done—and simply killed the beast then you would have remained oblivious to this aspect of court life. I should have known better than to trust a mere girl with such an important job.”

Her jaw clenched angrily. “That doesn’t make this okay, nor that you shouldn’t be attempting to put a stop to it.”

Zayman snorted mirthlessly. “Who are you to judge? Look at you! You’ve brought a dangerous monster straight into the heart of Veldala. It is foolish! I expect better professionalism considering who your parents are.”

She straightened, her jaw hardening. “He is not like that. Even my parents would have seen that. Do you imagine anyone would have been able to put him in chains if he was unwilling. He is suffering this humiliation in order to negotiate for the valuable service he provides for the desert. It is for everyone’s mutual benefit. He will continue to protect you so long as he might live in peace.”

“Negotiate?” Zayman barked with laughter. “Is that what this absurd performance is about? I had imagined it to be your plan to get more money from the king. I never would have imagined a hunter becoming a traitor to her own kind and aligning herself with a monster she has sworn to kill. The king and the entire court will laugh at such an assumption. He is a creature with no right to negotiate. He is a dangerous monster. Even now he could potentially break free and bring about a bloodbath on the city and every inhabitant of the palace.”

“And perhaps you would deserve it,” she replied, biting out every word. “Perhaps I should release him now so you can see for yourself.”

His eyes widened and he took a step back from her. “That is madness. To even suggest that.... you are no hunter!”

“Zayman? What is going on here?”

King Decort walked toward them from among the crowd; his brow furrowed with confusion. He was not as old as Abby expected him to be given that he was a king. There was only the smallest hint of gray in his beard, but his features bore the softness of a child. His gaze fell upon Samir then and she saw the true depravity within him as his expression lit up and he licked his lips with his thick tongue hungrily.

Abby straightened, intentionally placing herself between the king and the manticore. This was her opportunity. “I’m here to negotiate on behalf of the manticore, Samir, who is graciously submitting to your royal authority. He destroys many dangers that come into his territory in the desert and deserves rewards and peace, not hunters sent after his skin and tail as trophies.”

The king frowned at her. “What need do I have for that? I have plenty of troops and men at my disposal to send after anything that threatens my kingdom. What I want is right here.” His head craned to peer around her, his frustration melting away as it was replaced by an expression of excitement. “I have never imaged to have a manticore to add to my menagerie, and yet here he is!” he exclaimed with a happily little, sadistic laugh as Zayman pulled her to the side to give the king an unobstructed view. “Oh, isn’t he splendid,” Decort crooned rapturously. “I cannot wait to see what he’s capable of.”

Abby frowned. So that was it. The king did not care about the lives of anyone but his own and had no consideration for anything other than his own perverse pleasures. He would never negotiate for peace with Samir; he only wanted to harm the male she loved and the people within the city. Not only he but his whole treacherous court needed to go if anyone was to have any peace. “I’m quite certain that he’s eager to show you,” Abby agreed darkly.

The king laughed. "Is he indeed? Marvelous. Simply marvelous."

"Your majesty, I don't think—" Zayman protested, but Decort cut him off with a disgusted look.

"Oh, shut up, Bibal. I don't care what you think. If you are not going to participate and join in on our pleasures, then you can leave." A cruel smile tugged at the king's mouth. "Though I do imagine you will be staying. You may protest but your dick gets hard at these little displays, and you've even fucked a siren once we had cut off her wings, removed her treacherous tongue, and pinned her down for you. Consider this an even more exotic experience."

"Yes, Zayman, do stay," Abby agreed, disgust roiling in her stomach.

The king smiled at her and chuckled. "You see even your little huntress agrees. She understands the allure of the forbidden appetites these creatures possess. It spices up the fucking to see a monster's inhuman cock plow whatever pussy or ass that they decide to rut."

Abby gave him a brittle smile in turn as Zayman continued to back away, a cruel and angry sort of glee rising within her as she anticipated what was to happen. "No, I don't think you understand, King Decort. I came here with the intention of ridding you of monsters. It is why he is here as well," she said nodding toward Samir. "And now I see that we get to do exactly that."

The king's smile fell. "I don't understand," he murmured but his eyes widened with a satisfying amount of fear as she whipped her blade from her belt.

She had the key for Samir's chains, but she ignored them for the moment, focusing on the greatest weapon at his disposal. Summoning all the brutal force she possessed, she slashed through the strategically placed ties keeping the binding straps in place. A

broad grin stretched across her face as his tail whipped free through the air and buried deeply within the broad chest of King Vincent Decort. The king's eyes glazed with the force of fiery venom pumping into him, and his mouth gaped in a silent scream as he reached for Zayman as the gutless worm fled.

Abby shook her head as the screams began but she ignored them as she bent to her task, quickly unlocking clasp after clasp, the clatter of the chains falling away mingling with the sounds of terror from the courtiers. They had clearly emerged from the blissful fog of lust and whatever drug they were imbibing long enough to notice their king laying prone on the gold floor, his face swelling and discoloring, and they were now rushing in a blind panic to flee. Samir's tail whipping through the air stirred them to a greater frenzy and she blinked in surprise when several were brought low by projectile barbs viciously flung from the thick ridges of Samir's tail.

He rose above them all like a shadow of death. With one hand he stripped off the gold binding covering his mouth and let out a deep roar that shook to the foundation of the palace as flames spewed from him, rushing over the nearest piece of architecture. It was no mere roar but was laced with magic that she could feel ripple and spark in the air and borrow deep into her bones. Her mage blood responded to it, captivated by its power as he bellowed again, and flames rushed over the surface of the floor as he leaped forward in his attack.

Screams filled the air as he ripped through the courtiers. He ignored the servants, leaving them to go in peace as they gathered up the girl from the altar and hurried away fearfully. Even in his rage he protected them. Abby smiled and holstered her javelin to pull out her crossbow—another treasure from Samir's trophy wall. Drawing back the bow, she locked an arrow into place. She shot the gilded courtiers who would have gladly feasted and fucked while an innocent girl was torn apart until she ran out of arrows. At that point the brutal death from her javelin suited her fine. She pulled it free once more from her harness, sending it flying through the air to bury into the naked chest of a mostly nude male with gold paint applied to his loins,

emphasizing the piercings that run up his cock, many of which were connected by delicate chains. She gave them a curious glance as she stalked past him, wrenching her weapon from his flesh.

Strange how she felt nothing. There was no sickness that rose within her at the sight of his gore. Monsters. They were the true monsters. Every single one of them. She killed until blood became like a second skin, until she at last stood above the one man who had brought her out there.

She smiled down at him and lowering the tip of her javelin on the floor at her side as the sound of pillars cracking from the force of magic and rising heat of the fire filled the throne room. “You didn’t expect me to return, did you? I wasn’t supposed to. You were so surprised when I appeared at the gates and that was because I was supposed to be murdered by your henchman—whomever you had planned to send once I finished the job.”

“You should have died,” he spat out, blood gurgling from his lips.

Her eyes drifted over him casually. Was he wounded already? Ah, there it was. Although small compared to the size of Simar’s stinger, one of her lover’s long barbs stuck out from her employer’s chest.

“You traitor. You are no huntress,” Zayman gurgled weakly.

She cocked her head as she considered him, drawing out a long knife from her belt, her smile widening. “No, you are right.” With one deft motion, she sliced through his throat, enjoying the sight of his blood welling up and spilling forth, purifying the depravity of the palace along with the other blood drenching the stones. She leaned down as the light began to go out of his eyes. “I’m a monster.”

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Samir was as anointed as she was, blood coloring his fur crimson. To Abby he was still the most magnificent male she'd ever seen. He stood before her regal as a king, his mane dripping and his green eyes burning with a fire she wanted to be remade in.

Zayman had been right, she was no hunter. Deep inside she'd been a monster all along. Perhaps that was what her own mother had seen inside her only daughter. Perhaps seeing it had convinced her that Abby needed to be controlled and tempered by marriage to another hunter. Perhaps even her father and brothers had seen it hidden behind her eyes, waiting to be set free. And now that it was, there was no going back. She understood that now.

Abby Sinclair, monster and huntress extraordinaire, stepped into Samir's open arms relishing the connection that she felt with him and only him. She had made her decision in the desert and hadn't even fully realized it, not until confronted with the evidence of what she would have been forced to defend no matter how sickening it was. She didn't want that life. She wanted to protect the desert with Samir and to fall in love all over again with him every day.

"Samir?" she whispered.

"Yes, Abby?"

"I've already decided. Give me your sting. I chose you. I love you and want to remain in the desert with you forever."

A soft growl echoed from his chest and his eyes slid shut as a tremor rushed through him. "Then forever you shall have, my mate," he rasped. "And with it never shall my

fire harm you for you shall be of my magic for as long as I breathe, and the salamanders roam the vast deserts.”

She heard an almost musical sound of his tail whipping through the air and the painful bliss of heat that drove deep into her belly. She knew it was his stinger but all she knew was pleasure as she fell into his arms, her fingers curling around the manacle still fastened around his neck. She continued to cling to it as he spread her beneath him, his massive body covering as he pulled free her clothes and his thick cock, already eager for her, drove between her thighs. She cried out her pleasure, her body rocking rapturously with his as the palace burned, and the columns and walls continued to crack, and stones began to fall.

They fucked to the purifying destruction of the palace, reveling it and screaming their release as the palace groaned with its final death tolls. No one saw them leave afterward or strike out across the desert, heading back to their cavern, but word of mouth spread of a monster and his monstrous wife who lived deep in the desert. That they came to the city to topple a generational legacy of cruel kings had also spread, and the people by and large believed them to be those who still continued to safeguard and preserve the people, destroying anything that threatened them that attempted to cross the sands.

They were feared and they were heroes, and in the desert Abby Sinclair and Simar reigned—with a supply of chocolate, coffee, and tea left regularly in offering, for the people had not forgotten the manticore’s favorites. Even the merchant he once accosted came to believe he was their special guardian so long as they left him offerings up on a high rock that stood well above the sands along their trade route.

And as for Abby—her parents gradually came to terms with the fact that she was mated to a monster-destroying manticore and worked to push reform through the guild that held hunters responsible for recklessly destroying sentient beings without thorough investigation to determine if an execution was warranted. Her family even made frequent desert-crossings to visit, especially once their cub came after many

years of mated, monster-destroying bliss together. Abby had everything she wanted, renown as a skilled huntress, her duty, and a male and cub that she loved. Abby Sinclair lived happily ever after giving a “little death” to the monster she loved at every opportunity.

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