



Where Fools Have Tread (Tales from the Tarot)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Dec:

I've never really had much in the way of direction in my life, until I walk into an eerie shop where a strange man charges me more than I should pay for a tarot reading of one card. Next thing I know, I'm graduating school to be a domestic servant and find myself employed by someone else's weird uncle in the strangest mansion. Everyone is great even if they're all a little off. Except Thoren. He's a thorn in my side, and I'm not sure how I feel about him dropping his cards all the time just to make me pick them up for him. (My ass is not what he's looking at because what?)

Thoren:

I've known since I was a child the path I would take in life. I'm a guardian, one of the Trustworthy, and I am excellent at my job. I take my pleasure wherever I can find it, because I've earned every second of my leisure with the hours, days, and weeks of work I put in on every mission. Finding pleasure in teasing the new butler is new, but Dec seems to like it just as much as I do, no matter how often he tries to hide in the cleaning closet. (I'm definitely looking at dat ass because yum.)

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(Pronounced like it rhymes with Reese)

It feels like I stepped into the Tardis, except this is The Magic Shop . At least that's what the red letter sign on the front says. I don't know why I thought coming into a magic shop was a good idea, but I've already caught the attention of the proprietor (I assume), and that man's intense . He looks like he might be brothers with the Crypt Keeper, but you know, better dressed in a tuxedo for some reason, with a top hat, and alive with all his body parts. He's not sporting any unnecessary holes in his face, he's just... uh... got that look about him. He also looks like I better buy something or risk an actual curse on my genitals. I like my balls and would like to keep them rash free for the foreseeable future, so—

I walk down one of the narrow aisles, picking my way through what is definitely not an ADA compliant organizational standard. My uncle's wheelchair wouldn't have even gotten in the front door, and that's not necessarily the building owner's fault, but not updating to allow for access is.

Not that Uncle Clive would be joining me even if he could.

The ache of loss isn't as poignant as it was three years ago, but it's still the worst.

And I'm not going to wallow in the middle of a store where I might be in danger of getting cursed by the owner. Admittedly, I'm past the wallowing part of grief and loss. Uncle Clive made sure to take care of me before and after his death, and I had a really good grief counselor in the months leading up to and after his passing.

I'm ok on the grief front. Lonely, which is probably why I decided to walk into a

magic shop. My uncle loved magic more than anyone I've ever met, and he had a hundred stories about the adventures of his youth that he always exaggerated with magic. He ran around the world with a man when he was young, looking for trouble everywhere they went and magicking themselves out of it when they'd stirred up too much. I loved hearing him tell those stories. I miss him, but the hole in my life that he left behind is more than just the empty space where a parent lives in a child's heart. He was my entire social circle for all of my adult life, and even three years later, I still haven't found a space where I belong.

I'm lonely and listless. The jobs I qualify to work are the kinds of jobs occupied by people with their entire lives ahead of them or the ones with no prospects. High schoolers, addicts, ex-cons, and me. I don't fit in with the high schoolers, obviously. I have no experience with addiction. I've never been to jail. I'm just...

I don't know. I have no passion for anything I've ever tried. What I need is someone to give me some direction, but the only person who ever did that left this world at the behest of multiple sclerosis. He encouraged me to follow my heart at every turn, but since Uncle Clive's death, my heart has been empty and waning. I've tried dating; I've tried group activities. No one wants to keep me, and it's depressing as fuck to admit that.

I like people, but I'm not likable or important enough for anyone to choose me. Uncle Clive was important, people liked him; he had a revolving door of visitors who enjoyed his company, wisdom, and help. After he died, the visitors stopped coming. No one came to see me. The people I thought of as friends because they loved my uncle abandoned me as quickly as my mother did when I was born. It's a hard thing to face the fact that you're so unwanted and unimportant that the people you've known for years don't even notice they've left you alone.

Ugh. I'm wallowing again.

Stop, Dec, just stop. I might be unwanted and lonely, but I'm not going to give up yet. Someday someone like Uncle Clive is going to find me, and they're going to want me, and maybe between now and then I'll just buy a couple of magic books and teach myself a new skill.

A throat clears behind me, startling me into spinning on my heels. The Crypt—I mean, proprietor —stands at the front of the aisle, wiping a little dust from his top hat and eyeing me suspiciously. I swallow hard and duck around the end cap display of tarot books, slipping into the next aisle. The sign says it's the Tarot section, and I nearly collide with a rickety chair sitting in front of a table with a deck of tarot cards on it. There's a matching chair on the other side and barely room for me to scoot by without knocking into it. I nearly knock the books sitting on the shelf beside it off, but I manage to get past without catastrophe and pick up the first book I see with the word "Magic" in the title. The quicker I get out of here, the better, I think.

"Sit." The commanding voice from behind me startles the hell out of me, and I jump about three feet in the air before spinning to find the guy right there, top hat on his head with an air of confidence rarely seen in the wild. This close, I see that the strong lines of his facial features are more handsome than alarming, reminding me of some of the heartthrobs seen in Bollywood films.

He points to the chair on my side of the table as he pulls the other out. I quickly take a seat—there's something compelling about the man that makes me do as I'm told—and he sits opposite me, picking up the tarot deck on the table. Without another word he shuffles the deck three times, then sets it on the table between us and gestures to it.

"I'm the owner of The Magic Shop. Pick one card," he orders me, staring at me with an intensity I just don't know what to do with. No one has ever looked at me like this, like I'm...

Important?

Is that what he's doing?

If he is, he's gotten it wrong. I'm not important. I could disappear off this planet and literally no one would notice.

Still.

I slowly reach out, nervous because this feels... significant. No matter that I know I'm insignificant, the guy has a way of looking at me like that's not a true and proven fact. Like maybe he knows something I don't.

I swipe the cards to the side until it feels right to stop and then pick the card that catches my attention. I slide it out of the deck toward the top hat guy. Top Hat Guy? Should that be capitalized like a title or name? I think I'll just go with The Owner.

He reaches for it and flips it over, revealing The Fool card with a guy on it that looks remarkably like me, except I don't usually wear dresses. I have been known to dress up for drag night, and I guess if it was drag night I could pull off what this fool is doing. There's a bright sun and a beautiful sky with mountains in the background, and the guy's carrying a satchel like he's going on a trip, except it looks like he's about to walk off a cliff with a dog nipping at his heels. So I guess he's being herded to his doom or something on a very nice day.

Ugh.

I relate so hard to this. I'm always thinking things will turn out fine until I fall ass over teakettle, and it turns out I can't spot danger to save my life. Ask me about red flags in any of my very short-term relationships, I dare you.

Sighing, I slump my shoulders. “Even cards know I’m a disaster,” I grumble.

“The Fool isn’t a disaster; The Fool is an optimist. He represents new beginnings. Perhaps there is a bit of optimistic blindness, but if he listens to the dog warning him of the danger, he will be fine on his new adventure. You aren’t a disaster, you simply need some direction,” The Owner says. He reaches into the pocket of his suit coat and pulls out a small business card, handing it to me. “My friend runs a training school for butlers. Take this to the address listed and present her with this card. You’ll find your path.”

I take the card, noting a name and an address on one side and what looks like a serial number on the backside. When I look up, I startle again because The Owner is gone, and so is the deck of cards, except for The Fool, which is now sitting in front of me.

I pick it up, holding it behind the business card, and then a chime rings through the store and the voice of The Owner announces that the store is closing and purchases must be finalized.

I grab two more books without looking beyond the title and head to the front where a pimply faced teen is standing at attention like he’s been waiting for me this whole time.

I hand him the books and he takes them and the tarot card, rings everything up, and I pay way more than I probably should for the three books and a tarot card before exiting the shop. I’m not saying two paperbacks, a hardback, and a tarot card aren’t worth a hundred and fifty dollars, but I think I probably paid for that unsolicited tarot reading, and I guess...

I guess that’s ok, because I’ve been listless and lost since my uncle died, but buttlng sounds like a reasonable career. Who even knew there were schools for that?

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Chapter one

Dec

(This job might actually be the right one for me)

The last year has been a series of surreal moments for me. First The Magic Shop, then Ms. Cavanaugh's Academy for Butlers, then the internship, the interview, and now stepping out of the small airport in the middle of Colorado. The air is cool, and under the stink of airport pollution, it smells like the mountains. In the guest pick up lane, I search for and find the guy holding a sign with my name on it, standing in front of a hot pink muscle car with bright green racing stripes. It's... um... quite the sight.

I stop a few feet away, staring at the highly reflective surface of the passenger window. "I'm, uh, Dec Scion. Is this... real?" I stutter, not sure if I want to get into this bastion of pink. It cannot possibly be road safe, if only because it'll be a distraction to other drivers.

The guy beside me laughs. "It appeals to Maxime's need to stand out everywhere he goes."

Maxime Staiano, the person I now work for. He's... quirky. I loved him on sight because he is so much like my uncle. At the interview, he wore a yellow and green plaid top hat with a suit that wasn't the same pattern (but did complement it) and a bow tie/vest combo that was a similar plaid pattern but in green and yellow. He talked a lot about his massive model train collection and warned me that I wouldn't be

allowed in his train room unless he was in there with me. He was interesting, charismatic, and likable. I don't mind not being allowed to see his model train collection.

Really, I don't. Butler's are not curious; they're well informed.

"That's... something." I don't know what else to say.

"I'm Ethan Staiano. Maxime is my uncle. He sent me to fetch you." Ethan has a weaselly face, and I'm sorry for saying that in my head, but it's true. Like, if he was being cast in a movie, he would be the friend that betrays the main characters, but we'd see him in the sequel being squirrely and helpful in order to get back into the main character's good graces, but obviously he'd betray them again. They'd forgive him, of course, and excuse his behavior as "antics," and we'd see him in the third "Prime Exclusive" movie. He'd literally be the only character to make it through twelve increasingly bad movies, and we'd watch every one of them for his character alone. That's the kind of face Ethan Staiano has. It's unfortunate, really, though I can't say he's unhandsome. He's fairly attractive, even with the narrow features.

It's a testament to how distracting the car is that I didn't immediately notice that Ethan dresses like a 1980's television detective from Florida. He layered a navy blue sport coat over a low cut V-neck baby blue t-shirt and a pair of slim fitting chinos that leave a rather impressive bulge. He even had his hair feather-cut like they did in the mid-twentieth century. He's got the Don Johnson vibe down to a T; the question is why?

Well, none of my business unless something about his style becomes relevant to my job.

Ethan helps me get my luggage into the back seat, then I sit next to him in the front. The inside is as pink as the outside, and somehow the man beside me fills up the

space like it's as much a toy car as it looks on the outside. I didn't notice because of his face and the car, but he's really big. Huge. His shoulders are literally so broad that he's touching the door on his side and taking up all the space between our seats (not that there's much to take up). Our shoulders brush together when I sit centered, so I lean over to the side, and thankfully he doesn't seem to be offended that I'm putting space between us.

He drives normally as we get out of the airport, but as soon as we're on the highway, he speeds up way faster than I have ever comfortably gone in my life. He weaves through the traffic, only slowing down if there isn't space to squeeze through. It's terrifying until he turns on opera and blasts it like we're at a rock concert, then it's both terrifying and consummately cool. Like, how did I never know the joy of flying down the highway listening to *La Traviata* . It's such an extreme existential experience for me that it's a surprise when we slow down.

We've driven through mountain highways so far, but Ethan turns off the highway to take a lonely, mountain road. He hugs every curve like our life depends on it as he sings along with the tenor at the top of his lungs. My vision of the road blurs as I remember how my uncle loved this opera. I know every word and every note, but I'd never sing along like Ethan is. As much as my uncle loved it, I didn't want to ruin it for him with my inability to carry a tune in a bucket. Listening to Ethan, I'm glad I never even attempted. His voice is incredible. He could make opera his career if he was so inclined. Hell, maybe that is what he does for a living.

Midway up the mountain we've been climbing, Ethan pulls off the road and stops in front of a gated driveway. He clicks a button on the mirror of the car and pulls through the gate after it opens. The road takes us up a winding driveway through more mountainous forest. I was ok on the highway even though we were going way too fast, and I was alright on the mountain road because it wasn't too curvaceous, but the driveway is meant to be taken at half the speed we're going, and all the curves are sharp switchbacks. After a couple of minutes, my stomach protests and motion

sickness sets in.

I hold on, checking to discover that he's not actually going that fast—the driveway is just that bad—and I try to focus on a single point. It works for about five minutes.

Dear lord in heaven, I'm going to puke.

“Stop!” I shout, lowering the volume on the radio to be heard. “Stop, stop, stop.”

Ethan comes to a screeching halt, and I dive out of the car, hitting my knees at the edge of the asphalt and vomiting down the hill. There's not much other than water and crackers since I haven't eaten a meal in more than eight hours, but fuck, it's awful.

The car door closes behind me, and the scuff of Ethan's shoes alert me to his imminent approach. “Water,” he tells me as a cold bottle smacks me in the shoulder.

I take the wet bottle, rinsing out my mouth and drinking a couple of swallows to help settle my stomach. Now that I'm not moving, I'm recovering, but I look up the road and I can't see anything to indicate this trip is going to end any time soon. “How far are we from the end?” I rasp.

“Depends on how fast I can go. I can get there in about twenty minutes, but if we go the recommended speed on this road, it's about forty.”

So the weasel-face, opera-singing, speedster is going double the recommended speed. That tracks. I don't know why, it just does. It feels like that's the type of person he is. The type of person who drives too fast and listens to opera, and has a cooler for water somewhere in his car.

“So, sick for twenty or sick for forty...” Such a wonderful choice. “Can I walk?”

His laugh is just as weaselly as his face.

Ok, now I'm being unkind, and I mentally apologize to him.

“Not if you want to get there before sunset.”

I'm going to want to die before this drive is over. Yay.

Standing, I brush the detritus off my jeans and take a deep breath. “Ok. I'll yell when I need to puke.”

Ethan grimaces but indicates that he understands, and we get back on the road. This is absolutely not an omen of things to come.

I fall out of the car and drop to my knees as soon as Ethan parks in an underground garage. The last half an hour has been hell. We had to stop twice more before we got to a tunnel, which we entered and never exited. We drove for at least ten minutes in the tunnel (which was as unfortunately curvy as the open air roads) and it opened up to the parking garage we're in. Before he parked, I took in a collection of dozens of cars, almost all of which were some garish or flamboyant color like the hot pink car we drove in, but that's all I caught.

As soon as I catch my breath and my stomach stops gagging me like I have anything in it left to expel, I get back to my feet, looking around the parking garage. I think I underestimated how many cars were in here. They're organized by color, and we're in the pink section. There's a rainbow of colored vehicles in here, ranging from what looks like a lemon yellow model T to a sparkly superman blue Rolls-Royce.

I... I didn't think that Rolls-Royce would let someone paint one of their cars that color. It seems so wrong, but I guess maybe this is one of those things that you learn to ignore when you serve the extremely wealthy.

Ethan helps me get my luggage, and once I have it secured, he gives me a short verbal tour of the garage as he leads me through it to a door with a pin pad security lock. On the other side of the door is a vestibule with a pair of elevators.

Ethan inputs the code to the one on the right. “This is the elevator to the house. It goes between the house and the garage. The left one leads to the offices and labs. You will not have access to those.”

I didn’t realize that this was more than just a living space, but I suppose a lot of people live and work on the same property. If their business is something classified, I don’t expect to have access to their work spaces, and I don’t want to know. I’m a lot of things, and good at keeping my nose in my own business is one of them.

Yep. That’s what I’m going to tell myself. Butlers are well informed, but they are never curious.

Dec Scion: totally boring and definitely not someone with a curious nature.

That’s why I’m fine with never seeing the train room.

Yep.

The elevator takes us up, and it must be one of those super fast elevators, because it almost triggers my motion sickness again when we accelerate upwards. It opens to a bright foyer with floor to ceiling windows that look out over an expanse of lawn that I imagine it takes the gardener a full day to mow. Might even take a couple of mowers working together to get it mown. Beyond the lawn are hedges, and in small clusters scattered throughout the expanse are flowering bushes and decorative grasses. In the background of the picturesque landscaping, mountains rise up, snow-capped and beautiful on this sunny June day.

The foyer is covered in an assortment of tiles of various patterns that were shattered and put back together with gold like that Japanese pottery art, Kintsugi . It's shockingly beautiful, and such a flagrant display of wealth that I have to convince myself to actually walk on it. Ethan has no qualms about walking out of the elevator onto the gold floor, but he keeps walking without so much as a word.

I start following, but the click of heels behind me along with what sounds like the jingle of a collar and the clatter of dog nails on the tile has me looking over my shoulder. I turn to see Maxime—uh, Mister Staiano—striding toward me with a jaunty gait and a broad, welcoming smile, wearing a brightly-colored, floral-patterned suit with a matching top hat and bearing a cane that he certainly isn't using as a walking aid.

“Dec! You’ve finally arrived. Welcome, welcome. We are so very glad to have you at Chez Gargouille.” The man greets me with an enthusiastic handshake, which his dog adds to by sniffing circles around me.

“Thank you, Mr. Staiano.” As soon as he releases me, I lean down to give the dog a scratch. “Who is this lovely fella?” They’re a beautiful, medium-size dog with a full, fluffy white coat and long floofy tail.

“Oh this is Mr. Simms. He’s a Samoyed that I found wandering in a field full of wild goats in Maine. I rescued him and brought him home,” Mr. Staiano says, proudly puffing up his chest.

Ethan snorts, startling me because I thought he’d walked on without us.

“You stole someone’s herding dog.”

Oh. That’s not Ethan’s voice. That voice is sexy and smooth like expensive tequila, but rich and deep like a well-aged whiskey.

Whew. Did someone just turn up the heat in here?

I turn, coming face to chest with a giant. Ok, that's not really fair. I'm shortish, and he's tallish, and I'm looking at his pecs, so he's only head and shoulders taller than me, but still. He's broad like Ethan is broad, except Ethan is standing with him and is comparatively smaller than this new man.

Unfairly, he's also stupidly handsome. Strong, clean-shaven jaw, straight nose that's neither too long or wide, and big dark eyes that appear black even in the bright light of the windows. His cupid's bow was made for staring at and lusting after, and—

Nope. No. I am not looking, thinking, or imagining anything at all.

Not that there's much left to the imagination. The guy's wearing beaded leather pants so soft and tight that I can see his dick print down his left leg (it's both impressive and intimidating—my ass is sore just glimpsing it). His shoulders are so broad that the vampire red peasant shirt he's wearing is fully open from his belly button, but it's still stretched taut at the shoulders, exposing his massive pecs and displaying the bars running through his rosy nipples.

God. Damn. He's hot.

No, Dec. You are not panting over your employer's hot... something.

“Thoren, meet Dec. He's our new butler!” Mr. Staiano exclaims, grabbing our wrists and bringing our hands together like we need prompting to shake hands.

Thoren's hand is warm and dry, and he barely squeezes mine before releasing me. “Good. We've been in need of help since we lost Arcan. When do you start?” He doesn't sound thrilled to meet me, but I guess that's expected. I'm just a domestic servant; I'm not here to become friends, and I am not disappointed about that.

I did have the impression that some families consider their domestic servants as a part of their wider family, but clearly that is not how Thoren plans to treat me. That's fine. I will probably do better with limited exposure to... all of that.

"We're going to let him get settled in today, and tomorrow he will start with Maggie," Mr. Staiano replies for me, clapping my back with a heavy, almost painful hand. Considering that he doesn't look much bigger than me, the painful hit surprises me. I will have to be careful about getting within range of his, uh, affection. He turns the hit into a shaking side-hug, smiling so happily that I forgive the pain from his hit. "We are so glad to have you, Dec. You're going to fit right in."

"Thank you," I stumble out, letting him shake my brain with his hug because he suddenly reminds me of my uncle again, and that makes me like him more than I already did.

Thoren arches a brow at me, and yeah, I understand, Dec isn't a common name. "Dec? Is that short for something?"

I give him a professional smile because there's no way I'm going to tell him my name unless absolutely necessary. "Of course it is."

He waits, expecting me to expound, but when I don't after too long, he almost smiles. "What is it short for?"

I blink at him, for some unknown reason feeling confident about defying him to his face even though that is not a personality trait I generally possess. "My mom was dyslexic and fumbled her chance to call me Cedric," I deadpan.

Mr. Staiano laughs at the blatant lie. "Come now, Thoren, Dec doesn't owe you his name. Come along, my boy, let me show you to your rooms. The kitchen is on the way; we can petition the chef for a snack."

I stifle a grin at Thoren's narrow-eyed glare and follow Mr. Staiano into the house proper.

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Chapter two

Thoren

(That's not what we're doing)

Uncle Maxime pulls me into his train room after he takes the new butler to his apartment. The house doesn't have a lot of staff, but the few positions we do keep filled are necessary to keep this place from descending into chaos. The problem with Dec is that he looks like he's going to add to the chaos, not help with it. I don't know what it is about him. Blonds just seem like chaos engines. Butlers are supposed to have dark hair. They're supposed to be tall, not short like Dec, and they're supposed to have elegance and grace—Dec looks like he trips over air, and when Uncle led him away, he did.

"That human is all wrong for us," I start as soon as the door to the train room closes.

Uncle holds up his hand, cutting off my complaint. "You're wrong. He graduated top of his class from Cavanaugh's, and he spent time interning with them, proving himself more than capable of butling. You're just mad because he's not Arcan. It's ok to miss your favorite butler, but don't take it out on Dec. He's wonderful." He gets a starry, far off look in his gray eyes, and his smile turns nostalgic. "He reminds me of someone I used to know. You remember that friend I spent a decade running around Europe with about fifty years ago? He was called home when his father passed, but I loved that man. Dec reminds me of him. They have the same earnestness. It's beautiful to see again."

Well, that seals it. Even if I don't think Dec is going to fit in with us, he's staying; Uncle is already attached.

"What do you want, Uncle? What's going on?" I question, dropping onto the guest sofa.

Uncle has filled this room with a multilayered table for his model trains, and all around the room, there are elevated tracks for the trains that don't fit on the table. It would be impressive if the room was small, but it's the mansion's ballroom that he's converted into his train room. It's the biggest room in the mansion, and the table at the center is six meters in diameter. There's only one safe place for visitors, and that's on this tiny, two-seater sofa.

Uncle pshaws me, hitting a button to start his trains moving. He ducks under the table and comes up in the center of it. "There's a situation in Phoenix that requires your attention. A shelak spawned in an empty house on the Gila River. There's been three murders in as many days. I sent Hawthorn, but I lost contact with him yesterday. Go save that idiot and kill the demon."

I sigh from the depths of my beleaguered soul, heaving myself up from the sofa.

Shelaks are insatiable spirits that spawn from emptiness. They possess the bodies of people with weak wills in order to use the body to fill the emptiness. They use sensation to fill the void, and that usually ends up killing the host, because the void is endless but a body is finite. Shelaks love to eat, but they can never eat enough, and a body can only consume so much before it becomes a problem. So the shelak eats. And eats. And eats more. They will eat everything until the body they're in dies. Or if their first sensation is pain, then they will hurt and hurt and hurt until they kill the body they're in. I've never known a shelak to exercise any kind of restraint because it has no comprehension of temperance.

“Why am I not surprised that Hawthorn ended up possessed?” I grumble, heading out the door.

Before I get the door closed, I hear Uncle shout, “We don’t know for sure he’s been possessed!”

I roll my eyes, shutting the door. If there are murders and he’s gone incommunicado, that moron got himself possessed, no doubt about it. I love the guy, but this is the kind of thing he’d do just to be able to say he did it.

I stomp to the elevator and take it up to the roof access. I take the ten steps from the elevator up to the access door and squint as the eye-searing sunlight blinds me before my nictitating membrane slides into place to protect my eyes from the brightness. On the ledge of the roof, one of my brothers, Faulkes, rests in his stone form with a flock of chrylich cuddling him.

The chrylich are smaller versions of my species, the karkoyl. They’re non-native to Earth but migrated here tens of thousands of years ago and consider themselves Earthlings. In their stone forms, they blend in with the grotesques that were inspired by them that humans use to decorate and ward off spirits in temples all over the world. Humans called some of the guardians “gargoyles” after the sound that the ones that function as gutter drains make, and the chrylich have adopted the word for themselves. They call my family “the big gargoyles” and we call them “the little gargoyles.” We get along well and enjoy spending our days resting together like this.

I sigh as Ethan lands on the roof and takes his stone form. A group of chrylich surround him immediately. I’m a creature of darkness; I’m supposed to be asleep right now too. Unfortunately humans are not typically nocturnal, and they expect most people to be awake when the sun is in the sky. Even more unfortunately, as the eldest of seven, I’ve taken on the duty of maintaining the illusion of being human with the inhabitants of this planet.

I push off the facade of my human form, shedding it like an itchy, too tight sweater. I don't hate my human skin, but it's not my natural form, and I can only live in it for a few hours at a time before it becomes uncomfortable. I had to train my body to take on this form, and even after fifty years of expertise with the form shift, it still feels ill-fitting.

My wings unfold as soon as I'm free of the human skin, and I stretch them out, enjoying the freedom of movement again. I give them a few swings to loosen the cramped muscles up. I release the spell on my clothes that turns them into a believable costume that humans don't question too much and straighten the beaded bevalan leather loincloth that covers my modesty with a brush of my hand.

The bevalan from which this piece was made was my first kill. It's decorated in a traditional bead pattern of my people that tells others who see it that I'm one of the Trustworthy—warriors that fought in the War of Bathilde. We fought for and won the freedom of our people against the In'ai, the most brutal species of colonizers in the Andromeda Galaxy. For a thousand years my people were oppressed by the In'ai, and when my generation rose up, we selected warriors to face our oppressors. I was among those selected, and we won against the might of an empire.

We, a few thousand warriors, were absolute badasses against the millions of soldiers sent to stamp us out. We earned our title, The Trustworthy, and every gargoyle that sees my beading knows immediately what I am and that they're safe with me.

I reach into the pouch hanging off the belt of my loincloth and pull out a single card. It's The Fool, a gargoyle with a sui flower crown over his red horns standing in a sea of stars with one shining bright. He carries a rucksack with a small furry scidi following him in the void. The card is midnight blue with silver inlay outlining the picture, and it's worn around the edges from how often I pull the deck of tarot cards out.

I don't think I've pulled this card since the end of the war when my family was deciding whether we should pursue mercenary work or answer the summons from the Intergalactic Planetary Preservation Society that brought us here.

I'm not embarking on a life changing journey, but the cards aren't usually wrong, so I pull another card from the pouch: the Ace of Swords.

Ok, that's an omen. Not a bad one. It's an omen of success in the next thing in my life, but what the fuck do they mean pairing it with The Fool? I'm definitely not embarking on a new journey here.

"I'm going to save Hawthorn; this isn't a grand adventure." I speak directly to the pouch and pull another card.

When I lift my hand out of the pouch, two cards come out, and I almost gag at the sight of them. First the Ace of Cups on top and then the Two of Cups.

No. Nope. Absolutely not.

"Hawthorn is my brother," I hiss at the cards. "That's disgusting."

First of all, I am not in the market for a mate yet. I will eventually go back to Ukon to find a proper mate to spend my resting years with, but I am nowhere near old enough to settle down. Second, even if the cards don't mean Hawthorn specifically, there are only seven other karkoyl on this planet. They live in this house, and I am not fucking any of them. Gross .

I shove all the cards back into their pouch and give the deck a stern warning. "I will not be manipulated by you. You know that romance is off the table for me right now. I'm not interested in relationships at this time in my life, and I absolutely will not be looking at any of my brothers with those eyes. Someday when we return to Ukon, I

will look for a mate, but until then, you keep your love cards to yourself.” I reach in again, but this time I tell the deck what I want. “Give me the Seven of Swords.”

When I pull the next card out, it’s the one I requested. I slap it over the bloodstone rune on my thigh, activating a distortion spell that will hide me from human technology. It stays on my thigh as the activation key, and I start running. By the time I jump from the edge of the roof, I reach full speed, breaking the sound barrier with a clap of thunder. I spread my wings and catch my weight, flapping faster than the human eye could track if I was visible to them. I open the thread of connection I have with all my brothers, honing in on Hawthorn’s location and orienting myself to him.

I could teleport, but I take every opportunity to use my wings because flying is superior to every other mode of transportation. This is the hill I will die on.

I fly faster than most airplanes and significantly lower, and the distortion spell keeps me from being caught on anyone’s radar as I fly southwest. From where we live in Colorado it takes me about an hour to travel to Phoenix. I’m not too worried about getting there as quickly as possible, because gargoyles can take a lot of punishment before we worry about death creeping up on us, and hopefully Hawthorn had the decency to shift to stone before the shelak took over completely.

Who am I kidding, Hawthorn wouldn’t have done that. He’s probably in his gargoyle skin, without his distortion shield activated, and causing trouble, because that’s the kind of shit that fucker would do. He makes me want to rearrange his face sometimes. Maybe I should fly full speed. It’d only shave off ten minutes, but a lot can happen in ten minutes when a gargoyle’s involved.

Yeah.

I speed up, flying as fast as possible to Phoenix.

My connection to him leads me to a fucking restaurant in downtown Phoenix, and I land outside of it, pulling my human form back into place before deactivating my distortion spell. Humans can't see magic, so they ignore the appearance of a random man on the sidewalk; they literally would not be able to see me if I stayed in my gargoyle form, but I may need to talk to some of them, so I shift.

It's startling how unprepared for the wider universe the species on this planet is. The evolutionary lack in humans is such a strange and unique phenomenon that the Intergalactic Planetary Preservation Society declared Earth a protected planet and humans a protected species. The IPPS works in conjunction with the Council of Supernatural Species to keep Earthlings safe from hostile species that would take advantage of their inability to see magic. Some species have tried large scale invasions, but we've turned them all back without involving humans. As a group of karkoyle, we are well adapted and skilled at stopping invasion forces.

Slowly, other supernatural species are procreating with humans, and eventually there won't be any pure humans left and the species will be able to see magic, at which point they will have to catch up with the rest of us, but until then the IPPS has designated a budget to provide security for the planet. They have stationed my family here to protect humans from hostile species that would destroy humanity for any reason. Generally we're here to deal with large scale invasion forces (there have been five attempts since we arrived in 1949), but there are smaller problems that we take on between the larger issues.

Like shelaks. The problem with shelaks isn't that they can kill one human at a time; the problem is if left unchecked they will kill all the humans one at a time. That definitely falls under the purview of the IPPS.

I pull open the door to the upscale restaurant, garnering a sneer from the ma'tre d'. I ignore the man, scanning the restaurant to find my brother. He's not hard to spot. A commotion involving three of the staff catches my eyes right off. He's at a table that

clearly doesn't belong to him, grabbing food off the plates of the patrons and shoving it indiscriminately into his face. In his gargoyle form but not his stone form. Fucker.

The staff can't see him, of course, they're just panicking about food lifting off the table and disappearing in a mess because shelaks are messy eaters. They want to get all the food in them all at once. It's as disgusting as it sounds.

I stomp over to Hawthorn and grab him into a chokehold, pulling him backwards away from the table. I weave through the tables with his body. He struggles for a moment but eventually realizes this is a new sensation (choking), and he goes limp in my arms, enjoying it with a deeply disturbing moan of pleasure.

Shudder. Ewwww.

"I hate you," I mutter to the gargoyle somewhere inside the shell who allowed the shelak to possess him.

Once I have him outside, I shed part of my human skin, revealing the gray skin and black claws of my left hand. I reach into my tarot pouch, pulling out a card. Without looking, I slap it over his heart. I press my claws into the tough gray skin around the card, activating the bloodstone magic that runs in my veins. Hawthorn suddenly tenses, a choked cry escapes him, and then with a burning flash of light, he goes completely limp again. I lay him out on the sidewalk, standing over the idiot, and I grab The World card off his chest. Black vapor pours out of him with each heave of his lungs, dissipating into nothing.

I kiss the card, thank it for helping fulfill the shelak's fate, and return it to my pouch. Now I just have to wait for this fucker to wake up so I can beat the life out of him for being so stupid as to get possessed.

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Chapter three

Dec

(Being a badass butler will be a thing going forward)

I am in love. I know it's early and too soon to be making those kinds of declarations, but no one said I have to follow a specific protocol for love declarations.

Wherever Arcan Pearson is, I hope the universe thanks him on my behalf, because the man is an organizational miracle. The butler's office is situated in a small but cozy room in the staff wing of the mansion. Everything I need to succeed is written in meticulous detail in an organized binder that the house manager, Maggie Fenton, pulled from a small safe in here after she gave me the code to memorize.

The binder has the schedules of each member of the household written in it and the tasks needed to ensure that their days flow smoothly. It has a list of all the household bills to pay, when the autopayments go through, and how to check that the autopayments reflect the billing. It has checklists for tasks to perform each day/week/month/year. It is a beautiful work of organizational art, and I am fully in love with the creator. Even his personal comments attached to the pages on sticky notes are exceedingly useful. It's clear this was his professional diary, and it's so lovely.

I could never have come up with something like this, but I'm damn glad someone did. If I ever meet Arcan in real life, I will probably kiss him or buy him a puppy or whatever people do to show their gratitude these days. BJs? Maybe it's BJs. I don't

know, I haven't kept up with cultural changes. That requires interest in social media, and I'm more of a bridge night than a night out type of guy. I'm not interested in watching other people live their lives, and no one would want to watch me live mine. What would I even post?

Today I cleaned the banister. Look at that shine!

Somehow, I doubt there's an audience for how to get oak to shine. Even if there is, I don't think anyone wants to get their tips from me.

Movement in my periphery causes me to look up from the binder just before Maggie knocks on my open office door. "Knock, knock," she says with a voice that wouldn't be out of place as the mom on any animated kids TV show. There's a certain quality that all the moms in animated kids shows have, and somehow, she exemplifies it. I hear her, and I think "good mom," and I don't even know if she is a mom.

I can't really tell how old Maggie is; she's older than me but not old. She has big hazel eyes and buzzed red hair. She has tattoos covering every inch of skin from her neck down and quarter-size spacers in her ear lobes. She wears full baby doll makeup and dresses in the style of a modern witch with corsets over linen shirts and open-front skirts over skin tight pants. She's the house manager and the person directly under my supervision. She's been doing her job and mine since Arcan left, and she told me when I met her this morning that she's so glad that Mr. Staiano finally hired someone to replace Arcan.

"What can I do?" I ask her with a welcoming smile.

"Maxime wants to introduce you to the whole family, and everyone is home right now. They're in the library."

I stand, pulling up an image of a map of the mansion in my head and reminding

myself of the route. Maggie already gave me a rundown of the family, and the binder has a current face shot of each person with their schedule, but it will be good to meet each person properly. There are eight people in the family and six members of the staff that live in the mansion. I met all the staff early this morning, and they're all unique individuals. Mr. Staiano's dress code for his employees is, "Your clothing should be a reflection of your inner divinity."

I don't even know what that means, but the gardener wears a kimono, her assistant wears a lot of black with spiked jewelry and a rather distinctive codpiece, one of the housekeepers wears what looks like the skimpy armor designed for female characters straight out of fantasy video games, and the other housekeeper wears a rainbow leotard, black leggings, rainbow leg warmers, and ballet shoes. He dances everywhere he goes in the house.

I knock on the door to the library, receiving an invitation to enter before opening it and stepping in.

"Ah, Dec! Good. Let me introduce you to my family," Mr. Staiano calls as soon as he sees me, beckoning me over to him.

Before I get two steps into the room, Mr. Simms, the dog, leaves his side, trotting up to me for pets. I lean down and give the adorable dog a thorough scratch behind his ears and slip in a tiny treat from my pocket that I found in the butler's office with a note from Arcan who said that Mr. Simms could have one of those treats every time he greets me sweetly.

Since he's a sweet dog, I think I'll be giving him many treats.

Once he has his treat, I continue toward Mr. Staiano, but as I approach he suddenly stills. "Whatever are you wearing, my dear boy?" he asks, scanning me head to toe.

I try not to react to his audible distaste as I pass through the room, ignoring the seven pairs of eyes watching me. “It’s a suit,” I reply evenly; it’s just a black suit with a white shirt and black tie. Literally nothing special except that I had it tailored to fit me.

“Yes, I do see that, but did no one tell you of the dress code? Here at Chez Gargouille, everyone wears clothes that reflect the majesty of their inner divinity.” He pulls me to his side with his arm over my shoulder. Today he’s wearing a three piece white suit with huge roses splashed over the fabric in a way that reminds me of blood spatter. It’s almost a travesty of an outfit, but for some reason it fits the man as well as the plaid from yesterday.

“Find your inner god and live in clothing that displays that to the world. You are amazing and your clothing should show us the wonder of you.” Mr. Staiano’s voice rises and falls with the cadence of a man preaching his truth to a potential convert.

The men in the room with us mostly nod in agreement, and they are living embodiments of the clothing philosophy. They are also all just so fucking big. I don’t know how it’s possible that every man in this family is so big, but they are all at least twice as broad in the shoulders as I am. Mr. Staiano is the only one in the family that’s average size like me.

“I’ve never considered clothing as a showcase of my inner divinity. It might take me some time to figure out what clothing would fit for me,” I prevaricate in a soothing tone, hoping to turn the conversation away from my practical and perfectly acceptable suit. Is it possible to convince them that badass buttlings requires a suit just like the five in my closet that I bought specifically for my career? It would be a waste of money to replace them before they wear out, dammit. I’m not hurting for money, but I’m still on a budget.

“Please do, and of course, we take the uniform budget seriously here, so be sure to

order your clothing using the appropriate account.” With that Mr. Staiano bangs his cane on the floor with finality. “Now, let me introduce to you my nephews.” He waves in a broad arc toward the seven other men in the room.

I recognize them all, and I’ve met Ethan and Thoren, but now I get a proper introduction to the rest. Each of the nephews has the Staiano surname, and they are all as unique as their uncle.

Greeley dresses like a pirate, including the eye patch, sword on his belt, and heeled boots. He greets me with a saucy wink—well, it could be a blink since I can only see one eye—and then takes a swig out of an old fashioned, brown glass bottle labeled “Rum.”

Reeves wears a white suit with black trim that would fit in well in the Big Band Era of music. His wing tips shine like he just buffed them, which means I need to look at his entry in the binder to see if that’s part of my weekly chores. He up-nods me, and then his attention turns to a folder in his hands.

Hawthorn looks like a cowboy outlaw complete with a gun belt and guns. His black hat is dusty and well worn, and he’s rocking brown chaps over khaki colored jeans. His button up was probably crisp when he put it on this morning, but he’s clearly been outside since then, and there’s mud stains on both cuffs all the way up to his elbows. His broad smile is missing both of his front teeth, but there are dimples, and that makes me see him as cute rather than a hillbilly hell serial killer.

“How ya doin’.” It’s not a question, just a greeting, and Mr. Staiano introduces his next nephew without giving me the chance to reply.

Walker sits with one leg up on the arm of his chair in a relaxed pose that’s definitely more for show than comfort. He wears furry white pants and absolutely nothing else except a pair of black horns that curl back from his hairline. He looks like a fawn, and

I'm pretty sure that's what he's going for when he greets me with a tune blown into a panpipe that he whips out of nowhere.

Faulkes Staiano peeks out from behind Thoren (who's wearing the same pants as yesterday with a slightly different blood red vampire shirt open to display his impressive pecs). Faulkes is covered head to toe in what looks like a blanket made to look like unicorn pajamas, complete with the hood up and a horn sticking up. He's bigger than the others, but based on the body language that the others exhibit, I suspect he might be the one they at least treat like the youngest. He gives me a shy wave and ducks back behind Thoren.

After introductions, Mr. Staiano tells them all about me and then asks them to go easy on me while I get acclimated to the job.

Thoren's smirk distracts me, and I know what he's going to say before the words pass through those extremely kissable lips.

Dammit. No. He's not kissable.

"What's 'Dec' short for? We're all curious."

Without even thinking about it, because I have apparently trained my brain for snark, I pop off, "Dec nuts" like I don't know Mr. Staiano is fully capable of firing me.

Thoren scowls, and the rest of the faces in the room light up.

"Woah, butler got sass," Walker, the one wearing furry pants, announces as my face flames.

"I-I apologize. I'm not—" I don't even know where to go with that sentence. My name is no one's business except the government's and the people who need to know

for tax purposes.

“Nah, you said what you meant,” Ethan laughs.

Mr. Staiano turns to me with a weird expression on his face. If I’d seen him looking like this in any other context, I would think he’s looking at a cute pet he found. “Do you have anything else to say to the boys?”

“The boys” look at me expectantly, except for Thoren, who’s staring at me in a way that makes me want to back up a bit, and maybe also get on my knees, but that’s a ridiculous reaction, and I definitely put it firmly in the No-Go zone in my head. Why would he even want me, anyway? Especially after I just sassed him in front of his, uh, cousins? Brothers? I’m not sure how they’re related. Regardless, I can’t help but notice that “the boys” are all bigger and probably older than me. If Mr. Staiano thinks of them as boys, he must think I’m an infant.

“I apologize for my outburst. I’m truly happy to be here. Your previous butler was some kind of angel and has left me with a great system that will be easy to step into. If you have questions, concerns, or critiques, please let me know so I can help; that’s what I’m here for.”

There’s a sniffle, and then Thoren suddenly hisses and reaches behind him to bring Faulkes forward onto his lap. The huge man in unicorn pajamas dwarfs Thoren as he sits across his lap, and he buries his face in Thoren’s shoulder, sobbing softly.

I immediately pull a handkerchief from my pocket, offering it to Thoren.

“We’re still grieving,” Thoren explains with a dark look, taking the handkerchief from my hand and shoving it in Faulkes’s face.

“I do apologize.” I manage to get that out around the lump in my throat as Faulkes

honks into the handkerchief and then throws it on the floor with enough force that it sails past me.

I rush to pick it up, turning back to find all of the Staianos frowning at me.

“Sincerely, I’m very sorry, Mr. Staiano. No one mentioned the sensitivity of this subject,” I apologize to my employer, hoping not to lose my job. No one told me Arcan had died! I thought he’d moved.

Mr. Staiano sighs and rolls his eyes. He turns me toward the door with his arm around my shoulders. “Don’t worry about it, Dec, and for the love of Pizza Margherita, please call me Maxime. There are eight Mr. Staianos in this house, and I refuse to be called something so common.”

“Yes, sir. Uh, Maxime,” I stutter, stalled out on the pizza thing. My uncle used to say that exact phrase too. I wonder if it’s a thing from when they were young.

He pats my back and opens the library door. Mr. Simms darts out ahead of us, then Maxime pushes me out. “It’s fine, but let’s give the boys a chance to calm down before we do anything else.”

He shuts the library door behind me, and I’m left staring at the dog, who looks up at me with a wagging tail and a smile. At least I didn’t offend him .

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Chapter four

Thoren

(He was definitely hired on the basis of his assets)

I 'm not the only person who saw that, right? How did I not notice that before? It's not subtle. Not even a little subtle. The new butler has a badonkadonk .

“What was that ?” Greeley demands, turning his gaze from the now closed door to Uncle.

“What?” Uncle asks, affecting confusion, but we can all smell the deception.

“That ass .” Walker says it like an accusation. Honestly, I would bet the floor of the foyer that Uncle hired him less on the basis of his resume and more on the wideness of his ass.

“Uncle.” Reeves and I growl in unison. He's the son of my mother from the same sire, and we often sound like each other.

Uncle gives us all a sheepish smile, shrugging as he replies. “I didn't think any of us would mind a change in scenery.”

I move to pinch the bridge of my nose, but Faulkes is so big I can't reach, so I just pat him and run the tips of my claws up and down his back to soothe the poor guy. He misses Arcan the most out of all of us; Arcan running away hurt him deeply.

“Uncle, you can’t hire someone solely on the size of their ass. He needs skills! He needs to be able to run this place.” He needs to not ever bend over again.

“Dibs,” Hawthorn says as casually as anything.

“No.” It comes out less like a rebuke and more like a claim, but I’m not going to think about that. “No one is calling dibs on the new butler. He might not even be the new butler tomorrow. We are not keeping a man hired because of the size of his ass.” I shoot Uncle a narrow eyed glare.

Uncle smiles like I’m silly, and I dread the next thing out of his mouth. “He has perfectly good qualifications. I just liked his ass more than the other candidates. I wouldn’t hire someone unqualified for the job, Thoren. You should trust me more.”

“Should I?” I ask, even though I probably do trust him more than I should.

Uncle pouts. “I’m the most trustworthy among us! I am always honest and pure and kind and innocent of any wrong-doing. How could anyone doubt the wonder that is me?”

I wish I could say that he’s exaggerating, but he actually believes the words out of his mouth, and I think we would also mostly agree. He is as much one of the Trustworthy as the rest of us.

“You are wonderful,” Faulkes agrees, kisses my cheek, and gets to his feet. “I’m going to the roof.” He yawns, hiding it behind his hand before heading toward the door.

I stand because a roof nap sounds good, but Hawthorn also stands, looking like he’s about to go harass our new butler, so I resign myself to a full day of training to keep him occupied. “Hawthorn, training room, let’s go.”

Hawthorn gives me a sour look. “C’mon, Thoren; you already beat the shit out of me yesterday!”

I settle my face into a neutral mask. “And I will keep doing it until you learn how to handle the threats that Uncle sends you out to neutralize. I don’t ever want to find you possessed by a shelak ever again.”

I hadn’t told any of our brothers that yet, and a chorus of surprised what-the-fucks follows the announcement accompanied by Hawthorn turning a shade of purple I’ve never seen on an adult gargoyle before. I keep my face neutral, but my heart does a happy little jig at his discomfort.

“Come on, feun . Let’s go,” I urge him.

Hawthorn might be an attention whore and an idiot, but we’re still brothers forged in the fires of adversity, and he perks up when I remind him of that. All of these gargoyles are feun to me, and I am the same to them, which is why I’m not going to let any of them get away with losing the sharp edges of their training and experience.

In the elevator down to the training room, I touch Hawthorn’s elbow. “Why’re you covered in mud?”

He glances at his stained shirt. “It’s not mud,” he replies with a grim set to his jaw.

My heart turns to stone and stops beating in my chest as I ache at the implication. “Did we—”

“No! No,” he quickly interrupts. “Faulkes and I went to visit the nest earlier, but when we got there, nest Helvidi was hatching. One of the hatchlings was too weak to break out. The nurses were occupied with the other hatchlings and didn’t see the struggle, so I jumped in to help. The crevele collapsed before I got the hatchling out.

It was injured but alive.”

I’m torn between gratitude that our nest is safe, and sorrow for the injured infant. They will heal, but hatching injuries are visible and lead to life-long debilitation. The rest of that hatchling’s nestmates will likely reject them, and they’ll end up growing up alone. It’s not a death sentence, but it is a hard life.

“Poor thing,” I sigh. “Hopefully their aunt will make up for the lack until they find their path.”

Hawthorn nods. “She seemed regretful but willing to take up the challenge.”

Very few gargoyles would reject an injured infant, but their nestmates are too young to carry the burden of their pain and usually reject them because of it. “I’m glad.”

I tug on the bond between us, reminding us both of the importance of the bonds gargoyle nestlings hatch with. We’ve had this connection since before we were born, and we’ve strengthened it over time rather than let it go. We’re feun to the end, and we’re both grateful for the connection that keeps us together.

Hawthorn leans into me, I wrap my arm around his shoulders, and we walk out of the elevator directly into the training room together like that. I love this man, and I’m about to kick his ass for the second day in a row because this idiot needs the attention.

I adore my family.

I wake up with the dawn and shift from my stone form to my human skin, staring out at the shadowy valley where we’ve chosen to reside. Uncle came to Earth before the rest of us and bought this mountain valley so that we would have privacy for our work. The land is so different from Ukon, but after so many years, I find it as beautiful as the humans who live here do.

My home planet calls to me, the darkness of the land and the volcanic hot springs. Ukon has two suns, but the planet is gravitationally locked with their orbits. It is always day on the bright side of the planet, and the night is eternal on the dark side. My people live and flourish on the dark side, and on the side of eternal day, our fellow sapients thrive, the tevatyl. The In'ai could never stand the brightness and heat of that side of the planet and were unaware of the tevatyl living there. We never told them of the other sapients, and the tevatyl gratefully offer a tribute of wealth to the karkoyl every year on the anniversary of our independence.

Stretching, I wipe away the longing to see the stars of my galaxy and grumble about having to be awake during the day. Generally I take on the responsibility of being awake when the sun is shining because the rest of my brothers are unbearable if they have to rest at night. Faulkes especially gets grumpy when he has to work during the day. I would rather he stay happy and content if I can help it; he's more sensitive than the rest of us to interruptions of his usual schedule.

Once I'm awake and fully shifted into my human form, I take the elevator down to the house and head to my room. I pull off my loincloth and throw it into the particle cleaner hiding in plain sight as a laundry hamper in my bathroom and step into the shower, shedding my human skin. Human soap is toxic for my natural skin, so I cleanse with the sand we import from our home. It buffs out the grime from the day before and gives my body a soft sheen without stripping my skin of its natural chemistry and balance.

Once I'm clean and fresh, I step out of the shower and dry myself by shifting to stone and letting the water evaporate off me naturally. My stone form stores much of the water in the tiny pores and the rest evaporates away, then I shift back and pull my loincloth from the particle cleaner. I tie it on as I leave the bathroom and pull a card from the pouch tied to it, touching it to a bloodstone rune on the leather to activate the spell that will shift the bevelan leather from loincloth to pants. It morphs into soft leather pants as I walk to my closet where I keep all my shirts.

I dislike wearing cloth, but the soft cotton of the open front poet shirts I have custom made for myself is bearable. They also reflect the nature of my inner self that I rarely get to indulge in with a job as demanding as mine. I'm creative, and before I became a soldier, I was an entertainer. I entertained our oppressors, but regardless of the audience, I enjoyed my work. My favorite part was the smiles that I'd draw from the slaves because the In'ai didn't always hear the barbs in my performances but the slaves did.

I pull a shirt off a hanger and don it, making sure it lays on my body the way it's meant to. Tits out, I like to say. I didn't pierce these nipples to hide them behind cloth.

Once dressed, I draw a line of kohl under my eyes and give them a little wingtip, then check the time. I head to the kitchen where our chef, Jax Stuart, will have breakfast for me ready. The only days I skip my morning meal with her are her days off. Those days I go without eating since it's not a necessary function for my body every day.

I could shift to my stone form, and as long as I stay stone, I don't need food. The only reason to eat is because I expend excess energy in my skin shifts, especially the human shift. That form takes far more energy to sustain than either of my natural shifts. The only good thing about that is that I get the joy of eating Jax's food.

When I enter the kitchen, Jax casts a glance at me and points to a plate with what looks like a small quiche on it, some tomato slices, fresh mozzarella and basil, and a small bowl of strawberries with a dollop of yogurt and a drizzle of honey. I grab the plate and the roll of utensils next to it and sit at the kitchen table.

"It looks delicious," I compliment.

She snorts as her fake fairy wings catch on a row of hanging cast iron skillets. I was told when she moved her own cookware into the house that using cast iron skillets

adds iron to the food she cooks in it, thereby adding to the nutritional value of her food. We didn't think that gargoyles would need iron as a dietary supplement, but since she started cooking for us, we all feel sturdier, as if the extra iron is adding to the density of our natural forms. We sent the information back to Ukon. Since most of our people will literally eat rocks to replenish any mass converted to energy, we don't exactly have a lot of scientists studying nutrition.

Fuck, we're still recovering from a thousand years of enslavement, so we don't have a lot of scientists at all. For a while we were completely reliant on the tevatyl for all our educational needs. We've got a lot of ground to make up for, which is one of the reasons Uncle Maxime agreed to take on this position with the IPPS; in exchange for our posting here, the IPPS is working with our government to bring the karkoyl up to date with the other members of the Alliance of Species.

As I start eating, Jax sets another plate in the place where I got mine, and a few moments later, our new butler walks in, wearing the same type of plain black suit he wore yesterday. He doesn't immediately notice me, and when he picks up his plate, he says a few words to Jax, turning his back to me.

Now that I'm aware of it, his ass pulls my attention straight to it. It's the biggest bootie I've ever seen on a human, though I've seen porn with this body shape as the main aspect of the images. He's shaped like a pear with a straight body from his shoulders to his waist, then he expands in a beautiful curve to an ass anyone with a brain would want to play with. His thick thighs hold up that caboose and flow into legs hidden by the pants he's wearing. He can't hide how big his feet are, though. At least as big as mine, and that tells me this guy probably isn't fully human.

The pouch on my hip shifts, and when I look down, one of the cards flies out, hitting Dec's shoe. He doesn't immediately notice, so when he turns around to bring his plate to the table after his conversation with Jax, he startles at seeing me.

A smile creeps up my lips, but I squash it by shoving some fruit in my face.

“Good morning, Thoren,” Dec greets me, stopping in his tracks. “Do you mind if I join you?”

I kick the chair across from me out and wait until he puts his plate down before using my fork to point to the card on the floor behind him. “You mind grabbing that for me? Must’ve fallen out of my pouch.”

Dec turns, sees the card, and bends over to grab it, giving me the absolute best view of his ass. His upper body disappears, leaving the heart-shape of his lower half for me to enjoy for a second. He straightens and turns around, catching me staring. I feel absolutely no shame about that, but his cheeks turn a tempting shade of pink, and that alerts the inner bloodstone krake that my species evolved from to a potential new obsession. Our species’ evolutionary ancestors were obsessed with reds and pinks and collected anything in the red spectrum. Watching Dec turn pink stirs that inner beast.

Ok, that is embarrassing. I got over my obsession with pink when I was a child, but apparently this man’s ass has a way of turning me back into the primal krake that I was pretty sure I’d gotten past once I matured a bit.

I take the card from him. “Thank you.”

I glance at it, and what do you know? It's The Fool again. What the fuck is happening here? Do the cards think Dec will be a fun new adventure for me? No! Well, maybe. I mean, it could be fun to tease him a bit. I wonder...

“Uncle says you graduated top of your class from Mrs. Cavanaugh’s academy?” I can’t very well go around making the butler blush if it’s going to traumatize him or drive him off. “What brought you there?”

Dec smiles fondly and pulls out a tarot card from the inner pocket of his jacket, showing me a surprisingly good representation of him on The Fool card from a human deck of tarot cards. “Actually, it was this card in conjunction with a benevolent shop keeper that started me on this path. He scared me when I first saw him, but when I pulled The Fool out of the spread, he told me that I was starting a new adventure and gave me the academy’s card and a reference. The card and reference qualified me for a scholarship, and it was the best thing that’s happened to me in years.”

I wince inwardly, hoping that doesn’t mean he’s had a difficult life. Humans tend to fail their most vulnerable neighbors, and somehow Uncle always manages to find ones that society has failed. Jax paid for culinary school by running drugs for a gang that I had to intimidate into giving up its claim on her. Our gardener, Alex, was tending public gardens for free as a means of staving off existential despair before she got a job with us and was finally able to afford the gender affirming care she needed to thrive. Her assistant, Angel, walked up one of our mountains with the intention of getting lost because he’d lost his mate. Uncle found him and he’s been tending to our gardens and his grief ever since.

The point is, I don’t know why I expect Dec to have a history that doesn’t include some kind of distress. Obviously, I’m hoping for something that doesn’t align with the will of the stones in this old house.

“Can I ask why you haven’t had enough good things happen in years?”

Dec’s face saddens, but he replies without the hesitation that I would expect from someone trying to protect their vulnerabilities. “My uncle passed about three years ago, and it’s been really difficult since then. He raised me after my mother abandoned me, but I wasn’t prepared for life without his constant presence and support. It turns out, I’m pretty shit at life without someone to give me direction.” He stops and his eyes widen and his cheeks turn pink again. “I mean, I can totally run this house

without constant supervision. I am totally a badass butler. I mean, I excel at this job and enjoy it very much. I apologize for my crude language.”

Relieved that it’s only the loss of a parent that preceded his arrival, I chuckle at his sudden attack of professionalism. “Since you’re not on the clock for another fifteen minutes, I think we can forgive the use of perfectly common language. I believe Jax is on the clock and I’ve heard her drop three fucks, four dammits, and a shitty in the last ten minutes. I’m pretty sure it goes along with her angry fairy goddess vibe.”

Jax laughs and tosses a finger at me. “In my domain, my word rules. If I don’t threaten these machines, they think they’re in charge. Can’t get complacent or the smart fridge might decide it’s smarter than me.”

I point to her and wink at Dec. “So you see, use the language that empowers your inner divinity.”

A polite, professional smile rests on Dec’s lips. “Of course, sir.”

I wonder what it will take to break that mask of professionalism?

An answer comes to me a second before I open my mouth. I don’t know if it will do it, but the way he popped off the first time I asked gives me hope. “What’s your name, Dec? What’s Dec short for? Deceptive?”

His professional smile remains firmly in place. “No, my mother couldn’t make a decision to save her life.”

I laugh, shaking my head. Somehow I doubt she named him Decision.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:39 am

Chapter five

Dec

(There's a problem with sexual harassment in this house, and I have unfortunately discovered a new kink)

After a week of referencing the binder that Arcan made, I finally feel like I'm beginning to work out the rhythm of this job. It helps that Mr. Simms has a pattern of behavior that mirrors the schedule Arcan suggested in his binder. I meet Mr. Simms in the kitchen in the morning, feed him, and eat my own meal. So far, I've eaten breakfast with Thoren every day except for Jax's days off; Mr. Simms started joining us on the third day.

After the morning meal, Mr. Simms and I start our chores. We begin with a trip to the office where Mr. Simms chews on his rawhide while I check the day's calendar and prepare a mental schedule and reminders on my phone for any specific deviation from the routine of the day. Today, a contractor is coming to power wash the outside of the house, so I make a note to remind Maggie since she's the one who directs the maintenance staff.

After half an hour preparing for the day in my office, Mr. Simms gets up and herds me upstairs to Maxime's bedroom, where I open the curtains and greet him, prepare his clothing for the day and help him with anything that he requires. He usually dismisses me no more than an hour later, and Mr. Simms accompanies me down to the back door, where he refuses to leave via the doggie door and instead requires me to join him on his bathroom break.

After I clean up his mess, we stop in the mud room for Mr. Simms' daily brushing, which is our bonding time. Mr. Simms loves the attention, and I completely adore him. His company all day makes the work pass quickly.

Once Mr. Simms is clean and I've straightened up the room and vacuumed the excess hair, it's on to the daily chores. Today I'm inspecting and cleaning the art in the house. It's a full day's work and requires my entering everyone's bedrooms, but the binder assures me that the family knows that the first Wednesday of the month is art day.

As I make my way to the utility closet, I run into Ethan, who's hanging out by the servant's staircase. When he sees me, his eyes widen for a brief moment, but he straightens and smiles. Unfortunately, on his weaselly face, the smile looks insincere. The poor guy just got the genetic shaft; I'm sure he's not as untrustworthy as the biases taught to me by entertainment media would suggest.

"Good morning, Ethan," I greet him with a slight bow of my head.

Ethan glances up the servant's stair before giving me his full attention. "Good morning, Dec. How's it going?"

"I'm well. The binder that Arcan—oh, I'm sorry." I cut myself off because of how badly everyone reacted the last time I mentioned their last butler.

Ethan waves my faux pas off. "Fuck that guy. You don't have to walk on eggshells around me. I'm pissed at him for fucking off like he did, but I'm not so angry about it that you can't mention his name in my presence like Faulkes."

I freeze at the venom in his tone. I understand that every grieving process looks different, and that anger is a natural response to the death of a loved one, but this seems like Ethan is talking about Arcan like he's still alive. "Sir," I start, searching

for a delicate way to address my confusion. “Did something happen that would have an impact on my work?”

Ethan frowns, shaking his head. “Nah. Well, maybe. Arcan was with us for a decade, and the one time one of us trusts him with something out of the ordinary, he faints dead. Poor Faulkes was traumatized by his reaction. How would you feel if you told your best friend your deepest secret and they do something like that? I realize that Faulkes probably pushed the employer-staff boundary, but c’mon, Arcan was with us for so long. It was inevitable we’d get attached to him.”

I’m slightly more confused than I was when we started this conversation, and as I ask the follow-up question, Drew, one of the housekeepers, comes bounding down the stairs in full fantasy armor that covers him like you’d expect from the oversexualized female characters in some fantasy games.

“Was there something wrong with his heart?” That’s the only reasonable explanation for why the previous butler would die so suddenly.

Ethan snorts, watching Drew as he retreats down the hall toward the utility closet. “Obviously. No one with any kind of heart would do something like that. Faulkes wants us to forgive him, but until he stops crying every time the man’s name is mentioned, I’m inclined to stay angry.”

I’m not usually so bold, but I reach up to Ethan’s shoulder, stepping in close even though that means I have to look up at him. “It’s ok to be mad at the people who’ve passed on, but it sounds to me like Arcan died at an inopportune time, and that’s not his fault.”

Ethan’s eyes widen in surprise. “Arcan’s dead? Who told you that? When did he die?”

I step back just as surprised as him. “I—I thought he was? Everyone’s acting like he died. You said he fainted dead!”

Ethan blinks at me and laughs, putting a hand on his stomach and huffing in amusement. “Oh fuck, you had me in a panic. Arcan didn’t die. He ran away. He packed up his shit in the middle of the day and fucked off with Uncle’s little truck. He left it at the airport and was gone. We have no idea where he went, and it’s caused Faulkes a lot of distress because he feels abandoned by his best friend, but also because he thought Arcan loved him as much as he loved Arcan, and it turns out that the loyalty and feelings were one way.”

Oh my god. I need to ask more questions. This situation is completely different than I thought it was. “Thank you for explaining, Ethan. I was operating on a lot of wrong impressions.”

Ethan laughs again and claps my shoulder just as hard as his uncle does. “I’m glad we got that cleared up.”

The door to the utility closet opens and closes, and we both glance that way, watching Drew walk back toward us with a bottle of water in hand. He shoots Ethan a flirty grin and heads back up the stairs. Ethan watches him until he disappears around the corner, then he smirks. “‘Scuse me,” he says and jogs up the stairs, chasing the housekeeper.

I sigh, mentally adding a meeting with Drew to tomorrow’s agenda. I can’t have the housekeeper getting harassed and not reporting it for fear of losing his job.

First, though, a meeting with Maxime to make him aware of a possible problem. I pull my phone out of pocket and send a text message to Maxime alerting him of my need for a short conversation at his earliest convenience. I don’t get a reply back immediately, so I set to the task of getting the cleaning supplies for my chore for

today.

“You mind grabbing that for me?”

The question comes just as I spot the tarot card on the floor directly in front of me. I stare at the card that looks like a dark version of the one in my pocket. He keeps dropping this specific one: a gargoyle drawn to look humanoid with bat-like wings walking in the void of space backlit by a bright star, smiling as they traverse space with a rucksack and an animal companion that looks like a mix between a ferret and a bat. It’s a beautiful card with silver foil, and I wonder where he bought it. Not that I want or need my own tarot deck. I don’t really believe in that kind of thing.

After picking it up, I turn to find Thoren staring at my ass, like he always does when his cards mysteriously drop out of his pouch (snort), and despite myself I blush. He looks so good. The size difference between us just does it for me, and the butterflies in my stomach take flight all at once when he holds out his hand. The barbells in his nipples have silver chains hanging from them today, and fuck do I want to pull on them. I bet he’d follow me anywhere if I got a grip on him like that.

Shut up, Dec. No thinking about Thoren like that!

I hand it back to him and back up, hiding my butt from his perusal as I walk backward toward the utility closet. I will never admit what knowing his eyes on my ass do to me. Ever. “You should keep better track of those,” I suggest.

“They seem determined to drop every time they see you.” The tiny smirk that lives at the corner of his mouth, guarding what I think might be dimples if he ever gave in and smiled fully, makes me blush as much as what might be innuendo in his words.

I don’t know; maybe he’s being suggestive, but he sounds so earnest that I don’t know if he’s teasing me or not. “Try putting a rubber band on them.”

Thoren shakes his head. “I would never. I want these cards to like me.”

“So you’re really into Tarot then?” I glance back, reaching out to grab the handle of the utility closet.

He shrugs. “It’s a good focus. We chose Tarot because it was one of the better tools available to us when we—well, that doesn’t matter. I’m thinking Dec is short for Indecent.” He waves at my ass like that’s at all appropriate.

Of course my stupid brain thinks it’s wonderful to get sexually harassed by the hottest man alive. Not that brain, the one that lives in my pants.

I shoot Thoren the dirtiest look I can call up. “I think I would have chosen to shorten my name to Indie if I’d been blessed with such a name.”

As soon as the words leave me, I slip into the utility closet and shut the door quickly, locking it just in case he thinks he should follow me in here.

Good god, he’s way too sexy for his own good.

Chapter six

Thoren

(Why am I the way that I am?)

I finish reading the report on the latest expansion efforts of a species on our watchlist, the tinkral. They're a reptilian species that have plagued this galaxy for longer than I've been alive. I'm not sure when their planet rejected them, and no one knows for certain where they came from, but they arrived in the Milky Way some time in the last thousand years and have been systematically colonizing. They're adaptive as a species, able to live in a variety of environments, and colonize every planet they find that suits them.

They've been mining in the Kuiper Belt for a couple of years, but when they first arrived in the solar system, we warned them that Sol's planets and moons were protected by the IPPS. They haven't made a reach for Earth, but we watch them closely. They've just successfully completed an invasion and subjugation campaign on a planet in a neighboring solar system. Thankfully, they only successfully conquered one of the habitable planets in that system. The other successfully repelled them.

The tinkral take their wins, but they never fight wars of attrition. They give themselves a standard amount of time to conquer a planet, and if the planet manages to hold them at bay, the tinkral move on to easier targets. This is probably why the Alliance of Species hasn't taken more drastic action than levying fines on them when they fail their campaign. The tinkral pay the fines and move on to their next

campaign. They probably account for half of the alliance's income, and they don't seem to care about paying the reparation price for their unsuccessful campaigns.

I shuffle my tarot deck. "What do you think about the tinkral?" I mutter as I shuffle them twice more. The cards are more cooperative about protecting Earth than anyone else's deck, and when they give readings for our work, they pull from the collective power of our family rather than only from me.

I deal three cards in a row and turn them over one by one: The Lovers, The Fool, and the Two of Cups.

"What the actual fuck is this nonsense?" I demand, staring at the reading.

The Lovers is my card. It always comes up in reference to me. I'm family oriented and it makes sense that the cards designated that one to represent me. I've been focused on my brothers since our hatching. We bonded with Uncle because I decided he belonged to us, and everything I do is a reflection of the dedication I have to this family.

I'm beginning to suspect that The Fool is the card this deck thinks represents Dec. In which case, the Two of Cups is absolutely ridiculous.

"Are you suggesting that I start something with Dec? Do you dare suggest that I might be romantically interested in a human, of all species? They can't even see magic. I could walk out of this office wearing nothing but my gargoyle skin and they literally wouldn't be able to perceive me." I'd be completely invisible to them. I could walk around in my natural form moving things around and the humans in the house would assume it's haunted by an invisible poltergeist even if I was literally moving things in the same room as them while they were watching.

I throw another card on top of The Lovers. As expected, it's the Ten of Cups. That is

the minor arcana card that the deck has designated for me. It represents all the work I do to make sure my family is happy. Sometimes it means that I'm catering to their happiness and sometimes it means I'm dictating it, but it's all about my desire to take care of my family.

The card I place on The Fool is the Ace of Cups, which immediately makes me think that these cards have gone completely mad. "I am not interested in partnering with him." I stop as soon as the image of Dec's ass reminds me of my unhealthy interest in him. "Maybe a romp in the sack, but I'm not going to do that because that would be fruitless and pointless. I do not want to deal with another Arcan situation."

Faulkes is recovering from Arcan, but his heart still aches with the loss of the man outside of the family that he loved the most. It's difficult being bonded with him as he grieves, but I can't imagine how it would be if he had to carry this burden alone, and I don't want to think about how much worse it would be for the entire family if one of the rest of us made the same mistake.

"Fucking him would be a foolish decision, but getting in a relationship with him would be a mistake," I grumble at that cards, and I turn one more card over onto the Two of Cups.

For fuck's sake. It's the Three of Cups.

"So what I'm getting here is that you think I'm already starting something with Dec and that we're going to live a long and passionate life full of happiness and celebration." I whisper that quietly because I can't fathom any other meaning to this stupid reading. "Do you hear how ridiculous this sounds? How are you planning to convince Dec that we're supposed to fuck like bunnies and bond like he's even capable of forming a bond with a karkoyl like I would require. I'll grant you that he's not likely fully human, but looking like a shifter does not a shifter make. He might have something happening in his long past ancestry, but if he could perceive magic

he'd have questions by now. We're not exactly subtle about that since we know humans can't perceive it."

The cards are silent, of course, since they don't actually speak, but I feel the laughter they're silently shaking with.

"This is the problem with half sentient cards. I never should have infused you with my magic. Watch me drain you dry and then come back and give me this reading. I asked about the tinkral!"

I gather them up and shove them back into their pouch.

"If there's a day that goes by when I don't hear you threatening your cards, I'll make sure you're seen by the best doctors in the known universe," Uncle says, laughing as he leans up against my door frame.

I grind my teeth in frustration. "They're predicting love and happiness and celebration when I'm asking if we should be worried about invasion."

Uncle comes into my office and sits on the chair that's for anyone who wants to hang out in here while I'm working. "Oh? What has them so distracted?"

The question sounds innocent enough, but he's actually a nosy old gargoyle, and telling him would result in him meddling. No one needs a nosy old man meddling in their life. "They apparently think I need a companion and are making some very pointed suggestions. I think I'm going to steal my own dog, that way they can focus on something more productive."

Uncle waves off the implication in my words. "I didn't steal Mr. Simms. He was abandoned outside, and he loves living here. He's starting to herd our new butler, you know. They're so cute together. Dec gives him extra treats, and Mr. Simms keeps him

on a tight schedule. I think they're going to bond beautifully, which will be good for Mr. Simms. He needs someone to guard."

Uncle did, in fact, steal the dog. They're herding dogs, and Mr. Simms was both well-fed and chipped when he brought him home. Walker hijacked the microchip and changed all the info on it so that if Mr. Simms somehow gets lost, we will be the contact on his RFID, but he was absolutely a working dog before Uncle stole him and turned him into a pet.

I anonymously paid the previous owners and sent them a couple of vouchers for replacement dogs and training academies. They seemed placated by the reparation.

"Dec could probably use a companion to keep him company. What is that man's name?"

Uncle Maxime stands, shaking his cane at me. "You will have to ask Dec. I only know it because I have to for employment purposes. If he doesn't want anyone else to know, that is his prerogative, and I'm not going to reveal his secrets just because you're my nephew." He pulls a folded note from his pocket and hands it to me. "I've been summoned to perform a reading for the council."

"And?"

He shrugs and rolls his eyes. "And I already did the reading. The cards still say the same thing: something tragic happened a very long time ago that shouldn't have and the world is injured by it. The council is doing its best, but it's struggling because it is blinded by the injury. And soon the injury will heal and the council will be stronger and more successful than before."

It's the same reading that the council has been getting from Uncle's cards since the first time they requested a reading. It's always the same cards, always in the same

order. Sometimes he varies the layout of the reading, but even when he does that, the cards just repeat themselves.

His cards are better at reading the big picture and long consequences than any of ours, but they are shit at illuminating the details. They see the whole forest, whereas my cards see clusters of trees, while Reeves' cards see each tree in the forest as if none of the others exist. If we could get them to work together, we'd be able to see the future, but our cards absolutely refuse to talk to each other.

"You could just tell them the reading hasn't changed," I suggest.

Uncle waves the idea away, pshawing. "You know I enjoy visiting them when I'm invited. There will be a soiree, and I plan to make the most of it."

I glance down at the note he handed me. There are three possible incidents that I need to keep an eye on in case we need to send someone to help. "Go have fun. I've got this," I promise, standing and walking around my desk.

Uncle is small for our species and deformed from a birthing accident. His wings are still the size of an infant's, which is why he's so much smaller than us. Although the rest of us love him regardless that he can't fly and tell him that as often as we can, he still prefers his human skin to his natural skin, because in this form, he appears completely normal. Since we learned how to shift into human form, I've only seen his stone shape twice. I wish he was comfortable with us in his natural form, but the happiness he radiates in his human skin is genuine, and I would never want to take that away from him.

I bend and hug him, kissing his cheek and tugging on the bond between us to remind him that we are connected and family, and he must return to us safely. He travels a lot for the work we do because he is the ambassador of Earth for the IPPS, and we make sure when he leaves, he knows we miss his presence.

Uncle hugs me back and bids me goodbye, and when I release him, he teleports to the council building on the other side of the world. I've never been, but it's not exactly part of my job description and I don't feel like I'm missing out. That whole mess is more than I want to deal with on a regular basis. I'm happy just stopping shelaks from destroying cities in between halting potential Earth invasions.

And maybe it might be a little fun to tease Dec a bit more. No one can blame me for staring while he bends over. I work hard and deserve to spend my leisure time doing things that bring me joy, and teasing that man gives me so much more joy and pleasure than anything else I can think of. Dec's ass is one of the wonders of the modern world, and it's a crime that he hides it under his suit jackets.

I bet I could get him to take his jacket off.

I glance around the office to make sure I'm not forgetting anything legitimately important, then head out to find the new butler as I formulate a plan in my head for undressing the man. Not fully, obviously, and I don't want to damage his clothing. That would just be rude. I need something that will stain if he doesn't address it right away, but a stain that will be obvious on a black—

I stop dead in my tracks before pushing the button to the elevator that will take me up to the house. What the fuck am I doing right now? I just got finished telling the cards that I will not be entertaining the possibility of Dec as anything more than a member of the household staff, and here I am planning a prank just so I can get an unimpeded view of his ass? What is wrong with me?

“You look like you're having an existential crisis.” Ethan pokes the button on the elevator, scanning me from head to toe with his gorgeous stone gray eyes. They're his best feature, and that's saying something considering how handsome he is.

I grimace, grinding some dust off my stone teeth before pulling on my human skin,

reminded by his appearance that if I want to be seen, I have to disguise myself. “I’ve just realized that I’m playing into my cards’ hands, following their lead like I didn’t just sit at my desk for fifteen minutes telling them they’re wrong and stupid.”

Ethan gives me a pitying look. “You know that’s not how this works, right? You deal the cards and then interpret the deal, and it’s all on you how much the cards reflect your life.”

“Maybe your cards let you interpret their readings like that, but mine are damn near sapient and have opinions .”

He pats my chest as the elevator doors open. “Alright, brother. Come on, I’ll help you figure this out, but I need some food. I’ve been in and out of human form all day and require something sweet and creamy from Jax’s stash.”

I sigh but agree that ice cream would probably help whatever is happening to me. It might even be enough to make up for missing out on Dec’s ass.

Chapter seven

Dec

(Since when is my dick voice-activated?)

After a month of getting used to how the household runs, I feel like I've settled in. Every day is different, and the eight family members who live here are rarely here together. I've figured out that they leave the house in a specific order. I'm not sure why they do this, but if Ethan leaves, the next one out is Thoren, then Greeley, Faulkes, Reeves, Walker, and Hawthorn in that order. Then the pattern repeats. Sometimes there are days between them going out, sometimes it's mere hours. Last week all seven of Maxime's nephews were gone for several days. I watched them all walk out one after another over the course of a few hours.

It makes me wonder what they do. The only Staiano here all the time is Maxime, and when he's not in the areas of the compound that I do not have access to, he's usually in his train room—so far, he hasn't given me his permission to even peek at the inside of that room.

"I really don't think a person can be a divine butler," Maxime complains from the bed when I enter his room to help him with his morning routine. The book on his lap tells me that he hasn't slept since he went to bed last night. He often fails to regulate his sleeping pattern when he gets into a book, but I'm still more surprised to find him in bed rather than in his train room.

I give him a deferential nod. "I'm certain that is true for most people, but this suit is

the truest reflection of my inner self I could find.”

It’s not really reflecting my inner butler, but there’s no reason to tell him that my divine self hates waste and would rather wear my clothes until they fall apart than buy new ones. I’m sure he would understand—well, maybe. I don’t know. Maxime understands a lot about a lot of things, but there are some things that he’s just blind about.

For example, someone keeps moving the grotesques on top of the house. They are never in the same place when I look at them, and they often aren’t even the same statuary from one day to the next. When I brought it up, Maxime brushed it off as my imagination. My imagination? What does he think I daydream about? It’s certainly not moving statuary.

“It’s just so boring,” Maxime complains. “Are you sure you don’t want to have my clothier make you something more...” He trails off, waving his hand to indicate I should finish that sentence for him.

People do that when they don’t want to insult a person, but they’re ok with the person insulting themselves. I’m not going to play that game with him. “I don’t have a need for your clothier to assist me, but I will let you know if I ever do.”

He gives me another sour look. “Fine. I think I’m going to spend the day in bed. Could you just bring my breakfast to me? I’ve decided to take the day off.”

“Of course, sir,” I agree with a slight bow. “Shall I open the windows for you? Perhaps a bit of sun and a breeze will set the mood for you.”

“Oh yes, do that,” he agrees eagerly, scooting down in his bed and settling in.

I keep my smile internalized as I open the floor to ceiling curtains and crank the

windows open to allow the cool breeze into the room. As soon as I'm done, I gather the empty glass from his nightstand and head down to the kitchen using the servant's staircase. Just past the utility room, I bend over to pick up a tarot card that someone (Thoren) dropped, and behind me, I hear the click of his tongue against his teeth.

He's been throwing things on the floor since day one, asking me to pick them up for him. At first, I thought he was just clumsy, but now I think he's punishing me because I refuse to tell him my name. It's gotten out of hand, but it's too late to fix the precedent I've set, and there's this other thing that I barely acknowledge is happening.

Straightening, I turn, finding Thoren standing in the doorway of the utility room and staring at my ass. Well, now he's looking at my crotch, but it's clear what he was looking at. It's where his eyes always fixate when he throws his things on the floor. I ignore both the tingle of awareness that pulls my balls a little tighter to my body and all the reasons I should fix this situation and stop picking up his cards.

Today he's wearing another pair of beaded leather pants. This time the beads surround his exceptional dick print as if to emphasize the size of his... ego. His open front shirt shows off that he's changed his nipple jewelry since yesterday: today his rings have some fancy Celtic-knot type dangles from them. They don't match, but that just makes me look twice.

My cheeks burn when my eyes finally make it to his face to meet his glaring eyes, like how dare I look at what's on display. I'm not sure if he genuinely hates me or if he's got a case of resting bitch face. It could be either or both. I don't know. Sometimes he almost smiles, but I can't tell if he does that because he thinks I'm amusing or because he's teasing me. It could be either or both.

I said that already. It's because Thoren is a complete mystery to me. We have breakfast together five times a week, and every time one of his cards somehow flies

out of his little pouch all by itself and lands somewhere behind me so I have to bend over to get it.

I know I could just squat to grab, but the tingle that makes my dick perk up also makes my brain make stupid decisions. I've spent literal hours talking to him, but even with what I know about him, he's still so enigmatic. Either I'm a bit thick and I keep missing the obvious, or he's the most mysterious person I've ever met.

I don't have a lot of conversations with the family besides Maxime and Thoren, but the rest of them are fairly easy to get along with. Every time I talk to them, it's easy and flows naturally. With Thoren, things are far more complicated. He's likable, of course, but that's probably as much of a problem as... other things are.

"Hello, Thoren," I greet him, dipping my head and shoulders in a shallow bow to hide the fact that my cheeks are turning pink again.

"Morning, Dec. What's your name short for?" he asks in that ridiculous baritone of his.

"Straight to it then?"

We've been through this every day, and for some unfathomable reason I keep playing along. I've actually had to look up words with the letters D-E-C in that order in them. Fortunately, scrabble word finders exist and are helpful.

"Oh you know, my mother just loved the holiday season and snow. December was the highlight of her year." I snort at my own comment and shake my head. The best Christmas gift she ever gave me was signing away her parental rights.

Thoren, unsurprisingly, doesn't believe me, and he arches a brow, looking past me at the floor behind me. "You missed something."

His stupidly deep voice does eye-rolling things to me, and I'm not sure if it's because I think my reaction is over the top or because my reaction is nearly orgasmic every damn time he speaks. I had no idea my penis was voice activated until I started working here. In fact, there's more than a few kinks I've randomly unlocked since my arrival.

I spin around to hide my reaction and find another card on the floor just behind me. I could refuse, but my stupid brain listens to my tingly dick and I bend over, subtly arching my back to present my assets in the most attractive form.

"Hmm," I hum, unsurprised to see The Fool again.

I think Thoren throws it because I showed him the one I keep in my jacket. As I straighten up, I touch the card in my pocket. I keep it with me as a reminder of the incredible circumstances that brought me to this point.

Turning, I offer Thoren the card again, catching him staring at my ass again. My cheeks burn, of course, but my dick goes from interested to keen, and I realize I might have a problem happening in my pants.

He steps way too close to peer at the cards in my hand, flustering me further—I've struggled with this attraction from a distance, but this close? Holy smokes! I need to get away from—oh god, he smells like a fucking orange grove. Why would a person ever choose to smell like that? It reminds me of summers spent running through my uncle's orange grove, and the first time I kissed a boy: the best memory I have about my sexuality, and this guy smells like summer kisses under trees full of small green oranges; like excitement and joy; like first love and shared orgasms.

I might not have many good memories related to my love life, but the first ones are all covered in a haze of nostalgic joy, and smelling that on Thoren is as potent as love potion number nine, and I lean in closer to him, catching myself from doing

something completely foolish when he comments, “The Fool and the Two of Cups. Bad luck.”

“B-bad luck?” I stutter as he takes the cards, and I tell myself to back my horny ass up.

His deep voice rumbling through me as he answers keeps me frozen in place. “The optimist and adventurer and a change in your romantic relationship status. Might be you’re about to have a break up.”

Too close. Way, way too close. I take a couple of steps backward, finding my way to the door of the broom closet that we use for storing paper products. “I—I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Then you’re about to have one,” he responds, stepping with me.

Oh my god. I want to kiss him so much. No, Dec. Bad! Bad Dec!

What am I? A dog?

We are not unlocking puppy play kink today.

“I, uh—” I swallow, forgetting what we were talking about for a moment.

I immediately remember when the next hit of orange grove reminds me of boyfriends, happiness, and love. I don’t have a single prospect in this house. No, I am not going to even think about Thoren like that, and I’m unlikely to find someone safe to date on my next day off since I don’t leave the house unless it’s absolutely necessary. The drive up the mountain is a really good deterrent against leaving. The only person in the house I’m even remotely attracted to is the one crowding my personal space right now, but again, no .

“Um. I’ve got to just...” I trail off, grabbing the knob of the broom closet. I need to not be in the same space as him asap! He’s turning my brain to mush, and I didn’t have much to spare to begin with.

Quickly, to save my sanity and decorum, I open the closet door and fall in, shutting it behind me before I even flick the switch for the light. As soon as the door is closed, I take a deep breath, telling my racing heart to stop.

Damn. That was intense. I thought it was just attraction, but the butterflies racing around in my stomach, the heart rate through the roof, and the scent of summer?

I’m going to have to avoid him. This is becoming an actual crush, and I can’t let that happen. Fuck. “No, absolutely not, Dec. No one is worth losing this job over.” I love being here, and letting this crush on Thoren grow is a recipe for disaster.

I genuinely, sincerely, earnestly love being a butler in this house. I’m not going to risk it just because Thoren shows me a couple of tarot cards, smells like the best summer of my life, and turns my brains to mush with his voice.

Taking a deep breath, I give myself to the count of ten before slipping out of the broom closet, thankful that Thoren decided to step away. As soon as I see he’s gone, I make a dash for the kitchen, only slowing as I turn through the doorway into the divine-smelling kitchen.

Jax’s cheeks are rosy from the heat of her kitchen as she turns her big brown eyes on me. She wears a traditional chef’s coat and hat because she loves her uniform, but today she’s sporting green fairy wings and a matching fairy skirt.

She scowls at me, pointing to the corner of the kitchen where Mr. Simms sits with what looks like a smile on his face. She doesn’t really like having him in the kitchen, but this is where he’s used to eating, and I haven’t decided if we really need to feed

him elsewhere since the entire family eats at the kitchen table for most of their meals.

As soon as Mr. Simms sees me, he gets up, tail wagging excitedly. I stride to him, pulling a treat from my pocket as I talk to Jax. “Maxime is taking his breakfast in bed, and I think he’ll want a light, refreshing lunch. Is that ok?”

So far, Jax has been very flexible about the family’s tendencies to change the food plan for the day. They eat at different times and only ever have a meal together occasionally. They usually eat in bursts of twos and threes, and only twice this month have they requested a meal in the family dining room. If one of them is craving something, they request it, and if Jax has the ingredients, she makes it. The only time she told any of the family no in the last month was Reeves, and the reason was because of a recall on one of the key ingredients. He looked like he wanted to argue, but he gave up before the words even passed his lips.

“I got it. I’ll prep some fresh salads that he enjoys.” Her brusque tone is completely ruined by the fact that her speaking voice is nearly as high pitched as Minnie Mouse’s.

“Thank you,” I say, reaching into my pocket when my phone buzzes.

I pull it out and check the doorbell camera. Someone is standing on the stoop with their back to the camera, so I excuse myself and head to the door with Mr. Simms on my heels. I pull open the front door, and an extremely short man of some mixed Asian heritage spins to look up at me. He’s decked out like a goth god with black ripped jeans and a fishnet shirt paired with fingerless leather motorcycle gloves. He wears a black utility belt with bulging pouches and an abundance of silver chains around his neck. His eyes are lined with kohl in carefully drawn wings that look like they were done by a professional, and his blue- highlighted black hair is made up like he’s the emo member of a K-pop boy band in a rom-com yaoi anime.

“Hello, welcome to Chez Gargouille. How can I help you?” No one told me that they were expecting a visitor, but based on how this man is dressed, I suspect that Maxime hired another person and forgot to tell me.

“Well, aren’t you cuter than a freckled cock.”

Holy smokes. What is up with this day? The man’s voice is deeper than Thoren’s, but he speaks with an accent that sounds a bit southern, but maybe less Georgia and more Arkansas? I really do need to get laid, because even his crass compliment does things to me. That or I’m still in full raging libido mode after my encounter with Thoren.

Without giving me a chance to respond, the deep bass of his voice continues to pummel my sex drive. “You’re definitely fuckable, and if you’re interested in a little fun, I’m available after my meeting with Maxime.”

“I see. Please come in.” I latch onto my professional skill and ignore the offer, focusing on the meeting with Maxime. Stepping out of the doorway, I allow the man to enter, closing the door behind him. “Who should I say is calling?” I ask politely.

The man smirks at me, and it’s full of promise. “I’m Darcy Hellspinner. And you?”

Damn. That confidence is sexy . “Dec,” I reply, gesturing for him to follow.

As I lead him to the sitting room, Darcy whistles. “This might be the best view I’ve had since I turned in the bounty on a bunny down in Louisiana. Purdy from the front and sexy from the back, ain’tcha?”

I’m so glad my flaming face is turned away from him. Unfortunately, I don’t manage to keep the whispered, “Fuck,” from making it past my lips.

He laughs, deep and wicked. “That is what’s on offer, sweetcheeks.”

I take a deep breath, pull my professional demeanor as tightly around me as possible, and open the door to the sitting room. “Please wait here while I inform Maxime of your arrival.”

Darcy shoots me a hot wink, making himself comfortable in an armchair that dwarfs him, yet he manages to take the whole thing up with his ego. I shake my head at myself as I shut the door to the sitting room, trotting back to the kitchen with Mr. Simms to prepare Maxime’s breakfast, refreshments for Darcy, and to cool my ridiculous libido.

It’s flattering he thinks I’m fuckable, but there’s no way I’m going there. He’s not exactly on my bingo card for this year.

Although my dick seems to think that maybe sex with a certain Staiano should be added since we’re playing anyway.

I’ve really got to get Thoren out of my head.

Chapter eight

Thoren

(The number of times I've embarrassed myself is getting out of hand)

I am a terrible person, and I am not sorry at all for dropping those cards in Dec's path. The view alone is worth the pain in the ass that the cards are being about him. Most men do not have an ass that jiggles like that, and yeah, it's probably because he's got a little rabbit shifter in his ancestry, but over the last month, I've convinced myself that that just makes it better. If he's not fully human, he can probably see magic, if it's introduced to him correctly, and—

“Oh my fuck. I am not thinking about a future with the butler. I am not thinking about a future with anyone at all. I am not going to find a mate on this planet,” I hiss at the cards, smacking the pouch I keep them in. They've taken to launching themselves in Dec's path since his arrival, and as much as I love the view—and I do so love that view—this needs to stop. I am clearly losing my mind if I'm planning out magic-reveals to a mostly-human.

The cards are completely unaffected by my demonstration of superior strength. They're barely sapient cards ; the only reason they can even give me the sass they do is because I've been imbuing them with blood magic for almost two hundred years; they certainly can't feel me smack their pouch.

The scent of volcanic fire and blood magic fills the corridor as I approach Uncle's train room. Only one person I know smells like that. A smile stretches across my lips

as I knock on the door and enter the train room, spotting Darcy Hellspinner sitting on the back of the sofa watching Uncle's trains as they scoot down the tracks.

"Darcy! It's good to see you," I greet him, offering him my hand.

I genuinely like this man; he's the best tracker I've ever seen, smart as a whip, and a fun guy to hang out with during our down time. We don't always see eye to eye about insignificant things, but when it comes to important things, we're usually on the same page.

"Thoren, it's good to see you. Big and buff as ever, I see. When're you going to shift into someone more appropriately sized for Earth? You know humans are smaller than that." He waves at my totally normal six and a half feet.

I wiggle my fingers at his four-nine frame. "When you stop pretending you're a kid."

Darcy snorts and grabs the outline of the cock snaking down his jeans. "This ain't belong to no kid. I'm a totally normal height for a human born at the time of my incarnation."

"Oh, was that before or after the extinction of the woolly mammoth?" I tease, sitting on the couch with my leg up so I can face him.

Darcy's smirk smells a little like rage, but he hides it with a click of his tongue and a teasing reply. "In my day, we rode mammoths for sport and only killed what we could eat."

I drop my teasing when I get the scent of his rage and fear. Darcy's one of the most active scent emoters I've ever met, which makes the fact that he's good at hiding his emotions with his ego seem superfluous. However, it works because most sapient species wouldn't be able to smell that I hit a sore subject with him and might not

know he doesn't want to talk about woolly mammoths or how old he is. My species and his have some common genetic mutations, so smelling that his reaction to my teasing isn't happy, I change the subject out of respect for my friend.

"What're you doing here, anyway?" I ask, watching Uncle finish with what he's doing and duck under his table to join us.

"I called him in," Uncle answers, popping up next to me. "We've been contacted by the flink ambassador to the Intergalactic Planetary Preservation Society. They're missing a baby, and the last time they saw them, the baby had just befriended some little gargoyles that have been keeping tabs on one of your friends." He gestures to Darcy. "Romily Butcher, the Harbinger for Arlington Fox."

Darcy's scent warms with affection at the name even as his face sours. "That guy. I know him. He does have a lot of little gargoyles hanging out with him. How long has the baby been missing?"

Uncle shrugs. "A couple of hours according to the ambassador. They think the baby flink has been visiting the gargoyles during nap time instead of sleeping."

"Have you asked the little gargoyles if they've seen the baby?" I ask, though I'm sure Uncle wouldn't have overlooked that step.

Uncle gestures to Darcy. "I wouldn't have called for Darcy if the little gargoyles knew where the flink had gotten to."

That's unusual. The little gargoyles are particularly protective of the younglings of all species. If they'd seen the flink, they should have kept an eye on them until they'd been safely delivered back to their parents.

"No problem, then. I'll find the tyke. Did the ambassador send you anything of the

kid's I can use for tracking? A blood sample would be best, but if not I'll just take my sexy ass to the IPPS space station to get a sample from the parents."

"We have a last known location," Uncle says, pulling a paper from his pocket and handing it to Darcy.

Darcy reads it, folds it up, and sticks it into the pocket of his jeans. He looks straight at Uncle, narrowing his eyes slightly. "If this is a joke, I will be back with retribution."

What the hell was on that paper?

Uncle holds up both hands. "I assure you, it is not a joke."

Darcy jumps down from the couch, checking all his pockets out of habit. "Alright. I'll deliver the youngling to their parents, but you better warn them that I charge by the hour for search and rescue." He steps in close to me and hugs me around the neck before pecking me on the lips. "See if that butler's down to fuck. It'd be fun seeing that ass bouncing between us, don'tcha think?"

"No," I growl before I can stop myself. I clear my throat and shake off that stupidly possessive streak that keeps cropping up every time someone even mentions Dec and sex in the same sentence. "You're not fucking the house staff."

Darcy pulls in a huge breath and heaves a heavy sigh as he steps away. "What the fuck is happening in the world? Every fucking body is finding their fucking soul mates like that's something as commonplace as a Grindr fuck."

His expression wrinkles up in disgust, but the scent under that is longing. Darcy is barely human, yet he managed to inherit the human penchant for lying to both himself and others. I don't know how humans manage to connect to each other at all

when they hide so much of themselves. Darcy's words and tone say he hates the idea of being in a relationship, but his scent tells me that he wants that for himself. I wonder why he's decided to deny himself that?

"What are you talking about?" Uncle asks curiously, following Darcy as he heads for the door.

"Everyone finding their fucking soul mate." Darcy waves between me and the door. "Damn near everyone I know has discovered their one true love. I was pretty fucking sure that humans didn't even have soul mates, but right now I'm surrounded by so many fucking soul pairs, I itch just thinking about it. My favorite gargoyle and that bunny you hired are just the latest in a very disturbing trend."

Uncle's delight is palpable even as denial erupts from me. "Dec is not my mate! I'm waiting for that until I get back to Ukon."

Uncle giggles like the old man he is. "Oh my boy, you don't get to choose where your mate shows up. Better get to it; Dec isn't going to just wait around for you to make a move." He suddenly turns to Darcy. "Did you say he's a rabbit shifter?"

Darcy shakes his head. "Nah. He's got a little bunny in there, but he doesn't have the magic to shift. Fortunately for our boy here, there's enough magic to complete the mate bond y'all decided was a good fucking idea to have as part of your physiology."

I stall out as my brain denies that I have a mate, but my body heats up like I do. Darcy and Uncle leave me frozen on the sofa trying to get my mind and body back in alignment. There is no way that Darcy can predict that Dec is my mate. Mating is a choice, not a destiny. Anyone could be a gargoyle mate if they have the magic to complete the mate bond, but it'd be ridiculous to think Dec is...

"Dec is not my mate," I whisper as I finally unfreeze.

Is he?

Chapter nine

Dec

(After this I'm going to look up the meanings of tarot cards)

Mr. Simms' appointment with the groomer that comes to care for him once a month keeps him out from under foot for a couple of hours, and since he's occupied, and all my chores for the day are accomplished, I decide today is a good day to investigate the moving statuary. No one believes me that it keeps changing. Alex, the gardener, assures me that it is the same every day. Even when I showed her two pictures taken from one day to the next, she literally could not see a difference between them. It was the strangest thing.

Heading to the utility shed to grab a ladder, I glance up at the statuary overhead, comparing it to the picture I took yesterday. The little grotesques definitely do not look the same as they did yesterday. The larger ones are in the same position, but the horns are different. I can't see too many details from the ground, but the horns are definitely different.

Shaking my head at the strangeness, I finish the jog down to the shed, grab a telescoping ladder from the hooks on the outside wall, and carry it back to the side of the mansion where I won't be obstructing anyone's view and where I'm quickly available if someone comes to the door. Extending the ladder takes some creative handling. I'm not weak, but I'm also not a bruiser; I'm just an averagely strong man, and a forty foot long ladder is challenging for my arm strength and coordination.

With a few false starts but zero broken windows (whew!), I manage to get the ladder secure. As I climb, I take my time, because holy shit it's stupid to do this without someone to hold the ladder steady. What the hell was I thinking? I glance down and a shot of adrenaline puts me into high alert mode. Fear clenches in my gut, and I immediately look back up.

Shit, I'm an idiot. What am I doing?

Swallowing my fear, I take a deep breath and tell myself that everything is fine. People go up ladders all the time. I might have no business on a ladder, but I'm fine. I'm fine .

I never thought I'd have to overcome a fear of heights, but here we are. No, it's not the height. It's the fall. I'm very uncomfortable with a three story fall.

Do not look down

—again. Do not look down again .

Slowly I get my brain to make my muscles move and restart the climb up. It takes less time than it took me to panic to reach the top. I'm between a couple of the statues, and I now see that they're all grotesques, not a single gargoyle among them. That would have been cool to see in the rain. Oh well.

The little ones are pretty classically monstrous, about a foot and a half tall with pointed ears and stumpy muzzles with sharp teeth and fangs. Their wings are all folded around them, hiding everything but their clawed hands and feet. They're actually kind of cute with big eyes like baby Yoda.

“Hello there,” I say and chuckle at myself. “I guess I'm talking to the statuary now. Well, I suppose if you're moving on your own, there's no reason you wouldn't be

able to hear me. Not that I think statuary moves on its own.”

I look up at one of the big statues, and catch my breath, clamping my mouth shut. It’s clearly a gargoyle in the sense of the monsters that are depicted in entertainment and art. It’s about four feet tall, crouched on bent legs with hybrid features that make it appear humanoid. The detail on it is amazing, but the most inexplicable part is that it looks exactly like Ethan.

“Why would anyone make you look like Ethan of all people? Not saying he’s not worthy of being the face of statuary but—well, I guess it takes all types. Diverse tastes and all.”

I shake my head, and very carefully climb onto the roof.

I blink, stunned. The entire roof is covered by statuary. There are four large statues and at least thirty of the smaller ones. I reach for one of the smaller ones and attempt to move it, but it’s so heavy that I barely get it an inch off the ground before I have to put it down again. There’s no way I could move the big ones.

“Who the hell is moving you?” I ask, walking through the garden of statues.

They’re all different in the details—the artist is clearly talented. I walk to one of the other larger ones, unsurprised to see a familiar face. Greeley as a gargoyle is hot. The next one is Faulkes. The artist really captured his immensity and the devastating sadness that has corroded his child-like joy.

“I’m so sorry for what happened to you,” I whisper to the statue, wishing I could say the words to the man himself. “You deserved better.” As much as I applaud Arcan’s organizational skills, breaking Faulkes’ heart is unforgivable.

Patting the statue’s head between his horns, I move on, looking at each of the little

grotesques one by one.

I let out a very audible gasp when I reach the last of the larger statues and it looks exactly like Thoren.

“Fuck,” I whisper, running a finger along the statue’s cheek. “You look just like him. Jesus. Someone has a fucking crush on you. Look at you. Whoever made this has been way too close to your face.” I scowl at the tiny scar above his eyebrow that is only visible when Thoren gets close enough, pressing on it with the tip of my finger.

“Not sure why I’m getting upset about a fucking scar,” I grumble to myself, looking away from the face to take in the rest of the details.

The horns stand straight up in a conical shape with a spiral pattern. It looks like the artist gave the impression of fur, which I hadn’t noticed on the other statues, and there’s a design on the folded up wings, though it’s not clear what the design is because it disappears into the folds of the wings. He’s sitting on one foot with the knee of the other leg bent up and fortunately (maybe unfortunately) he’s wearing a loincloth with beading on it in a similar pattern to what his pants usually have. The statue’s naked upper body does things to me that I’m ashamed to say are a direct result of seeing Thoren’s massive chest every day. His nipples are even pierced like they are in real life.

“They really do know your body, don’t they? Weird how they got the nipple angles right.” I touch the nipple of the statue, tracing over the stone impression of barbells, but I drop my hand, uncomfortable now that I’ve touched him. “I’m not doing this. I’m not perving on a statue,” I chastise myself, turning around so I stop looking at the thing.

“Alright. Let’s find out what the fuck is going on up here.” I clap my hands to rally myself to the task again, and I start looking around for evidence of whoever the artist

is and how they're moving the statues.

I don't see any scratch marks, so I assume the statues are being moved on wheels or possibly carried. The roof access door is a surprise; I didn't realize the mansion had roof access, though I suppose if the family has designated the roof for work, I wouldn't have access to their work areas.

"How did you get up here?"

I startle at the voice coming from behind me and spin on my toes, wide-eyed at the sight of Thoren in... a... loin... cloth.

"Holy shit." As soon as the words escape, I clamp my hands over my mouth.

Thoren smirks, running his hand down his body from his chesticles to his cum gutters.

My throat dries up like the savannah before the monsoon season, while my cock decides it's fucking mating season. Holy fucking shit he's so...

No. No?

...No, no for sure. I'm not lusting after Maxime's nephew.

"Dec."

I startle again, realize I'm staring at the peek of pubic hair above the line of the loincloth, and jerk my eyes back up to his stupid-handsome face. My cheeks flush with the heat of embarrassment as I recall touching the statue like I want to touch the man.

“What?” I rasp, cough and try again. “I mean, what can I do for you?”

Thoren’s wicked grin makes a reappearance. “Why are you on the roof? You don’t have access to the roof.”

I gesture to the roof access door. “Yes, I just realized that.” A thought hits me and exits my mouth before I even think about it. “Are you the artist?” I gesture to the statuary all around. “Are you the one who keeps moving the grotesques?”

Thoren glances around. The corner of his mouth creeps up into a half smile and he shakes his head. “Pretty sure it’s a group effort.”

That brings my brain function back to normal and I frown. “Why would Maxime tell me I’m imagining things if he knows you all are moving the statuary?” I huff, shoving my fists onto my hips and turning in a slow circle to look at the statues.

“No idea,” Thoren replies. “Come on, I’ll take you back down to the house. No more roof access for you. This is private for the family only.”

Thoren grabs my arm above the elbow, gently directing me to the exit. My body does not heat up at the touch, and my dick definitely doesn’t chub up. Nope. That’s not what’s happening right now, currently, in my body. That would be ridiculous.

He inputs a code and the door unlatches, then he and I walk down a half flight of steps to the elevator. Another code and we enter the elevator. He presses the button for the first floor, and the doors shut. The elevator is so small I can smell him, and he smells like that frickin orange grove again. It’s crazy. How does he always smell so damn good? And why did he pick something so very nostalgic for me?

The silence between us feels heavy and tense, and I nearly choke on it before I finally give in and ask, “Am I in trouble?”

Before Thoren can answer, the door opens, and instead he gestures for me to exit.

I do, taking a few steps out of the elevator before turning to face him. “I’m sorry, I was just concerned since no one seemed to even notice the statuary moving.”

Thoren raises an eyebrow and horniness immediately replaces worry. “You’re not in trouble unless you want to be,” he says, and I swear it’s an offer that makes my ass clench and tingle at the same time.

Lots of people like a smack or two during sexy fun times. I might minimize my butt as much as possible while I’m working, but in the context of the bedroom, I love it when my lovers play with it in all sorts of ways.

“Uhhh.” I stall out trying to remember what I’m supposed to say, and trying to blink away the fog of lust. “No?”

That’s the right answer, right?

“You sure?” he asks, looking me over from head to toe like he sees something he might enjoy eating.

“Um. No?” I need to stop looking at Thoren in nothing but a loincloth. Who even owns loincloths these days? I want to be eaten so bad—no! Bad Dec! I do not want to be eaten by Thoren. “I mean, yes?” Right?

I turn away, taking a calming breath and making an attempt to stop whatever is happening with my dick and ass. “Ok, thank you. I need to...”

I trail off as a card slides across the floor past my feet.

“Mind picking that up?”

Thoren's presence behind me suddenly feels a whole lot more tempting than it was when I was looking at him. How is that even possible?

My body and mind war for a moment about doing the right thing or doing the sexy thing. My body obviously wins, and I give in to my own damn nature. I peek over my shoulder, eyes locking on that massive chest again. "Sure."

I take the two steps I need to, arch my back, and bend to pick the card up.

Ace of Cups again.

Chapter ten

Thoren

(I'll show you Big Dick Energy)

The echo of Dec's fingers pressing into my nipples is probably what makes me do stupid like it's my job. As soon as that ass is exposed I step in close, pressing my traitorous dick between those two glorious globes, sliding my hand around his hip. Dec barely stutters at my touch. He gasps softly, and the rich scent of his musky arousal thickens as he straightens, pressing his shoulders to my pecs.

"What are you doing?" he whispers, subtly pressing his ass closer.

"Supervising," I respond, letting my hand wander from his hip to his belly just above his belt line.

"What?" His confusion gets lost in the rasp of his voice, the small shift in his stance that creates friction between us, and the blinding temptation of his scent.

I lower my face to his, ghosting a kiss on his neck and inhaling to coat my nose and tongue in the taste of his arousal. "Can't get in trouble if I'm with you."

Dec's breath shudders out of him. "Oh. I—fuck."

He expels the expletive as I nip the sensitive skin under his ear. "Yes," I growl.

Dec's hand finds my hip, grabbing the skin there and pulling to get me closer. "Yes?" he gasps, adorably confused again.

The card in his hand catches my attention, and I almost wince. Ace of cups? Really? My cards are ridiculous. New relationships, passion... I really am living up to the card's meaning right now.

Slowly, I take the card from Dec's hand. "Yes. The answer is yes. Whatever you want, Dec—what's your name?"

The question causes Dec to huff a laugh. He spins to face me, sliding his arms around my neck. I take advantage, slipping the card back into my pouch before gripping his ass with both hands and kneading the delectable globes like they already belong to me.

Dec looks up with an amused smile. "My mother just wanted me to grow up to be a decent person."

I laugh and shake my head. "Decent is not your name. C'mon, you can tell me. What's your name, sweetness?"

"Well, it's not sweetness." He laughs, shaking his head. "Let me go, Thoren. We're not going to do this."

"He says, as he tightens his arms around my neck," I mutter, lowering my head until we're a breath away from kissing. "As your supervisor, I give you permission to kiss me."

"As my supervisor?" His words are barely a whisper. "I think that constitutes sexual harassment."

“Report me to HR, if you must. Just kiss me, please.”

Dec’s lips crash into mine and I swallow his fervor, tightening my arms and welcoming his taste. His tongue meets mine, and fuck, I love the way humans kiss. It’s so sensual and emphatic. A conversation and a dance. His tongue tangles with mine, and his arms nearly strangle me as he pushes in as if trying to obliterate the thin fabric separating us.

I pick him up and his legs wrap around my waist as I peek to find a wall to push him against. Two steps carry me to the doors of the elevator and I press him against it, giving him the hard surface of my abs to grind into. With the extra leverage, I take one hand from his ass, circling his neck and angling his head so I can ravage his mouth with impunity. Fuck me, he tastes exactly like he smells, like temptation and sex, passion and lust, like something straight out of my sexiest dreams.

I squeeze his delectable ass, unable to stop myself. He’s so wide and soft; there’s more than a handful, enough ass to really play with. I can’t believe the man is single and available, and now I’m thinking that he’s not going to be for long.

I rip my lips away from his, dragging in a deep breath of his arousal as his hips move to rub the steel shaft in his pants against me. He moans softly, eyes fluttering as he seeks to pull me back to his lips. Fuck, he’s so pretty like this. I could stare at him for hours as he seeks his pleasure.

“That’s good, sweetness. You’re so fucking beautiful.” Damn, I wonder how far down that flush goes?

“Kiss me,” he demands, pulling at my neck and bringing himself forward.

I relent, pushing him back and taking his mouth again, and he moans. It’s the softness of his voice—the way it vibrates in my mouth, the purity of it like his pleasure must

have an outlet—that consumes my soul. I lose all sense of time and place. I give myself utterly over to him, somehow surrendering to the undulating of his hips and the rhythm of his kiss. For a short eternity, I exist for his pleasure only.

Gravity suddenly betrays us, and overbalanced, I fall forward, nearly dropping him as we tip toward the floor together.

“Woah!”

Our fall suddenly stops as Faulkes catches us both.

Jerked out of the moment with Dec, I fix the balance issue and pull him out of Faulkes’s arms. “Apologies,” I tell my brother, stepping back out of the elevator.

Dec wiggles in my arms. “Put me down!” he hisses.

Faulkes shrugs, pulling his unicorn hoodie over his head. “You’re good, but maybe take it up to your room?” he suggests, scooting past us and walking away.

“Sure,” I call after him.

“No,” Dec rejects, pushing to get me to let him go.

It’s cute he thinks he’s strong enough to make me do anything I don’t want to do, but I put him down anyway because: consent.

I set him on his feet but push in close, tipping his head up as I bring mine in close enough to share breath with him again, “If we were in my bed, I wouldn’t have to ruin your suit with cum.”

Dec, flushed from our activity, catches his breath, and his pretty brown eyes glaze

over as his imagination takes over. “Oh god. What is wrong with me?” he groans, blinking up at me. His eyes refocus and his fist clenches, which is when I realize his hand is still on my chest. “It’s because you’re so fucking hot. If you looked like your, uh, brother? Cousin? I don’t know, no one’s told me how you’re related! It doesn’t matter— if you looked like Ethan, I would not have this problem.” He takes another breath. “Ok. Listen. Thoren. You are clearly the incarnation of my dream man, but I work for your uncle and this,” he points between us, “can’t happen. I am not going to lose my job because you’re too pretty to resist.” He looks at me from my chest to my hair and back. “And fuck are you pretty. But no. We are not taking this further. We are going to forget it happened. We are going to resume a purely professional relationship. Yep. That is what we’re going to do.”

He steps back as if we’ve ever had a purely professional relationship, but I think he genuinely means the words coming out of his mouth even though they are utter nonsense. “Uncle believes we’re fated mates.” I don’t like saying those words because they’re also utter nonsense, but I’m happy to play a little dirty to alleviate his concerns.

He scoffs and takes another step back. “That’s ridiculous.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You have met Maxime Staiano, right?”

He opens his mouth, and then shuts it again, nodding. “Yes, that’s a valid point. Wait, does he really think that?”

I press my lips together with a small amount of disgust at myself for using Uncle to get in Dec’s pants, nodding. “He genuinely does think you and I are destined.”

Dec’s confusion is palpable. “But why would he think that?”

“Darcy Hellspinner told him so. Don’t believe a word out of that witch’s mouth. He’s

not an oracle. My cards are more accurate than he is at predicting the future.” I pat my deck, even though they’re only slightly more accurate than Darcy.

“Darcy? The, um, Asian man that visited the other day?” he confirms.

“That’s him. He’s got a bit of an ego problem and likes to think he’s right about everything.”

Dec laughs. “He definitely exuded big dick energy.”

I have to give him that because it’s true. “He comes by it honestly—biggest dick I’ve ever seen.”

Dec snort-laughs and claps his hand over his mouth. “I really don’t need to know.”

That’s the truth. The only big dick he needs to worry about is currently attached to me.

Ugh. There I go with the possessive shit again.

I offer him my hand. “Your room or mine?”

Chapter eleven

Dec

(No one is surprised by this plot twist)

O h he is so smooth. I almost put my hand in his, but I take another step away to keep myself from making any mistakes. “Nope. No. We are not doing this. We are pretending it never happened. Remember?”

Thoren looks from my face to his outstretched hand and back to my face. “Really?” he demands, but there’s a smile in his eyes that I decide means he’s teasing me.

I shrug and give him my most professionally polite smile. “It’s a very nice necklace. You should be happy you were genetically blessed with such excellent form.”

He gives me a disbelieving look, but it clears away quickly, and his fingers curl up and he drops his arm, shaking his head. “I can admit when my advances are rejected. When you’re ready to admit that you’ve made a mistake, you know where to find me.”

I laugh as I start walking back toward the next thing I should do on my never ending list. “I’m nothing if not capable of never admitting I was wrong,” I toss at him, winking to let him know I’m teasing.

It feels like a mistake to walk away, but that’s just my dick talking, and that guy isn’t known for his sound judgment, so I keep walking, forcing my feet to keep moving

until I finally get to my office. I really don't have much in the way of work, but I do some reorganizing until Mr. Simms' appointment with the groomer is done, then I meet them at the front of the house to pay the woman. She reports that Mr. Simms was perfectly well behaved, takes her payment, and I see her out.

"Come along, Mr. Simms. Spa day is over. Time for a snack and a nap."

Mr. Simms, being the proper good doggo he is, follows me straight to the kitchen, waiting patiently for his good boy treat that he takes to his bed in the corner to snack on.

Jax eyes Mr. Simms as he takes his place in her kitchen. "I don't know why you insist the dog bed has to be in here. It's unsanitary," she comments offhandedly.

"Don't listen to her, Mr. Simms. She's obligated by her proper schooling to object to your bed being in here. She likes having your company, I assure you." Honestly, the reason the dog bed is in the kitchen is because there isn't another room in the house that is as regularly occupied as the kitchen is. Jax is here all day, and in the evening after she goes home, Mr. Simms accompanies me to my rooms. I don't know how things were before I arrived, but no one is complaining that they've lost their sleeping companion, so I assume it's ok for him to sleep on my bed.

"I am not a pet lover," Jax denies as she hands me a bowl of raw foods that she put together specifically for Mr. Simms, even though I told her I would buy him dog food. She was the one who said, "It's my job to feed this household and he is part of the household."

I put the bowl down where Mr. Simms can get it if he's hungry and smile at the squishy-on-the-inside chef. "You don't have to be a pet lover to love Mr. Simms. He's such a good doggo, everyone loves—ah!" I yelp as a stone statuette of one of the roof grotesques appears out of nowhere on the counter. "What that fu—dge."

Jax looks at me like I've lost a marble or two. "What was that?"

I cough to clear out the need to find the biggest expletive I can find, and gesture to the statuette. "This just appeared out of thin air."

She looks right at the statuette, shaking her head in confusion. "No. It's been there. Someone brought it in. I don't know why they left it there. Isn't it one of the gargoyles from the roof?" She shrugs like she doesn't find it strange that someone left a statuette on her counter. Also, it was literally not there when I walked into the kitchen, so that's weird.

"I swear to you it was not there when I walked in here just now. That thing appeared out of thin airrrr..." I trail off as it disappears and reappears in the doorway leading out.

Jax tilts her head, confused even more. "It's been in the doorway this whole time. You had to step over it to get in the kitchen. I'm telling you, you need to find a furniture dolly and get it out of the way because it's a fire hazard and a poorly thought through prank."

What in the Finding Nemo Dory fish forgetful hell is this?

"Are you joking? Are you teasing me right now?" I ask, walking over to the statuette and pointing at it. "This was on the counter a second ago. I didn't walk over it to enter the kitchen. I would never leave something in a doorway—aaaand it's gone again."

"What's gone?" Jax asks, barely looking back from where she's started pulling ingredients from the fridge.

I fish-mouth at her in complete disbelief. I don't even know what to say. I feel like I

need a meme right now with the sound clip “emotional damage” playing on repeat. What the fuck?

I glance around the doorway to find the little grotesque a few feet down the hall with a wing out, pointing to the left.

I don’t know what is happening here, but it looks like I’m being led by a moving statue. Maybe I’m the delusional one? Am I having a psychotic break right now? If I follow the moving statue, is it my own mind leading me away from the kitchen? If this is what a psychotic break feels like, then I’m a bit disappointed in the entire experience. Being aware that my mind is fucking with me takes something away from the whole ordeal.

Possibly I’m not having a psychotic break and there is something extra going on. I believe in aliens, no doubt, so maybe that’s what’s happening here?

Aliens or a psychotic break. I’m not liking my options here, and yet, I still find myself walking toward the little statue and following its lead.

It disappears and reappears and leads me on a direct route from the kitchen back to the elevators, but it stands in front of the one that I don’t have the access code for.

Which is apparently not a problem, because it disappears again, the elevator doors open, and then it reappears standing in the elevator.

“This is fun,” I tell myself as I enter the forbidden elevator.

The button is already lit for sub-basement three. Wow. I am going to get fired for sure.

“So, what’s your name? Where’re you from? Where are we going and what’s with

the handbasket?”

The statue obviously doesn’t respond, but the elevator chimes so prettily that it makes up for the weirdness of it all. I kinda wish the other elevator chimed like that. It sounds like church bells.

The doors open, and I wait for the statue to appear ahead of me. The elevator opens into a well-lit, stainless steel and white room that looks like it was built straight out of a sci-fi movie. Except recently all the sci-fi labs have been dark except for spotlights over the lab tables, which seems inefficient because you literally can’t do anything except deal with what’s on the table.

What’s on the tables, you ask? No idea. I do not recognize even a single item of tech on the tables. I don’t know what the beakers are cooking, and I couldn’t tell you what that smell is. It’s all just science stuff and aliens.

Oh hey, I found aliens. So it’s not that I’m having a psychotic break, that’s nice to know.

The alien looks exactly like Walker with his furry pants and horns, except that he’s gray skinned, has wings, and the facial features are more pronounced, like...

Like the statues on the roof I saw earlier, except this Walker is definitely moving around and not made of stone.

He’s a gargoyle... and now the name of the mansion makes so much more sense. Chez Gargouille. I’m... I’m working for aliens. That’s, uh, something.

“So are you—”

Walker startles and flings what’s in his hand in a hundred different directions, jumps

backwards and runs into the table behind him, knocking over the beakers on it, and making a huge mess that waits about three seconds before exploding with a deafening bang and igniting his pants on fire. He immediately strips out of them and throws them across the room to a shower space that vaporizes them into nothing, leaving him naked with nothing to wear.

I glimpse a dick worthy of being memorialized in art before jerking my gaze up to his wide eyes as he stares at me.

“How the fuck did you get down here?” he asks, more shocked than angry.

I point to the little statue on the table with its wings spread as if to say, “Tada!”

Walker’s wide eyes slide to the statue and narrow. “You little gremlin. You know the staff are not supposed to be down here.”

My eyes slip back to his dick, but I force them up again. “So, are you all aliens, or are gargoyles, um, native to this planet?”

Walker’s gaze returns to me. “You can see me.”

I tilt my head to the side and raise my hands as I give him my best are-you-joking look. “Obviously. It’s hard not to see you. Do you want me to go get you some pants? That would be well within my job description.”

Walker glances down at himself and shrugs. “I only wear pants because it’s necessary around humans. How can you see me? Well no, more like, what are you if you’re not human?”

He looks me over, head to toe.

“I’m fairly certain I’m human. Have been all my life.” Self-doubt makes me wonder if maybe I am actually going through a psychotic break and this is just my mind playing a game with me. At least it’s interesting this time; hard to tell reality from fiction with this twist.

“No, if you were human you wouldn’t be able to see the chrylich moving, and you certainly wouldn’t be able to see my wings. Humans can’t see magic, and I am, at the core of me, magical. Most species are. Humans are the only species in the known universe and all its realms that have evolved to be fully blind to magic. If you can see me, you’re not fully human.” He gives me another once over, but this time it’s for more assessing. “Probably rabbit shifter. You got the ass and hips of a rabbit shifter and those huge feet. It would explain why you can see magic. I assume you can’t shift, otherwise this conversation wouldn’t be all that surprising.”

“My brain is gaslighting me. I didn’t even know I could do that to myself. This is super fun.” I should probably see if that health insurance I have now is any good. Mental health support is super important.

The elevator behind me dings, and I turn, catching Thoren in nothing but that beautiful loincloth ducking out of the elevator because he’s too tall for it with the horns on his head. That’s right. Horns. And wings, obviously. He looks exactly like the statue on the roof did earlier except his skin is velvety and not made of stone. Holy shit, he’s hot. Like the tingle in my dick is not at all subtle.

“What are you doing down here?” he demands, then looks at Walker. “Why the fuck are you naked with Dec? You know the staff aren’t allowed down here.”

“I didn’t make me naked, he did!” Walker defends himself, pointing at me like I’m the one who took his pants off.

The tingle disappears so fast, I bet it could win a Formula 1 race. “No. You took them

off all on your own. You threw them over there and they were vaporized. I am not taking responsibility for nudity. That is not in my job description.” I’m a lot of things, but a doormat is not one of them. “And don’t even start blaming me for following a moving statue through the house to the basement. I don’t even have the access code to this elevator. One cannot be blamed for following a statue that keeps disappearing and reappearing.”

Thoren scowls at the little statue. “They’re gargoyles, just a different species than us, and they’re alive, not statues. They’re only statues when you perceive them because you’re mostly human. The rest of us can see their substance when they’re active.”

“Is this that whole humans-can’t-see-magic thing again?” I suspect again that I may not be having the psychotic break I thought I was having.

Thoren confirms this with a low grunt. “Gargoyles are the standard for perception to be included in the intergalactic senate. No species who can’t perceive their active form is allowed a seat in the senate.”

I should probably wait to freak out until I’m alone, right? Freak outs about aliens and intergalactic senates are alone-time things, right? Right. Ok. Freak out later, for now extricate myself from the situation that my foolish curiosity and stubbornness have gotten me in. Yep, extrication. And maybe stop staring at the hot alien.

“I’m, uh, going to just, ah, go.” I get that stupid sentence out as I back up toward the elevator. On the plus side I don’t have to input a code to call it since getting out of here isn’t the problem. I press the button and the elevator immediately dings.

Thoren stomps in after me, but he doesn’t say anything as the doors to the elevator close us into the small space together.

I look up at his enormity—he’s bigger in this form than in his human form—and my

mouth decides that my thoughts should not be kept private. “Nice horns. The loincloth makes sense with the wings. You’re furry, so that’s something. Holy shit, I need to be quiet.” I clap my hand over my runaway mouth.

The side of Thoren’s mouth lifts in a half smile that makes me want to do nasty things with him. Jesus. I’m a monster fucker. Well, I could be a monster fucker if I just say the words he wanted to hear earlier. That’s... possible.

“Thanks,” he says, casually brushing his hand against my hip.

“So you still want to fuck.” I should not have uncovered my mouth.

Thoren chuckles softly, turning to face me fully even as the elevator stops. “Yeah. I still want to fuck.”

I stare up at him as my wayward hand reaches out to touch his furry chest and his hands grip my hips. I cannot not look at the alien I am definitely going to have sex with. He’s stupidly handsome in his human form, but in his gargoyle form? Well, it turns out I have a kink for Thoren in his natural state. “I’m going to be a monster fucker, Thoren. You’re not going to take this away from me, are you?”

Thoren’s smile spreads across his face with a wave of heat that feels like it could burn me up if I get too close. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Oh what a way to go.

I hit the button for the third floor of the house. “Take me to your room.”

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Chapter twelve

Thoren

(Monster fuckers for the win)

I 'm choosing to be flattered that my natural form is his preference, and I'm not going to wait too long and give him a chance to change his mind.

Ugh.

My own fucking brain makes me feel like a creep every time I think about this man.

Possessive- check

Dubious consent- check

All I need is the touch-him-and-die trope, and I'll have the whole trifecta—

Shit.

I definitely had the immediate reaction to kill Walker when I saw him naked. If there hadn't been three tables between him and Dec when I walked in, he'd be a bloody mess on the floor right now. He summoned me to the basement probably as soon as Dec walked in, and I was still blinded for a moment by the fact he was naked with my Dec.

I'm the worst, and there is something wrong with me. And I still fit myself into my human disguise, step out of the elevator, and throw this beautiful man over my shoulder. He yelps when I smack his perfect ass, and I stalk straight to my room. I kick the door closed behind me and toss him onto my bed, letting the disguise melt away and fitting myself back into my natural state.

I shake my wings out and Dec's big brown eyes completely blow out. He sucks in a breath, freezing in place like he can't move as long as he's looking at me. Considering that my own species thinks I'm one of the ugly ones, it's more than a little flattering. I run my hands up his legs, appreciating the way he looks at me like I'm the only thing in his world right now. "Unless you want Uncle to replace your pants, I suggest unclasping them."

My instruction is met with a look of confusion. "What?"

I lift my hand and wave my claws at him. "These are useful for a great many things, including ripping the clothes off your body." I prefer to have consent for such raw expressions of my desire, but I don't want to scare him, so that's a conversation that can wait for—

"Do it," he breathes, slack-jawed as he takes in the sharp points of my claws.

"Fuck," I hiss, as absolute delight fills me from the end of my tail to tips of my wings.

I grasp the front of his pants and rip them open, shredding them with claws meant for eviscerating my prey. I toss the scraps of fabric away and stop in awe at the delicious view of a pair of satin gray lace panties that match my skin tone almost perfectly. They're so perfect, it's almost like he knew I'd be seeing these.

"Fuck." The word slips out again as I press my face into his crotch to explore the

texture of the lace with my lips. I lick through the fabric to the hard cock under it, running my tongue over him and grumbling my approval when he whimpers in pleasure, the scent of his arousal thickening until it's nearly its own entity.

“Thoren. Please.” Dec’s strangled voice vibrates through my soul, and I growl in response.

I run my hands up his body, lifting my head to watch as I rip his shirt and jacket off, shredding them with as much raw need as I did his pants. As soon as his soft, pliant body is exposed to me, I push his arms above his head and pin them there with the small, clawed hands at the apex of my wings.

“Omigod, you have two pairs of hands,” he gasps, bucking his hips and rubbing his cock on whatever part of me he reaches.

Fuck, he’s intense. “Yes, my wings are arms adapted for flight.”

Dec’s eyes roll back and he groans, grinding his dick up on me again. “Fuck. I’m so fucking lucky.”

Fairly certain I’m the lucky one here.

I pull back enough to manipulate his body, flipping him over without losing my grip on his wrists, they’re now crossed above his head, but I’ve got a gorgeous view of his ass covered in lacy gray silk. My favorite word slips between my lips again as I place both hands on those luscious globes, kneading them through the silk. I don’t want to destroy his panties, but my claws catch on the fabric and tragically rip them. I hate what I’ve done, but I love the way the ripped fabric declares in no uncertain terms that this ass belongs to me.

“Mine,” I growl, leaning down to bite.

Dec yelps and groans and pushes his ass into the bite.

My sharp teeth break through the lace, and the taste of his blood sends what little sense I have scurrying away, awakening the savage beast within. I rip the fabric down the middle seam and bury my face in his ass, swiping my long, split tongue over his furled pink hole.

Dec rears up, trapped by my hands keeping his wrists and ass in place. “Holy shit! What is that?”

In reply, I split my tongue and lick him from the top and bottom of his ass, meeting in the middle at his hole and alternately drilling into that puckered bud with each fork.

“What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck...fuck, fuck—yesssss,” he hisses as he finally relaxes enough to let one of my splits through that tight little gateway.

I fuck that half of my tongue in and out of his hole as I lick around the outside with the other half. His response is everything. He whimpers, shouts, groans, and whines. He tries to buck up and grind down, struggles against my hold on his wrist, and kicks his legs like he can’t stop himself. When I lick over his p-spot, he’s so far gone, I don’t think there’s a single thought left in that pretty little head except the one word that keeps falling out of his mouth, “Yes. Yes. Yes,” like a holy chant.

I work him over, using pressure until I can slide both forks of my tongue into that precious ass. He groans with the intrusion, but there’s no sign of distress, and his little gland swells up like he’s on the edge, so I let up on the stimulation, easing out of him slowly. His entire body goes lax as I pull my tongue out of his ass, licking that gaping, wet hole a few more times.

Delicately, to make sure I don’t prick him with my claws, I knead his wide ass again, spreading his hole open to watch it wink at me. My cock is so hard and so desperate

to be inside him, but I need to make sure that he's ready and able.

"You ready for more?" The words grind out of me like I've given in to my stone form, and it feels like parts of me have. It's my natural resting state, and as fulfilled as I feel right now, it's no surprise parts of me have gone stone.

Dec moans his approval. "Uh huh. More."

Fuck, he's cute. Sexy. Mine.

Fuck.

I sit up, pulling the tie on my loincloth and tossing it aside. My cock rests in the crook of his ass, a monster snake nestled in the valley where it belongs. It looks so good against his pale cheeks that a pulse of arousal jumps through me and a spurt of viscous precum jets out of my breeding slit. I squeeze my shaft to get the rest of the liquid out and wipe it up, coating my cock in the slick.

I rub the tip of my dick over his hole. Spreading it wide, I watch it gape, and the shot of desire that hits me causes my dick to spurt more of my natural slick over that pretty little hole and into it to prepare him for taking my girthy cock. I've never seen a hole so small, but I know humans can take a lot of dick if they're cared for.

"Thoren. Get in me," Dec complains, pressing up with his ass.

"I am, sweetness," I promise, pressing the head of my dick into that tiny little hole.

Dec gasps and pushes back, but I withdraw to keep him from taking me too fast. His hole is as prepared as it can be right now, but that doesn't mean we're going to rush. The tension of the wait is as delicious as his entire ass. The sound of his complaint when I don't give him what he's after causes my dick to jerk and another spurt of

precum to douse his hole.

I press in again and withdraw, over and over, until with a little pop, his ass sucks me in like he's been waiting for me his whole life. Dec's noises grow in volume as I push into him ever so slowly. He struggles to get the leverage to make me take him faster, but when he gets to the thick flared ridge at the center of my cock, he stills, going completely lax as that flare spreads him almost more than I think is possible. Somehow, his hole relaxes and welcomes me in past the flare and all the way to the root.

"Please move," Dec begs, turning as much as he can to glare at me like I've somehow offended him by caring about his ass.

I lean to the side, desperate to move like he wants, but I'm also going to make a few things clear to my little bunny. "I will take care of your ass because I intend to spend as much time as possible in it. I take care of my toys, sweetness, and my little monster fucker is a very good toy, isn't he?"

Dec stares at me, open-mouthed and silent, but his head bobs up and down. I reward him with a slow pump of my hips, and his voice finds a way out on a loud, beautiful moan.

"Good toy," I praise him as I find a slow rhythm that teases us both with friction that's almost but not quite enough.

His reactions are beautiful, and I would watch him all day, but the sight of my cock disappearing into his ass and the way it pulls when I hit the flare is the sexiest thing I've ever seen. The contrast of our coloring is mesmerizing. My cock is a gray so dark it's almost black, and his lily white ass is so perfectly smooth that it's like dipping my stick in pure cream. My heart races at the sight and my body fully contracts as it readies to go off. My rhythm increases by measures until I'm pounding

into his ass like an accelerating piston engine.

I rip the shreds of Dec's underwear off him as his voice gains volume. I increase my speed, aiming for his pleasure zone until, at the crescendo of his song, he cries out, pulsing around my cock and setting off an explosion of pleasure inside me that builds from my chest outward, down to my lower belly and into my balls. A wave of pressure builds in my sac, hammering with the beat of my pulse until it finally cracks open the stone passage inside me, and I spill inside my Dec, filling him up with the flood of my crevele .

Panting as the last of my crevele leaves my body, I hunch as my body contracts again to make sure I've emptied my sac completely. Two more contractions and the flared ridge deflates, allowing me to pull out of Dec with ease. I release the hold I kept on him, gathering him into my arms, lying on my back with him atop me, and wrapping my wings around us both in a comforting cocoon of darkness.

I snake my tail up and around his leg, pressing the tip of it into his entrance to plug my crevele inside him. He's not a breedable partner—unless rabbit shifters have different biology to humans—but my instincts need him to keep my crevele in him so he can absorb as much as possible and use what remains.

As soon as he's plugged, his body goes limp and his breathing evens out. Knowing he sleeps in safety, I close my eyes and give in to the beauty of a post-coital nap.

Chapter thirteen

Dec

(Keep me)

I wake up slowly, becoming aware in steps that wherever I am, I'm naked, cold, in the dark, and lying on stone. I try to move, but my arms and legs are trapped in place, and there are stone bands around my torso keeping me in place. I think there might be something in my ass too.

"What the fuck?" I croak, trying to move, but no. I'm fully trapped. "What the fuck!" I shout as fear builds in my chest. "Thoren!"

Suddenly the stone under me softens to flesh, and the darkness disappears as Thoren's wings unwrap from around me. He releases me from his arms and pulls his tail (I'm assuming) out of my ass. I push myself up, breathing heavily as my brain catches up with what happened.

I laugh, relieved, and lean on Thoren's perfect chest as I recover from that fright. He turns to stone when he falls asleep. Got it.

He blinks up at me, still a little sleep hazed. "Ok?"

I nod, patting his chest as my guts clench. "Yes. Just a moment of fear before you woke up because I was trapped in the dark. I should be fine if it happens again," I say, climbing off the bed. "I need to use your toilet."

Thoren waves to his en suite bathroom permissively, as if I would have let him keep me from using it if he'd refused. I might not be anyone's idea of a long term relationship, but I'm not above matching an asshole's energy.

Thankfully Thoren isn't the kind of asshole that would kick me out of his room as soon as the cum was cleaned up.

I shut and lock the door and sit my naked ass on his toilet, waiting for the aftermath of raw sex. My guts clench again, and what comes out is far more solid than I expect—unusually solid for me. While I don't have a problem passing it, I'm still both embarrassed and concerned because I don't think Thoren washed up after, and he definitely didn't use a condom. I hope he hasn't been sleeping in filth this whole time. Oh god, his tail was inside me just a few minutes ago. He needs a shower ASAP.

As soon as I'm done, I use the bidet to make sure I'm clean, and when I look back as I flush, the, uh, deposit is as gray as Thoren's skin. I stare at it for a moment, concerned for my health. Did he hurt me? No, it's not bloody or black. That's gray gray. Is that what he put inside me?

Honestly, that makes more sense than it being something my body made. I don't have gray stool, and now that I've decided that's probably what it is, I'm not surprised that monster cum isn't like human cum.

These are the consequences of monster-fucking, I guess. I still have no regrets.

I mentally add needing to use a toilet after sex to my routine and flush. At the sink as I wash my hands, I take stock of the absolute wrecked state I'm in. My wrists look like I spent a good long time tied up and struggling, and I have red marks on my ass that look like my underwear was ripped from my body and left behind a few friction burns. My hair is a complete disaster, and the small amount of brown eyeliner I use is

smeared down my cheeks.

“To make the walk of shame like this, or to use Thoren’s shower? That is the question,” I hum to myself, checking out a set of fingertip bruises on my hips that include tiny little pinpricks from his claws. My dick immediately swells at the sight and memory of his hands holding me tight as he pounded into me. “I’m going to have to figure out how to keep him forever, because I’m fully ruined for every other man on this planet,” I tell my reflection.

He grimaces at me, and I get it. Who would want to keep me? Well, besides my uncle. He was quick and determined to keep me when my mother abandoned me, but I don’t think he counts. He’d wanted a child since he was much younger, and my mother’s choices gave him the opportunity to live his dream. I was lucky I had an uncle that wanted kids. So far, no one else seems to think I’ve been worth keeping.

“Don’t look at me like that. I could be someone’s forever. The cards seem to think I’m on a path for new love, remember?” I whisper to myself. I don’t actually believe in predictive Tarot. I believe it’s a really good tool for self-reflection, but...

Well, Thoren says magic is real, and he keeps them in a pouch on his hip, so maybe I’m wrong about Tarot? Although that might be wishful thinking too.

“Gah, my brain’s a mess. Shower, find some clothes, and walk out with dignity, in that order,” I tell myself and jump out of my skin when Thoren knocks on the door.

I step over and unlock the door, opening it a crack. “I’m going to shower,” I tell him in no uncertain terms, just to make sure he’s not going to kick me out before I get cleaned up.

His smirk turns wicked as he pushes the door wide. “Sounds lovely. My shower’s big enough for both of us.”

I glance over my shoulder at the open walk in. There isn't a curtain, but the part where the water comes out is around a tiled wall, and I've never been in it, so I don't know how big it is beyond the wall. "Oh, ok—aaaay!" I squeal as his warm hand wraps around my hard cock and he squeezes.

"Good toy," he rumbles, pushing into the bathroom and forcing me to back up with his grip on me.

A shudder of arousal runs through me at the braingasm caused by his praise. Who knew I wanted to be called a good toy all this time? It's like an off-switch for my self-doubt. Who thinks Thoren doesn't want to keep me when he tells me I'm a good toy for him? Not me. Thoren takes care of his toys; I know because I'm not even a little sore after the absolute pounding he gave me earlier.

Thoren leads me past the sink to the shower, hitting a button on the side I hadn't noticed that turns on the shower. As the water warms up, he leans in close, pressing his mouth to mine. His tongue touches mine, and I feel it split down the middle. Both sides of his tongue caress mine, and it's so fucking hot my balls draw up like I'm about to come. From a kiss. Shudder. Monster fucking is the best.

Thoren pulls back, and I chase after his mouth until his hand wraps around my neck and he pushes me backward into the steamy warmth of the shower. The hot water hits my back and Thoren stops me there, moving his hand from my cock to my ass and pushing my head back. I drop my head, wetting my hair in the waterfall.

His tail snakes up my leg like it did earlier and prods my hole, but I don't know if he's even aware he's doing it with how intensely he focuses on my face. At least that's what I think until his lips turn down and his eyes frown. My heart rate spikes, and I clench my hands around the arm attached to the hand around my throat.

His tail pushes in further, sending a spark of lightning crashing through me when it

brushes my p-spot. The sensation of something sliding so far into me is weird, but eventually he clicks his teeth. “You expelled the crevele already.”

My heart sinks at the disapproval in his voice. “Sorry.”

His tail snakes back out of me and he pushes his face in close to mine. The movement of his lips as he speaks tickles mine. “I’ll have to fill you at every opportunity since your frail body expels the crevele so quickly.”

I probably should have talked about more than just consent before falling into bed with him, but I guess better late than never? “So, uh, what is the, uh, crevele ?”

Thoren releases me from his grip, and a sudden wave of loneliness hits me before I realize he’s just reaching for the shampoo. He pours some into his hands and starts washing my hair as he explains. “Humans have euphemisms that match human society. Your farmers plant seeds and grow food, so you talk about planting your seed in a fertile womb to grow your offspring. My people—gargoyles—are stoneworkers. Our resting form is stone, and our euphemisms reflect that. The crevele is the proper casual term in the same way seed is a proper casual term for you. Its direct translation is “muddy clay,” like what is harvested from river banks. It has to dry out before it becomes useful, and that is what happens with our crevele . The water, so to speak, is absorbed by a fertile body, and what is left is the clay useful for creation. The clay becomes the shell of the egg we hatch from.”

I stare at him in awe of his species. “That’s amazing.”

He rinses the shampoo out of my hair before he pulls me in for another one of those strange and exciting split tongue kisses. A boy could get used to this kind of aftercare.

When he pulls back, he grabs the conditioner, squeezing some into his hand. “Our

species believes every successful hatching is a miracle. When our people go through droughts and our crevele is dry, our shells are brittle and the egg fails, but during the wet season, the shells are thick and strong and our spawn hatch in great numbers. A fertile gargoyle can lay an egg every month, and every child spawned is a miracle.”

He tips my head back and rinses out the conditioner as I imagine what gargoyle families must look like. “You must have a lot of siblings. How do you, uh, provide for such large families?” That question might be insensitive to his culture.

“I don’t know how many biological siblings I have. Reeves is the son of my mother from the same sire, but we don’t talk about siblings who are born of the same parents like humans do. All of the gargoyles in this house are my brothers. We have bonded. We have experienced battle together. We are the Trustworthy. We have sworn our loyalty to each other. We are feun , brothers until death.”

He pours body wash into his palm, and somehow when he touches me, it feels like he’s washing me with a soft stone. I guess that’s one way to exfoliate. It doesn’t hurt, and I am not going to complain about soft skin. “So, you don’t form connections with your mother’s other kids?”

He chuckles softly and shrugs. “We’re raised in large group conditions and not by our mothers. Aunts and uncles raise us. Uncle Maxime raised all of us together. We all hatched during the same hour out of the same nest, and he took us into his care. The ones who raise the young do not provide the crevele or lay the eggs. The responsibility for the children is on all of our people together. Every gargoyle takes part in the continuation of our species. Someday I will go to the hatching grounds and gather the children that I will raise with my brothers.”

It surprises me that he wants to raise children. “I’m surprised you’re not going to, um, donate the crevele ?” Is that how to say that?

He laughs as he sinks to one knee, looking at me like I'm an adorable kitten, and shakes his head. "There is no fertile gargoyle that would accept my crevele."

"Why not?" I ask as he starts scrubbing my legs.

"It may come as a shock to you, but I'm not the ideal gargoyle. All of us here at Chez Gargouille are considered so ugly we're known for having great personalities. Our eggs were deformed." He laughs again, pressing a kiss to my groin as he scrubs my legs.

"That's bullshit," I snap, completely shocked. "You're gorgeous!"

He looks up my body with a soft smile, pulling up one foot and gently massaging it. "Thank you. I'm glad you think so. That doesn't change the fact that in my culture the beauty standards are different and I am unbreedable."

I put my foot down, frame his utterly beautiful face with my hands, and bend in close. "You can breed me anytime you want, baby, and in my culture, you're hot as fuck and very, very breedable." I pause at the image of sticking my dick in him and shudder. "Well, not by me, but I'm sure there are plenty of men out there that would stick their dicks in you if you wanted—no, no you're not going to go find someone's dick to ride. No. That's a big no. Full caps, underlined, and bold. In fact, just up the font size for emphasis too."

Thoren chuckles. "I do not have a hole they can stick a dick into, so you don't have to worry about that. I can't take a dick; I can only give mine."

My eyebrows climb up my forehead in disbelief. "You don't have an asshole? How do you expel waste?"

Thoren stands, pushing me into the water to rinse my body. "I have a means of

expelling waste; it just doesn't function the same way yours does. You have a sphincter, and I have a pouch. I empty the pouch when it gets full, but my waste comes out as refined gravel or sand, sometimes a smooth stone if I'm unwell, but I don't have the need for something as soft and squishy as your human system requires."

"Soft and squishy does describe humans well, but I'm not sure how I feel about someone who looks like he eats humans for breakfast calling me that," I hum thoughtfully as Thoren pulls me out of the shower and hits the button to turn the water off. "What about you?" I question, offended that he wouldn't let me return the pampering in kind.

Thoren looks down his body and back up to my face. "It wrecks my body chemistry to use soap. I just water myself and use a sand scrub once a day."

"Why do you always smell like an orange grove?" I demand as he wraps me up in a soft towel.

Ok, for real, I love getting pampered by this man.

"Because that's how your nose interprets my natural scent." He shrugs, dips in close and smells me at the base of my neck. "To me, you smell like snow melting off the Grouvis Mountains when the clouds finally leave and the sun blisters the stone."

"That is quite the description." I have no idea what the Grouvis Mountains are, but I can picture the dawning of the season melting the snow off the mountains. That's a nice picture, but I wonder what it means to him and if I smell like one of his favorite memories too.

"I doubt one of my brothers would say the same. Not that you will let any of them get that close."

I am apparently not the only person suffering from You-Are-Mine syndrome.

Oh hey. Maybe that means Thoren will want to keep me.

Chapter fourteen

Thoren

(The cards are stupid)

I 'm such an embarrassment. Who tells the guy he hooked up with that he's not allowed to let anyone smell him? Me. That's who. I have zero chill.

"I wonder why you smell like my favorite memory," Dec ponders aloud, and that's the clincher for me.

I could have probably overlooked that his base scent is a reminder of passing into adulthood, when I raced the sun down the mountain, chasing the bevalan into the safety of the shade. It reminds me of finally catching it and sacrificing it on the altar of my youth. I fed our family, created tools from its bones, and wear its leather to this day. It was the happiest moment of my youth, and Dec smells like the memory of that day. However, I can't overlook that I smell like his favorite memory too.

"When did you notice that I smell like that to you?" I ask, curious if this has been an on-going thing I've ignored, or if it's a recent development, because I haven't gotten close enough to scent more than his most vivid responses until now.

My uncle's summons comes again. I've been ignoring it for the last forty minutes, and I need to go find him, but this conversation is important.

"Oh, a few days ago," Dec replies as I walk him into my closet.

I'm glad to know I'm not too far behind him; it would have been embarrassing if I'd been ignoring what was right in front of my nose. At least now I know we're pretty much in alignment.

I move to the back where I keep the shirts that I only wear when circumstances require me to and pull a soft cotton t-shirt from a hanger. It's black and boring and I would never wear it if I could get away with it, but it will cover Dec's nudity long enough for him to get back to his room. I'm going to have to buy clothing that will fit him to keep in my closet, because I fully intend to destroy every suit he owns. Hmm, I will also need to put some pretty things in my underwear drawer for him. This one time I'm going to let him walk out of here in a t-shirt, but next time he will have clothes that fit him.

I help him into the shirt and pull it all the way down. It hits him just above the knees and is decent enough that I'm not too worried about anyone seeing parts of him that should be for my eyes only. I take a step back.

"Turn around," I order.

A small, stupid part of my hindbrain grinds out a happy laugh when he immediately spins in place, showing me his back side.

The t-shirt covers him, but it's tight on his ass and his dimples are on display in it. The color helps hide them, but I can still see them.

"What are you doing?" he asks, looking at me over his shoulder.

I point to his ass. "I'm figuring out if I'm going to have to walk behind you all the way to your room or if I have something to cover your dimples."

Uncle's summons comes again with a note of warning.

I've got about a minute to leave my room before one of my brothers arrives to rouse me.

Dec turns, examining the clothes in my closet.

I don't always use glamour to clothe myself, but I have physical copies of all the clothing I'm seen in so that it's never questioned when I do. Also, glamour only works on humans if it's realistic, so the best glamour can't stand up to never having laundry. I have to own the clothes I'm seen in, otherwise the humans can't see my clothing at all. All of us were accidentally seen naked a few times when we first arrived on this planet; we've learned how to be successfully hidden since then.

Dec pulls a sweater off a hanger, wraps it around his waist, and ties the arms together in front. He takes a spin, showing me that his ass is perfectly covered, and I nod.

"Perfect," I approve, pulling him in close and kissing him again. Something in me needs to keep tasting him. "I have a meeting with Uncle now. I'll come see you when I return."

Dec pecks one last kiss to my lips. "Don't wake me up if I'm asleep. I will murder you if you do, and I know exactly where to hide the body where no one will find you."

"What I'm hearing is, sleep is important to you."

Dec smiles broadly and shakes his head. "No-no, awake Dec doesn't think sleep is all that important. Sleeping Dec thinks that anyone who tries to wake him up deserves a knife to the throat. I'm just trying to save your life, that's all."

I laugh. "I will be sure to disarm you before I attempt rousing you."

The door to my suite bursts open and Greeley walks in, booming, “Thoren! Get your ass uuuu—oooooh. Dec. How naughty of you. I’ve been looking for you for an hour, mate.” Greeley adjusts the sword hanging from his belt, grinning lasciviously.

Dec turns a pretty pink. “Ah, apologies. I’ll be ready in ten minutes. Where am I needed?”

Greeley laughs, a grating sound that means he’s partially shifted to stone right now. He looks Dec up and down, enjoying the sight of his bare knees far too much. “You’re not needed for anything specific. Mr. Simms was looking a bit forlorn without you, which set off a search for the elusive butler. I’ll call off the rescue mission.”

“Feun, if you don’t walk out of here right now, I’m going to rip your wings off.” The warning comes out of me as I wrap my wing around Dec, hiding him from my brother’s view.

Greeley stares at me, surprised by the threat in my voice. “Aye. I’m gone. Uncle’s called you a few times,” he tells me, keeping his eye on me as he backs out of my room.

“I’ll be there,” I promise, watching him until he shuts the door to my room again.

It takes me a full ten seconds to release Dec from my wing because I have to convince myself that Greeley isn’t going to come back.

As soon as I do, Dec turns to face me with narrowed eyes. “You just encased me in stone without my consent. If it was anyone but you, I would not be nearly as calm as I am right now. You don’t do that. That’s a line for me. Cross it and this is over.”

Stone erupts on my arms and chest, but he’s right and I bow low, ensuring my head is

lower than his. “You’re right. I apologize. I won’t react that way to my brother’s goading again.”

Dec takes a deep breath and relaxes. “Ok, good. Thank you. I don’t mind it when we’re asleep as long as you wake up when I do, and of course that would be fine if there was a threat or someone’s shooting at me or something. God, I hope that never happens.”

I smile, reaching out and pulling him in close. “Thank you for clarifying your permissions,” I say, dipping in close for a kiss. “I’ll see you when I return.”

Dec opens up for my kiss and responds as beautifully as before, tightening his grip on me and pulling in to press himself as close as he can. I soak myself in the taste of him, reaching under my shirt to squeeze his ass. The whimper that my hands on his butt elicits is music to my ears, and when I finally pull back and release him, the dazed look in his eyes makes me decide it’s about time to take a few weeks off work.

Dec deserves my undivided attention.

I see him off, walking with him until our paths diverge, then I leave him, following my uncle’s summons to the conference room, where all of my brothers have gathered. I’m the last to arrive, but no one says a word about it. Clearly Greeley has let them know I’m not taking shit about Dec yet.

As soon as Uncle sees me, he pulls up a holographic display of the solar system. It’s a live representation of the system in a model that discounts the vast space between the planets unless we need it. He zooms in on the Kuiper Belt directly opposite of the Earth. “We’ve detected tinkral ships dropping out of FTL in the Kuiper belt. They aren’t arriving en masse like they usually do, but we’ve detected four ships in the last week.”

The tinkral use faster than light travel to come here all the time.

“That’s a normal number of tinkral ships making stops in the Kuiper belt,” Ethan points out.

Uncle runs his hand down the orange plaid weave suit he’s wearing, frowning. “You’re right, but they stop in the belt, gather a rock, and leave. These ones aren’t leaving.”

I grind my teeth together as I consider our next actions. “I can teleport over—” I stop mid thought as two more ships drop out of FTL in the same region as their compatriots.

We all watch the display as it analyzes the ships, coming back with the result of two invasion class carriers. Each of those ships carries ten million tinkral soldiers that they can deploy in under ten minutes.

“Fuck,” Ethan rasps. “They’re not mining.”

“Those ships can be here in seconds. It’s a tiny jump to get from there to here,” I remind my brothers. There are not enough soldiers in both ships to take the entire planet without heavy losses, but they’re likely not the only ships coming, and we’re not going to let them get that close. “We need to talk to them, warn them that they’re not going to get as close as they’re hoping, and turn them away. If that doesn’t work, we knock out their FTL drives and call a tow.”

Uncle smiles at us. “There are six ships; one for each of you and someone to coordinate here with me. Thoren, which ship is yours?”

I scan the specs on each ship and point to one of the carriers. “That one.” The mission leader is on that one, I guarantee it. It’s slightly newer than the other, and the tinkral

are strict about their best and brightest getting the newest and shiniest.

I pull my deck from the pouch I keep it in, shuffle it, and deal seven cards in two lines of three with one in the middle, then I deal a sideways card over each of them. I've dealt this formation exactly like this for every joint mission my brothers and I embark on. Each of the cards beneath represent my brothers, and without deviation for the last two hundred years, they've been in order of birth from top to bottom, youngest to oldest, with me in the middle: The Star for Faulkes, The Sun for Hawthorn, The Moon for Ethan, The World for Walker, The Magician for Greeley, Justice for Reeves, The Lovers for me, and at the last second I move my card up and deal another one below it for Maxime: The Empress.

The cards know what I'm doing, but I say it aloud to make sure we're on the same page. "Will we come home?"

I start dealing the response cards sideways over the other cards: Three of Swords, Five of Swords, Six of Swords, Seven, Eight, Nine...

I look up at the worried faces of my brothers, hesitating before dealing the response card over mine.

"Deal it," Reeves insists.

I put down the Five of Wands.

"Mine too," Uncle adds.

Seven of Wands.

Uncle is the first to recover from such a dire reading. "Shuffle them back up and redeal; ask them if a different plan will bring you all home."

I pick the cards up, shuffle the deck three times, and deal out the cards. The first cards are the same in the same order, as they always are. The second cards don't change. They're all negative, casting doom on the plan for everyone except me and Uncle.

I pick up the cards, shuffle them again, and deal one for me and one for Uncle. "Should I go alone?"

Five of Wands on The Lovers, Seven of Wands on the Empress.

The room erupts in shouts. My brothers do not like sending me into a possible enemy incursion vessel by myself with only Uncle for backup.

"You are not going in alone!"

"There are six vessels that have to be disabled altogether!"

"You're not fast enough to get in and out of them all before they jump to FTL!"

"No! No! You can't!" That shriek escapes Faulkes, and Reeves grabs him, pulling our brother into his lap and wrapping him up in the comfort of his wings.

Reeves holds up the hands on his wings to silence my brothers. "The cards have never led us astray." My brothers quiet themselves, and Reeves points to my cards. "Deal one more. Ask if anyone else can go with you. You need backup, no matter what they say, and no offense, Uncle, but you are not my preference."

Uncle Maxime smiles affectionately. "I know what I am, and while I am an excellent organizer, I am not a field agent."

I deal the cards again. Me, Maxime, and the third that comes up is The Fool.

I stall out at seeing that. “Oh, fuck no!”

My brothers look at me expectantly.

“Who’s that?” Faulkes asks softly.

I deal out the other three cards: Five of Wands, Seven of Wands, Ace of Swords.

“That’s a hell yes,” Walker points out. “Who’s The Fool?”

I shake my head. The cards are crazy if they think I’m taking Dec on a mission to stop a hostile invasion force. He’s a butler, not a guardian trained specifically for this task. He can barely perceive magic. The tinkral might not be able to harness innate magic as a species but, they can at least see it and they excel at harnessing the magic of other species, not to mention they’re among the most technologically advanced species in the known universe. It’s too bad that in their rush for advancement they made their planet inhospitable for themselves, because we wouldn’t be facing an invasion force if they had ever in all their history stopped to think that maybe making their planet inhospitable to themselves would be a long term problem.

“Thoren.” Uncle’s voice makes me wince, and I blow out a frustrated breath.

“That would be Dec,” I respond with gravel in my voice. “He’s been pulling The Fool since he arrived.”

“The butler?” Hawthorn’s dubious question reflects what everyone else is thinking. “He’s barely more than human. What could he possibly do?”

“Well, tinkral are known for keeping pets. They really like cute things, right?” Faulkes offers with a shrug. “Maybe his cuteness will distract them?”

Tinkral would probably consider humans adorable pets, that's true, but I'm not willing to stake Dec's life on their tendency to adopt cute things. They're worse than humans in that, but no.

“Why don't we talk to the man himself? He might have more insight into what he can offer than we do,” Uncle suggests, already typing on his phone.

I stand, gathering my cards, and head out to meet Dec at the elevator to escort him to the conference room. There's no way I'm taking Dec onto the ship of a hostile invasion force no matter what the cards say.

Chapter fifteen

Dec

(The cards have got to be fucking with me)

Thoren's hand hasn't moved off my ass since he pulled me into the elevator that goes down to the basement levels. He opens the door to the conference room where the gargoyles have gathered around a large table upon which is a holographic image of six different, uh...

Spaceships? I'm assuming they're spaceships based on the representation of asteroids in the picture.

"You know, if it wasn't for all the Hollywood depictions of holographs, I would freak out that the technology exists and I had no idea," I say, because I have no idea what else to say when everyone's eyes are glued on me like I did something wrong.

I do not want to talk about sleeping with Thoren until I have the chance to talk to him about it. I don't even know the parameters of this situation yet, and I'm not defining it in front of a crowd. That's a private conversation that we will have when one of us gives in to the pressure of the need for definitions, expectations, and limits. It will probably be me, because: insecurity, amiright? But not today. Today I am going to just go with the flow.

"It's not commercially available," Maxime replies easily, frowning at my black suit. "Are you really sure a black suit is the reflection of your inner divinity? You seem

more interesting than that.”

Thoren’s hand squeezes my ass as I respond, “Everything I am wearing is a comfortable reflection of my inner, um, badass.”

I’m so not a badass, except that I’m totally a badass butler. Also, the reflection of my inner self is definitely what’s happening under my clothes. I can’t wait to see what Thoren thinks about the blue lace bralette and thong set I put on. He loved the gray lace panties so much he fucked me with them on. Although he’s going to have to give me a stipend for underwear if he keeps destroying them; it’s not like pretty panties for men are cheap and easy to come by.

He squeezes my butt again and pulls a chair out for me, so I sit, trying not to stare at the gargoyle forms of all the Staianos (except Maxime who remains in his human form). “What’s going on?” I ask to cover my need to examine each of them. If someone speaks, I’ll have the excuse to study them, and no one can accuse me of staring. Just gotta be chill.

Thoren picks me up out of the chair, sits in it, and sits me back on his lap.

As soon as I’m rebalanced, I twist to look at him, narrowing my eyes. “What are you doing?”

Thoren smiles, but it’s not nice, and it’s not directed at me; he’s looking at his brothers. “We don’t usually have guests at this table,” he replies, pointing out that there isn’t another seat available for me to move into except the one that appears to be Faulkes’s. Since he’s sitting on Reeves’ lap right now, I could probably protest and take that chair, but honestly, I kinda like that Thoren is staking a claim like this.

“I... see. What, um, what’s going on?”

Please don't let me be in trouble for sleeping with Thoren.

Maxime points to the holograph. "These ships are a tinkral invasion force. Tinkral are an intergalactic species of colonizers; they are known for subjugating native species on their homeworlds and moving in. They prefer worlds with infrastructure already in place, and the only reason they would be hiding out in the Kuiper Belt is if they're planning to invade Earth."

I stare at the ships as Maxime explains and soak all this in. Aliens are real. Hostile invasion forces are real. I fucked an alien. Obviously. "We should probably alert the government about the possible impending doom, don't you think?" I suggest, throat drying up as the theory of hostile aliens becomes a concrete reality in my head.

"No, there's no reason to do that. We're going to stop them before they're organized enough to make the jump to Earth," Reeves assures me, but his stare is intense and intimidating, and it sounds like he's trying to include me in that "we," and there is no possibility that I am going to be able to do fuck all about stopping an alien invasion force.

My vision blurs and light-headedness makes me sway on Thoren's lap. He pinches my side and I gasp, realizing that I'd stopped breathing. I take a few deep breaths, forcing myself to think rationally for a few minutes.

I close my eyes and let my brain imagine the worst case scenario, delving deep into the possible destruction and horror. I give in to the fear and agony for just a few seconds, and then I force myself to hear that these gargoyles believe with no uncertainty that they're going to stop this invasion before it happens. I lean back against Thoren's broad chest and remember how very solid, strong, and indomitable he is. My Thoren can and will stop this invasion, and I'm here because he believes I can support him. I got this.

I open my eyes to find every person in the room staring at me. Each of them expresses a different emotion with their face, but none of them look hopeless or cowed. These men are perfectly capable of stopping this invasion, and I believe that. “Ok. Let’s do this. What’s the plan?”

“You’re good?” Ethan asks skeptically.

I let my professional smile lift the corners of my mouth and dip my chin. “Of course. What can I do to help?”

As Thoren's arms flex and tighten around me, Maxime claps his hands together and looks at me with absolute delight. “You are a treasure, Dec. I’m so glad I made the right choice to hire you. Now, let me explain what our dilemma is, and maybe you can shed some light on it.”

I listen to his explanation of the cards and their guidance, and how they decided that I’m supposed to go with Thoren to an alien spaceship to disable it, and the entire time my brain fluctuates between intense disbelieving laughter, terror, and absolute shock that anyone would think me—the butler, for fuck’s sake—would have anything to add to a mission on an enemy ship.

When Maxime finishes talking, I make sure to stare at him in agape horror for ten full seconds before answering, “With all due respect, Maxime, you’re crazy if you think I’m going to teleport into an enemy ship as Thoren’s only back up. I’m a butler . I clean, I polish the silver, I make sure that the house doesn’t fall apart, I supervise the staff, and I make sure your needs and the needs of your household are met expeditiously. What I don’t do is invade enemy ships and hope for the best. I will lead the squad of cheerleaders pumping you up for your mission, but I won’t be going on it. The cards are crazy if they think I’m a better choice than...” I pause, deciding which of the brothers is possibly the least likely to be someone’s backup. “Faulkes.” Regardless of his incredible mass, seeing him sitting on Reeves’ lap because he needs

comfort for an intense situation makes me think he's the last person they'd choose for the job.

Reeves pats Faulkes back, nodding. "Obviously we would prefer to send Faulkes; he's the most skilled with these types of covert missions among us, but the cards have never led us wrong. If we send Faulkes, he wouldn't return, and we're not risking that. If you go, you and Thoren will both return from the mission. The cards aren't wrong."

Ok, so the baby of the family is really good with disabling ships. I would not have guessed that, but it just goes to show you that you can't judge people by the aspects that you see. Faulkes acts like a sensitive baby boy, but maybe he's only that sometimes. Who knows?

I twist again to gauge Thoren's reaction to this. "What do you think?"

Thoren's grip tightens again and the muscles under my butt harden. "I think the cards are stupid and I'd rather take Faulkes, but like Reeves said, I'm not willing to risk losing him. We can ask the cards for guidance again, but whatever the deal is, it will be up to our own interpretation."

"Ok, I'd like to see that," I decide. Having seen one Tarot reading in my life, and that was just a single card that the owner of that shop used to encourage me to go to buttling school, I'm interested in knowing exactly what Thoren does.

Thoren pulls his cards out of the pouch on his side and sets them on the table. "Shuffle them, then deal out nine cards, three on the left, three on the right and three down the middle. Each card you deal will be representative of a person in this room. It's important that you know that these cards come out in order every time these cards do a reading for this family."

I don't think I understand, but I shuffle the deck, and then shuffle it twice more. Three times feels right. Then I deal a card onto the table on the left, but before I even put it down, Faulkes says, "The Star."

It's The Star.

I pull another card as Hawthorn says, "The Sun."

The next one Ethan predicts, "The Moon."

Walker, "The World."

Greeley, "The Magician."

Reeves, "Justice."

Thoren rumbles behind me, "The Lovers."

Then Maxime smiles kindly as I set his card down. "The Empress."

Then they all speak together as I set "The Fool" down.

"I'm The Fool," I whisper, tracing a line over the gargoyle on the card. They have a flower crown around their red horns, and they're standing in a sea of stars with one shining brighter than the rest. They're wearing a backpack and they have a small dog-like creature with them.

Thoren's lips press against my neck above my collar, kissing me. "What is your question for the cards?"

My question? Do I need just one? Because I think I could ask a different question for

every person at the table. “Um,” I prevaricate, trying to land on a single question that could help clarify why the cards could possibly think I should go with Thoren. “Um, can, uh, anyone back me up while I back up Thoren?”

“Good question,” Hawthorn mutters, shooting me a visibly impressed look.

“Ok, now just deal a card over each one in order sideways. We don’t want them up or down,” Thoren instructs, so I start dealing out the cards sideways.

Six of Cups, Six of Wands, Seven of Cups, Nine of Pentacles, Two of Pentacles, Two of Swords, Ten of Cups, Seven of Wands, and Ace of Cups on my card.

“What does this mean?” I have no idea what any of these cards mean.

“That’s not really certain,” Thoren replies, sitting up to look over my shoulder. “The cards represented here are usually upright—”

As soon as he says the word, the cards shift to the upright position all on their own.

“That’s not weird.” Is that sarcasm I detect coming out of my mouth? For shame.

Thoren chuckles. “They’re imbued with a lot of magic. They do shit like this all the time. I lay out a reading and they change the reading because they think they know better than me.”

I wave at the cards. “So, what does this mean?”

The cards shift again, this time so that the top card shifts down and to the right of the bottom card. They’re still stacked, but the bottom card is visible now.

“Deal out another sideways card on each stack, and ask your question again.”

I do as I'm told, and this time the cards are a variety of the minor arcana, but with each one the tension in the room slowly relaxes. When I finish, Thoren hums thoughtfully and explains, "These are all positive cards. These cards indicate that every person here would be a good back up to you. I want you to gather them again and shuffle. Ask the cards which of us should talk to the tinkral, because I think they're meaning that you ought to talk to the tinkral and I should do the dirty work if talking doesn't work."

I gather up the cards and shuffle them again. Is it weird that I'm the one dealing out the cards? It's Thoren's question, right? Also, who thinks the butler should make first contact with the aliens? That doesn't seem like the best diplomatic move to me...

Although, I suppose that often the personal assistants to leaders are the first ones to make contact. Like, someone has to make the appointment and clear the calendars and book the rooms, and it's not going to be the world leaders doing it; it's going to be their assistants talking to each other first to coordinate. So, in a way, it makes sense that I might be the one to talk to the invasion force first.

Ugh. I'm just justifying this in my head, aren't I?

I stop shuffling. I don't even know how many times I shuffled, but when I deal out two cards, the first one is The Lovers and the second is The Fool. It's uncanny.

"Who should talk to the tinkral?" I ask.

I deal the Hanged Man atop The Lovers and the Ace of Cups on The Fool.

"It's weird that I keep seeing The Fool and the Ace of Cups together."

"For this moment in your life, those two cards best represent you. You'll likely grow out of them and settle in on cards that represent you, but while you are young, your

cards fluctuate. The Fool and the Ace of Cups are representative of you starting new ventures in your life and relationships.” Thoren’s explanation makes sense, but it’s still uncanny that those two cards keep coming up.

“So, what does this reading mean?” I ask, gesturing to the Hanged Man and the Ace of Cups.

“It means that you, my boy, are the best candidate to make contact with the tinkral,” Maxime replies, smiling like a proud father. “Thoren will accompany you, and the rest of us will be on standby to assist.”

Wow. That sounds horrible. “Are we sure the cards aren’t just fucking with us?”

“I’m one hundred percent certain they are,” Thoren growls, picking up his deck and putting it back in its pouch.

Chapter sixteen

Thoren

(First dates probably shouldn't include concrete plans for family expansion)

Dec's fear and confusion send my protective instincts into high alert, which puts the rest of my brothers in the same state. We talk about the plan in exacting detail, which we don't normally do, and we go over as many possible back up plans as we can think of. We have plans A to J (Dec was helpful with some of his suggestions, and I'm confident in plan A because of that) before Uncle decides we've done enough for today, and tells us all to go rest up, including Dec, who's wide-eyed with a scent full of adrenal hormones. There's no way he'll be able to sleep in his state, but I happen to know exactly what to do to help him come down.

While the rest of my brothers head to the roof to rest, I pull my glamour back on for the walk back to my room. Mr. Simms greets Dec and me as we step out of the elevator, wagging his tail and licking Dec's hands. Dec's scent almost immediately smells of the sweet love that he has for my uncle's stolen pet.

"Such a good boy, Mr. Simms," Dec coos at the dog, petting him and feeding him treats from his pocket.

"I didn't realize you had treats in your pocket for him," I comment, surprised. Usually I can smell food, especially dog food, but Dec's scent appears to mask the treats from my nose now.

“Of course. Mr. Simms is a part of this family and he deserves as much of my regard as the rest of you.” Dec straightens from his bent position, smiling at me. “Did you know he’s been sleeping with me at night? I have to leave the doors to my rooms open in case he needs to go out, and I’ve considered installing a doggie door for him, but I haven’t decided if I want to do that or if I’m comfortable with just leaving it open for him.”

I take his hand and thread our fingers together, walking him toward the kitchen. We’ve been in a meeting for hours; he needs sustenance. “I’m surprised that Uncle hasn’t been more obnoxious about losing his pet to the butler. He loves Mr. Simms.”

Dec chuckles quietly, following me without hesitation. “I wondered if someone would be missing his company. He’s an excellent snuggle buddy.”

“Mr. Simms usually follows Uncle around all day. I doubt you noticed it, but the door to his office and the conference room both have doggie doors specifically for Mr. Simms. That dog knows how to call the elevator and which floors will get him where he needs to go. I haven’t seen him in the basement for weeks.” I ponder that for a moment, before concluding, “I believe you may have stolen Mr. Simms’ loyalty.”

Dec shrugs, blushing as he smiles. “I didn’t mean to, but I’m not going to complain. I love Mr. Simms.”

“Clearly he thinks highly of you too.” I squeeze his hand as we enter the kitchen and release him, pointing to the small kitchen table. “Sit, if you want. I’m going to prepare us a meal.”

Dec stops in his tracks and looks at me in horror. “No you very well are not,” he objects, slipping around me and putting himself between me and the rest of the kitchen. “I will not be taking a verbal beating from Jax tomorrow because you decided to fuck around in her kitchen. She has left us prepared food in the oven and I

will be more than happy to serve it, but you aren't touching anything except the drinks in the drinks fridge if that's what you want. I will take water and a long pour of wine."

"How do you know she left food?" I ask, backing away from the fiery glare he's using to keep me from cooking in my own kitchen.

Dec snorts. "I asked her to prepare a meal that would keep warm in the oven while everyone was arguing about making plans."

"Ah. Ever the organizer. Is that why your mother named you Decisive?" I tease, watching as he turns pink again and scoffs.

"That is not my name." He turns away to hide his blush, opening the oven and using a set of mitts to take two large casserole dishes out of the oven.

"What is your name?" If I'm staring at his ass while I ask that, it's because I think I see his underwear lines, and if he's not wearing a thong, I'll let Hawthorn beat me in our next sparring session.

Dec sets the second casserole dish on the stove top and smirks at me over his shoulder. "Tell me the truth, have you asked your uncle? Or snooped through my employment contract?"

"I have not gone snooping, but I did ask Uncle and he told me to ask you." I could pull up Dec's employment contract right now on my phone if I wanted to, but I enjoy our game and know the reward will be well worth the wait when he finally tells me.

Dec's smile is warm as he turns away to fetch a couple of plates. "Maxime is the decent sort, isn't he? Can't be said of my mother, and I honestly don't know why I haven't changed my name other than it's a whole process, and my Uncle Clive

always said my name with so much... love and affection that I'm worried I'll forget if I change it how good life can be when you're steeped in the love of another person."

I can't see his face, but the way his voice cracks on the word love pulls me to him like the gravitational force of his body suddenly increased. I press in directly behind him and wrap him in a hug, holding him as close as I can. "It sounds like your uncle was very important to you," I murmur, offering him what comfort I can. I don't know what I will do when Uncle Maxime falls into the dawn, but my heart aches that he must refer to his uncle in the past tense.

Dec leans against me, resting his weight in my arms as he serves us both some of the decadent casserole that Jax made for the family. "He raised me. My mother abandoned me and he took me in. He was older than her by fifteen years, and she was already forty when I was born. I found a letter when he passed—this was three years ago—that he'd kept in his safe with his will and other important documents. It was from my mother to my uncle. When she learned that he'd stepped up, she told him that she wouldn't petition the court for custody as long as he paid her a monthly stipend and he didn't change my name. Even after he adopted me legally, I wasn't allowed to take his name; instead he changed his to match mine. I didn't realize that, of course. He never told me that he did that and I was a baby. I thought he'd given me his surname, but he hadn't. He'd changed his instead."

Dec picks up both plates, and I reluctantly release him. "That's a devoted parent. I'm grateful you had him and regretful that he isn't still in this world."

Dec sets the plates on the table and retrieves glasses from the cupboard, spurring me to return to the task of getting our drinks. "I was lucky he wanted kids and had never had them. I was lucky that he was my closest living relative and that he had the money, time, and wherewithal to pursue becoming my legal guardian and adoptive parent. I'm grateful he took me in."

There's a note of sadness in his scent as he talks about the man, and I can't help pulling him back into my arms as soon as I set the drinks down. I pick him up and press his face into my neck where my scent will be the strongest, thinking warm thoughts toward him so that my scent will comfort him. I know he's not a gargoyle who'd be able to pick up the nuances of my scent and understand my actions without words, but I'm hoping that he will get some benefit from the skinship.

"We will toast to uncles who love us," I rumble, sitting with him on my lap and pulling his plate next to mine. I've eaten many meals with one of my younger brothers on my lap, and Faulkes almost never stays in his own seat. The big brute is the cuddliest of us all and needs skinship more than any of us. Dec is tiny compared to him; it'll be easy to eat with him on my lap.

Dec breathes in deeply, nose pressed to my neck and nods. "Yes, let's do that. Is this a date?"

I feel the temperature of his skin rise as soon as he realizes he asked that question. I don't blush, but my wings tingle with the realization that perhaps this is a date. I really, really do not have a single degree of chill, do I?

Dec pulls away from my neck and moves to get off my lap, but I lock him in place without thinking and a short growl of disapproval erupts from my throat. He narrows his gaze at me. "Thoren, I need human words."

My teeth grind together, and I swallow the fine particles of sand that coat my tongue from them. He needs words. Human words. Right. "This is a date, you are my—mine. You are mine, and in order for that to not be true, you're going to have to run away like Arcan did."

Dec stares at me for an eternity of seconds that tick by connected by moments of time slowed by the singularity created by my declaration.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one of us suffering from Mine-itis,” he finally says, turning thoughtful. “It’s weird though, right? I’ve never been particularly possessive of anything or anyone. I was a kid who shared so well that when other kids took my toys, I was absolutely unbothered. My uncle thought there was something wrong with me because I let go of things so easily. But here we are, and I meet you, and you’re... well, you’re you , and now my heart and mind keep chanting ‘mine-mine-mine’ like it doesn’t matter if you don’t want me. It’s stupid because I’m not an asshole about consent. I know what it is and how to respect it, but I’m fairly certain that I would find a big stick to conk you over the head with and a crane to drag your stone ass to my cave if you tried to leave me. Wow, I need to stop talking now.” He slaps his hands over his mouth, shaking his head like he can’t believe he just spoke every thought we’re both thinking.

I pull his hand from his mouth, chuckling softly. “It’s a whole mood, isn’t it? Caveman conking and I’m keeping you no matter what. My ancestors locked their mates in their wings so they couldn’t escape.”

Dec pours our drinks and hands me the glass of wine. “I thought you weren’t allowed to mate,” he says, then raises his glass. “To the uncles who raised us. We are grateful for their love.”

I clink my glass against his and sip the dry wine with him. Setting my glass down, I answer his unspoken question. “When we were a young species, mates were our breeding partners, but the word implies a lifelong companion now. I have always wanted a mate, and my plan was to go back to Ukon to find one among the other Trustworthy, but only about fifty percent of my species ever seeks a mate. Uncle has never expressed interest in a mate. He’s always been extremely settled having his nephews, and that’s true of most of the aunts and uncles who raise our spawn. Very few couples raise children; most of them care for a nest, although some are breeding partners. My mother sought a mate and they were breeding partners.”

“Do your brothers want mates as well?” he asks, giving me the opportunity to take a bite of meaty, potatoey, cheesy goodness.

Jax is entirely too talented as a chef and it’s a shame that we’re too selfish to let her leave us without much whining and begging. She’s tried to get a job elsewhere twice, and Uncle raised her salary to outmatch the competition. I think she job hunts whenever she decides her skills have improved enough to warrant a raise, but she is worth every fucking penny we pay her.

“A few of them have said they would seek out mates when we go back to Ukon, but the others are content with our plan to harvest the nest we hatched in.” I’m looking forward to becoming an uncle to a flock of hatchlings.

“When do you plan to go harvest the nest?” Dec asks curiously.

“The eggs we’re watching will be ready to hatch in about three years. The nest isn’t full yet, but we’ve watched a new egg added to it about once a year, so it will be full in about three, and then we’ll bring our babies here.” Three more eggs and the nest will be full enough for the spawn to hatch.

“Ok, you’ve lost me. Why does the fullness of the nest matter to when the hatching happens?” he questions, confused.

“Our young hatch together or not at all. The eggings remain dormant as their nest fills up, but once their nest is full, the bond between eggings will snap into place and then they mature and hatch. Our species doesn’t want to live alone, and we are born bonded to our nestmates. We live together, grow together, and many times the bond lasts for the entire lifetime of the nestmates.”

“So, on our first date, we now have a rough date for when we’re going to become parents. That seems fast,” Dec mumbles, like he didn’t mean to say that aloud.

But, yeah, it's true. "We have three years to decide if you want that."

I would let him go if he didn't want the babies. They've been part of my plan for fifty years already. We waited for the last group to leave the nest and then put our mark on it so everyone would know that we intended to take the next group. Once a week, Faulkes travels to the nest to make sure our children are still healthy and that none of the eggs have cracked. We've lost four eggs in the last ten years, but we're hopeful that the next three will be strong enough to withstand the wait, and I won't give them up for any mate, even one as delicious as Dec.

"Dec is short for Delicious," I suggest as my mind wanders back to what he's hiding under his clothes.

"It's not, and if I'm with you, I'm all in on gargoyle babies. I won't even complain about sharing custody with your brothers," he smirks, tapping my plate with his fork. He's already finished his food, but I've been talking about gargoyles this whole time and I'm not even half done. "Hurry up, slow poke."

If the way his scent turns thirsty is any indication, I'm going to need the energy.

Yesss .

Chapter seventeen

Dec

(Plan B it is)

Thoren walks with me back to the basement where, instead of the conference room, I'm introduced to the command center. It looks like the bridge of a Star Trek starship. Take your pick, any of them will do as long as we're talking the iterations with shiny touch pads. Each of the brothers occupy a different shiny touchpad, and I decide not to touch anything at all, standing with my hands behind my back equidistant from anything that looks remotely breakable or like a big red button that might launch a nuclear missile.

Maxime stands from a captain chair that has multiple holographic displays at his fingertips, and he grimaces at my black suit. It's one of three I now own because Thoren's claws rip fabric like it's cotton candy and his enthusiasm for my ass precludes unbuttoning my pants. Honestly, it's just so hot seeing him shred my clothes that I'm willing to spend Maxime's money on a new wardrobe for it. (I won't let Thoren rip the clothes Maxime buys for me; that's slightly more unethical than I'm willing to go.)

"You're going to wear a black suit to talk to the tinkral?" Maxime sounds dubious, and if it were anyone else, I'd question my style choice, but he's adamantly against my suits because they're boring, not because they're inappropriate.

"This is my work uniform," I confirm, "but you'll be delighted to hear that Thoren

has ruined two of my suits and I will be replacing them with your stipend as soon as possible.”

Maxime still looks dubious. “You know you don’t have to wear formal suits here, right?”

I chuckle, and if it comes out nervous, it’s only because Faulkes suddenly pulls up a holographic image of an alien that looks like an unwinged, quadrupedal dragon with arms. They remind me of the dancing alligators in Fantasia that walked upright with their tails straight out behind them and their heads sitting at an anthropomorphic angle.

Is that terrifying image a representation of what I’m about to face? “I, um, I know—Is that a tinkral?”

Faulkes turns his face without moving his body and gives me a reassuring smile. “Yes. They look scary, but really it’s their technological power that you should be wary of. They use both magic and tech to overpower the worlds they conquer, but they stick to the accords that set rules for conduct during warfare. They’re civilized for an expansionist species.”

“Better than the In’ai,” Walker grumbles from the station he’s currently manning that has a holographic projection of what are possibly the blueprints of the big ship that we’re going to be teleporting into.

I’m not going to ask about the In’ai right now, because I’m pretty sure that I’ll piss my pants if they give me the answer I suspect I’m going to get. I really do not need nightmares about all the possible ways Earth can be destroyed right before I go talk to the current threat.

“Alright, at least I’m prepared for what they look like.” I manage to sound somewhat

normal saying that. “What do we need to do to prepare to board their ship?”

Greeley holds up a canister of what looks like ointment. “The only thing we need to do is paint you with this. It will protect your skin from the slightly denser presence of nitric acid in the atmospheres of their ships. You’ll have to use an oxygen filter so you don’t irritate your lungs. They’re capable of long term exposure to Earth’s atmosphere, but the opposite isn’t true for you, mate.”

Thoren takes the canister from Greeley, who gives him a slightly manic grin. “You don’t want me putting ointment on your boy?”

Thoren’s threat rumbles from him. “Touch him and I’ll tear your wings off.”

Greeley takes an immediate step backwards and spreads his hands palms up in surrender, shooting Thoren a winning smile. “I wouldn’t dream of it, mate.”

Thoren barely nods and turns back to me. “I’ll rub this on you,” he grumbles, pushing me back out of the command center and into a small office with a tidy desk and a modicum of privacy. He smirks as soon as we’re alone. “Should I rip these off you, or are you going to undress yourself?”

I don’t even know why I think it’s so hot when he destroys my clothes, but since I’m not walking onto an alien spaceship naked, I very quickly untuck my shirt and start unbuttoning it. Thoren watches me with hunger in his gaze as I pull off my bow tie and fold my shirt and jacket onto the desk with it. He licks his lower lip at the lacy white bralette I’m wearing, and his greedy eyes rev me up so much I’m half hard by the time I push my pants over my hips to reveal the lacy scrap of fabric holding my balls up. It’s too small to cover my dick while it’s half hard, but the way he rumbles makes me think he prefers that it doesn’t.

I love the beginning stages of a relationship when you can’t keep your hands off your

partner and all you want is to spend hours in bed making each other crazy. It's why I wear my pretty little things. I own boring old boxer briefs, but panties are life when you're trying to feel confident and drive your partner wild.

"Thoren, you can't look at me like that. You can fuck me in these when we successfully stop a tinkral incursion. Right now, you have to rub me down and pretend you're not achingly hard while doing it." We can both pretend, in fact. The moment he puts his hands on me, I'm going to go from half chub to a full mast, and we're going to pretend like I'm not.

"I'm not going to pretend I don't want to bury my face in your ass and live there. I will, however, control myself. Don't take off your under things; I'll work around them," he orders me, twisting off the lid of the jar.

The ointment doesn't immediately smell like anything when he dips a scoop out and I lean over to smell it. It tickles my senses a moment later, but it's just the barely there hint of clean and fresh. Maybe there's a bit of ozone, but that's stretching the imagination. He rubs the glob between his hands and spreads it over me in a thin layer. It feels slightly sticky but only for about ten seconds, and then it feels like I'm wearing lotion. So that's nice. I don't mind the feel of lotion on my skin; I lather up every time I get out of the shower. I put extra lotion on my feet before I put my socks on so my feet stay moisturized all day, and I quite like that the results make me feel baby soft.

Thoren spreads the ointment over me in a slow, sensual glide of his hands, dipping out more from the jar every time he runs out. He avoids getting any on my underwear, but when he turns me around, he discovers that the panties are a thong, and he groans in a mixture of pleasure and pain as he slips to his knees. He spends a bit more time than necessary on my ass, rubbing and kneading my cheeks. I don't complain even when my dick escapes my underwear, standing proudly like he's about to get a nut. He's an idiot but an insistent and loud one, and it makes me think

maybe we have time for a little hanky panky before we leave.

Fortunately the big head wins out, and before Thoren can reach for my prick, I steal some of the ointment and quickly spread it over my cock and balls.

“Just to avoid temptation,” I explain softly.

Thoren sniffs in frustration but nods, and he proceeds to spread the remainder under my bralette, massaging my pecs a couple of times before standing back up and screwing the lid on the jar. “You can redress now,” he grunts, stepping back.

His gaze gets caught on my hard on, and I tuck it up into my underwear again. It’s not likely to stay in place with him watching, but hopefully by the time I get my clothes on, it will have deflated. I just have to stop looking at Thoren, because the tenting of his loincloth is far too sexy to ignore with my eyes open.

Turning, I stand with my back to him until I’m dressed again, and then we return to mission control where Reeves fits a lightweight, translucent breathing mask over my mouth and nose. It’s held on by magic, apparently, because it doesn’t require a strap or over the ears loops. It just stays in place with no visible explanation.

Maxime smiles at me with satisfaction. “Perfect. You’ll do wonderfully, but we will monitor from here in case things go awry. If there is any problem, Thoren will get you out of there and the rest of us will back you up if things get dicey. They won’t, obviously, but if they do, we’re here. Good luck!”

That’s it. That’s his pep talk, and there’s no explanation for what happens next. Thoren places a hand on my shoulder, and then we’re no longer in the control room. We’re on the bridge of a ship, standing directly in front of a whole bunch of dragons. That’s right; I’m calling them dragons because that’s what they are. Also, the holographic image that Faulkes was studying? Too small. Waay too small. These

things tower over me. They're probably twice my height.

It's unnerving, but I pull my butler professionalism around me like a security blanket and pretend I'm just the assistant representing Maxime and I'm only here to open the door and greet his guests. "Greetings, you must be the tinkral. I'm Dec Scion, a representative of Earth and of Maxime Staiano, the ambassador stationed on Earth by the Intergalactic Planetary Preservation Society. May I ask the purpose of this visit to Sol?"

Someone assured me yesterday that the tinkral would have universal translation magic because the spell was created to encompass the entire universe. It doesn't work on most humans, and sometimes, even with the humans the spell does work for, it only works for some species. We don't know if I will be able to hear the tinkral in my own language, but we're hoping that the spell will work since I can perceive the small gargoyles and the cards think I should represent Earth on this mission.

One of the tinkral steps up with their scales pulsing between a vibrant green and a brick red. Somehow I know that means they're laughing. "Hello, little Dec," the dragon replies, and it sounds like they're from the midwest.

Not the part of the midwest that speaks in a standard American accent except that they have a few weird names thrown in, but the part of the midwest where the phrase "don'tcha know" is commonly used. Why would the translation give them a midwestern accent?

"Well, aren't you just the cutest thing I've ever seen. You said your name was Dec? That's adorable. Did your mother have a litter of ten? I didn't realize humans were so prolific." As an aside to one of the other dragons looking at me, they add, "We might have to sterilize most of the population so they aren't breeding out of control."

I've never been talked to like I'm a pet, and now that I have, I can say from

experience that it's really fucking demeaning. "Sir or ma'am or other, please refrain from treating me like a pet. I'm not here to entertain you or keep you company. I'm here to discover the reason for your visit and to remind you that the Intergalactic Planetary Preservation Society has designated Earth as a protected planet and humans as an endangered species, and the Alliance of Species ratified that status in the Abron accords. The protected status is to remain in effect until such time as more than fifty percent of the human population is capable of perceiving magic."

"Aww, he thinks he's a diplomat," the dragon says to their friends, and they all laugh by fluctuating the color of their scales between green and reddish brown.

Fun. How do I convince these dragons to take me seriously?

I take a deep breath and glance back at Thoren who's standing behind me. His breathing is getting heavier like he's ready to attack, but I'm really hoping for a peaceful resolution. I tighten the reins I have on my butler training and give the dragon a bland smile, keeping my tone cool and even. "I am not a diplomat. I'm not here to negotiate. I'm here to greet you. Whether that greeting is a 'please enjoy your visit' or a 'we are not accepting visitors at this time' is entirely up to you."

The lead dragon bends over to put us eye to eye, speaking with a smile in their tone. "You're adorable. We're here to take responsibility for the humans and their planet. They're not good stewards of their resources and the IPPS is failing at influencing the world leaders into creating serious conservation efforts. We're going to preserve Earth and occupy it. Humans will quickly be interbred with other species that can perceive magic, and within fifty years, half of the humans on the planet will be able to perceive magic. You can tell your ambassador that. The tinkral are taking responsibility for the preservation of Earth."

"Ah, I do apologize, but I regret to inform you that Earth will not be accepting visitors at this time. Please exit the solar system as quickly as possible and call before

planning a return trip. I will inform the ambassador that you have chosen to be unwelcome.” I put my hands behind my back, indicating to Thoren that now is the time to initiate the disabling.

The scales on the dragon turn a shade of blue that I suddenly know communicates their disappointment. “There’s really no stopping us. Earth isn’t well protected enough to stop us from coming to its aid.”

This person is completely delusional. “As I have said, please make your exit out of the solar system as quickly as possible. If you fail to comply, it will be a galactic standard month before anyone from the Alliance of Species will be able to respond to your distress.” That last part isn’t necessarily true, but I don’t think it will take much convincing to keep anyone from sending aid to these fuckers.

“It’s a good thing you’re cute, little human. Tell you what, why don’t you follow my nice friend here to a lovely playroom where you can relax and have fun without worrying about what we’re doing. We’ll make sure your ambassador knows what’s happening and keep him informed of your wellbeing.”

I sigh and look back at Thoren. “Shall we?”

We’ve got a few engines to disable.

Thoren starts to say something, but then he stops and tilts his head, swiveling his pointed ears like he’s listening for something. The dragons still and their coloring shifts from green to red, telling me that they’re amused again.

“Did the little gargoyles arrive?” I ask, fairly certain Thoren is listening to his friends making minced meat of the ship’s innards.

I can’t hear them, but once Thoren explained that all stone-based creatures with

magic can teleport (including all the species of gargoyles in the known universe), I asked if the little gargoyles might be able to infiltrate and disable the ships without putting the brothers at risk, and they all agreed they should have thought of that option too. According to the brothers, the little gargoyles were the originals on Earth and have a vested interest in keeping Earth safe, which is why they hang out on the mansion's roof.

The cards made their opinion known by somehow calling Thoren an idiot. I don't know how he read that in the cards, but he did.

Me? I think the cards were just fucking with me. There's absolutely no reason I should have come at all. I've gotten nowhere with the dragons, and I'm basically just a pet to them. They're not taking me seriously, and why hasn't Thoren said anything?

"Is that how you got here?" the midwestern dragon asks surprised. "I wondered how you got past the wards."

I stare at him confused, then point to the big ass gargoyle standing directly behind me. "My escort brought me."

The dragon looks beyond me and his scales turn reddish brown again. "What do you mean?"

These fuckers are laughing at me.

I reach back to pull Thoren forward, but he's not where I expect him, so I turn to grab him, and he's right there. I reach for his arm, but instead of my hand meeting his flesh, I pass right through him. We both have a moment of disbelief before Thoren disappears, leaving me alone with the dragons.

I straighten my spine, call on my inner badass butler, and return my focus to the

dragons in the room that think I'm cute and like to tease.

Time to find out what they did with Thoren, and I don't mind playing dirty.

Chapter eighteen

Thoren

(We should call this strategy “Weaponized Cuteness”)

I touch Dec’s shoulder and teleport us to the tinkral ship. It takes a moment, but then I hit a ward around the ship hard enough to crack my stone. It dazes me, but I immediately teleport back to the command center.

“Where’s Dec?” Reeves demands as he jumps to his feet.

It takes me too long to realize my Dec isn’t in my hand. A chance glance at a screen tells me I’ve been gone for fifteen minutes already, which means I was hanging out in space longer than I expected after I hit the ward.

Dread pools in my stomach, and I teleport back to the spot where I hit. In my stone form, the vacuum of space doesn’t affect me, but it would have killed Dec if he was knocked out of my hands when I hit the ward. It didn’t feel like I lost him, but it didn’t feel like I was knocked out either.

There’s no sign of him outside the ship, but I don’t let myself hope until I’ve scoured the entire area. As soon as I’m reasonably sure that he isn’t a floating corpse in the vacuum of space, I start punching the ward around the ship. If he’s not out here, and he’s not back at the command center, he’s inside, and there’s no magic strong enough to keep me away from him. I believed the cards when they said he would successfully get the tinkral to leave, but I should have paid better attention to the fact that it was

going to be a struggle.

I reach into my pouch and grab a card, slapping it against the ward and imbuing it with my magic. Snakes of red magic slither out from between my palm and the Two of Cups, hissing as they expand outward over the hull of the ship. The magical snakes grow until they circle the entire ship, meeting directly opposite of me. As soon as the circle is formed, I flex my power and the snakes squeeze, putting pressure on the ward. I punch with all my might against the ward, a physical blow and a magical one, and it shudders beneath the power of my magic.

A moment later, all six of my brothers arrive. Each of them slaps a card imbued with their magic against the ward, bolstering my strength with theirs. Spidery cracks break the ward with each hit from our collective force until it shatters. As soon as it's down, I feel Dec's presence and teleport straight to him.

Well, as close as I can get, anyway.

Dec is surrounded by tinkral. I can't see him, but I can smell the saline of human tears. The noise of my rage fills the bridge of this ship, the sound of rock grinding stone to dust under the force of pressure. My body turns to stone as I prepare to pulverize these tinkral savages for daring to hurt my Dec.

All at once, the tinkral turn, giving me a view of my precious person, who's crying into a pocket square, begging the tinkral to "Find my Thoren. What if he's out there in the dark? What if he's frozen to death in space? Find him, please! How could you do this to me? I thought you liked me!" His voice sounds completely broken and pitiful, and he has the tinkral wavering between various shades of blue that tell us they're heartbroken for the little human. A few of them even have scales turning the fiery orange of distress.

As soon as Dec sees me, his expression clears up and he launches himself at me.

“Where the fuck have you been?” he demands as I catch him and wrap him in my wings, turning them to stone to protect him from anything the tinkral might do, though I have a feeling they’re not planning to do anything he doesn’t like.

“I was breaking the ward. My brothers are working on the wards on the other ships. What happened?” I ask, watching the blues and oranges on the tinkral around us become greens and reds again.

“I need to turn around to talk to them,” Dec mutters, trying to wiggle.

I reluctantly return my wings to flesh and let him turn, but I wrap him up again as soon as he’s settled and let my wings become stone to protect him.

Dec leans into me, looking up at the tinkral around us. “I can’t believe you created wards specifically to keep teleporters out. How are the guardians of Earth meant to greet you when you ward against their magic? I could have died, and then how would you feel? Bad, probably. Your scales would turn blue permanently. You’d be pretty but morose because you killed a human. That’s just no way to live.”

The tinkral mission leader, identifiable by an emblem branded into a scale on his shoulder, and the captain of the ship, identifiable by a different brand on his shoulder, both step forward. They’re still green and red, but some of the red is purple and some of the green is blue. The captain taps their claws together, blinking a few times before addressing me. “You’re one of the guardians this human speaks of?”

“I am,” I agree as a communication alert appears on their command display. It’s an urgent alert and the mission leader hits the display.

On screen, a tinkral sits pinned down by five of the little gargoyles and speaks directly to the mission leader. “Our FTL drives are toast. I don’t think we can get into the engine room to check them for at least a month. These little chrylich have taken

the command crew hostage and locked down the wake-up protocols for the invasion force. We're grounded."

Another alert comes in, and the captain hits the display for that one. The sight in that video is almost a mirror of the other, and the captain of that ship reports a destabilized FTL engine and the lockdown of the ship's crew in their living spaces.

The captain turns back to Dec. "Did you do this?"

Dec thinks about it for a moment, then nods his affirmative. "I guess I did."

It was his idea to enlist the little gargoyles.

The captain looks back to me. "Are they all like him?"

"Like what?" I ask, curious what they mean. I've met a lot of humans, and Dec is the only one like him I've ever met.

"Cute."

"Dangerous."

"Emotional."

"Violent."

That adjective comes out of the mouth of a tinkral holding a bloody cloth to his mangled lips.

"Something happen?" I ask, hoping it was Dec who did that.

Dec tenses. “They grabbed my ass.”

The alert that the engines of this ship have failed shows up as I narrow my focus on the tinkral with the audacity to touch what’s mine. “Humans are as varied as any species, but as a whole, they are cute, violent, emotional and dangerous, and this one is mine. You don’t touch my Dec without permission, and I’m never going to give you permission.”

“It’s my body,” Dec deadpans, and it’s a threat.

“It is your body, but until such time as you retract your consent, I get a say in who touches you, and the only people whose hands belong on your ass are yours and mine.”

Dec gives me a moment to stew in the possibility that he disagrees before he hums in agreement. “Yes, that works for me. Please keep the pervs at bay.”

The captain and the mission leader exchange a look before they both turn to us. “We now understand why your ambassador has failed to bring the humans in line with the galactic senate. We formally withdraw our intention to claim stewardship over Earth.”

“We appreciate that, but may I ask why?” Dec asks, back in stuffy butler mode. It’s impressive how quickly he can turn that persona on.

The mission leader replies, “The tears of humans seem to have a psychoactive effect on civilized species. We don’t think that an invasion force would be able to withstand human suffering based on your ability to call up tears when you’re separated from the people who are important to you. The plan for stewardship will have to be re-evaluated to take into account the bonding agent in your tears that triggers the need to comfort you and forces us to experience your sadness far too empathetically to

succeed in gaining compliance to our stewardship.”

Is that the load of basalt they’re dumping on this invasion? Humans aren’t taking care of their planet, so they’ve decided to do it for them? They’re delusional if they believe their own rhetoric. Tinkral invasions of inhabited planets are brutal and devastating. They’re not the worst expansionist species, but targeting Earth is...

Honestly, it’s stupid. The senate won’t interfere in their invasion of worlds not part of the Alliance of Species except for the ones protected under the Abron accords. Any invasion of Sol would be considered an act of war against the Alliance of Species and would result in heavy fines against the tinkral. Their membership in the alliance might even be revoked.

Against my dire thoughts, Dec’s scent fills with the happiness I associate with amusement in humans. “I see. Unfortunately, you seem to have come to this conclusion too late. Like I said, it will be a month before anyone can come tow you out, but it looks like the little gargoyles have left your life support active, so it’s not a complete tragedy.”

A growl erupts from me. Dec might be amused, but something is happening with the tinkral if they thought invading Earth was their best strategy. “When the Alliance comes for you, make sure you never return to Sol. Do you remember what the Trustworthy did to the In’ai?”

Any civilized species would know what we did to that species a hundred years ago, and the tinkral captain’s scales shift to orange when he hears me and finally sees me for what I am. “Of course.”

“The Trustworthy protect humans and Earth, and we allow you to mine at the edge of Sol because you’ve never turned an eye to Earth before. Your welcome is rescinded. Henceforth any tinkral ship entering the orbital range of Sol will be destroyed without

warning. We will assume the tinkral mean to invade Earth again and will act accordingly.”

As soon as the mission leader and captain both acknowledge that, I teleport my Dec back home. I don’t think the tinkral will return anytime soon, especially given their weakness to human tears and the reputation of the Trustworthy among the space-faring species who know of us, and I’m done with having Dec anywhere near them.

Chapter nineteen

Dec

(Possessive Thoren gets hugs)

Thoren takes a few seconds longer than I expect to release me from the stone trap of his wings, and when he finally does, I turn back around to face him, resting my hands on his massive pecs as I crane my neck to look up at him. Not as much as I did with the tinkral, but still.

“So,” I start, going for a note of firm finality because I do not want him trying to negotiate what I’m about to say.

“So?” he asks as his brothers start popping into the command center one by one.

“I will not be part of any mission going forward even if your cards decide I’m the best person for the job. Literally the only thing I did was find out that the tinkral are as susceptible to human tears as humans are to baby animals. I guess that’s helpful information, but humans would have kicked their technologically superior asses in a few hours if we’d let them come, and if I hadn’t been there, you still could have sent in the little gargoyles to destroy their engines. I was a superfluous body and the one who took all the risks! That is not happening again.

“I am a badass butler . I do not go on missions; I keep the house running, make sure your living spaces are warm and welcoming, and ensure that you have all the comfort at home that you need in order to be well so that you can do your jobs at maximum

efficiency. That is my calling. Do not even suggest I accompany you off world for any other reason than vacation or to go get our babies when they hatch.”

I wince at the words that leave my mouth like Thoren and I are already planning to raise children together. I mean, we are, because a butler is a part of the household and does serve a role in the care-taking of babies and young children, but that’s not what the “our” in that statement meant and everyone in this room knows that.

Maxime claps and coos in absolute delight. “Oh goodie! You are soul mates!”

Thoren and I look at each other with matching expressions of exasperation before we turn together to face Maxime. I don’t know what Thoren has to say, but I don’t wait for him to take the lead here. “Sir, I don’t think you can just go around declaring soul mate pairs because you want it to be true. That puts too much pressure on a situationship that doesn’t even have clear boundaries.”

Thoren’s rumble next to me is decidedly discontent. “I think we have a fairly firm idea about the boundaries of this relationship. You’re mine, and I’m yours, and everyone else can stay in their own lanes.”

I give that a second to sink in before I find myself nodding in agreement, sinking into a warm vat of emotional pleasure. He wants me. “Ok, sure. We’re in a possessive relationship and don’t need outside interference mucking it all up.” We’ll probably do that just fine on our own.

Possessive Thoren grumbles a bit as he reaches out and pulls me into his arms again. “Exactly.”

Maxime looks at us like we’re adorable. “Well, I’m disappointed, but convinced you are, in fact, a divine butler. I won’t complain about your suits anymore, and we will make other plans should the cards ever suggest we include you. Thank you for

participating in the successful repelling of the tinkral invasion force. Do you mind if Reeves debriefs you before you two leave?"

Reeves, who looks and sounds a whole lot like Thoren except for his penchant for wearing suits that make me think of Big Band Era musical directors and swing dancers, looks like he ran afoul of someone's claws. There's three sharp gashes on his cheek, though he's not bleeding and the exposed flesh looks shiny like obsidian rather than pink like I'd see with a human. "Shouldn't take long," Reeves assures us, gesturing for us to take the lead out of the command center.

I follow Thoren out and poke him in the back, muttering, "Maxime agreed, but you need to agree too since they're your cards."

Thoren throws me a side eye. "We all have cards. I just usually do the mission readings because my cards are more cooperative than the others. Our collective decks elected mine as the representative deck."

"Do you all use Tarot for magic? No wait, first, acknowledge that I will not be going on missions with you again." I can't let him distract me.

Thoren leans over and nuzzles my hair. "I promise to work all available alternatives before approaching you for a mission, but I am not promising to leave you out of mission briefings if the cards think you'd be a valuable addition. You're downplaying your importance on this one. You're the one who convinced the tinkral not to invade. We could have stopped them without you, but we prefer not to kill people if we can help it. Peaceful resolutions are far superior to bloodshed, and you're the reason we were able to avoid mass casualties this time. I'm not going to arbitrarily sign away the ability to call on you because you don't see the importance of your being."

My insides ooze with warm gooeyness at the way he talks about me like I'm important. It's like maybe he thinks I'm worth keeping. "Oh. Um. Ok. I guess that

makes sense.”

Thoren pulls me through the door to the conference room and sits with me on his lap, ignoring Reeves for another minute. “Somehow you’ve convinced yourself that you’re not important, I think, so let me correct that thought. You are important. Even if you hadn’t been the linchpin of this whole mission, if we were just talking about you being here doing the job you do, I would say you’re important. I’ve been around a long time, sweetness, and I’ve never met a person or creature who wasn’t important.

“I wasn’t sure about your employment here at first—you were filling the shoes of a man who’d been with us for ten years, who we were heartbroken to lose—but you’re an excellent butler and an asset to this home. Even if you weren’t already mine, I would keep you. So I promise that I will refrain from bringing you on missions when it’s unnecessary, and I promise to take you off world on vacations to show you the beauty of my homeland and the planetary wonders of this universe, because I plan to keep you for a very long time.”

That’s the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me. It takes me a moment to really wrap my head around that. He thinks I’m important, and the idea that every person is important sinks into my soul. I don’t think I’ve ever considered that I have value beyond what I can do for the people around me. I am valuable because I exist. What a novel idea. My mere existence is important. How revolutionary.

“Thank you,” I whisper as I wrap my arms around him and hug him tight, burying my face in his neck and breathing in his orange grove scent. I’m going to fall so in love with this guy. He’s the man of my dreams, and if he’s keeping me...

“I’m keeping you too.”

After Reeves debriefs us, which is basically an interview with detailed answers,

Thoren takes me back to his room and tears my clothes off of me, saving the lacy thong and bralette from his claws so he can admire how I look in white. Something feels different between us when his wings surround us, blocking out everything but the softness of the bed beneath me.

He leans over me, kissing his way up from my sternum to my neck, along my jaw, and finally he meets my lips, tangling his tongue with mine as something between us, a liminal space that never existed before, suddenly cracks open. I moan with the pleasure of falling through that crack with him, and the low rumble of a minor earthquake with an epicenter in his chest echoes the same pleasure back to me.

I tear my mouth free, panting heavily as my hips lurch upward, seeking friction against his. “What is that?” I demand as my hands frantically search for a handle and my body prepares for a ride or a fall or a rollercoaster—I don’t know; I need something because whatever is happening is so fucking big.

Thoren forces my legs apart and shoves my thong to the side, prodding my entrance with his slick cock over and over until my pucker relaxes enough to let him in with a sucking pop that makes me bow up from the pleasure and force of it. He meets my lips again and sucks on my tongue as the chasm between us welcomes us both in with a gaping maw. There’s no fear in me; there’s happiness, delight, excitement, and undiluted lust, but no fear.

“Thoren!” I rasp, holding him as tightly as I can because we’re falling into something that I can’t stop—

No. That’s wrong. I can stop it. I could reverse the fall with a thought and bring us both out of it. It’d be easy. So easy to stop this fall and close the chasm pulling us into it, but I know if I do that, I’d be missing out on something I want. I don’t even know why I want it. I just want...

Oh. I see what this is now.

We're bonding. Falling into the same liminal space to occupy it together. We're creating a path that we can walk along together, a life with space for us both, a bond that will keep us in tune with each other. This place is for us, but as I relax into it, the vision of the place comes to my mind, showing me that we're two people connecting in a network of bonds like a complex cave system, where every cave is connected to every other cave. Thoren is inviting me into his family, and I desperately want to join.

With a slow breath, I open my eyes, focusing on Thoren above me, who's staring with an intensity I've never known in my life. He's not moving; we're just connected right now, staring at each other.

I swallow, overwhelmed with the invitation and the beauty of the bond he's offering. "I've only ever wanted someone to keep me."

Thoren holds himself up on one elbow and delicately traces the lines of my face with the tip of his claw. "I think you've always been kept, sweetness. First by your parent, the uncle who loved you, then you kept yourself. You sought and found your calling, and you should be proud of who you are. And now we would keep you if you let us. Every person in this family wants to welcome you, and I want you. I've wanted you since the first time I saw you, even if I didn't recognize that want in myself. If you let me, I will keep you forever. Longer than you'd expect. If you bond with me—with us—you will share with us everything we have. We want you. I want you, but the question is, do you want this too?"

"Oh course I do," I reply without a mote of hesitation, remembering that not only does he think I'm important and a keeper, but that I am those things even if he didn't think them. What an extraordinary thing to learn.

I close my eyes and fall back into the chasm, pulling Thoren down with me. The bond

that links us cracks us open, invading our hearts, minds, and bodies, and linking us inextricably into a network of bonds that suddenly occupy my soul. The strongest, largest channel exists between me and Thoren, but the others are there too, smaller bonds, but navigable if I want to use them.

Thoren pulls me out of that place with a kiss that ignites all my carnal desires again. He traps my arms with the hands on his wings as his other hands play my body like an instrument he's mastered. The thick flare on his shaft rubs my p-spot over and over until my body succumbs to the pleasure and I shoot off, orgasming hard and crying out as stars detonate in my vision and I finally, finally find my forever home.

As I come down, awareness of the bond between me and Thoren lights me up inside like fireworks going off. Under that bond are seven other connections, each singing celebratory notes. None are quite like the others, but together they sound like a symphony of celebration. It's beautiful and crazy. I love it.

Thoren inhales deeply as he slides his cock out, rolls with me onto his back, and wraps us up in a cocoon of his wings. "You fit in perfectly, my Dec."

I sigh, smiling, and reply with the most important thing I can think of to say that would encompass the feeling of wholeness in my chest. "Undecided. My name is Undecided Scion because my mother was an asshole. I've called myself Dec since I learned my own name."

Thoren chuckles softly and kisses the top of my head. "Whatever your name, Dec Scion, you're important, you're mine, and I'm yours."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:39 am

(Three and a half years later)

“Decius could’ve been his middle name,” I murmur to the tiny karkoyl in my arms.

He’s beautiful with shiny obsidian eyes that watch me as closely as I watch him. We’re in our human guises today. When I shifted into my human form, I created his disguise as an extension of my own glamour until he learns to shift on his own. One of his brothers has already learned how, so the rest of the nestmates will figure it out soon enough. We’ll have to officially name them when they do, otherwise the human staff at the mansion will be confused, but that’s tomorrow’s project.

Today, my mate stands before a human judge with all the confidence of a man on a mission as he finally, legally, changes the name on his birth certificate. It was important to him that his birth record should reflect the name he’s chosen, so today he’s officially becoming Decius. He decided he didn’t want to change how people call him, only that he should have a proper name. I advocated for December, but he said since he wasn’t born in December that wouldn’t make sense, so from this day forward he will be Decius Clive Scion.

Along the row next to me and in the row behind me, our family watches as the judge declares my mate’s new name and decrees that his birth record should be changed, and with the banging of the gavel, we celebrate, quietly, with a low rumble of happiness.

Dec thanks the judge, speaks to his lawyer for a moment, and then joins us in the hall, holding out his hand for the baby in my arms. “Gimme,” he says, smiling widely as I

hand him the little one. “Hello, my love, Uncle Dec finally has a proper name!” he exclaims, tickling the little one.

The baby giggles, and I take the opportunity to lift Dec’s chin and peck his lips. “Congratulations, Decius. I’m so proud of you.”

Dec beams at me with love pouring through the bond we share. “Thank you. It feels so right.”

And it does. The rightness of the name sings through the bond. Our family crowds around us, each offering my mate their own congratulations, trading babies with him until he’s hugged and kissed each person in our family, including all seven of our newborns.

Seeing my mate with our nephews fills my heart to bursting with love and joy. I know this is barely the beginning of our many, many years of companionship, and I am overflowing with anticipation of every day we get to share. I brush another kiss to his temple, holding him close as I whisper, “I love you, sweetness.”

Dec turns his face to mine, pecking my lips as our bond sings with his earnest love. “I love you too.”