



GODDESS ISLES

TWICE A WISH

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

PEPPER WINTERS

Twice
a
Wish

Goddess Isles
Book Two

by

New York Times Bestseller

Pepper Winters

Twice a Wish
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OTHER WORK BY PEPPER WINTERS

Pepper currently has twenty-eight books released in nine languages. She's hit best-seller lists (USA Today, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal) thirty-three times. She dabbles in multiple genres, ranging from Dark Romance to Coming of Age.

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Twice a Wish Blurb:

*“There was a monster once. A monster who bought me, controlled me, and
took away my freedom.*

*There was a man once. A man who dealt in myth and secrets, hiding behind
his mask, making me hunger and wish to know the truth.”*

Eleanor Grace belongs to the man and the monster, hating them both but
unable to deny that something links them. Something she doesn't want to
feel, something that traps her as surely as the sea surrounding the island
where she serves.

Sully Sinclair belongs to his past and the black and white script his life has
become. He views his goddesses as commodities—possessions to be treated
kindly but firmly. The only problem is...Eleanor is different.

She's jinxed him.

Cursed him.

Awakened him.

She's a goddess with the power to ruin him.

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Dedicated to:

For all of those with filthy minds but are normal on the outside...(define normal).



Prologue

A HEART WAS LIKE a sea.

In one beat, it could be ruthlessly cold, cavernously deep, and protective of its secrets, yet in the next, it could be blissfully warm, wondrously calm, and piercingly clear.

That was my heart.

A complex ecosystem of darkness and light.

Hate and lust.

Forgiveness and revenge.

But if I were the sea, then Sullivan Sinclair was the shark.

Sleek and sensual, effortless and cruel, he was the predator of the ocean, all while I was the keeper of his livelihood. Not only was I his goddess, to rent and pawn, to earn untold treasures from her flesh, but I also harboured his secrets and buried his truths in my bottomless heart.

Without me, he'd just swim in sunshine and shadow, prowling and patrolling, hunting and surviving, his lifetime a monotonous replay of the day before.

But the sea wasn't monotonous.

Each day was different.

Tempest and full of storms in the morning.

Crystal-spangled and serene in the afternoon.

That was my heart.

That was the breadth of my emotions when it came to the man who bought me.

The crevices and cracks were the veins surrounding the stubborn muscle keeping me alive. The brine was my blood *hish-hishing* through those veins, granting me strength to keep surviving.

Not because I had to win, but because of the tiny crumbs I collected about the god who'd captured me. His ability to hide a thousand shipwrecks was almost as impressive as the sea's capacity to house a million creatures.

Sully Sinclair said I had the power to ruin him.

I believed him.

Something bound us that we couldn't explain.

But that wouldn't be what would destroy him.

A tidal wave of injustice and anger, of loneliness and lust was cresting in my heart. Sweeping along the shallows, stirring up the shadows, ensuring I wasn't just a droplet caught in a bottle but an entire tsunami just on the horizon.

I had the power to ruin him, yes.

But in the process, I would also destroy myself.



Chapter One

I CARRIED HER FROM the VR Room as gently as I dared.

I tripped under her weight, my own muscles wrung ragged from the punishment I'd delivered while Eleanor was in Euphoria. My heart barely had enough energy to pump blood through my veins, my legs burned with lactic acid, my entire body squeezed dry of every life-giving molecule.

But fuck, it was worth it.

Worth it to feel somewhat sane after the nightmarish confusion of the past week. Worth it to finally find calm in the chaos that this dangerous goddess had caused.

I looked at Eleanor, fast asleep and limp in my arms. Her lips were parted and still red from a thousand kisses. Her cheeks still flushed from untold orgasms. Her skin glowing from within, thanks to the magic of what she'd indulged in.

Euphoria had the power to break you apart, but it also had the potential to make you rise from the ashes that you once were. Whatever parts were destroyed while she played in the fantasy, coded and delivered by yours truly, I had no doubt she'd awake stronger, bolder, and far more dangerous than before.

My fingers dug into her silky skin, pressing her close.

Fuck, I was in trouble.

I knew that.

But for the first time...I owned it.

I'd made yet another colossal mistake...and this one, I honestly didn't know if I could survive.

"Who *are* you?" I whispered in the darkness, ignoring the trembles of my body, the hunger in my belly, the exhaustion in my mind. Every inch of me begged to rest. To place Eleanor on the sandy pathway and curl up beside her.

To sleep after surviving a night we'd both never forget...for entirely different reasons.

Stumbling forward, I groaned at the shooting stitch in my stomach. I'd overdone it. I'd drained myself to the point of sickness. I needed rest. She needed rest.

But...just for a moment—a single, stupid moment—with no one around and no one to witness, I stopped, let down my shields, and stared. I stared at the girl who'd twisted me up just by existing. The girl who I still didn't know what to do with. Could I keep her on my shores for four years? Could I rent her out to men who didn't deserve her? Would I have the strength to keep my distance when parts of me that I'd killed years ago were slowly waking up?

It wasn't just her beauty that arrested me. It wasn't just her temper or her personal choices. Something I couldn't explain bound us together, drawing us closer, against our will...creating a minefield of destruction.

Her forehead furrowed a little as whatever dream she had ghosted over her face. She shifted in my arms, curling deeper into my chest.

And fuck if my heart didn't kick with an extra beat.

Tightening my grip on her, I continued walking, digging bare feet into soft sand, forcing a body that had well and truly been abused to keep going, for just a little while.

She didn't wake up as I carried her.

I hadn't drugged her to keep her under. I hadn't used science to keep her unconscious. She'd done that. She'd drowned her system in pleasure, annihilated all her strength and reserves, and finally learned how to let go.

How to be free in sex, in herself...even in sleep.

"Sir?" Calvin appeared from the darkness, only half his face visible from the flickering tiki torch. "I can finish the process. You should..." He came closer, peering into my drawn, exhausted face. "Ah, fuck, you don't look so

good.”

Baring my teeth, I barged past him. “I’m fine.”

“You need to lie down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” My back straightened with anger, feeding my depleted cells some much-needed indignation.

He muttered something under his breath, trailing after me. He remained behind me all the way to Eleanor’s villa. Scooting in front of me, he opened her door. I groaned as I stepped over the threshold and my gaze fell on her bed.

Christ, I’d give anything to collapse face first into that cool white linen.

My eyelids drooped, sleep coming for me, despite my attempts to stop it.

“Sinclair.” Cal snapped his fingers in my face. “You’ll drop her if you fall asleep.”

I swallowed back fatigue, tripping forward and placing Eleanor softly on the bed I very much wanted to claim for my own.

My arms felt strangely loose and unattached to my body now that her weight no longer rested in them. I swayed. My knees buckled. Cal caught me around the waist and kept me standing. “Come on, let’s get you home. You don’t want to be here when she wakes up.”

I nodded. I didn’t. I didn’t want to witness the flashing hate she’d feel toward me. Not after what I’d been through tonight.

“I’ll finish up. You crawl back to your own place.” He guided me toward the door, but I shook my head and reached deep down for my final reserves.

“Get me the container.”

“Shit, you’re a stubborn son of a bitch,” Cal muttered, marching toward the walk-in wardrobe and the small drawer tucked inside. Each villa had such a drawer. Each goddess went through the same aftercare upon return from Euphoria.

Cal came back, slamming the wooden box with black hinges on the bedspread beside Eleanor’s unconscious form. She lay on her back, her long hair spread like a halo, her naked body bruised and used but also so elegant and perfect. She looked like an innocent princess just waiting for true love’s kiss.

Gritting my teeth, I ripped open the box and pulled out the specially designed towelette. Opening the package, I ran the damp softness over every inch of Eleanor’s skin. She arched her neck as I ran it over her cleavage, still at the mercy of the final dregs of elixir.

My cock twitched in response, but the debilitation of my entire body meant a twitch was all I could manage.

Once she was free from the oil I'd spread over her at the start of the evening, I tossed the soiled towelette back in the box. That oil had allowed her to feel every touch tonight, to sense the heat of the fire, to revel in the softness of fur. Next, I pulled free the earplugs from her dainty ears that allowed a caveman to command her. Moving down her body, I removed the sensor pads on her fingertips that permitted her to feel the male who'd most likely fallen in love with her tonight.

All carefully designed tricks to turn an illusion into a reality.

"Her eyes," Cal muttered, standing close with his arms crossed. "Want me to get them? You're not exactly...stable right now."

I waved him away, and as gently as I could, with quaking hands and a body that wouldn't stop swaying to do such delicate tasks, I pried open her left and then her right eye, freeing the contact lenses that'd made her see a cave instead of my islands—allowed her to see a man she'd never met before, to fully exist in the deception of Euphoria.

The second the contact lenses fell into the box, Cal scooped it up, shut the lid with a crack, then marched toward the exit.

I trailed after him, glancing one last time at Eleanor.

She looked so vulnerable lying in the dark. So defenceless all alone. Where had she been stolen from? That boyfriend she mentioned...was he looking for her? Or had he given up already?

Goddammit.

Turning around with a groan, I stumbled back to the bed and pulled the white blanket over her nakedness. The night sky still held humidity and heat, but the instant the comforting weight fell over her, she sighed and curled onto her side. Her hair lay strewn over her pillow, inviting me to touch it.

I'd become obsessed with her hair. I didn't know if it was the length or the colour that appealed to me, or the fact that I could control her with a single fist in the strands—either way, it was a fucking struggle to back away.

The gauzy curtains by the open doors fluttered with soft sea breeze. The scents of dense foliage and rich undergrowth ripe thanks to a tropical rainfall that'd passed through earlier.

My eyelids drooped again; black feathered over my mind.

"Sinclair."

Cal's snap wrenched me back into purpose. All I wanted to do was sleep,

but I couldn't, not until I was safe in my own bed.

Trudging toward the exit, I didn't look back at the goddess who'd caused so many problems. I knew my exhaustion was due to my melancholy thoughts. My fatigue the reason I had no power over the weakness creeping through my heart, but it didn't mean I was okay with the fact that I *felt* something toward that girl.

Something I was powerless to stop.

Cal closed the door behind us as I swayed on the sandy laneway, looking up through palm trees to the vast cosmos above. Stars twinkled, winking with secrets, fully aware of my sins.

His hand pushed between my shoulder blades, and for the first time, I noticed I had no shirt on. My board-shorts were the only thing keeping me decent.

"I'll walk you to your villa," he said quietly, nudging me forward until I lumbered down the path. "The other goddesses shouldn't see you like this."

I nodded. He was right. No way did I want them to witness their tyrannical ruler wobbling and weak. I wouldn't prove to them that I wasn't a god after all but pure mortal. A mortal with wounds and worries and the god-awful premonition that I'd fucked up big time.

I shouldn't have put her in Euphoria.

We walked in silence for a bit, allowing the buzzing cicadas to serenade us and the ribbits of tree frogs to fill in vacant conversation. Trailing down the pathway leading toward Nirvana, the waterfall I regularly rock climbed, Cal finally broke the insect-amphibian orchestra. "Why did you do it, Sinclair?"

I shrugged.

I doubted he'd like answers like: '*I couldn't help myself.*' '*She's different.*' '*She's messing with my mind.*'

"Next time, I'll prepare and finish her. You don't need to be around Jinx any more than absolutely necessary."

My hands balled.

"All you need to do is focus on your guests, your lab, and the coding for fantasies, remember?" His green eyes flashed with light from the carved lanterns leading the way. "You did ask me, once upon a time, to remind you of what was important if you ever deviated."

Previously, I would've agreed with him. Those three things did keep me plenty busy without self-destructing thanks to a fascination with a goddess.

But...that was before.

Before *her*.

I strode ahead.

The lights of my villa beckoned me, granting the final dregs of movement. "I remember, Cal. And I also remember being the fucking boss around here."

He stopped, allowing me to continue on my own. However, his voice chased me over the sand. "At least she didn't die tonight, Sinclair. The elixir didn't push her over the edge."

"It wouldn't have mattered if she had," I threw over my shoulder, wanting an end to whatever suspicions he had about me.

"Yeah, sure." His dark laughter echoed in my ears as I trudged up the two shallow steps and wrenched open my villa door. I could still feel his judgement long after I slammed the door, locked it, and planted face first on my bed.

I was out cold a heartbeat later.



Chapter Two

Five Hours Before

ELIXIR.

My horror and haven.

Suffering orgasms at my own hand while under its influence had been the most painful and shameful experience of my life.

Until now.

I screamed as the caveman mounted and speared inside me.

One thrust.

One swift stab of his hot, hard cock...and I shattered.

My first orgasm snatched me with no warning or politeness. My body skipped past previous cues that hinted a climax was imminent.

He entered me.

And I existed no more.

Undiluted, chemically-supercharged bliss shot me from my body and sent me soaring in delirium. I wasn't aware of anything apart from my body splitting apart, wave after wave, squeezing and milking the carnal intrusion inside me.

It went on forever, stealing all my energy until I blinked with blind eyes, doing my best to breathe and slip back into my skin that felt too hot, too sensitive, too *much*.

As quickly as the catapulting of my soul happened, I ricocheted back into my body and collapsed. My elbows gave out, crumpling me to the floor with my cheek pressed into musty dirt.

I didn't care.

All I cared about was the *drum, drum* of my frenzied heart and the lava of lust in my veins.

I wanted to rest, to fade away into the stars where I'd just visited. However, my cheek rubbed rhythmically into the earth. My breasts swayed. And my hips remained high in the sky while the stranger rutted into me like a beast.

Blinking, I glanced over my shoulder. I willed strength to push up but my muscles were totally useless. His eyes glowed with a hunger that tore apart my stomach and hollowed me out. His eyebrows shadowed everything but raw desire while his teeth stabbed into his bottom lip as he fucked me with unwavering obsession.

I moaned as he threw his head back, driving his hips deeper into mine, filling me further. His throat rippled with muscles as he swallowed. Sweat ran down his scarred and muscular chest.

I had no idea where he came from, and in some recess of my mind, I screamed to get free. To remove his body from mine and curl up in the corner. To bellow for someone to save me. But that timid little voice of propriety was instantly gagged by another torrential wash of desire.

He was a stunning specimen of a man. Big in all the right places. Hairy on the parts that oozed masculinity. Brutal and ruthless with an aura of an animal who took what he wanted and often.

I was totally at his mercy, his fingers bruising my hipbones as he continued to thrust unforgivingly. I couldn't get away. I couldn't tell him to stop. He wouldn't let me go until he'd debased me in every lewd and aggressive way.

That ought to make me cry.

To make me fight for my freedom.

And I would.

I *should*.

But...the elixir had turned me into an enemy.

The longer I watched him taking everything from me, the longer I swayed and pumped to his rhythm with his cock still buried inside my drenched pussy, the more my lust amplified.

Unlike the day when Sully gave me the elixir, and I'd had no outlet to release the pain of blistering pleasure, today...I had an outlet.

I wasn't slowly dying from a build-up of agony that had nowhere to go.

I wasn't tired from my release.

I wasn't annoyed at his continued rutting.

And I *definitely* wasn't sated.

I would use him as much as he used me.

I welcomed his cock because it was the painkiller to my disease.

I encouraged his rhythm because it gave my overworking, overstimulated senses something to cling to.

My back arched. A ripple of need ran down my spine.

He grunted and fucked me harder.

I groaned as he collapsed over me. His huge hand splaying over my nape, trapping my cheek against the dirt. His chiselled belly crashed into my ass each time his hips pistoned forward, stuffing his throbbing erection deeper into me. His sweaty chest smeared on my spine as he put his weight on me, pinning me immobile, his pace growing fast and shallow as he chased his own release.

His grunts filled my ears, sounding entirely like a bear and not at all human.

And *fuck*, it turned me on.

Tears oozed from my eyes as another full-body quake appeared out of nowhere, responding to his sexual treatment, the unapologetic way he claimed and controlled me, the delicious way his body consumed mine.

His tongue licked my skin where salty tears fell. He swallowed once, twice, his lips opened and guttural, lust-raspy words spilling out. "You're crying because I'm *fucking* you?" His hips drove forward, accenting the word fuck. Reminding me exactly what he was doing. This was a take-over—hostile and violent—and because of the drugs swimming in my blood, I wanted it more than air.

I whimpered as he rolled his hips, digging into me as deep as he could. "You don't like this?"

I squeezed my eyes, shaking my head as another wave of bliss added to the first, getting ready to squeeze my womb and ripple down my core.

"You don't want me to fuck you?" His hand dropped around my waist, his fingers finding my clit just as his voice licked into my ear.

My second orgasm wrenched a sob-scream from my lips.

Once again, I vanished from the physical plane and shot into the astrophysical. I bounced around glittering, pulsing stars as my body came undone. I literally couldn't tolerate the intensity, the magnitude of every atom committing suicide with rapture.

He growled as my inner muscles squeezed him, his pace turning erratic and hungry.

His strength scooted me forward along the earthen floor, smearing my cheek with dirt, painting me in the filth of what we were doing. My tears continued to rain, needing an outlet for my confusion just as my body needed his for relief.

His fingers threaded through my long hair, tethering me all while holding my nape. Breathing was difficult, my spine ached, and my knees burned, but all I could think about—all I *cared* about—was wringing out another orgasm and another and another...chasing the right to my own body again, determined to be sane and not this wild, unhinged creature.

His hands clamped on my hips, jerking me back as he snarled in some ancient tongue, jettisoning his release into me.

No condom.

No protection.

Just this stranger who'd claimed me for his own.

His body lost its throbbing tension as he withdrew. A splash of his cum mixed with mine and landed on the ground. I shivered as he slowly skated his hand from my nape and down my spine, over my ass crack to the slippery wetness between my legs.

I winced as he rubbed my clit, moaning and wanton as yet another climax demanded to be shed. I had too many stored inside me. I could see them. Little glowing orbs of sinful need, blinking blood-red eyes like demons, biting at me with lustful teeth. There was an entire nest inside me. A nest of rabid monsters, straining at their leash, desperate to escape and chew me apart.

"I asked you a question." His voice lowered, his breath coming in quick exhales. "Three, actually." Smearing our combined wetness on my thighs and up over my hipbone, he murmured, "Why are you crying? Because of what we did, what we will do, or because you liked it so much?"

With Herculean effort, I pushed myself off the ground and swivelled until I sat on my knees to face him. My breasts rose and fell with tattered breath, and even now, even after two of the most blistering orgasms of my

life, I still needed more. The ache still brewed in my teeth and fingertips. My skin still sparked with sex and sickness. My heart skipped and tripped; unable to find a calming beat, it settled for mayhem instead.

He sat on his knees too, his cock still hard, glistening with our mixture. Angry and veiny, threatening me as much as tormenting me. “So?” He raised an eyebrow, playing with me.

Our gazes collided, and I swallowed back loathing, disgust, and, most of all, shame. I was *ashamed* of what I was. Mortified that I’d allowed him inside me without even knowing his name or his past or if he was safe to be with in this manner.

But Sully had said his elixir eradicated shame. That it freed us from the rules and barriers we’d put on ourselves. So why did I still fight?

Why, even though my body had given in...why did my mind still revolt?

My hands curled, and a flash as bright as a burning comet blazed with temper. I *hated* Sully. I hated what he’d made me become. That he believed I’d enjoy this.

Enjoy what exactly?

Being stuffed in some otherworldly dimension with a caveman who’d just taken his fill? Who already looked ready to take me some more? Or the fact that I already squirmed in place, fighting the urge to touch myself, biting my cheeks to ward off the overwhelming need to stick my fingers inside me and come.

Again.

Again.

With a sigh, I dropped my chin so my hair curtained all around me. Each strand had a tongue, licking my sweaty skin. Each crackle from the fire had heat, stroking me. Each icy breeze from behind the fur entrance had fangs, lacing me with frost, only to melt with my desire.

“You can talk to me...here, in this place.”

My hands balled as I looked up. My fingernails sliced into my palms, and instead of wincing in pain, I stifled a moan of drunken desire. Pain matched other pain. Bruises would help ease some of the deliria inside me.

“I’m no longer crying.” I stiffened, sitting prim even as my hips moved to a silent erotic beat.

He reached forward. I flinched back. He still caught me, running his callused thumb over my cheekbone and revealing a droplet of salt. “You are.”

I swiped under my eyes, my fingertips coming away wet. “I’m not

crying...not by choice, anyway.”

“Yet sadness continues to fall.”

“It’s madness...not sadness.” I dropped my hand, expecting it to land as I wanted it to on my lap. But the elixir had other plans, hijacking my control, planting it over my breast instead.

I moaned loudly as I pinched my nipple, and the need to be filled again descended over me like a black thunderstorm. A cloud with no visibility or reason, crackling with electricity, filled with the power to maim.

The shame I felt popped like tiny bubbles. The fight I clung to vanished under the cloak of heavy lust. I was sucked down, down, down...back into the singular obsession of need.

He noticed my downfall and pounced on my weakness. Pushing my hand from my breast, he cupped the weight in his massive palm. He kneaded me, and my tears fell harder.

“I hate this.” My teeth bared with truth, but my body swayed into him, relinquishing to my lies. “I don’t...” I cried out as his other hand traced the wetness between my legs. My hips shot forward, seeking more.

“Are you so sure you hate this?” Pulling me forward by my nipple, he ran his nose along my chin to the dip of my collarbone. “I can make you feel better.” He licked me, worshipped me.

I mumbled something I couldn’t articulate. Words no longer inhabited my brain. Only sex. Only raw, basic coupling.

His arm wrapped around my waist, dragging me from my knees and positioning me over his lap. His cock pulsed upright, ready to claim me again.

“You have the choice,” he whispered, husky and harsh in my ear. I shivered as he licked my lobe, biting it gently. “Sit on me...or don’t. Use me...or use yourself.” His body trembled with barely held restraint. “I have all night to fuck you. So...I’ll be generous and let you fuck me instead.” His eyes flashed with brittle obsidian, looking down at my pussy, spread and bare above his erection.

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, groaning under his breath, but he didn’t try to force me down. He trembled and waited, staying true to his word.

My thighs spread, wanting him despite my still struggling mind. I dug my fingernails into his shoulders, wrenching a hiss from him.

I became transfixed on his mouth. On the roughness of his jaw. On the

softness of his lips. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, making me gasp.

I'd never seen something so enticing, never had a full-body clench just from looking at a man's mouth before. His large hands walked slowly up my spine, then dived into my hair and threaded strands over strong fingers. He held me captive, but he still didn't push me onto his cock.

Instead, he pulled me forward, inch by inch, gentle but authoritative. "Is that what you want?" he murmured, bringing me closer and closer. "A kiss?"

I shivered.

Goosebumps speckled my flesh. I almost came just from the word.

How?

Why did a kiss have such power over me?

Why did tears slip down my overheated cheeks at the very thought of being set free by something so *normal*?

Pulling me the final distance, he brushed my nose with his. Once, twice. Our foreheads pressed together. Our eyes locked.

And I lost myself to him.

I lost because of the depth within his stare. He wasn't just a man here to fuck a tied-up, confused, scared, and forcibly-horny girl. He was here because he wanted what I did. He wanted to let go and find salvation in connection. To transcend simple sex and share something on an instinctual level.

Sucking in a breath, I sank down of my own volition.

Sliding over his thighs, my mouth opened wide as his hard length slipped inside me.

His fingers pulsed in my hair, holding tight. His chest rose and fell with shallow sips of air. And we both released a soul-deep groan as I sheathed him completely within me.

His flesh within mine.

His vulnerability mirroring mine.

His hunger matching mine.

I hadn't expected this. To find a moment's peace in the arms of a total stranger.

"What's your name?" I moaned, drunk on the size of him, intoxicated by the fierce way he held me.

His hips soared forward, stabbing his erection deeper. "I'm yours."

I cried out, only to have his mouth capture mine.

"Just like you're mine." He fed the words into my mouth, kissing me

brutally deep.

The second his tongue pierced my lips, I spindled outward.

My third orgasm caught me completely by surprise, but in a way, I should've expected it. To know that I lived on the permanent edge of shattering.

His tongue swept deeper, kissing me ruthlessly. My eyes rolled back, and my internal muscles squeezed his cock in reply, in welcome.

I came.

Over and over, wave after wave, heaven and ecstasy all in one.

He vibrated around me, his rhythm staying fierce and deep, thrusting into me even as I came apart. His kiss never stopped, his tongue tasting all my shadows, his teeth biting my bottom lip, his finesse as archaic as mine.

Wrapping my arms around his head, I deepened the kiss.

With every minute that ticked past, each rock of our bodies and tangle of our tongues, my mind gave up its fight to boycott this illusion.

It accepted that the fire was real, the cave was real, this man was real.

Sully and his Goddess Isles had been the dream. The nightmare.

I accepted that my world was no longer firmly based in truth but had deviated into nonsensical.

And that was okay.

Because I couldn't keep fighting anymore.

My strength had popped. My disbelief fading beneath the pulsing demand of my body.

And with that freedom, the second part of elixir came into effect.

First, it stole my senses. It made sex my only reason for existing. But the second part, the part that hadn't occurred when I'd been alone in my villa, sobbing in agony and struggling to relieve myself, cannonballed through my ribcage.

Peace.

The final tethers of society's requirements, the mess of political correctness, and the strain of living in a world filled with stresses fell away.

I found freedom.

True freedom.

Freedom from my own thoughts and expectations. Freedom from my need to run from this because it was wrong.

It wasn't wrong.

I chose it.

I chose to unzip the body of a girl who'd been terrified and stolen and, instead, stepped into the goddess Sully wanted me to be.

I didn't do it for him.

I didn't even do it for me.

I did it because it offered such tranquillity to the pandemonium in my heart.

Our kiss set fire to every cuff and leash I'd wrapped around myself and incinerated them to dust. Its flames reached deep into my core, to the nest of monsters with their demon blood-red eyes whose only creation was to climax, and burned their cage to the ground, encouraging a fourth release to curl my toes and make me buckle in the man's arms.

He held me closer, driving into me.

The rhythmic clenches of my orgasm weren't as severe as the previous three, granting a breather from the overwhelming intensity, but it did grant a strange kind of gift.

Somehow, I eclipsed my basic existence of a girl being devoured by a caveman and hovered as an entity above us.

I saw myself as an outsider would.

I watched a lusty woman rock on the lap of an equally lusty man.

I witnessed the straining and coupling of two creatures who didn't give a fuck what the world thought of them. In their cave, they were safe to be who they wanted and do what they needed.

She looked like a queen. A wild-haired, sensually savage queen while he looked like a barbarian. A gladiator with scars and tragedies, his prowess and power fogging the rustic cave around them.

He was unconquerable. Huge and hulking, muscled and mighty, but he held the woman, he held *me*, as though I granted his every wish and dream.

Sully was right.

Euphoria wasn't the magic his guests paid for.

It was the goddess they were paired with.

Me.

I was the alchemist, the priestess, and the witch.

And the man was utterly under my spell, just as I was under his.

I groaned as he arched his hips with thick desire, making my skin heat and thoughts scatter. As I let go of ideas and conclusions, I suffered a final realisation, the last shocking truth.

I was worshipped.

Wanted.

Priceless.

I threw my head back and gave in.

* * * * *

Time lost all power in our faraway cave.

My fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth orgasm were delivered in quick succession. Falling like ill-spent coins, glittering and spinning, crashing and bouncing on the floor.

Each one manipulated my system until my heart thudded sporadically and my nervous system threatened to shut down.

Too much.

Too intense.

Too often.

But I couldn't stop it.

We were just as bad as the other.

Exploding in pleasure, only to begin the climb again the moment we went lax. After he'd taken me from behind and over his lap, he pushed me possessively onto the thick pile of furs.

The exquisite sensation of soft plushness made more tears spring to my eyes. Tears full of gratitude that such softness existed. My tears soon turned to pleas for another release as the coiling, curdling want drove me mad.

The man mounted me again, sliding in deep until he pushed my hips into the ground.

He drove into me, wedged high on his hands and looking down at me prone beneath him. The darkness of his gaze hid the depths I'd seen before. But it didn't mean I couldn't sense how he felt. Somehow, somehow, he'd not only given me his body but his heart too.

I *knew* that.

Without any doubt or question, this scary prehistoric man had fallen in love with me.

I tasted it in each kiss. I heard it in each groan. I saw it in the way he watched me come undone, and how his fingers still bruised me, his cock still owned me, yet he wanted more than just my body.

He drove into me with single-minded determination, as if he could crack me open and claim my soul. With each thrust, his eyes glowed with warmth and undying need. He stared at me as if he wanted to kill me for making him weak.

The complex riot of emotions he suffered made me quake outward, moaning as my body wrung out every heavenly pulse.

I was too drunk on elixir to question how our hearts had become entangled. Too at the mercy of primal greed to fully understand.

All I knew was that each time we came together, each touch and kiss, we created our own little universe. And as more time poured its sand through whatever hourglass that'd trapped us in this place, we lost ourselves further.

This drive between us had started as animalistic need, poured down my throat against my will, but now we shared a startling intimacy.

A communion that sent electricity crackling from his fingers into my skin. Connection that linked us by golden, gleaming strings, bringing us together again and again.

* * * * *

My ninth orgasm was spent on his tongue.

The huge breadth of his shoulders wedged between my thighs. His face between my legs. I combusted under his teeth as he bit me. I jerked his hair as he inserted three fingers. I screamed as he feasted.

* * * * *

My tenth release came from his voice alone.

Tucked against his body, allowing us time to scoop up our shattered pieces, he kissed my temple, and whispered, "You are incomparable. I can't stop wanting you. I want to live inside you forever."

My core used his words as a literary phallus, feathering and flexing, granting me yet another pleasure-pain explosion.

* * * * *

My eleventh climax came from his sudden aggression.

Plucking me from the fur-cosy bed, he scooted me down his body. I shivered where he touched me. I arched my spine and rolled my hips for him to mount, but he gritted his teeth, wrapped his fist in my hair, and slowly but fiercely pushed my mouth to his groin.

"Suck me. Fuck...suck me."

His teeth sank into his bottom lip as I obeyed.

He grunted as my lips encircled him, and my tongue slipped down his salty length. My hair tumbled around me as his fingers spasmed with bliss.

The power of sucking him.

The beauty of looking up the chiselled belly of a man on the brink of erotic violence made my body fragment. I spindled and pulverised, coming in

bursting waves of shivers and spice.

* * * * *

My twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth orgasm were spent in an interlude of dreamy passion.

After we traded mutual fellatio and the sensuous grinding of missionary, we flopped beside each other. Surrounded by furs and fire, we rested for a while, staring at the ceiling and its network of cracks and waterlines, doing our best to recover.

But our breathing remained uneven. Our awareness of each other far too intense.

I wanted to relax. I rubbed at my heart to stop skipping with its unnatural beat, but it was no use. I shook from an overloaded system. I grew weak from using up all my reserves.

I wanted to sleep, but my core still ached to release. My body hadn't reached satisfaction. I was still a slave to Sully's nightmarish elixir.

It was me who initiated the next round.

Me who rolled on top of him while he lay with his eyes closed and shaggy hair strewn on the furs.

Me who straddled him, cupped him, and inserted him deep inside me until his belly tensed with need. I rocked my hips, digging my fingernails into his chest as I crashed through another two releases.

He kept his eyes closed as if he didn't have the willpower to watch me use him. As if he didn't want to give me the final pieces of whatever shattered heart still tinkled behind his ribs.

But I stole them anyway.

Because I was his goddess.

And that was my elixir-granted magic.

* * * * *

My sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth release arrived in a flux of fierce ferocity.

I'd crawled from the furs, seeking another kind of need. For the first time in hours, my body craved something other than sex. The elixir finally lost its tenacious grip, and thirst for water became paramount.

The leather cuff around my ankle scuffed the earthen floor as I traversed to the side of the cave and collected a rudimentary carved cup. Not far from the pile of utensils waited a large shallow dish, catching the drip, drip, drip of water trickling down the cave's walls.

Scooping up a cupful, I drank the icy refreshment all in one go.

The chill hit my stomach, making me shiver.

The ability to feel other sensations other than desire made relief roll my shoulders.

I was sore and tired. My heart still felt strange, and my limbs shook from exhaustion. If the elixir was wearing off, could that mean I'd soon be freed from this place?

Would the caveman disappear, and I'd wake up in Sully's arms on his Indonesian Islands? Would I still be his prisoner?

I ran my hands through my hair, pulling on the length, trying to hasten the process. Now I was no longer the elixir's wanton slave, I blinked with remembrance...and shame.

Scott.

Oh, my God.

Scott.

I'd slept with another man.

No, not just slept.

I'd *devoured* another man.

We'd explored each other's bodies to the point where I'd memorised every inch of his erection, his belly, his chest, his face. He'd tasted me, been inside me. He'd claimed me more thoroughly than anyone before him.

And I'd done it willingly.

Gratefully.

Oh, no.

I buried my face into my hands, shaking my head.

What have I done?

Hands snatched my waist, jerking me into a tower of muscle. "Don't wake up...not yet. I'm not finished with you." Fisting my wrist, he flung me against the cave wall, smearing my skin with icy water and muddy residue.

I gasped.

I sank under the elixir's spell again as he grabbed my face and kissed me recklessly, ruthlessly, desperately.

I kissed him back.

My mind flickered with images of Scott, Sully, and this stranger.

I preferred it when my mind was quiet. When my body was master and everything inside was silent. This time, it was hard to shut it off, drowning under rights and wrongs as I burned through the last few drops of elixir.

“Not yet. I don’t want to give you up just yet,” the man snarled into my mouth, hoisting me up until my legs wrapped around his hips. With our eyes locked, he impaled me on him, pinning me against the wall, his forehead knotted and gaze wild.

All softness and gentleness vanished.

He rode into me, and I couldn’t do a thing to stop it.

How horrible that I’d been with this man for hours—that we’d shared a level of intimacy that I’d never known. Yet now that the drug that’d made me pliant had faded, I squirmed to get away. “No...I’m—”

His mouth plundered mine, his hips pistoned faster, he shoved me headfirst into another blistering climax.

“Not yet. Not yet,” he chanted, pressing his forehead to mine as he drove faster, deeper. In a rush of power and speed, he ripped me from the wall and carried me back to the pile of furs, still inside me. There, he dropped to his knees, withdrew for a moment to plant me on all fours before surging back inside me. “Stay mine. Fuck.” He rutted into me, disrupting the visions of my life before this, scattering my shame over Scott.

Silence crushed my worries as I rocked back, mewling with renewed need and spreading my legs for deeper penetration.

His fingers found my clit, rough and unforgiving, ripping yet another lacerating release through my core. My arms gave out, and once again, I found my cheek pressed into fur while my hips stayed high for his use.

I looked back, hypnotised by the way his face scrunched up with fury, driving both of us into agony, bruising me internally and externally, frantic to spend what final time we had together.

And, in a moment of horrifying, mind-crippling yearning, I wished it was Sully.

The second his sculptured, cultured, stunning face entered my thoughts, my body detonated with every stick of dynamite left in the world.

I screamed as wave after agonising wave splintered me apart.

I couldn’t rid myself of Sully’s voice, his scent, and his achingly blue eyes. I climaxed with his name on my tongue, his creation all around me, his punishment within me.

In my haze and floating down from the soul-searing orgasm, I barely noticed when the man jerked and jettisoned inside me. I flinched as he stroked my spine. I mumbled with burnout as he withdrew and laid me gently on the furs beside him.

“Thank you, Jinx. For the best fucking night of my life.”
I curled up tight, no longer wanting to be touched.
He kissed my forehead, smoothing back sweat-tangled hair.
“You’ve captured my heart.” His voice wavered with frustration and
fury. “I’m afraid I’ll never get it back.”
I should say something.
I should do something.
But...I’d finally reached my limit.
Elixir let me go.
My eyelids snapped closed.
My body shut down.
And I slept.



Chapter Three

RAKING MY FINGERS THROUGH my hair, I wedged my elbows into the desk.

My eyes hurt from the bright sunshine spilling in through my open driftwood doors. The base of my skull throbbed from dehydration. And the lactic acid in my limbs from last night had stuck around, tormenting me even after a full eight-hour crash.

I never usually slept that long. Normally, I was up with the sun, annoyingly attuned to the lightening world, and unable to ignore the call to work.

Not this morning.

This morning, I had the hangover from hell, thanks to far too much physical activity.

I blinked and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to wrangle my erratic concentration into paying attention to my emails.

Skimming my inbox, I placed the correspondence relating to my lab and questions from my team of scientists into one folder, deleted the junk and propaganda I had no interest in, and went to log off.

A swim would help.

The cool, salty water could wash away the dregs of my pain.

Afterwards, perhaps I wouldn't feel like shit.

My mouse hovered over the shutdown button. My gaze snagged on a new email that flashed with fresh delivery.

The traffickers.

To: S.Sinclair@goddessisles.com

From: 89082@gmail.com

Subject: New Addition

We have received your employment request. However, due to unforeseen complications, we are pausing our recruitment services for a few weeks. We will resume business as soon as possible.

I groaned.

Fuck.

Even the scum of the underworld had sentenced me to suffering. I couldn't even order a new girl to distract me from Eleanor. Then again, the way my body hurt this morning, the last thing on my mind was sex. Plus, I had an entire island of willing, beautiful goddesses...I could just choose one of them.

Perhaps, Jealousy could be a good alternative? She was the closest thing I had to a female friend in this place. She was honest about her intentions toward me. I had no sixth sense that she said one thing but meant another—unlike I did when Calico came sniffing around. Jealousy had already asked if I could keep her past her four-year contract, regularly helping my day staff in the kitchens and willingly hosting water sports and other guest activities. She'd gone above and beyond just being a goddess in Euphoria.

She'd proven she would be an asset to my team in other ways, not just selling sex. Maybe she'd be an asset in my bed too?

Fuck.

I dug my fingers into my temples, massaging the agony pulsing there. Jealousy was pretty, kind, and honest, but...the idea of keeping her as my own? Of sharing a bed with her?

Nope.

I couldn't do it.

There wasn't a...spark.

Not like with...

Shut up.

Don't think about her.

Sitting straighter in my chair, I threw back a glass of cucumber-iced water that a staff member had brought in an hour earlier then resumed my task of working.

Screw my swim. I would just work through my foggy pain and get on with it.

I'd just clicked on an email from Peter Beck, my head scientist over at Sinclair and Sinclair Group, when Cal knocked and came in without waiting for my approval.

His habit of barging into places without an invitation had become highly inconvenient.

"Nice of you to wait for admittance." I scowled, hoping he got the memo.

He shrugged. "Got things to do. No time to waste."

"One of these days, you're gonna barge in somewhere and regret what you see."

He smirked. "Already happened. On multiple occasions."

My eyes narrowed, wondering what incidents he referred to. Seeing me butt-ass naked after I'd had a shower and decided to air-dry instead of using a towel? When he caught me mid-masturbation a few years ago? Or how about walking in and cock-blocking me when I'd been seconds away from taking Eleanor last night before Markus fucking Grammer could claim her?

My hands curled into fists. "Some days, I truly want to fire you."

"But you won't." He laughed. "Who else can you trust around here?"

He had a fucking point.

Ever since I'd opened my islands to my exclusive guests, I'd fought a never-ending carousel of people wanting to steal my idea. Virtual reality was huge in today's society. Kids played it. Teenagers lived in it. High-class athletes and expensive professions employed it as a training tool.

It'd become common, easily accessible. However, none of them had the fully immersive experience like I did. Goggles and headphones with an interactive chair were the extent of what was available.

Mine, on the other hand?

The sensors, earbuds, contacts...it all ensured you lost yourself in the hallucination. It became so real that it *wasn't* a hallucination. Your own nervous system and brain accepted the sensory clues I coded and treated it as true.

That was what people wanted to replicate.

And I wasn't open to selling.

Which meant I'd made more enemies from my VR creation than I had through my pharmaceutical formulations...which—*honestly?*—was fucked up.

Drugs were better than gold in today's market.

Create a drug that granted happiness?

Instant billionaire status.

Conjure a drug that offered salvation to disease or pain, but in turn caused side effects that needed a whole other box of pills to cure?

Instant presidential status.

Control the health of the masses, and you became a true god in every sense of the word.

I'd had people bow to me for what my lab had created. I've had councillors and governors try to kill me for not conforming to their rules. For delivering drugs that didn't cause the suffering that they so readily relied on to thin out the population and make money from their misery.

And now, I had jealous assholes who wanted my technology. Yet another reason I appreciated the seclusion of my shores. No one could sneak up without being fully visible upon the sea. No one could take what was mine without being murdered long before they could claim it.

"What do you want, Cal?" I massaged the base of my nape, cursing the persistent headache. I should probably pop an anti-inflammatory, but just because I pumped out pills and marketed medicine like new fashion lines didn't mean I partook very often.

I preferred natural cures. Cures grown in my gardens rather than in my lab.

"I didn't think you'd make an appearance today. Figured I'd screen any important emails so you didn't have to later. Also, Jupiter is in Euphoria tonight. That Nathan Fisher guy's fantasy is twisted."

Cricking my neck, I rolled my shoulders. "Twisted how?" Did I miss something when I let him play on my island? Should I have revoked his invitation as I did so many others?

"He wants a full *underwater* experience." Cal carved air quotations on either side of his head. "His words: I want a slutty, hornier version of *My Little Mermaid*, but not on land, in that cave where she has all those knick-knacks and forks and shit."

I rolled my eyes. “He watched way too much Disney as a kid.”

“Either that or he has a fetish for fish. His last name probably predisposed him to marine life.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to code something like that?” I bit my lip, working through the computer algorithms that I’d have to write. The gravity wires in Euphoria would have to be used so they felt weightless underwater. Even without half my brain throbbing with agony, I doubted I could design a mermaid that could have decent sex. Where were their sex organs anyway?

They’re mythical, Sully.

They don’t have pussies because they don’t exist.

Ugh, my temper was the length of a shoe-lace and threatening to snap. Ocean.

I needed to wade into that wet haven and drown away my pain.

Cal noticed my huff of annoyance. “I can write the cipher. No big deal.” He chuckled. “Be kinda cool to see what sort of human-world rules I can break.”

My eyes swooped to his. “I can do it.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to. That’s why you pay me. I do the crap you don’t need to—”

“When have you known me to take a sick day?”

He frowned, legitimately thinking. “You know...I don’t think you have.”

“Precisely.” I grimaced and straightened my spine. “I’ve put myself through worse and survived. This is nothing.”

“Yeah, but...” He came toward my desk, his suit pressed and slate-grey sleek. “I haven’t seen you that drained in a very long time. Ever since you—”

“Enough.” I gave him a warning glare. “It’s just another day, Cal. That’s all.”

“If you say so.” He sniffed with history, glowering with his own temper. “But you fucked up last night. You know that, right?”

“Quit it,” I growled.

“You shouldn’t have prepared her *or* removed her from the VR hook-up. You should stay the hell away from her.”

“For fuck’s sake—”

“No, just listen.” His jaw flexed as he gritted his teeth, knowing he shouldn’t say what he was about to but was going to anyway. “You never usually interfere with the everyday housekeeping...so you shouldn’t start

now. And you know full well why.” Planting his fist onto my desk, he muttered, “You gave me one clear guideline when you started his place. One unbreakable rule that doesn’t make a shitload of sense to me, but you made me swear...so here it is. You said if you somehow forgot, I was to remind you why you choose animals over humans.”

I bristled. “I remember.”

“I don’t think you do. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have done what you did last night—”

“I told you to back the fuck off.” I shot upright, ignoring the disgruntled pain of my body.

“And *you* told me to keep you away from anyone who threatened everything you’ve become. You told me that you’d rather stay alone than let someone else have a power over—”

“Leave.” I pointed at the door. “I know what I said, and I know why you’re reminding me, but I have things under control.”

He snorted. “Yeah, if this is you under control—unable to stay away from that walking Jinx of a curse—then you’re in deeper shit than I thought.”

My mind skipped back to last night. Of holding Eleanor. Of my heart kicking when she snuggled close. Of all the other bullshit that’d happened since she’d arrived.

It was a minutely struggle not to ask him how she was this morning. Not to stalk to her villa and make sure she’d drunk her smoothie, taken her vitamins, and stuffed her face with life-giving food.

Had she enjoyed Euphoria?

Was she in pain?

Did she hate me less or more?

Ah, Christ.

He was right. I let her have way too much monopoly over me...and I couldn’t fucking stop it.

Sighing, I sat down and pinched the bridge of my nose again, trying to squeeze out her curse like an ugly zit.

“Look, Sinclair...I get it. She’s unique. There’s obviously something going on between you two. You’d have to be blind as those fat-ass fruit bats you rescued. But...I’m only doing what I promised—” He held up his hand in surrender. “—Guarding your back.”

Before I could argue, apologise, or agree, Pika flapped through the see-through curtains and landed on my laptop. Squawking and doing his little

foot-stomping dance, he attacked the letter K, going at it like a feathered Rottweiler.

“Ah, no you don’t.” Plucking him from the computer, I held his little body, so vibrantly aware of his tiny thrumming heart in his very breakable chest. His sharp beak pecked at my fingers. His black glossy eyes gleamed with mischief as he squeaked like a dog’s chew toy, trying to get me to free him.

“Ugh, why do you do this? Your cuteness is pissing me off.” I opened my palm, expecting him to fly away, but he flopped upside down instead, rolling on his tucked-in wings, a strange aerial version of a turtle on its back. I rolled my eyes at his scaly little legs waving in the air. “Yeah, yeah. Good morning to you, you little nightmare.”

He squawked loudly, making me wince. “Morning! Morning. Pika. Pika. Pika!”

My eardrums physically ached. A swim was definitely needed. I refused to waste the entire fucking day to this residual agony.

“God, you and that bird.” Cal scoffed. “Get a room.”

My lips twisted into a half-smile, glad our previous conversation was over and fully aware that Cal had a soft spot for this little menace, just as much as I did.

After all, Cal had been in my life almost as long as Pika. He’d been the first to learn of Pika’s origins. The only guy I trusted when it came time for my massive liberation.

My second-in-command held my stare for a moment, reliving the path we’d travelled together. I’d told him to go off on his own multiple times. He had the brains to cook something equally as profitable as I had. But, instead, he decided to hang out with me, mastering the art of irritation.

Fuck only knew why.

Some might say it was a mistake bringing Cal with me to my islands. He wasn’t trained to be a personal assistant, manservant, or my second. He’d been a junior university geek when I’d taken over my parents’ pharmaceutical company. Training to be a pharmacist, he was doing some very underpaid research in the lab, so he could understand how drugs were mixed and blended, ready for the illnesses he’d be dispensing for.

We’d met in typical unplanned fashion.

I’d been nineteen; he’d just turned twenty.

I’d been head honcho of Sinclair and Sinclair Group for precisely five

days. The policies I'd put in place had ruffled the delicate feathers of the stuffy board members. I'd done things they weren't happy with. I'd implemented new rules they despised. But they couldn't stop me as I owned the majority shares and had the wishes of an iron-clad will from my recently deceased parents.

Sullivan Aiden Sinclair...their new ruler and king.

My older brother, Drake, had also been in the will and testament. However, his inheritance came in the form of the ridiculously expensive mansion my parents owned, the summer house in Greece, and the entire contents of their lucrative bank accounts.

He was the golden child.

I was the second born kid who didn't fit in with their family squad. I hadn't been left cash or property—I'd been gifted Sinclair and Sinclair, not as a reward but as a punishment.

However...I was grateful. And I'd used it to my full advantage.

On the sixth day of my ownership, I'd sent out a blanket email announcing the immediate ban on all animal testing. I didn't care what it was for—face cream, acne prevention, cancer eradicator—all animals were forthwith freed from their miserable existence.

When I'd bumped into Cal on the elevator, a monkey was wrapped around my neck wearing a diaper, his skin peeling from the latest tests and his eyes bloodshot from a new form of conjunctivitis medicine. In my left hand, I held four leashes, all tethering timid and terrified beagles to my heel. And in my right, I had a cage holding a dozen dying mice.

He'd stumbled into the mirrored elevator, lost in the humongous skyscraper of Sinclair and Sinclair, and came face to face with his boss's boss's boss who also happened to be evacuating a zoo.

Without a word, he'd taken the beagles.

We'd descended to the glass-caverned, travertine-coated lobby, and he'd helped me stuff the diseased and ill-gotten creatures into a massive truck destined for the airport.

That had been the beginning of an incident I was both deeply proud and immensely ashamed of. It'd also earned me a ruthless reputation.

Before I'd moved permanently to my Goddess Isles, I'd heard what they whispered in the fancy corridors. Human killer. Animal lover. They claimed I had the heart of a wolf instead of a man—choosing four-legged beasts instead of his own brethren.

They meant it as a slur.
I took it as a compliment.
Because it was true.

Humans deserved the worst from me. Animals were guaranteed my protection.

From anyone.
Pika fluttered to my shoulder, nibbling my ear.

I shivered and nudged him away with my chin. “Fly away, little flea. I’m busy.”

He twittered and tweeted, mimicking the sparrows and other birdlife that regularly serenaded the garden outside my office. My headache crested with each of his little chirps, not finding comfort in his song, when usually, my heart would settle and my stress would evaporate.

Fuck it.

Standing slowly, I pinned Cal with a stare. “You code Nathan Fisher’s fantasy. I’m going for a swim.” I smiled cynically. “And who knows...maybe I will take a sick day, after all.”

I left before he could rub my downfall in my face.

Pika fluttered after me, his wings snapping in the humidity.



Chapter Four

I SPRAWLED ON THE sand like a discarded toy that'd had all its stuffing removed.

The sun was at its zenith, directly above me, doing its best to chargrill my skin, even with the generous lashings of sunscreen I'd applied.

I willed myself to sit up. To eat. To focus on this stunning, glittering day.

But...the sand cradled me too well. The effort of clenching stomach muscles and corralling arms to push up was too much.

So, I lay there. The sun painting bright red patterns on my closed eyelids, stealthily streaking my dark hair with strands of bleached copper. I'd always been a sun lover, acutely attuned to its alternating shades and strengths in different countries.

Ozone played a large part, along with distance from the equator, and air pollution to its heat and colour, but here, on Sully's island, the gilded orb had the warmth of a thousand cosy blankets, pressing into me, reaching through my pores and blood to my bones beneath, easing out the tiny pinpricks of pain and melting them into nothing.

I was washed in gold, inside and out—the perfect healer to my exhaustion.

At least I was outside and no longer in bed. To be honest, I was surprised I'd achieved that small goal. It'd seemed like an impossible task when I'd first woken and been assaulted with aches and bruises, tenderness and

overuse in literally every extremity. Even my little toes hurt when I gingerly slipped out of bed and hobbled toward the bathroom.

There, I'd swayed as blackness crawled over my hazy vision. Once again, my blood sugar levels were dangerously low. My stomach clutched on emptiness. My hands quaked with hunger.

My core wrenched a moan from my lips when I clenched my pelvic floor, my feminine attributes highly aware they'd been touched, licked, fucked, and sampled far, far too many times.

I'd wanted to soak away my discomfort in a bath, but with my knees almost buckling, I opted to sit on the plush bath mat by the huge wave-carved vanity instead of risking a fall.

Putting my head between my legs, I waited for the wooziness to pass, breathing as deeply as I could, doing my best to tame a tattered heartbeat. By the time I looked up again, I'd formulated a flimsy plan of crawling back to bed, ringing for some food to replenish me, and spending the rest of the day in misery.

Hauling myself to my feet, I blinked back new stars, focusing on the large stone bathtub. As if by magic, warm water bobbed with frangipani flowers, aromatic with sweet blooms and comforting vanilla.

How?

Did someone come in and draw a bath while I'd slept?

My shoulders rolled with utmost gratefulness. Tears even came to my eyes as I clutched the lip of the bath and carefully slipped a leg inside. The warm water embraced me instantly, deleting some of the strain.

I melted, and that was the extent of my strength.

I allowed myself to plop like a pebble into the comforting water world, holding my breath as I ducked under. My ribcage grumbled with aches as I held my breath, slowly easing by the time I came up for air.

Some guardian angel had foreseen my need for bodily rehabilitation. If only I had something to eat, I could wallow away the rest of the morning, allowing the bath to work better than any pill or painkiller.

Wiping away water droplets from my eyes, I blinked again.

What on earth?

There, on a small bamboo table with a small vase holding three freshly picked frangipani flowers, two bottles of sweet-smelling lotion, and a box of anti-inflammatories, rested a dewy, blue-glossy smoothie.

Oh, my God.

Had I been so blind not to notice these gifts when I first entered the bathroom or was some of the magic from Euphoria spilling into reality?

I bit my lip, looking around the bathroom to see if an invisible staff member poised with yet more offerings plucked straight from my wordless wishes.

But I was alone.

Alone with the tweets of birds, gentle slap of waves on the shore, and the tropical heaviness of humidity.

Wincing as I employed muscles to reach for the smoothie, I grabbed the dense drink and slipped back into the warmth again. Only my head and my hands remained dry, tipping the weighty glass to my lips and slurping huge mouthfuls of deliciousness.

I moaned as if the flavour explosion was another orgasm. My system instantly clamoured to convert food into life-giving glucose and minerals. Blueberries and banana, cinnamon, coconut, and a blend of too many other things to pinpoint.

Thick and wholesome, I devoured the entire thing, gasping with brain freeze by the end.

Contentedness spilled through me, and I reclined in the bath again.

I stayed there until the warmth turned to air temperature and the smoothie navigated from my stomach to my muscles. Only once I could stand without black spots dancing in my vision did I grab a towel, dry off, slip into a silver rhinestone-studded bikini, and apply liberal sunblock.

Even that amount of exercise made me very aware of how weak my body was. How all it craved was more nutrition and somewhere to rest. I padded through the airy villa and followed the sweet, spicy aromas coming from the deck.

Once again, my mouth fell open in shock. The table, resting under a giant umbrella, groaned with a plethora of dishes. Earthen pots holding rich curries, banana leaf plates presenting fluffy pastries, white china with fresh fruit, and dishes with lentils, vegetables, and barbecued halloumi, all waited to be chosen.

Saliva coated my tongue. I selected a huge piece of ripe watermelon, a handful of lychees, and a still-warm chocolate croissant before descending the two steps from the teak decking to the sugary sun-warmed sand.

I ate my beach picnic in record time, then lay back and...the rest was history.

I couldn't move.

I didn't *want* to move.

I'd made the mistake of lying down in paradise, and for the first time in my life, I didn't let guilt push me into motion.

My body wanted to rest.

I will rest.

I had no one to please, no chores to complete, no parents to obey.

Just bird song and wave chorus lulling me into a state of utmost lazy leisure.

Unfortunately, while my body might be able to switch off all signals to move, to lie like a corpse and be grateful for its respite, my mind began to race.

Last night returned in crystal, clamouring detail.

The cave.

The man.

The mind-numbing, body-breaking, elixir-maddening sex.

My nipples pebbled just from my memories, from his voice, from the way he manhandled me but also cared for me. It hadn't been like I feared. He hadn't been abusive or cruel. He'd taken what he wanted, but he'd also ensured I enjoyed it too.

And I *had* enjoyed it.

As much as I wanted to lie, to curse and scream and make myself sound less like a harlot, I had to be honest and admit...last night had been the best night of my life...sexually speaking.

A blush crept over my cheeks. A blush full of chagrin for Scott. If I ever got free—*when I get free*—how would I look him in the eye and admit what I'd done? Would it matter that I hadn't had a choice? That the man who'd bought me stole my senses, plugged me into some sort of illusion, and then left me to his guests' mercy?

Would Scott forgive me?

There's nothing to forgive!

My hands curled, grabbing fistfuls of hot sand. I didn't willingly open my legs for that brutish caveman. Yes, while under elixir's influence, I had, but...that was a weapon used against me. My own libido and lust had become enemies.

If I ever saw Scott again, he would understand. If he didn't...well...*he doesn't deserve me.*

Nodding with firmness, I tried to calm my heart rate that'd once again skipped into tattered. A small puff of air wafted my face just before a gentle rustle of feathers and a cute chirp sounded in my ear. "Lazy, lazy."

My eyes snapped open. I turned my head to come nose to beak with Sully's tiny parrot. He tilted his neck so his head was horizontal, comical and far too bendy. "Lazy!" He ruffled his feathers, shaking off invisible dirt.

I smiled, studying the gleaming green feathers, snowy white chest, and apricot cheeks. "You're very pretty."

He puffed up like a tennis ball, pride cheeky and bright in his gaze. "Pretty Pika!"

I nodded, rolling onto my stomach, trailing my long hair over my shoulders but leaving most of the length, strewn like seaweed in the sand. Resting my chin in my hands, I laughed quietly as the little parrot stomped his scaly legs around in a dictatorship-style dance. His wings fanned out like a cape, his beak held high, his body bristling with authority. He squeaked with each step, sounding like the world's tiniest bullhorn.

"Sully, Sully, Sully!" he screamed, abandoning his weird march and nibbling my hair in the sand. He ran bath-clean locks through his beak, pruning and preening me as if offended that I hadn't done what he ordered and stopped being lazy.

I tried to ignore the way my stomach flipped at the mention of Sully's name or the knowledge that this little bird seemed to have something unique of his.

He was loved by a man who didn't seem capable of such a thing.

Stroking the top of Pika's head, I murmured, "What can you tell me about him, huh? Is he all bad, or is there something good inside him too?"

Pika immediately forgot about my hair, arching his neck for me to scratch between his feathers under his chin. His eyes closed in bliss, and snuggled closer, showing total affection and intelligence far beyond what most people believed a bird could do.

This wasn't just a mindless creature, focused on food and fornication before his lifespan was over. This was a tiny soul, sentient and smart, as valuable as any other being.

My heart squeezed as a tune of chirps and squeaks fell from his beak, his version of a purr, adoring my cuddles.

"I can see why Sully fell in love with you. You are rather irresistible."

"His ability to invoke feeling is a daily punishment, I agree."

I gasped, whipping around to face the dark, disgruntled voice behind me. Pika squawked indignantly as I sprayed him with sand, sitting upright, wincing a little at my remaining aches. “Sully!” I shielded my eyes from the sun. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

Pika flew to his master’s head, resting like some feathered jewel in Sully’s wet hair. He once again puffed with self-satisfaction, his tiny ego overflowing with knowledge that he belonged to someone who cared.

Sully didn’t acknowledge the bird. His fists stayed stiff by his thighs while his powerful body dripped with saltwater. Wet tracks on the sand revealed he’d swam here, appearing from the depths like some prince of the brine.

Pika must’ve flown while Sully swam, chasing his owner to torment me.

My chest turned hollow, creating a high-steepled church for my heart to pound. My gaze disobeyed me and trailed from his harsh eyebrows shadowing crystal blue eyes to the flares of his collarbones, ridges of abdominals, and over the ripples of shoulder and bicep. His lower half was hidden by dripping black board-shorts, his legs planted hip-distance apart and feet buried in the sand.

The sun absolutely worshipped him, turning his skin a gorgeous bronze, dappling him with gilded-shadow that only highlighted the impressive condition he kept his body in. With the small breeze teasing wet hair on his forehead and the sea still clinging to him, he wasn’t just a king of water but the master of all elements.

Earth, water, air, and fire.

The fire was inside me, an ember that’d struck a match the moment we’d met and continued to smoulder when we were apart, only to whoosh back into cardinal flame when we were close.

Last night faded. The caveman and the endless orgasms I’d enjoyed, all gone.

Everything vanished under the intense, terrifying recollection of Sully’s mouth on mine. On the way he’d dragged me from the bath by my hair, kissed me as if he’d die, then prepared my body with oil and tricks for another man.

Anger poured into the fire in my chest, crackling with sparks. “You rented me out.”

He ran a hand over his face, dispelling stinging salt and striding closer, casting me in shadow. “What did you think of my creation?”

“I can’t offer an opinion on something I don’t understand.”

He sucked in his bottom lip as if tasting my reply. Finally, he cocked his head with acknowledgement. “What don’t you understand?”

“Why?” I crossed my arms. “Are you going to tell me what Euphoria is? Are you going to explain how one second I was here, then I was there, and then I woke up in my villa as if I hadn’t travelled thousands of miles, regressed hundreds of millennia, and had sex—multiple times—with a prehistoric male?”

He sucked in a breath, making his belly strain. “I can...if that’s what you wish.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

He shook his head, making Pika take wing. “I’m here because, once again, my willpower is shit.”

Goosebumps darted over my skin at his confession. My lips tingled as if he’d just kissed me. As if I *wanted* him to kiss me...which was a total lie.

Stay away from me.

Just...grant me that, and I might be able to survive you.

“Do you visit all your goddesses after they’ve been in Euphoria?” I climbed to my feet, uneasy with the dynamics of him towering over me. Sand crowned me, decorating my skin with silver-golden glitter.

His gaze darkened, his eyes narrowing and skating over my bikini-clad form. He sucked in a thin breath as he caressed my cleavage, my belly, my briefs, and down my legs. My body prickled as if he’d physically touched me. Hyperaware without the condemning curse of his elixir.

I hated that I couldn’t blame a drug on my reaction to him. I despised that the more time we spent together, the more my body ignored my wishes and had its own intentions. My breasts grew heavier, my nipples harder, my core wetter.

It didn’t matter that I had no intention of acting on my attraction to him. It didn’t matter that I would never, ever willingly sleep with this bastard. The body was a fickle, betraying thing, and it’d chosen Sully Sinclair to be my own personal hell.

Where had my decision to wear that sack of a jumper gone? I should permanently live in that hideous thing...if only to protect myself from someone I wasn’t equipped to withstand.

He took his time replying, his stomach rippling with yet more tension. “No, I don’t.” He peered into my face, seeing my strain, my stress, the

aftermath of countless sex. “However, not many have fainted at my feet. I figured I’d be protecting an investment if I came to check on you personally.”

I fought the urge to back up. “So the bath and the smoothie and all that delicious food...that’s you ‘protecting your investment?’”

He raked a hand through his hair, dispelling clinging ocean and encouraging the dark, bronze-tipped strands to dry. “No, each goddess receives those things after she’s...worked. I’m aware that your system needs fortification.”

“So magnanimous of you.”

He smirked. “I try.” His attention slipped from mine, drifting to the table still groaning with food. A scowl tangled his face. “You didn’t eat.” Temper flashed as he looked back at me. “Why the fuck haven’t you eaten? Remember what happened last time?”

I squeaked as he grabbed my elbow and marched me toward the deck. Pika chased us, chirping as Sully pushed me into a chair, wiped his hand free of the mixture of sunscreen and sand from my skin, and reached for a scrumptious-looking raspberry pastry. Plopping it onto the empty plate in front of me, he commanded, “Eat. Unless you want to visit Dr. Campbell and his syringes again?”

Grabbing the pastry, I shooed Pika away as he tried to nibble it, and glowered. “I was going to eat. I *have* eaten. I’ve been...listening to what my system needs, and it needs rest.”

He reached for the remaining wedge of watermelon, unsheathing his teeth and taking a bite so big, pink juice dribbled through his five o’clock shadow.

I froze.

I shivered.

I couldn’t look away as his tongue darted between his lips, catching as much of the fruit juice as he could before he wiped the rest away with the back of his hand. His eyes closed in bliss, his jaw working as he chewed, his throat contracting as he swallowed.

He. Was. *Gorgeous*.

Drop-dead, fantasy-created perfection.

I wanted to cry.

I wanted to leap up and scratch and scar him. To make him as ugly as his chosen profession.

My appetite vanished as my stomach clenched with disgust. How could I

find him so appealing when he'd sentenced me to four years of slavery?

He grabbed the chair next to me, sitting tall and selecting a big bowl of tempeh satay skewers dripping in peanut sauce, accompanied with pickled cabbage and carrot. Slipping the entire length of tempeh into his mouth, he placed the empty skewer back into the bowl, his gaze catching mine as he chewed.

Thanks to the shade offered by the large umbrella, I noticed things that the sun had hidden. Smudges decorated under his eyes, and his body seemed leaner, tight over muscles as if he hadn't eaten in a while. His hands shook slightly as he chose another satay stick and quickly devoured it.

He ate as if he'd been subjected to elixir and all the spiritual, physical, and emotional exhaustion that came with it.

What could that mean?

Had he used another goddess last night after handing me over? Who had been the guest I slept with? I hadn't seen him around the island, and it hadn't been the man who'd said he couldn't wait to be with me when Jealousy and I had bumped into the two guests.

My heart rate picked up, confusion trying to rearrange into crazy conclusions.

"Eat," Sully muttered, doling out a large ladle of veggie mie goreng onto my plate.

Taking a bite of my pastry, I asked softly, "Why are you so hungry?"

He froze. His gaze snagged mine, turning navy with hesitation. Tearing his attention away, he grunted, "I forgot to eat breakfast."

"Uh-huh..." I picked a gooey raspberry from the sweet custard of the pastry.

He glowered, hating my disbelief. "I was...I overdid it with exercise last night."

"And what sort of exercise was that?" I braced myself with acknowledgement that he was busy fucking a goddess until neither could walk straight. I wanted him to admit that whatever this electricity was—that only seemed to increase in voltage between us—meant absolutely nothing to him.

That would give me clear boundaries to stop allowing my body to twist my mind, to prevent my heart from getting involved.

"None of your fucking business." He grabbed a grain cracker, scooped up a mouthful of caramelised onion, and ate it as if daring me to ask again.

Fine.

Whatever.

I didn't care what he got up to last night. What I did care about was what I got up to. How it happened. Who it happened with. If every instance would be the same.

We ate in silence for a bit before I poured myself a glass of freshly squeezed pineapple juice and hid my smile as Pika perched on the edge of my drink, dipping his beak in and slurping up the sugary liquid.

Sully stiffened as Pika continued to sip from my glass. His face grew stormy, as if possessive of the bird and unwilling to share him. I frowned as he whistled gently, his call acting like an immediate noose, setting Pika to flight and placing him firmly on Sully's shoulder.

I reclined in my chair, sampling the pineapple and once again confused about who this man was. "You don't like sharing his affection."

He growled low in his chest. "I don't trust others to be kind to him."

"No one?"

His eyes flashed. "No one."

"You have my word I'd never hurt him, Sully."

He flinched at the use of his name. "Words don't earn my trust, *Jinx*."

"Perhaps not, but you must have some inkling of who I am as a person by now? You spend enough time harassing me."

He bristled. "I *harass* you?"

"You're here eating my food, aren't you?"

"*Your* food?" His eyebrows shot into his half-dried hair. "Are you forgetting who owns this establishment?"

I placed my glass down, boldly swiping a tempeh satay off his plate. "Oh no, I could never forget that part."

He scowled as I chewed the rich peanut delicacy. He studied me with such intensity, such curiosity, I squirmed under his stare.

"What? What is it?" I wiped my cheeks. "Do I have something on my face?"

A cold smirk twisted his lips. "Just trying to decide if you've changed. The first time in Euphoria normally scrambles a person. However, you still seem to have a terrible sense of self-preservation, a tongue that will only get you in trouble, and questions that won't deliver answers you'll like."

I braced my spine. "Does it piss you off that I'm still fundamentally myself?"

He paused before nodding brusquely. “Actually, yes. I’m fucked off you’re still the same—even after...” He cleared his throat. “Even after being fucked within an inch of your life last night in a dimension that wasn’t real.”

“Why does that annoy you? Why aren’t you happy that I’m strong enough to withstand whatever nightmares you throw my way?”

“Because I don’t like what you make me—” He cut himself off, his hands balling on the table. “We’re off topic. You wanted to know about Euphoria.” He glanced at his naked wrist, waving it as if an expensive Rolex winked there. “Time is ticking, Jinx. I’ve overstayed my welcome as it is, and I have work to do, guests to welcome, goddesses to prepare. You get three questions about how my VR works, and that’s it.” He grabbed a handful of grapes, popping one into his mouth and chewing slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. “Go ahead. Ask.”

I did my best to keep my attention away from his lips and throat as he swallowed. “Only three?”

He nodded regally.

“Fine.” Tapping my mouth with a finger, I deliberated. Doing my best to incorporate as much into one question as I could. I wouldn’t fall for his tricks. I refused to walk away from this strange, impromptu luncheon without knowing everything I could.

Information was key. And I needed all the keys I could earn to escape.

As he waited patiently, Pika fell asleep on his shoulder, his little head bobbing with tiredness.

Leaning forward, I ignored the way Sully’s gaze latched onto my cleavage as I placed my arms on the table, pushing my breasts together. His jaw flexed, his naked chest rose with a harsh breath, highlighting muscles that made my mouth water.

My stomach reacted to him, coiling itself with barbwire, pinpricking with pain.

Stop it!

My voice cracked as I asked, “You called it VR...VR as in virtual reality?”

One question wasted.

Dammit.

He steepled his fingers, elbows digging into the armrests of his chair. “Precisely.”

“And everything you put on me...the oil, lenses, earbuds, the stuff under

my nose, the mouthwash, the pads on my fingertips. Is that how the illusion felt so real?”

“It was.”

“How?” I held up my hand before he could answer my final question with a generic reply, adding a caveat. “I want an in-depth explanation, not just a quick, mysterious hint. I want to know *exactly* what each element did.”

It was his turn to lean forward. Pushing his chair away from the table, he moved it to face mine, clasping his hands between his legs. “Normally, I let the goddess figure it out. But...I did say you could ask, so pay attention because I’ll only divulge this once.”

I stopped breathing, way too aware of how close he was, how powerful, how ruthless. Voltage sparked from his body to mine, crackling with invisible lightning bolts.

“Virtual reality only works if your senses are consumed. Gamers use headsets that see three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, so no matter which way you look, you only see the world you’re immersed in. Your brain accepts the imagery as gospel. You can run in an empty field but slam into a wall in a tiny room. Once you feel the walls instead of grass, the illusion is shattered and the brain boycotts the deception, dumping you firmly back into reality.” He shrugged. “I don’t let that happen. I don’t allow any instances where the hallucination can be broken.”

Taking my hand, we both jerked as our skin burst apart with fire. The heat and burn were so intense, I couldn’t understand how our flesh remained uncharred and flames didn’t crawl up our arms.

Clearing his throat, he stroked my fingertips with his. “If you touch a wall in reality, with the sensors on your fingers, you touch grass from the field. If you smell, with my serum under your nose, you only scent sweet earth and spring growth. If you feel, thanks to my oil, you only feel the soft blades upon your skin and the breeze within your hair. Your taste buds taste the fallacy. Your ears hear the delusion. Your body may remain in a blank room, and harnesses might keep you from straying, but none of that exists to your brain. You don’t feel the bare tile beneath your feet if I’ve coded a cave to be lined with fur. You don’t hear the voices of the people around you if you’re listening to crackling fire and grunting cavemen.”

Letting me go, he shook out his hands as if trying to eradicate the leftover crackles of chemistry. “That’s it. Just a trick. All carefully designed to make your brain believe something unbelievable.”

“So...you’re saying you can create any apparition, conjure any scene a guest wants?”

He cocked his head. “That’s a fourth question.”

“I know...but...it’s relates to my previous one.”

He sighed with impatience. “Yes. I can code any fantasy they want. I can make you an angel with wings, fucking in the clouds. I can turn you into a mermaid, fucking beneath the sea. You become anything they want. They want you blonde...you’re blonde. They want you older, you’re older. They want you to be someone they loved and lost, then you’re a ghost. Or if they want you as you are...then that is what they get.”

I sat in silence for a while, processing the depth of the daydream. It’d been so *real*. I’d touched the man who’d been inside me and felt his body and heat. I’d tasted his salty flesh when I’d sucked him. I’d gasped with pleasure as he’d licked me in return...but it’d all been—

“Wait.” My spine stiffened. “If it’s all a mirage, then...are you saying I didn’t *actually* have sex last night?”

He stood swiftly, planting his hands on my chair’s armrests, caging me in. His belly rippled with muscle as he loomed close, his eyes dabbled with turquoise and sapphire. “You’ve used up all your questions.”

“But...”

In a flash, he wrapped his fingers around my wrist and plucked me from the chair. Dragging me down the deck and back onto the beach, he didn’t stop until the sea lapped at our ankles.

The fresh coolness after sitting in stagnant humidity was welcome. Sand still stuck annoyingly to my skin, but I didn’t understand why he’d carted me into the ocean.

Pika squawked around our heads before flapping off into the foliage, abandoning his master, knowing the open seas weren’t a place for a winged parrot.

Sully never stopped, manhandling me deeper and deeper until the tide lapped around my waist, then breasts, then throat. Only once we were completely submerged, my tiptoes digging into the sand beneath the surface for balance, did he cup my chin and bring me close.

He licked his lips as if he’d kiss me. His eyes flashed with a hunger that made equal starvation claw at my belly. For a second, I had no idea what he intended.

Drown me?

Fuck me?

Ruin me?

But his fingers tightened around my jaw, bringing me closer until our chests bumped and the hardness in his broad-shorts nudged against my stomach. His voice licked into my ear, low and laden with lust. "Ask yourself that same question. Does your body feel like you didn't have sex last night?" His other hand suddenly latched around my breast, fisting the weight, activating bruises. "Are these not sore from a man's attention?" His fingers trailed over my waist, cupping me between the legs, instantly making my thighs clamp around his wrist, far too sensitive to be played with. "Is this not swollen from being fucked all night?" His finger teased my clit, pressing my bikini briefs against my entrance. "Are you not wrung dry from pleasure?"

If the water hadn't cradled my weight, I would've collapsed.

The rudeness of him fingering me. The aggressive, possessive way in which he touched me...as if I *belonged* to him. As if he wanted to replace himself with the man who'd invaded those places multiple times last night.

I shivered as he ran his tongue around the shell of my ear. "Ask yourself if you believe you didn't have sex last night, Jinx, and be honest with yourself. Ask why I poured elixir down your throat. Why I served you up as a rabid, wanton creature if your sole purpose wasn't to be used."

Pressing a chaste kiss on my mouth, he murmured, "Your mind hid the identity of the man who fucked you, but your body knows the truth." Pushing me away, he wiped his mouth, removing me from his lips. His face held torture and torment, his eyes tight and lips thin.

My heart fluttered as I wafted my arms in the water, staying upright even though I wanted to sink to the bottom and never resurface.

What he'd just said.

What he'd just hinted...

Could it be true?

Fear prickled me even as sick joy melted my broken, stupid heart. "If you have the power to make a simple girl become an angel or mermaid or anything else a man desires...that means you can change *him*, too."

He jolted.

Shutters slammed over his gaze.

He pushed off from the bottom, hovering as if he was a water demon, able to breathe in an aquatic dimension, about to return home after visiting poor mortals on earth.

Words tumbled from my mouth, determined to ask before he vanished.
“Who did I sleep with last night, Sully?”

He gritted his teeth. “A guest.”

“Which one?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I do. I *do* need to know.” I splashed my fists into the sea. “Was it you?
Were you the one who fucked me?”

Please say yes.

Please say no.

God...what is happening to me!

He bared his teeth. “You would know if I ever fucked you. I told you
you’d never be the same if I did.”

“I’m not the same...not after last night.”

“You’re still the same maddening, dangerous girl I can’t seem to stay
away from.” Swimming backward, placing distance between us, he added in
the darkest, rawest voice, “Euphoria is a blessing and a curse, Eleanor.
You’re free to be whatever you want...but that freedom means you’re at the
mercy of being used by your greatest enemy or dearest friend. You’ll never
know. Never know who hides behind the illusion’s mask. Never see the man
whose body thrusts into yours. Never see past what I want you to see. You
only see what they pay for.”

Taking a deep breath, he turned and duck-dived under the surface.

I waited for a hundred skipping heartbeats for him to reappear.

But he never did.

I sank beneath the surface...

...and screamed.



Chapter Five

YESTERDAY WAS MY LAST day of acting like a goddamn idiot.

I didn't appreciate nor accept the threads of softness Eleanor cursed me with. I'd had enough of battling my thoughts, losing against my rules, and overall being a fucking moron.

I'm done.

She was just a girl.

A high-class commodity.

Nothing more.

After my swim, I'd buried myself in work, scaled Nirvana thanks to the excess energy I had after visiting Jinx, then forced myself to stay in my villa all night.

In bed.

Hard as a fucking rock.

I didn't allow myself to skulk through the shadows, to enter a certain goddess's room, to pin her down and force her to take my cock after she'd taken so much dick the night before.

I reminded myself of what Cal had been so adamant I recall. Why I didn't do humans. Why I would never do her. And why I'd made such strict laws.

The highlight reel of my past left me sick to my stomach and a little

afraid of what I was capable of when pushed to my limits.

It didn't matter that it was *me* pushing myself to those limits—Eleanor would be the one to pay if I allowed myself to feel anything else for her.

The truth was...I *would* kill her. Not maliciously, probably not even intentionally, but I tended to act irrationally when forced to endure things I wasn't equipped with. And...alone in the dark, with my thoughts thick with blood and history, I admitted I wasn't equipped to deal with her.

Therefore, all interaction and communication had to cease.

For her own safety...and for mine.

The only human relationships I wanted were those bound by NDAs, huge sums of money, and an expiration date.

Cal was the one exception.

As the sun rose and dawn brightened to noon, I strode from my office. My inbox had been dealt with, a small issue with some new lab equipment resolved, and an online conference call with my head scientist completed. Thanks to the internet, I no longer had to physically be in many places. Only a few instances required my personal attention and I loathed those requests.

My islands had become a sanctuary I hadn't been aware I needed, and when the outside world intruded, dragging me back into smog-filled cities jam-packed with self-centred, apathetic bastards, I struggled to keep my temper in check.

I'd probably done the wrong thing by cloistering myself away in paradise, creating my own personal Zion, pretending I'd achieved the impossible and eradicated the plague of mankind. These days, if I entered the main vein of population, I couldn't focus on the tiny snippets of good, only on the mountains of disease and screw-ups that society had piled into shit mountains.

Not for the first time, I was tempted to create a drug that would eradicate the problems we'd caused...by eradicating *us*. But that would make my life's work highly hypocritical.

I owned a company whose entire purpose was pharmaceuticals—both external and internal medicines—to extend the longevity of the people I couldn't stand. I donated millions to cancer research and didn't hide my breakthroughs—delivering my successes at affordable prices, despite the death threats from men who traded in fatality.

Before I'd started selling flesh and fantasy, I'd whored myself out for the masses, draining myself for humanity that no longer remembered what that

word meant.

Striding down the sandy pathway, I raked hands through my hair, smoothed my navy pinstripe suit, and buttoned my hand-cut blazer.

Enough dwelling in the past.

I had a good balance in my life these days. I would keep it that way. And besides, talking of relationships with expiry dates...it was time to say farewell to Markus Grammer.

Gritting my teeth, I ignored the acid wash down my throat, splashing corrosive in my belly. Just once, I'd like to revoke my policy to greet and goodbye each guest, but part of me needed to see him gone. To be sure he no longer had access to what was mine.

Thinking of the devil must've conjured him as he appeared before me, turning off the fork in the path which led to his private villa. His luggage would've already been taken to the helicopter. His khaki messenger bag nudged against freshly pressed jeans, swinging with his every step. The shade of his baby blue polo highlighted the tan he'd earned while staying here. He still looked a little drained from being in Euphoria, but the swagger in his body said he'd never forget the week he'd spent on Goddess Isles.

Too bad for him he couldn't regale his office buddies with stories of what went on here, unless he wanted the iron-clad NDA I made him sign to bite him with serious fangs in the ass.

I cleared my throat, preparing to put on my mask of suave and polished. He heard me, turning to look over his shoulder. He stopped immediately, a huge shit-eating grin on his face. "Sullivan."

Fighting the urge to throttle him, I kept walking until I caught up beside him. Slipping both hands into my pockets, I nodded politely, all while wanting to murder him. "Mr. Grammer."

He slung his messenger bag up higher, matching my pace toward the beach and helipad. "Wow, man. Fuck, I had *no* idea." He wiped his mouth, letting his head loll back in memory of the fuck-fest he enjoyed at my expense. "You're a god. Truly. I thought you were some smug bastard when I first arrived, but after Euphoria?" He waved his arms in dramatic surrender. "You, sir, are a fucking *genius*."

My teeth threatened to crack, but I smiled and bowed my head graciously. "I'm glad you approve."

"Approve?" He whistled under his breath. "Approve doesn't come close. That girl...Jinx? God, I've never felt anything like that. With anyone. She

was exactly like you said.” His eyes glazed with memory. “She was gagging for it. She wasn’t shy or ashamed. She basically slurped up everything I gave her and then got on her knees for more.”

I grinned, locking down every inch of violence inside me. On the outside, I was perfect. On the inside, I was chaos. “And how did you find your stamina compared to a goddess high on elixir?”

“Yeah.” He whistled again, low and long. “You were right, that one night is enough. I can’t remember the last time I had so many releases in one go. Maybe when I was sixteen, I could come multiple times, but that was a long time ago.” He chuckled, nudging my shoulder with his. “But with Jinx? I’m glad you don’t give that elixir stuff to the men...I honestly didn’t need it. Seeing how fucking drenched she was? How much she shivered when I touched her? How she came from my voice alone? That’s some serious magic right there.”

He laughed, mocking himself a little. “I mean, I’ve been told I’m okay in the sack, but I’ve never had some girl cream herself just from my talking to her...you know?”

My hands balled in my pockets, threatening to break the seams of my expensively tailored clothes. “Their inhibitions no longer tamper in their pleasure with elixir. Just as people are capable of climaxing in their dreams from no stimulation other than their brains, they are capable of coming from an array of stimulus when they’re stripped to nothing but heat.”

“Yeah, you can say that again.”

No, you bastard. I won’t. I want you gone. Immediately.

“Well, I hope you enjoyed your stay, Mr. Grammer. That you feel rejuvenated to return to your everyday world.” I slipped silver-lensed aviators from my breast pocket and shielded my eyes as we broke the shadows of the palm tree and orchid lined laneway, stepping out onto the sun-drenched beach.

I needed to leave before I killed a guest. I hadn’t been driven to that extreme yet, but today...well, it was highly probable I’d snap if I had to hear another goddamn thing about him screwing Jinx.

“How did you get my fantasy so perfect by the way? All I told you was that I liked that era. That I wanted a woman who was more animal and feral than the girls today.”

With a hard sigh, I turned to face him, struggling to rip my gaze from the sea while trying to find my centre of calm. The turquoise expanse had a small

ripple with occasional white-cap, courtesy of the stronger humid breeze.

The helicopter waited on its pad, surrounded by black basalt, its heavy blades sagging around the sleek machine. Two pilots chatted in the air-conditioned cockpit, waiting to act as a taxi service. Markus would be in for a rough ride, judging by the wind.

And that made me ridiculously pleased.

Turbulence in an airplane was one thing. Turbulence in a chopper felt like you were moments away from becoming shark food. And who knew, maybe he'd crash and the sea that protected my investments would swallow him whole.

Good fucking riddance.

"So? Can you tell me how you created something that's ruined me forever?" He placed his own Ray-Bans with smoky, auburn lenses on his nose.

I crossed my arms, hating the quake in my muscles. "You mentioned you liked *Conan the Barbarian*, *Alpha*, *Cavemen*, and other prehistoric movies in your dossier. You wanted a woman spread-eagled and tied down with a fire roaring, meat roasting, and furs from your kills at your feet. Are you forgetting that you wrote down what you regularly jerk off to? That you picture a woman, smudged with dirt, tangled hair, wild eyes, a body desperate to be mounted?" I angled my head, my hair tumbling a little over my forehead. "Did I not deliver?"

He nodded quickly. "Hell, yeah, you delivered. I just wanted to know how you could load a computer program that made it seem so *real*."

"Tricks of the trade. Island secrets, I'm afraid." My smile felt stretched and fake. Time to end this charade. Raising my arm, I pointed at the helicopter. "It's been a pleasure hosting you, Mr. Grammer. I wish you a safe journey—"

"Wait." He fumbled with the flap of his messenger bag. His hand dived into the depths, digging past a laptop and paperwork, and reappeared with a black box.

A box I was highly familiar with.

Ah, fuck.

He wasn't the first guest to do this, and he wouldn't be the last. But the fact it was for her? For Eleanor...

Yeah, it made my heart do lawless things like *hurt*. It also made my arms bunch to rip his head off.

Caressing the box, he looked at it with a starry, puppy-love gaze. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Can I see her? Before I go? I want to...I want to tell her that I'll never forget her. That she'll always be a goddess to me... the best experience of my life."

My jaw ached as I once again clenched too hard. "Seeing her again isn't possible."

"But surely I can give her this? Tell her that in one night I fell hard. That a part of me will always be in love with her."

"I'm sorry." I shook my head. "It's a regular occurrence to fall in love with your fantasy. After all...it's your fantasy. The pinnacle of your idea of perfection. But that girl you fucked is not real. She's a figment of your imagination and must remain there." I bowed stiffly. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I really—"

"She is real. Her name is Jinx, and I would really appreciate if you'd let me—"

"Stop." My temper slipped through my leash. My face tightened with a darkness I couldn't see on myself, but it gleamed in Markus's reflecting sunglasses. It sketched me with savagery. "Not possible."

He opened his mouth to argue, but the soft hiss of sand from my shoe as I stepped toward him shut up his foolish request.

Backing up, he tossed me the box instead. "You give it to her then, on my behalf. That's the least you can do. Call it a tip." He bared his teeth. "I don't know what you pay those girls, but I doubt it's enough. Not after the connection we shared."

My fist curled around the box. "I think it's time you return to reality, Mr. Grammer." Snapping my fingers, I smiled coldly as Cal stepped from the dense foliage. I'd felt his presence a few moments ago, tolerated the vibration of my cell phone in my pocket that buzzed with his code, alerting me to his closeness.

I hadn't intentionally set out to train Cal to serve my every whim. I didn't berate him into anticipating my needs. He just did it automatically. Sometimes staying within his boundaries, sometimes overstepping them. Most of the time, fully justified for his reactions.

Turning to face him as he stalked toward us, I muttered, "Kindly escort Mr. Grammer to his ride. I have other things that require my attention."

"It would be my pleasure." Cal smiled, sharp teeth and crocodilian grin. He could be kind and courteous, but he could also be ruthless and cold. "This

way, Mr. Grammer.”

Markus pointed at the box in my hand. “Please...just give it to her. It would mean a lot to know she received something from me.” Hoisting up his messenger bag, he gave me one last look and held out his hand to shake.

“Thanks, Sullivan. For sharing the sorcery that you wield.”

I didn’t shake his hand. “Goodbye, Mr. Grammer.”

Stalking away, I trusted Cal to kick him from my shores. My glossy Italian leather shoes glided through sand as I traded sunshine for shadow and ripped open the box the moment I was alone.

Nestled inside was a Hawk diamond.

A ridiculously expensive two-carat flawless stone.

Many of my guests purchased a diamond for themselves—a memento for the time they spent here. However, many purchased a second stone...for the goddess they traded their hearts to. Women they’d never see again. A conquest who’d already forgotten about them.

Jethro Hawk earned a hefty commission from me and my regular sales of his priceless gems.

Snapping the box shut, I fisted it.

Should I give it to her or not?

That was the million-dollar question.

I didn’t have an answer as I stormed deeper into the soul of my island.



Chapter Six

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since I'd seen Sully.

Three days since I'd served in Euphoria.

Four days before I would be summoned to serve again.

It was that thought alone that evicted me from my villa and forced me to trade loneliness and fear for company.

I had four days to come up with an escape plan, and the only way I could do that was by interacting with goddesses who might slip and give me clues on how to flee.

Divinity dining room rested like some slumbering turtle, tucked into the dense jungle not far from the main restaurants and café for guests. The same thatched roof, sweeping heights, and exposed rafters welcomed me but on a smaller, more intimate scale.

No men drank cocktails and joked on the wraparound deck, only women. No aura of testosterone lingered, stinking up the place.

In fact, the whole place reeked of femininity with frangipani trees lining the wooden steps—granting much-needed shade—the local herons tiptoeing between quaint ponds, and the numerous hints of sexually charged goddesses.

Napkins were folded in ways that hinted at spread legs. Fruit had been cut into phallic enticements. Even the crockery held a lipstick kiss glazed into the china.

I hated it.

For the first time, I'd found something cheap and crass on Sully's island

of impeccable taste. This place wasn't elegant and understated but vibrantly vicious with what our purpose was: to be a rentable vagina to whomever had deep wallets.

I shivered in disgust, about to turn around and return to my villa. I'd eat alone on the beach like I had the past few mornings. Yesterday, another tiny parrot almost identical to Pika had watched me warily from the ferns. I'd tried to entice it over, placing a napkin of blueberry danish and fresh grapes on the deck close by, but it hadn't braved a visit.

At first, I'd thought it'd been Pika, his usual vivacious personality subdued because Sully wasn't around, but when I'd peered closer, I'd noticed the new arrival was slightly smaller with more tangerine than apricot cheeks. A few sprigs of black feathers crowned its head and a timid gloss to its eye hinted it didn't trust easily.

I didn't know why I'd been graced with a visit, but it'd stayed all day, watching me swim and scribble on my map, trying to solve the riddle of my freedom. By the time dusk fell, the tiny parrot fluttered off in a flurry of white belly and green wings as if satisfied by its curiosity of me and ready to go home.

I'm ready to go home, too.

If only I had wings, escaping would be a far easier task.

I sighed. I might not be able to fly away, but at least that timid creature would be a far more enjoyable lunch companion than the four women peeling with giggles under the shade of a large black sun sail.

My feet had barely touched the sand to go when a voice stopped me short. "Jinx! Wait up."

I looked over my shoulder, relaxing a little when Jealousy left her table by the edge of the deck, abandoning an e-reader next to a bowl of half-eaten muesli.

"Oh, hi." I tucked an errant piece of hair behind my ear, smoothing down the long teal sundress I wore. It'd been the closest thing in the wardrobe to cover up as much as possible. The thin spaghetti straps barely hid the bronze bikini beneath but at least the cheesecloth material fell to drape over my toes.

I'd worn it to protect myself from Sully's stare.

I couldn't figure out how I felt about not seeing him for two days. I'd grown used to his 'harassment', horrifyingly enjoying our sparring matches and the fact that I had the guts to query his lordship—to tell my truth...for

him to let me.

“You okay?” She reached out and rubbed my arm with a sweet smile of welcome, her cream dress floating elegantly around her pretty figure. “You recovered from Euphoria?”

I licked my lips, swallowing hard. Was it normal for my dreams to be completely dripping in sex after Sully’s VR? I’d had my fair share of erotic dreams before. When I’d hit puberty, I’d even had a release in my sleep—or at least I thought I had. But the past two nights, I’d woken up with my hands between my legs and the residual echoes of intense pleasure.

And the fantasy that I pictured?

Sully.

Slave master Sully instead of sweet innocent Scott.

Sully wrapping his hand in my hair, jerking me from the bath, kissing me until our teeth chipped. Sully bending me over the vanity, kicking my legs apart, and thrusting into me, all while our eyes locked together in the mirror. Even Pika starred—a pipsqueak blur of colour crowning Sully’s head as he claimed me.

I blushed, stepping away from Jealousy. “Physically, I’m much better. But mentally...” I shrugged. “I guess it takes time to stop thinking about what happened.”

She nodded gently. “It does. After you’ve had such liberation, it’s hard for your body to allow propriety to shackle it again.” Leaning closer, she whispered, “I don’t know about you, but sex is a huge part of me now. I can’t go a day without an orgasm.”

I gasped, not entirely comfortable with such honest conversation.

She laughed softly. “You’re telling me you haven’t...you know?” Her eyebrows wiggled. “Acted on that persistent craving in your blood?”

I arched my chin, ready to deny any attempt at self-release, but my shoulders sagged. If I couldn’t be truthful with a fellow goddess—the only one I’d find a confidant in, according to Sully—who could I? It wasn’t like I could ever speak of my experiences back at home. I would hoard my secrets from Scott until I died. While I was here, I was expected to be a wanton creature—which was good because...I couldn’t help it.

Not after ingesting elixir twice. Not after living in a heightened state of sensitivity, waiting for Sully to appear, disappointed when he didn’t, disappointed in myself that I was disappointed.

It’s exhausting.

She laughed again, taking my hand and guiding me to her table. She pushed me into the chair next to the one she'd abandoned, her hazel eyes twinkling. "So..."

I sagged. "I can't stop the dreams. They're far too intense."

"I know. I always have very explicit dreams after Euphoria."

"Do they stop?"

"Yes." She grinned. "But by the time they stop, you're summoned to fulfil another fantasy." She pushed her bowl away. "Around and around we go."

"Great." I rolled my eyes.

"What do you dream about?"

I stiffened. That was one thing I wouldn't divulge because I didn't like what that made me. It made me one of *them*. The other goddesses currently glowering at me from across the deck, the girls in lust with Sully.

"Do you dream about him?" Jealousy whispered, very aware the other girls had fallen suspiciously quiet and watched us closely.

Another blush scalded my cheeks. I could lie but the truth was crimson on my face. "I don't want to."

She patted my hand. "I know. It's not your fault that your mind disobeys."

"I should dream about my boyfriend."

"You can dream about anyone you want. That's the beauty of a dream... you're not hurting anyone."

I dropped my gaze, wincing against the sudden pain in my chest. "I'm hurting myself."

"Maybe, but only because something inside you senses something inside him." She reclined in her chair, still keeping her voice low. "You can't help it if something's going on between you two." Flicking a glance at the other goddesses, she murmured, "You should've seen him when he came out of the bathroom. He looked as if he'd tear the room apart. I've never seen him that...hungry."

I froze. "You saw him? After...after—"

He kissed me.

Do I dare say it?

Was it worth the risk or guaranteed suicide?

She waited for me to continue, her gaze steady and clear. She was either the best actress in the world, hiding her pettiness and envy, or she honestly

had no feelings for our overseer.

“What happened in there?” Her question ached with secrecy, a sisterhood that made me weak and protected at the same time.

“I...he...” I licked my lips, trying to figure out how to tell her that a single kiss had shattered me, woken me up, and shoved me headfirst into the possibility that Sully might not just be a nightmarish part of my life that I had to endure but a fundamental piece to fix it. That in a single heartbeat, I’d felt more wanted, more devoured, more powerful than ever before. That something had happened past lust and longing...something that would not only destroy me but ruin Sully too.

“I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

I wrenched my gaze from Jealousy’s, hating that our nucleus of confessions had been rudely popped. A girl from the beach the other night, Jupiter or Neptune, I couldn’t remember which, leered down, her hip cocked, her see-through kimono revealing a willowy, sexy body clad in a golden one piece that made her voluptuous attributes seem as if they were poured from priceless metal.

“Nep, this is Jinx.” Jealousy leaned back in her chair, a trace of irritation bracketing her mouth. “Jinx, this is Neptune, Jupiter, Calico, and Jewel.”

The four women who’d traded their table to loom over ours smiled thin, judgy grins. As four, they chanted, “Hello, Goddess Jinx.”

I nodded politely. “Hello.”

The chocolate-skinned one, Calico, came closer, eyeing me up. Her initial stare smouldered with aggression, but then a smug smile tugged her lips, her judgement slipping into manipulation.

She didn’t see me as a threat. Didn’t think little ole me with my long boring brown hair and colourless grey eyes could ever steal Sully’s attention.

And, in reality, she was right.

If Neptune was poured from gold, then Calico was carved from obsidian. Her skin glowed a rich, flawless ebony, welcoming the sun to make her gleam, only to absorb its rays rather than let it mar her. The stunning white bikini popped against her colouring; the amethyst sarong around her hips, tied in a knot and split up her thigh, made her a walking poster for illicit longing.

“So...you’ve had your introduction into Euphoria.” Calico ran a hand through her chin-length black hair. “How was it? Did you picture someone from your past or the master who bought you?”

Jealousy released a long-suffering sigh. “Girl, not everyone has the hots for Sinclair.”

“Only those who are blind.” Calico smiled tightly. “Or those who lower themselves to sweeping floors and cooking lunch. If you want to stay on as a pittance paid staff member, Jealousy, be my guest. But I plan on staying as an equal.”

“You know he doesn’t let anyone stay past four years.”

“I’ll be the first.” Calico’s shoulders braced. “You’ll see. I’ll make him change his mind.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Jealousy snorted under her breath, antagonising her with far more bravery than I had. “He’s not interested in you.” She scanned her gaze over the four stunning women caging us in. “He’s not interested in *any* of us.”

“How do you know?” The girl I hadn’t met, Jewel, with her chestnut red curls asked. Rake thin, she wore her green one-piece with silver beads dripping down her chest with svelte sex appeal. “It could be him in Euphoria. Anytime we get plugged into that thing, we don’t know who we’re sleeping with.”

“That’s true.” Jealousy nodded calmly. “But why would he hide if he wanted you? You live here. He doesn’t have to pay for your charms. He doesn’t have to take his entire body and code it to become something else just for you to have sex with him.” Her gaze narrowed. “I happen to know that even when a goddess creeps into his bed and wakes him up with a hand on his cock, he *still* refuses to sleep with them.”

Calico shot ramrod straight. Her eyes blazed with hate.

I didn’t need to ask if the goddess in question had been her.

Jealousy coiled through my chest at the thought of her touching Sully, only for me to curse myself for feeling possessive. *Possessive* over a man who’d purchased me, trapped me, whored me.

What is wrong with you, Ellie?

“He’s a gentleman. That’s all.” Calico’s nose rose into the sky. “He wouldn’t—”

“Wait, *what* did you say? Did you just call him a *gentleman*?” Jealousy’s belly laugh cut her off. She didn’t hold back, her chuckle condescending and rude. “You call him a gentleman? Oh, my God. Come on, girl. He paid money for your *life*. He’s farmed you out to hundreds of men in the past three-and-a-half years. He’s made a fortune while you’ve been on your back

with a dick in your mouth. Is that a gentleman?” She laughed again, winking at me. “Man, I must be old-fashioned ’cause I thought to earn that title you had to do things like care for someone, protect them from harm, put them first, and never *ever* share them with other people.”

She rolled her eyes as Calico glowered. “Don’t idolize the man who only sees you as a payday, Calico. Take the gifts, treasure the memories, enjoy the Euphoria ride, but don’t fool yourself that you won’t be flying home in six months and you’ll be back to working in some office or McDonald’s and struggling to fit in to blandness after living in a false paradise.”

I sat dumbfounded.

When Sully had introduced me to Jealousy, warning me it would likely be my one and only friendship, I hadn’t planned on her feistiness. That she hadn’t taken being an outcast from their little clique as anything but a blessing.

These girls were the mean wannabes from high-school. The ones who were unfortunate enough to be stolen and snatched from a life rich in attention and opportunities, only to find themselves dumped into an existence where every wish was delivered...in return for one thing.

To be worshipped.

And adored.

And ruthlessly used.

Measured, masculine footfalls sounded behind me. My skin prickled with knowledge. My heart flurried with awareness.

Sully.

God, *why* was I so attuned to him? Why could I signal him out just by his footsteps? Why did my entire body go into shock, heightened and hurried, fight and flight mingling with a complex recipe of hate and heat?

I hated how his presence made every part of me sit up, tingle, and crave to be acknowledged. To be touched. To be wanted.

My hands balled in my lap as I did my best to fight off the electricity that slipped over my shoulders and down into my core, a live wire connecting him to me, transmitting things we both refused to admit.

Every set of eyes locked onto Sully as his shadow fell over mine. I fought the urge to hide under the table, flicking a quick look at Jealousy who smiled conspiratorially my way.

I didn’t move. I didn’t spin to face him. I didn’t want anything to do with him.

He should've stayed away. I should've done more to stay out of his orbit.

I waited for Pika to flutter with his attitude and comical authority. Only, no chirps or parrot chatter sounded, only the brusque, powerful breath of a man I wished I was immune to.

"Good morning, goddesses."

My skin showered in goosebumps. My belly clenched and heart raced. Jealousy noticed, her smile widening.

Dammit.

Calico instantly lost her stick-up-her-ass pose and slipped into sensual. "Good morning, Sullivan."

"Morning, Sullivan," the other goddesses parroted.

"What brings you to Divinity this morning?" Jupiter purred.

Jealousy rolled her eyes, reaching for her muesli and inserting a huge spoonful into her mouth. If that wasn't a clear indication that she felt nothing toward Sully, I didn't know what would. She basically shovelled food and chewed as if watching a highly entertaining telenovela right before her, allowing the rest of us to provide the script and screw-ups.

"I'm ticking off things on my to-do list," Sully replied in a toneless, chilly voice.

"Can I be on your to-do list?" Neptune murmured.

He didn't reply, his shadow staying firmly over me.

"I suggest you run along and spend your time elsewhere." His suit rustled as he stepped closer, coming to my side. His tall frame, his overbearing presence, it all pressed me deeper into my chair.

I flatly refused to look up. I bowed my head, encouraging loose hair to curtain my vision. Had he heard what they'd said about him? Did he see my reaction to him?

My determination to run swelled to unbearable.

I couldn't allow myself to continue feeling this way. Dreaming this way. Being this utterly *stupid*. If someone had divined my future and told me that I'd be kidnapped, sold into slavery, and been idiotic enough to feel anything but loathing toward the man trapping me in servitude, I would've slapped myself. I would've been so disappointed.

I am so disappointed.

The girls looked as if they'd refuse, but Sully growled low in his chest. "Leave. I won't ask again."

With a piercing, hateful glance at me, the four glided away, their hips swaying, their femininity leaving a trail of lusty gossamer-like silver snail tracks.

Jealousy went to stand, but Sully muttered, “You can stay. Finish your breakfast.”

She slowly relaxed back into the chair, unobtrusively picking up her e-reader and becoming falsely engrossed in the blank screen.

Sully moved to face me. His shadow no longer cloaked me, allowing the hot sunshine to do its best to rid my traitorous goosebumps.

Without a word, he placed a black box on the table in front of me.

I froze.

Jealousy sucked in a breath, despite her attempt at giving us privacy.

When I didn’t move, Sully grunted, “For you.”

Bracing myself, I tilted my chin.

Our eyes instantly locked. Two mirroring pieces, knotting together, plaiting together, unable to be undone. My heart malfunctioned, skipping and kicking, pounding so hard my ribcage became its drum.

His throat worked as he swallowed. For a second, I thought he’d leave. His to-do list had been ticked. I wasn’t worthy of more time.

The stormy, icy look on his face remained from dealing with his other wayward goddesses. But in a flash, he bent forward, fisted my hair, and jerked my ear to his mouth. “Open your gift, Jinx...you earned it.” He taunted me cruelly, but it only added gasoline to my flaming blood.

I bit my lip as my skin ignited with lust.

Jealousy was right.

After elixir and Euphoria and the rampant hunger of my unchained libido, I wasn’t just Sully’s slave, I was my own.

His thumb traced the base of my skull while his other fingers buried themselves deeper into my hair.

I went instantly wet.

No question.

No doubt.

Just need.

I forgot about Jealousy sitting right there. I forgot about the other goddesses who might be watching. All I could think about was him. His touch. His scent. His power.

Coconut and salt shot up my nose. I fought everything I had not to moan.

Not to turn my head and meet his lips with mine.

His nose nuzzled my ear, his breath hot and sinful. “I jerked off to you this morning.” His voice fed confessions into my ear, secret and soft. Jealousy didn’t have a clue, and I didn’t stand a chance.

His hold tightened, burning my scalp where he held me. “I tried to stop myself. I ignored the unbearable ache in my cock.” His teeth slipped threateningly around my lobe, his breath caught, struggling to inhale, just like he’d stolen all the air from me. “I don’t masturbate to a goddess. Ever. Yet... fuck, I couldn’t help myself.”

Biting my ear, he murmured, “Want to know why? Why I fisted myself? Why it only took me seconds to come?”

I shook my head, swallowing and panting, trying to tug away. My mind swam with images of him spread on his bed. Naked. His belly clenched. His fist wrapped around his massive erection.

My bikini briefs became embarrassingly damp.

I struggled harder to get away. I needed distance, but he held me firm, kissing the highly sensitive skin behind my ear. “I couldn’t stop because another man told me that you’re the best he’s ever had. That he’ll never forget fucking you. That he gave you a piece of his heart.”

His voice turned angry and frostbitten. “I got...*jealous*.” He bit the word into pieces, ripped out its entrails, and threw the rest into a fire. A fire that licked down my neck and over my nipples, scratching deeper into my core.

Throwing me away, he stood to his tall height and wiped his mouth with a shaky hand. He didn’t shake from weakness. He shook from undiluted, raw *need*.

He infected me with it.

He cursed me with it.

I shuddered as he snatched the box from the table, ripped it open, and tipped something bright and blingy into my lap.

The teal of my dress caught it, spinning rainbows and unblemished glitter.

A diamond.

A huge rock of a gemstone that shimmered with expensive splendour.

I didn’t need to ask if it was real. The brilliance of such a stone couldn’t be fake.

“That’s from the man who fell in love with you three nights ago.” His handsome face twisted with a savage sneer. “First time in Euphoria and

you've earned a forty-thousand-dollar diamond. Four days until your next serve, Jinx. Let's see if every man falls in love with you...or if it's just one."

With a sadistic, spiteful look, he spun and stalked away.

Only once he'd vanished down his immaculate orchid-frosted pathway did I manage to breathe. To look around. To notice Jealousy had gone. The other goddesses had disappeared.

And I sat all alone, in a wet patch caused by his voice, clutching a diamond worth more than I'd ever earned in my life.

A diamond given in lieu of a man's heart.



Chapter Seven

A SHRILL RING REACHED into my sleep and clawed apart my dreams.

Not that I dreamt anything good. Just goddesses and diamonds and the endless pain of not taking the girl I wanted.

Another ring and I shot awake.

An echoing sound followed, just as piercing, just as annoying.

My cell phone vibrated across my bedside table, the screen lit up, its noise crashing the serenity.

Reaching for it, I fumbled to accept the call, groaning at the time.

Four a.m.

Another ear-splitting ring ricocheted even though the call had already connected, wrenching my attention behind me. Pika hopped across the spare pillow, screeching his head off, mimicking the ring—or trying to.

Caique parrots weren't known for their vocalization skills. Their mischief, intelligence, and teenage sense of calamity, yes. But their ability to talk as easily as macaws or other feathered cousins, no. The fact that Pika knew a few words and figured out what context to use them was outstanding in and of itself. However, his imitation of a cell phone definitely wasn't his forte.

"Sinclair? That you?" A man's voice popped into my ear as I held the mobile close.

Pika let out another painful screech.

I lunged across the pillows, trying to grab his beak to shut him up. He just eyed me with rascal impishness and fluttered into the rafters.

Silence reigned again as I settled back on my bed, rubbing my eyes from haze. “Yeah, Sinclair speaking. Who’s this?”

“It’s Peter Beck, sir.”

“Peter.” I sat up, instantly alert. “Why are you calling me at four in the morning?” The darkness of my villa suddenly seemed full of threats. The heavy stillness of the tropical jungle oppressive outside. The ceiling fan above sent licks of cooler air, ensuring I could sleep with a sheet rather than totally naked.

I didn’t feel the heat much during the day—my body trained to accept a suit and not sweat. But at night, alone, I hated clothing. My flesh needed breeze and sea and freedom.

“Oh, it’s that early? I’m sorry. I forgot to check the time zones.”

“Everything okay with the lab? Nothing’s blown up, has it?” I wiped my mouth, stifling a yawn. Sleep no longer had a hold on me, but my body hadn’t quite caught up with my brain.

“Yes, it’s fine,” the head scientist said. “Our new trial with blending CBD oil with the other compound we were discussing last month is going better than expected. Results are showing significant reduction in cancer cells along with providing pain relief and anxiety suppression in one package.”

“Sounds promising.” When he didn’t continue, I added, “What’s the problem then?”

“It’s Mr. Sinclair, sir. Your, eh, brother.”

Instantly, a heavy scowl tipped my eyebrows down. “I know who Mr. Sinclair is. What’s he done now? He knows he’s not allowed in the building.”

“I know. But...he summoned a private board meeting the other month, unbeknownst to me. He managed to persuade a few members that you’re incapable for the position, no longer have time to spend on his parents’ company, and driving Sinclair and Sinclair Group into the ground with philanthropic work and far too cheap pharmaceuticals. Eh...he convinced a few of the members to accept his proposal that they allow him a lab of his own. To prove that he’s the better leader.” His voice lowered. “He basically means to overthrow you. To toss out the genius and replace with a savant. His words, sir, not mine.”

“He’s not a savant.” I swung my legs off the bed, wedging elbows into

thighs and slouching. “However, if he wants to use that term, he’s welcome. After all, I’ve always wondered if he has a mental impairment. Brain damage could explain his behaviour, but it would be too easy. He’s just a liar and a bastard.” My hands curled. “I want him the fuck out of my building.”

“I’m fully aware. But...others have accepted his promises and are financing him behind your back.”

“Goddammit.” My legs bunched, soaring me upright. “The board don’t control my company’s assets. How can they—”

“They control access to labs and technicians if you’re not around to make an executive decision. They provided your brother with what he asked for because, for the first time, he didn’t come sniffing for cash.”

“Yeah, and that’s the terrifying part.”

Even with untold millions from his inheritance, Drake Sinclair seemed to have fingers that coins rapidly spilled out of, whereas I’d taken a slap in the face and turned it into an empire.

An empire that wouldn’t give him a shit-covered penny.

Peter Beck stayed silent, letting my mind whirl in peace. My brother had always been a spoiled asshole. The moment I was born, I saw him for what he was. A soulless, cruel, despicable excuse for a human who managed to use reptilian grace and falsehood to con my parents into thinking he was angelic.

His halo had always been blackened, but it didn’t stop them from thinking he hung the moon and stars, while I was the sweeper in the shadows, cleaning up his messes.

When we were younger, if our parents had been in the room, he let me play with his toys, hang with his friends, hugged me like a brother. But the moment they left...fuck me, it’d been a totally different story.

I’d been known as a ‘clumsy’ kid. Breaking bones, ruining clothing, losing belongings. What they didn’t know was, it wasn’t clumsiness causing my pain and unhappiness, but the boy I shared DNA with. A son five years older than me and utterly malicious.

He’d been the catalyst for my first tragedy. The constant devil in the wings, taking anything I loved and destroying it.

“My hands are tied, sir, I’ve tried calling another board meeting to refresh company policy and remind them that you are still very much at the helm, even if you live in Java. But...well, my summons went unheeded.” He sighed heavily. “There isn’t much more I can do without having you personally here.”

“If I visit, I won’t be kind. I won’t be forgiving.” My voice frosted with ruthlessness. “If the board makes me physically appear, their lesson won’t be gentle.” I shrugged, doing my best to roll out the vicious tension in my shoulders. “I’ll fire them and blacklist them from ever working on a board again. I won’t accept any excuses. Back my brother and you’re dead to me.”

“I did try to warn them, Mr. Sinclair.”

“Don’t call me that. Not while my brother holds the same title.” I raked a hand through my hair, my mind already on a plane going to defend my dominion from infidels. “Give me twenty-four hours. I’ll make my brother realise the error of his ways.”

Vengeance would never be so sweet.

I hung up and instantly called another number while striding toward the bathroom. The open air space didn’t look out into a private garden like most of the villas along the ocean did. My personal home didn’t share the beach with goddesses. Instead, it was tucked away in the fronds of huge palms, jackfruit trees, and lime bushes. Heliconias and orchids added colour, enticing birds and butterflies. But it wasn’t the flora and fauna that ensured I’d built my villa inland instead of coastal...it’d been the waterfall.

Nirvana splashed constant and majestic, the perfect backdrop to my shower. Most of the time, I just bathed in the basin formed by the splashing falls. This morning, however, I had no time to waste.

Cal answered on the third ring. His voice catching with a sleep-filled croak. “Sir?”

“Book me a flight to San Diego. Leaving immediately. Charter a flight from Jakarta if you need.”

“What? Right now?”

“Yes, right now.” I rolled my eyes. “Do it.”

“Why are you going to Sinclair and Sinclair? Just communicate online like—”

“Cal, we’re friends, so I permit such liberties, but don’t mistake our dynamics when I ask you to do something. I need a flight. So book me a goddamn flight.”

“It’s *because* we’re friends that I’m asking.” His voice hardened. “The only reason you’d be leaving is if your brother—”

“For fuck’s sake, I’ll handle it.”

“Ah, shit. Drake’s being a cunt again.” He didn’t ask it as a question. Just a statement, followed by his unwavering loyalty. “I’m going with you.”

“Like fuck you are.” Throwing my toothbrush and other toiletries into a bag, I quickly stormed to my walk-in wardrobe and tossed shirts, shoes, and suits onto the rattan chaise lounge in the centre, working out what I’d need.

Something that said ‘I’m done with your bullshit.’

Something that screamed cold-hearted murder and could hide bloodstains. *Lots of bloodstains.*

“Last time you had a run-in with Drake, you—”

“It won’t happen again. I’m just going for a friendly chat.”

“Bullshit.”

“You’re staying here.”

“Not if you’re going.”

“I need you to run Euphoria. To welcome the guests. To keep the goddesses safe.”

To keep Eleanor from other men. To protect her. To keep her on my shores.

“I’ll get Arbi to do that. He’s aware of the requirements of this place. I trust him.”

“I don’t.” I zipped up the army green duffel, uncaring that priceless suits were crunched and stuffed in its depths. “You’re staying. I’m leaving. Call the pilots. I want to be airborne in thirty minutes.”

* * * * *

My fingertips pressed against the helicopter’s windows as the sky traded smoky dimness for coral spiels of dawn. Soft coral deepened to glowing scarlet, quickly losing its crimson in favour of golden sun.

We descended from sky to tarmac, landing at the congested airport of Jakarta.

Cal had arranged a private plane to get me to Manila, Philippines, before connecting with a first-class fare to Los Angeles and another private flight to San Diego. A diabolical mess of a journey.

I didn’t like visiting overpopulated cities. However, my other reason for not travelling much these days was it took so fucking long. Next thing I’d look at improving on would be air transportation.

There had to be a better way.

A faster way.

A teleport would be best.

It’d popped into my head as a joke but so had VR to start with. I’d had a kinky dream about a man stepping into a chamber where he could become

anything he wanted and fuck whoever he desired.

That fantasy had become a reality.

Perhaps teleporting remained impossible, but it wouldn't hurt to investigate other outlandish possibilities.

Unbuckling the five-point harness, I waited for the pilot to slide the fuselage open before hopping onto the already steaming tarmac. The sun had barely risen, yet the temperature on the black ground surrounding the hangars and airstrip pumped out heat.

I'd miss the mugginess—the tropical warmth that acted like a physical entity instead of an unseen element.

"This way, sir." The co-pilot beckoned me to follow him. We didn't have far to walk from one landing pad to another where a sleek silver jet waited.

I nodded in thanks and climbed the steps into the cream leather, chocolate piped interior. I hid my cringe. The thought of sitting on a cured animal hide repulsed me. I'd much rather pineapple leather or any of the other alternatives available these days, but society were slow to accept change, and the rich didn't give a fuck.

A hostess in a matching uniform approached with an icy hand towel and a dewy bottle of water. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Sinclair."

"Thank you." I pinned on a thin smile and sat in the oily embrace of a dead cow. Accepting the towel, I fanned it out and wiped my hands.

"We're just waiting on final approval from the tower. Be ten to fifteen minutes before we can depart." She bowed, her black hair tied neatly in a bun. "I apologise for the delay."

"It's fine." Grabbing my laptop from my bag, I cracked open the screen, ready to draft an email giving the board one last chance. If they evicted my brother from my building, they could keep their jobs...and their heads. They had precisely three hours until I landed in Manila to comply. If they didn't... well, I'd be in the market for a new board and possibly a burial site to farewell my brother.

I was no longer a runty kid who had no support or strength. Drake would no longer win against me. He hadn't in a long time.

The helicopter co-pilot appeared with my duffel, smiling as he placed the bag on the chair next to me. "Safe travels, sir. We'll look forward to your speedy return."

"Appreciate the fast response getting me here."

“Always.” His footsteps sounded on the aircraft steps as I returned my attention to a very strongly worded email. The hostess had vanished into the cockpit, and I soaked up the silence of being alone.

My thoughts left the realm of work and murder, settling back on my island, trespassing on a villa where a certain dangerous girl lay.

Eleanor would still be sleeping.

She would wake and wouldn’t be any wiser that I was no longer there to torment her.

The distance would be good for us. Cal would be there to keep any threats at bay. I could return to my life before she’d scrambled it.

She was due to serve in Euphoria in three days.

The travel alone would take me two days—there and back. That left me twenty-four hours to deal with this catastrophe and return. To interrogate the man who would be next to sample my greatest goddess. To slip elixir down her gorgeous throat and curse myself all over again.

Cal had strict instructions to watch her. To be gentle but firm.

I didn’t like it.

I hated the crawling sensation under my suit, whispering that I should’ve brought her with me. I should keep her close in case something happened. But that was fucking ridiculous. Jinx belonged to me just like the food prepared in my restaurants and the staff who cultivated my gardens.

I didn’t need to constantly monitor her existence.

She was mine.

Therefore, she was safe.

Cricking my neck, I scowled at the screen and a few measly lines of text. How the hell did I word an email that demanded my brother be evicted and any of his requests denied without sounding like a whingey kid with a bad case of sibling rivalry?

Shit.

Footsteps sounded on the aircraft steps again, wrenching my head up.

I’d hoped the arrival was the airplane pilot, given approval from the tower to taxi to our departure point.

My heart stopped.

Sub-zero temperatures turned my blood to ice. “Calvin.” My voice did nothing to show my seething displeasure. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I got a ride after you.” He lugged a bag over his shoulder, moving down

the aisles to fall into a chair in front of mine, then turned to look over the headrest. “Not letting you deal with that cunt on your own.”

“I wanted you to take care of my *investments*.” My teeth ground together, turning my words to dust. “You can’t do that if you’re not there, dipshit.”

“Arbi has it under control. They’ll be fine. The girls know their schedule for Euphoria. Jealousy will help prepare them. You have a loyal, capable team, Sinclair. They can handle us gone for a few days.”

“That wasn’t the god. Damn. Point.”

Eleanor.

She was still too new. Too flighty. Too aware of her imprisonment.

Without a daily reminder that there was no chance of escape...it would become a temptation too great to ignore.

I’d give her forty-eight hours before she attempted a freedom expedition.

She’d leave.

She’d fail.

And I wouldn’t be there to save her.

Or to drag her back.



Chapter Eight

FATE HAD BEEN THE reason for my kidnapping and captivity. An awful version of karma that ensured I'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, serendipity gave me a chance at freedom.

A perfectly choreographed moment that had no other explanation for its occurrence than divine intervention.

I'd been brought here because I'd been easy, silly prey. But I would leave because I'd grown wise and brave. I didn't want to be a girl who had erotic dreams about her new lord and master. Who allowed her days to be filled with pampered promise. To forget she had a life before she'd become someone else's.

I had to be honest with myself: I had a very limited amount of time to flee. Limited time before I lost myself, lost to him, lost to servitude.

And that time was already running out.

Every day, I grew more and more lulled by this existence he offered.

Every night, I curled up in a bed that'd become familiar, welcomed...*home*.

Stay any longer, and I'd forget that I wasn't here of my own free will. I'd forget how I was snatched, degraded, traded, and delivered. I'd accept. I'd *enjoy*. I'd fall in love with the sand, the palms, the tiny parrots...and even...possibly...Sullivan Sinclair himself.

The veil between love and hate constantly tore in the battle of romance.

And that thought began a wormhole of self-reflection, forcing me to admit that sometimes...for microseconds of connection, when Sully stared at me, kissed me, and held me firm, my hate would stray into affection. My belly would flutter. Butterflies would become fireflies. Fireflies became moths. Moths became warnings clawing at my heart.

He blurred right and wrong.

He smudged yes and no.

He dazzled my senses until I didn't trust myself anymore.

He was the real danger here.

And I was in danger of being the worst kind of idiot.

The stupidest type of girl.

I was in danger of actually liking him. Of not just lusting but *liking*. Of finding out his secrets. Of wanting more between us than owner and possession.

No.

It can't happen.

I refuse!

My silent shouts were my one saving grace, delivering a single opportunity to escape.

I shot from my bed at four in the morning, my blood popping with fury and fear.

I couldn't lie there and drown beneath such truth anymore. I needed to be outside. To breathe fresh air. To finally come up with a concrete solution to escape.

Wrapping a silk dressing gown with embroidered silver lilies around me, I slipped from my villa and headed down the sandy path. The lanterns still flickered with light, leading me through the darkness toward the main beach.

There, I plopped onto the sand beside the same bush where I'd eavesdropped on the goddesses and brought my knees up to rest my chin on.

The sun hadn't made an appearance yet, but the stars slowly faded, yawning with fatigue, wrapping themselves up with swathes of midnight. No sea breeze. No waves licking. Just utter, bone-deep silence.

The quietness had a weight, heavy like a knitted blanket, cascading over my shoulders with comfort.

Where the stars twinkled was the direction of my escape.

Out there to the horizon where faint island lights flickered.

So near...yet so far.

Jewelled lacquered kayaks had been hauled higher up the sugary beach, resting on their sides with their oars speared into their belly.

I could take one of those right now.

I could slip it into the sea, push off the shore, and paddle into the vastness.

But without a map, I would get lost. Without food, I would starve. Without water, I would die. Besides, Sully would notice I was missing within an hour. He'd chase me down and bring me back. He'd punish me—how I didn't know—but an infraction like that wouldn't go without reprimand.

I sighed heavily. My chin dug into my knees, tiny granules of sand sticking to my legs.

Perhaps, I'd done something bad in a previous life and this was my penance. Maybe, I'd been selfish without realising it or cruel without noticing, and the powers of the universe decided to make me pay.

But at least, I'd stayed true to my pact not to give in. Every night I fell asleep with my hand-drawn map clutched tight and every scenario of escape rushing from consciousness to dream world.

I'd toyed with every semi-sane idea for freedom: breaking into Sully's office to use his phone and call my parents, befriending the pilots to fly me home, or even trying to switch places with a goddess on the day she was released (if Sully actually did let us go after four years...it could've been a lie).

When the sane ideas didn't offer help, I'd turned to insane instead: making Sully fall in love with me, so he'd realise keeping me prisoner wasn't the best way to treat his soul-mate, making Calvin fall in love with me so he'd kill Sully and free me, or telling a guest my name and begging them to pack me in their suitcase when they flew away.

As I sat on such a pristine beach in the early hours of dawn, a part of me felt guilty for bemoaning my captivity. As far as slavery went, I knew I had it easy.

I wasn't minutely molested, physically beaten, or psychologically broken. I had the best food I'd ever tasted, the comfiest bed I'd ever slept in, and the prettiest jail cell ever created.

Sully's islands were second to none.

I could travel the world with Scott forever and never find such heaven again.

So yes, the guilt came on strong when tears trickled down my cheeks at

my inability to leave.

Any girl in that dark hovel in Mexico would gladly trade places with me. I had no doubt about that. That girl Tess was probably dead by now. Raped by her owner, tormented until she broke, and then tossed in a shallow grave to make room for the next purchased toy.

Not for the first time, I thanked everything celestial that I hadn't been trafficked to such a man. However, Sully's monstrous rule came in other ways—he granted paradise, ensured his goddesses had everything their heart desired, kept us healthy, content, and fed us an elixir that turned our one unavoidable task into pleasure.

That was his talent at control.

His effortless skill at dominion.

It wasn't a fist or gun keeping us in line...it was the serenity, the safety, the endless idyllic sunny days where we could live peacefully, swim, indulge, laugh with fellow girls, and accept that four years wasn't so bad in the scheme of a life.

A noise pricked my ears. A tiny chirp followed by the baritone of a male.

I froze by my bush as Sully appeared, walking swiftly, carrying a satchel and duffel. Pika flew after him, struggling to get purchase on his shoulder while Sully marched. "Go home, Pika." His voice carried along the heaviness of the silence, low and gruff. "Go get drunk on hibiscus blooms for a few days."

The parrot squawked and crash-landed on Sully's head as he left the beach and strode purposefully down the jetty toward the helicopter.

Sully stopped and held up his finger, waiting for the parrot to climb aboard. When Pika perched safely, he brought his hand to his face and eyed the small creature. "You can't come. You don't ever want to return to that place."

Pika hopped up and down, twittering in argument.

"I won't be gone long. You won't even notice. Go visit Skittles. I haven't seen her in a while."

Pika let out a heart-wrenching squeak.

Sully sighed, and, in a move that split my chest in two, he brought the tiny bird to his lips and kissed his fluffy head. "Don't get into too much mischief while I'm gone."

Pika rubbed his face over Sully's chin, scrambling to get closer, almost

falling off his finger when Sully moved his hand away and carried the grumbling, mourning parrot to a heliconia bush. He waited patiently for Pika to climb off his finger and onto the red flower stem. When he didn't, Sully shook him off. "Stay. Behave. I'll see you as soon as I can."

Pika attacked the flower as if it'd mortally offended him.

Without looking back, Sully stormed toward the helicopter and climbed into the luxurious cabin.

Two pilots bolted from the shadows, jogging half-dressed. One did up his shirt and another buckled his belt, obviously summoned into work with an abrupt phone call, cursing the fact that their boss already waited for take-off.

I didn't dare move.

My spot wasn't obvious, my sanctuary hidden by overhanging leaves, but I didn't want Sully to know I watched his departure.

Something inside said he wouldn't want me to know. That his leaving increased my chances of escape.

I stayed in my spot while the pilots did their pre-flight check and Sully worked on a laptop in the back. I hugged my knees when the huge hulking blades whirled and spun into speed, lifting off and turning toward the horizon. The size of the aircraft slowly diminished, swallowed by the darkness.

A strange kind of anticipation prickled my skin.

Ten minutes passed.

Silence descended after being torn into pieces by the helicopter.

I waited.

I waited to see if Sully had truly left. If my one golden chance had been delivered. If I would be exempt from his avid attention.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Hope flared in my heart, along with the tiniest vein of sadness. I had no excuse now, no gatekeeper guarding me. I would leave today, and I'd never see Sully again.

Run.

Go now.

No time to waste.

I went to move. Only...in the darkness, another helicopter engine shattered the silence. Its high-pitched and powerful rotors shredding the sky.

I stiffened as the landing lights flickered and a rotary-winged machine landed on the helipad.

Peering into the lightening dawn, I waited for Sully to reappear. Even Pika fluttered down the jetty in anticipation.

But no one climbed out.

The two pilots waited, fiddling with controls, not turning off the engines. The colour of the fuselage was different. The previous one had been silver, and this one was black. The other had a purple orchid on the side, yet this one had nothing.

Had a guest arrived?

In which case, why had none of Sully's staff come to welcome them?

A flurry of activity came from the undergrowth, catching my gaze. I turned just in time to see Calvin jog onto the beach and along the jetty, carrying a bag. He flung himself into the chopper, and they took off a moment later.

Once again, I waited until silence returned and my ears stopped ringing from the screech.

Pika gave up waiting for his master to return and shot into the foliage.

And the hope that'd tentatively been tiptoeing through my veins exploded into living, breathing life.

I trembled with possibility.

Sully's gone.

His second in command is gone.

Whatever leader was left in charge would be thorough but not nearly as dedicated.

I had a chance.

I had a way.

To *run*.



Chapter Nine

“ARBI, HAVE YOU CHECKED on the goddesses?” I paced in the first-class lounge at Manila airport. Four hours had passed since I’d left my islands. Four hours that Eleanor could’ve used to her advantage.

“Yes, sir.” Arbi cleared his throat importantly. “I personally went with the wait staff to deliver breakfast to each of the goddess’s villas. All are accounted for.”

I wanted him to elaborate. To ask a million fucking questions about a certain goddess.

I didn’t trust him. I didn’t believe Eleanor would behave.

But Cal shot me a warning look, passing a plate of vegan appetisers on offer for the lounge users. I took it and placed it on the table holding my laptop.

No return email to my shitty one demanding the immediate eviction of Drake Sinclair. I’d hoped my words would strike fear into their useless hearts, saving me a journey.

Already my skin itched to be back in the humidity, the openness, the vitality of an untouched world. I hated the smog sitting over Manila, staining everything with a toxic haze. I didn’t like the chatter of businessmen and holidaymakers, sharing the lounge with us.

They were locusts. A contagion that I was well and truly over associating with.

I despised my own species, and it showed in every scathing look I gave them.

“Check on them again at lunch and dinner. And I want a two a.m. shift as well.”

“As you wish, sir,” Arbi said. “Everything is under control. I will protect your girls and ensure your guests enjoy their stay.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, cursing the start of a headache. “Fine.”

I hung up, baring my teeth at Cal as he sat and popped a caramelised onion tart into his mouth. “You should be there, you asshole.”

“Too bad I have a boarding pass with my name on it...sitting next to you.”

“Tear it up and fly home.”

“What? And leave you sitting next to a stranger?” He smirked. “I pity whoever has to put up with your ass for such a long flight.”

“Arbi isn’t qualified—”

“He’s been working under my guidance since you started this enterprise.” Cal wiped his mouth with a napkin. “He’s Javanese, so he has his local reputation to uphold. He’s loyal to a fault. Dedicated enough that he probably won’t sleep while you’re gone. And I trust him to keep the guests from the goddesses and Euphoria running on time.”

Fuck.

What more could I ask for without seeming like I’d lost my mind?

I slouched in the chair, my appetite severely lacking. I wanted fresh fruit from my orchards and vegetables from my gardens—not mass-produced crap. Even if it was vegetarian approved.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I scowled at the swirly, shitty carpet that all airports adopted to hide sins and stains.

In the grotesque pattern, my eyes saw an illusion.

An embroidered foretelling where I’d deal with my brother.

I’d win.

Yet I’d return home and find out that I’d lost.

Like always.



Chapter Ten

A KNOCK SOUNDED ON the door for the second time today.

I scurried to throw my bedsheets on top of the small pile I'd gathered while creating my escape bag. Running to the door, I opened it.

Once again, a smiley, pretty girl who I recognised was here to deliver a tray groaning with every delicacy imaginable. Usually, it was just her. A friendly hand over of lunch.

But not today.

Today, the same man who'd appeared this morning at seven a.m. stood beside her.

His tanned skin and jet-black hair hinted of his Indonesian origins. His intelligent dark eyes promised swift repercussions if I disobeyed, and his body held muscles that looked painstakingly built rather than given at birth.

Sully might have left, but he hadn't relinquished control. This new overseer narrowed his eyes with suspicion, looking past me into the villa as if I'd stolen Sully's prized belongings and frolicked with abandon.

"Thank you," I said quietly as the girl dropped off the tray on the driftwood carved sideboard.

She smiled and bowed a little, darting back onto the sandy path and waiting for the man to signal departure.

The man continued to stare at me. Holding his hands clasped in front of him, he stood with his legs spread in authority and his lips pressed together in deliberation. Finally, he said, "As you are not serving in Euphoria today, I

suggest you remain in your villa and enjoy this fine afternoon.” He bowed his head cordially. “I will be along to check on you this evening. If you require anything, please just ring for service.”

Another check?

How many will he do?

I nodded, clutching the door handle to end this strange meeting. The ease that cloaked the island while Sully ruled had gone, tightening with tension under this new leader’s command. His control felt brittle, as if he clutched the reins too hard and they might snap from his attempts at perfection.

As one, the man and woman turned to go. My mind whirled. I’d hoped I’d be able to head to the dining room to collect more food and water. Rations for my escape. His suggestion to stay in my villa had been more transparent, strict instruction rather than just a kind proposal.

“Do you think...” I held up my hand, stopping them. “That I could have some more water delivered? My fridge is low. Also...another bottle of sunscreen? I’m out. Oh, and some fruit would be great—but not sliced or prepared. I don’t mind peeling them.”

To my ears, I’d confessed to my plans of escape. I rushed with a shaky laugh. “I just like putting the fruit in the fridge and eating it when its cool... that’s all. If it’s already been prepared, it can go a bit brown and soggy.”

The man eyed me.

I wanted to hold his stare but instead dropped my gaze to his bare feet covered in golden-silver sand.

He studied me for far longer than I liked, and worry scattered down my spine. I’d thought leaving would be easy with Sully gone. I hadn’t accounted for his lackey to be so diligent.

“As you wish. I’ll have some brought directly.”

I hid my huge exhale of relief. “Thank you.” Before I could hint anymore at my indiscretions, I closed the door and slouched against it.

Oh, my God.

My heart winged a thousand flurries a minute, burning off breakfast, making me shake.

If I was going to do this, I had to be braver. I had to fully commit. To accept the hazards and pitfalls, to admit that it might not work and pain might be waiting on either side.

Pain of failure—beaten and reprimanded.

Pain of success—unknown hardship and struggle.

I'm committed.

I am.

Balling my hands, I straightened my back and returned to my small pile. Two sunhats, a long-sleeve blouse, one long skirt, two bikinis, a bottle of sunscreen, four bottles of water already pilfered from the fridge, pastries wrapped up from breakfast, a handful of grapes, and a slim, solar torch from the bedside drawer.

I had no idea how long I'd be at sea. The sun would beam down from above, burning me, dehydrating me, killing my energy and hope. I had to be smart and give myself the best possible chance of survival.

I was well aware I could be jumping from a monster's den into death.

But...if I didn't try...*what does that make me?*

My plan to leave before the sun rose had quickly evolved to a more intelligent attempt. If I'd jumped in a kayak then and there, without supplies, I wouldn't have travelled far.

I didn't want to be like the girls Sully said who'd attempted escape, only to be found sun-blistered and delirious from drinking saltwater.

This was my *one* chance.

I would not waste it.

Striding into the walk-in wardrobe where an array of priceless jewelled gowns and expensive island garments waited, I selected a seagrass woven beach bag and carried it back to the bed.

Surveying my chosen belongings, visualizing what my future held, I began to pack.

* * * * *

Time crawled.

I wanted to leave the moment I'd prepared myself, but I couldn't leave until the final check. Until darkness had descended and I wouldn't be seen rowing out to sea.

Dinner was delivered at seven p.m.

The man peered suspiciously, ensuring I still resided where I should.

I ate everything I could without passing out in a food coma and saved the rest that would travel. I had an additional four water bottles, extra sunscreen, and two pairs of sunglasses. Sully had been generous with my wardrobe, and I'd taken everything that would aid my journey. After I'd packed my bag, I'd spent a stupidly long time trying to decide if I took the diamond that'd been paid to me for allowing a man to treat me like some

horny cavewoman.

The stone twinkled in my palm but instead of promising cash if I traded it if I escaped, it only captured facets of that fantasy. A heady, heavy reminder of what I'd done and what I'd become.

I didn't want anything to remind me of how far I'd fallen.

The diamond returned to its dark home in my bedside drawer, and I turned my back on it. On the man who'd paid for my pleasure.

At eight p.m., the sun had set deep enough that the stars and their crescent moon had taken up residency in the velvet night.

I dressed in a cheesecloth blouse, longest skirt I had, and floppy straw hat, then slung my heavy bag over my shoulder. If the sun still shone, I could've explained my behaviour on wanting to sunbake on a different beach than my own...with a picnic for six and clothing for an entire weekend.

However, with the lanterns my only form of illumination as I tiptoed down the laneway, my attempt at escape might be foiled before I even stepped foot in the sea.

Reaching the end of the path, I took refuge in my bush. I waited and watched, ensuring no tipsy goddesses had decided to share wine and gossip on the sand.

Nothing.

No one.

Silence.

It seemed everyone had been requested to stay in their respective villas because the aura of the island was subdued.

The palms hung as if in loneliness for Sully's return. The orchids not as vibrantly purple. Remove Sully from his home and the very ground where he resided mourned.

Poor Pika.

Where was that feathered fiend? Was he still sulking in a tree or had he vanished into the centre of the island to drown his sorrows on hibiscus like Sully had suggested?

When no one appeared after ten minutes, I sucked in a breath.

It's now or never.

Last chance.

My heart skipped a beat as the tiniest fragment of hesitation filled me.

My ending on this island had come and I didn't know why that made me pause. Why a small piece of me would forever remember Sully and his

paradisiac utopia.

Go!

Stop thinking about him.

Stop being an idiot!

Gritting my teeth, I scurried from my bush, flung my bag into the closest kayak, then threw my weight against the jade green fibreglass, shoving the sleek craft toward the tide.

It hissed over the sand, slipping on its side, making the oar clank against its innards.

I froze.

I looked back at the treeline.

No one appeared.

I pushed again, coaxing it to ease closer and closer to the shore.

Come on. Come on!

With my heart in my mouth, I kept pushing until the back of it went weightless, twisting to sit upright and buoyant as the sea claimed it.

With warm water lapping at my ankles, I held up my skirt and looked back one final time.

The treeline remained empty.

The island seemed poised and pregnant with promise. Trees and foliage watched me leave. Tropical beauty said goodbye.

Go!

With a shaky breath, I clambered into the kayak and collected the oar.

I'd only ever manned a watercraft once before. It'd been five years ago during the summer holidays. We'd gone to a lake, and my friend's brother had a kayak that he took us around in. He'd promised he'd keep me safe, but in the centre of the huge lake, he'd dived in and swam home, leaving me to row back on my own.

I'd hated it.

I'd had no arm strength and blisters covered my palms by the time I docked, shaky and angry, vowing never to use such a torture device again.

How ironic that this was now my favourite thing.

The tiny unassuming boat that would sail me to my freedom.

With one last look, I imprinted Sully's home to my memory, drank in the sights of majestic palms and stunning moonlit sand, and rowed.

I turned and rowed, rowed, rowed.

I rowed until I couldn't see his island anymore.



Chapter Eleven

I LANDED IN LAX.

I turned on my phone.

One voice message.

My heart picked up sticks and began to drum.

I waited for the line to connect.

I motherfucking almost got arrested in the arrival hall.

My phone hurled through the air as I launched it with rage, the message repeating itself as it flew.

“Mr. Sinclair, sir. Ehh...a goddess is missing. A kayak is unaccounted for. We have launched a search party. We’ll advise when we find her.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuuuccckkk!



Chapter Twelve

TWO THINGS HAPPENED WITHIN an hour of leaving.

One, my hands burned with pain, ensuring I would no longer have smooth palms by the end of my flee.

Two, a tiny parrot appeared from the darkness, flying straight to me, perching on my bag strap as if I'd summoned it through psychic will.

I rested my oar on my lap, eyeing the small bird, recognising the sprigs of black feathers and tangerine cheeks.

The parrot that'd watched me the past couple of days. The parrot that looked a lot like Pika but had none of his flamboyant, comical personality.

What was a bird doing up at night?

Surely, it should be roosting somewhere the moment the sun went down. Why had a flighted creature flown over acres of sea in the dark? Even seagulls were smarter than that, and they could rest on water.

"Are you lost, little one?" I asked softly, the sound of my voice strange in the water world where I bobbed. The only noise had come from the splashes of my oar and the gentle slap of sea against the bow.

The parrot blinked, splaying out a wing and preening the sleek under feathers. It fluffed up its body, seeming grateful to have found a perch.

What a strange little thing.

What an annoying little passenger.

I looked over my shoulder to the disappearing distance where Sully's shores hid. I couldn't go back and drop it off, who knew if I'd ever have

another chance. I looked forward at the vast openness before me, at the faint lights of other islands, calling me, summoning me.

I wanted to obey and keep going, but I couldn't row with a bird as my stowaway. I couldn't take it so far from home. How terrible would that be to displace it? What if it was Pika's mate or another one of Sully's pets?

So? He displaced you. He stole you. Why do you care about a bird?

My shoulders slouched.

I cared because I'd always had a bleeding heart when it came to animals. And perhaps *because* of what'd happened to me and the captivity I'd just run from, I was hyperaware of what it would mean to this little parrot if I continued with it.

You can't stay bobbing out here.

They'll start searching soon.

I was stuck.

Dammit.

"What am I supposed to do with you, huh?" I took off my hat, not needing it with only starlight painting me in a muted silver glow.

The parrot cocked its head, blinking with curiosity. I stared back, wasting ten minutes trying to decide what to do when I should've been rowing. "Go home. Fly away." I tried wafting it with my hat, encouraging it to leave.

It only spread its wings, hovered out of distance until I stopped antagonising it, then swooped back and wrapped its tiny talons around my bag strap again.

"Ugh." I clutched my oar, worry skittering down my spine that I had to keep going. I had the favour of darkness for now, but I had to put as many miles between me and Sully's island before the sun woke up.

My heart broke but common-sense tried to make me rational. The bird had wings. It'd flown here of its own free will. It could leave again—it wouldn't be stuck if I continued. It had the means to return.

Gritting my teeth, I dug the oar into the waves and continued onward. "I'm sorry, but I have to keep going. Have a rest and then fly back to where you came from, okay?"

The bird chirped quietly, stuck its head under its wing, and went to sleep.

* * * * *

Dawn crested far too soon.

The first island still seemed ages ahead, leaving me vulnerable on the open ocean. As the sky slowly lightened, I dug my oar deeper, wrenching out more power from over depleted muscles.

I had no choice but to keep going. Keep rowing. Keep trying.

My back crawled with fear that I was being followed, but I refused to look behind me; refused to entertain the possibility that I wouldn't make it.

Sweat rivered under my clothes by the time I entered a rip around the rocky, palm tree crowded land. The sea carried me swiftly toward the splashing, crashing shore. I did my best to navigate around the island without puncturing a hole in the kayak or capsizing, only stopping when I found a tiny inlet with sand and an overhanging of banyan trees.

The parrot took off, flying into the many palms as I jumped out into knee-deep water and hauled the jade green kayak to shore. Doing my best to camouflage it, I tucked it under some trees.

Only once I'd scattered a few broken branches and foliage over the top did I grab my bag and crawl through the dense undergrowth.

It seemed this particular island was uninhabited—or at least, where I'd landed.

A raucous bird song hinted it was populated by animals other than humans. Peering into the treetops, hidden in dense foliage, and damp with sweat, I spotted the tiny parrot who'd kept me company during the night.

It sat eating some sort of berry, stripping the outer layer and indulging in the juiciness within. My own stomach growled, prompting a small breakfast from my rations. A sun-warmed orange and a slightly crushed pastry were followed by a few sips of water.

Packing my picnic away, I didn't drink what my thirst demanded.

I would restrict myself carefully. Who knew how long this trip would take.

Thirsty, achy, and tired, I made a little nest of leaves and lay down.

At least I didn't have to worry about hiding from people. I could rest in the shady undergrowth, recover from a night of rowing, and begin again at dusk.

* * * * *

I rowed for another night.

The tiny parrot perched on my bag and watched me dig the oar into the sea, over and over again. I didn't know why it'd chosen to follow me. I didn't know if I'd stolen something valuable from Sully unintentionally, but I was

glad for its company. I found comfort in its intelligent black gaze as we continued to slice through black sky and even blacker ocean.

Occasionally, I'd shine my torch over the glossy surface, beaming illumination through the gloom, seeing gliding shadows of sea creatures, witnessing luminescent fish as they darted through the light, but most of the time, I rowed in utter darkness.

I could be going in circles.

I could be returning to Sully.

I could be rowing to my demise.

My back ached from twisting and spearing the oar into the water. My hands, even wrapped with one of my blouses, oozed blood and blisters.

I ignored it all.

Freedom was worth the pain.

By the time the sky lightened on the second day, a larger island beckoned up ahead. A smaller landmass heralded safety to my left, hinting Sully hadn't been lying when he said he owned forty-four islands in his private archipelago.

The islands were scattered everywhere. Some close, some far. All of them potential friend or foe.

Pausing, I studied the left island. The size looked too small to hold habitation. It would be safe to rest without being caught. But the sheer sides offered no mooring for the kayak and I didn't have the strength to row around the entire thing, searching for a bay, only to find none and have to keep going.

I needed to be off the open water before the sky pinked any brighter.

My eyes locked on the larger island ahead. Still a few kilometres away but doable if I summoned the final dregs of my energy. Striking off with renewed determination, the little parrot squawked and flapped its wings.

Goosebumps ran down my arms as it cocked its head, staring at the pre-dawn sky. It chirped again, this time with a worried question hidden in the avian dialogue.

I followed its stare, studying the world above me instead of the water around me. Fear appeared and spread through my heart, quick and insidious.

The sky wasn't clear like usual.

Every day since I'd been on Sully's island, the horizon usually held turquoise blue with the occasional rain cloud. Rain fell at night when the humidity level had filled the clouds to capacity. I'd grown used to the

stability of hot days and wet nights.

But today, the sky was not stable.

Black-edged clouds gathered in one giant mass. Wind sprung up as if Zeus flicked a switch, whipping the calm sea into choppy whitecaps. A rumble of deep, disturbing thunder echoed in the distance.

My fear morphed to panic.

The parrot hopped from one bag handle to the other, chirping and twittering in worry.

“Shit.” I plowed the oar into the water, shooting us forward. A tropical storm could rip palm trees from the soil, claw apart villas, and decimate islands. A tropical storm at sea where a girl and a tiny parrot sat in a flimsy kayak? It could kill us.

I rowed as fast as I could.

The heavens opened.

And big fat raindrops fell.



Chapter Thirteen

I LANDED IN JAKARTA.

Alone.

The whole flight from the USA back to Indonesia had been a torture marathon of my thoughts. The waiting in LAX for a way home had driven me insane. The five-hour delay in Singapore shredded my self-control.

I'd flown to my lab to protect everything valuable to me. I'd left my sanctuary to face a brother I despised with every molecule, yet...before I'd even arrived, I'd turned around and jumped on the next available flight home.

I'd chosen a fucking goddess over my empire.

I'd sent Calvin to deal with Drake when it ought to have been me.

My palms had crescent-moon cuts from my nails digging deep. I'd clenched my fists the entire journey, unable to figure out what the fuck I was doing.

Why had I abandoned everything I'd built? Why had there been no question about which catastrophe to chase?

Even Cal had known. The minute Arbi called, he'd collected my thrown phone, called to book the next available flight back to Indo—a wait-time of eight fucking hours—and then continued to the chartered plane to San Diego.

I trusted him to kick Drake from my building.

I knew he'd set the board straight.

But it should have been fucking me.

Christ!

I raked a hand through my hair, pacing down the air bridge with the two other first-class passengers. I had a good mind to turn around, jump back on the Boeing, and order the pilots to take me back to America. To stop being a goddamn idiot and put my company before a goddess.

I'll book a return journey.

Right now.

Turning on my phone, I gritted my teeth with determination. I'd made a mistake flying back here. Arbi could find Eleanor. He could discipline her. She couldn't have gotten far. I'd arrange yet another plane to get me to San Diego, and I'd deal with my fucktard of a brother myself.

And then I'd deal with my runaway possession.

Notifications and emails pinged as I connected to the internet. Ignoring it all, I scrolled through my phonebook to the travel associate on file.

My phone vibrated in my hand before I could connect the call, the ringtone following a second later.

Arbi.

Pressing accept, I picked up my pace to customs and immigration. "You find her?"

If they'd found Eleanor, they knew what to do until I returned. She'd be held with means fitting for an ungrateful runaway. No more luxury. No more kindness. She ran from my gifts? Well, she'd fucking return to my fury.

"Eh, we found the kayak," Arbi muttered.

"Where was she? How far did she get?"

Silence thickened before he admitted, "We found the kayak, sir. But... not the goddess."

I slammed to a halt. "What?"

"She, eh, wasn't on the boat. It capsized in the storm. It didn't last long, but the wind and rain—"

"Storm? What fucking storm?"

"It came through early this morning."

Placing him on speaker, I brought up the local weather forecast. Sure enough, a tropical pattern had swooped through just before dawn, drenching the area, causing localized flooding and a few ruined infrastructures.

My island would've withstood its ferocity, thanks to the quality craftsmanship of my villas, but a tiny kayak at sea? She would've been a cork bobbing at its mercy. No, worse than a cork. She would've been a rock,

plunging to the depths the moment the boat capsized.

She wasn't just missing.

She's probably dead.

The lance to my heart overrode every scrap of common-sense I had left.
Hanging up on Arbi, I called my helicopter crew.

The pilot answered on my second ring. "Mr. Sinclair. We're at the private hangar. Do you still wish to return to—"

"I'm on my way. Make sure you have plenty of fuel on board. Today isn't a taxi service. It's a recovery mission."



Chapter Fourteen

EVERYTHING WAS A BLUR. A drowning, gasping blur.

The rain fell like a heavy curtain, obscuring the island I rowed toward, blocking out light and sight. The thunder split apart my eardrums. The lightning bolts sizzled in the sky.

My parrot passenger squeaked and shot into the swirling, howling air, buffeted left and right as it flew drunkenly toward the land ahead.

The bottom of the kayak rapidly filled with rain, lapping around my toes, then ankles, then shins. Water all around me, water all over me.

Yet I kept rowing.

I had no choice.

The wind grew angrier, throwing my tiny craft against snarling waves. The calm serenity of this paradise had swiftly become a churning hell.

I didn't remember much after that. All my energy and focus went to my arms.

Row.

Row.

Row.

Quickly.

Quickly.

Quickly.

The island appeared and disappeared in sheets of rain—sometimes closer, sometimes farther, but never close enough to touch.

When the storm reached its pinnacle, I'd already burned through every dreg of energy I had left. I shook from cold and exhaustion. I was totally at Mother Nature's mercy.

So when the wave finally arrived, heavy and rolling, merciless with gravestones and eulogies, I sucked in a breath and let it happen.

The shock from cold rain to warm ocean wasn't what I expected. The kayak vanished, my supplies scattered, and the sea cradled me in apology, doing its best to keep me buoyant while air and wind became my enemy.

Strangely, being in the embrace of water rather than being lashed by it gave me another surge of strength.

I traded rowing for swimming.

I ducked under the rolling waves and kept my mouth closed so I didn't drink rain or sea. I kicked and stroked until the island inched closer still.

My skirt kept wrapping around my legs, acting like ropes dragging me down.

So I kicked it free.

My blouse kept billowing around my face when the current shoved me left and right, suffocating me.

So I yanked it off and let it sink.

By the time my bone-weary toes touched reef, I had nothing left—in belongings or energy.

Reef became sand, and sand became beach.

Crawling on my hands and knees, I traded saltwater and, once again, let needles of rain wash me clean. I collapsed with my cheek on wet gold granules, panting and gasping, protected only by a black bikini.

I didn't know where the parrot was. The kayak. My carefully packed supplies.

It was just me.

I survived.

Hauling myself to all fours, I eyed the treeline.

So far. Too far.

And in that moment, in some twist of nasty fate, the rain eased a little.

The wind died a little.

The storm hushed into quiet.

My elbows buckled, and I welcomed the soft beach to hold me.

I stayed where I was as the sun speared through empty grey clouds.

Its tentative rays warmed my back, soothing weak and weary muscles.

And I slept.

* * * * *

Thirst and sunburn woke me.

Guessing by the sun's location in the sky, a few hours had passed since I'd been washed up on this new island. Despite all my attempts at preparing for my escape, my pride at packing rations, and my determination not to be like the other girls who'd run before me, I'd fallen into the same trap.

I'd run from one island, only to be trapped on another. Yet this one didn't have shade or food or liquid that wasn't tainted with salt.

I have nothing.

Stumbling up the beach and into the undergrowth, I winced and gasped as sharp twigs and bracken stabbed my bare feet. Hunger drove me forward, but thirst made me panic.

I'd had my last drink before the storm hit.

Not that long ago, but thanks to inhaling sea and pushing my body to the brink of disability, I *craved* something to drink.

It was all I could think about.

The only thing I wanted.

My sunburned face hurt as I squinted in the sun's glare, popping out from the undergrowth to a cleared area. No sounds of rivers. No hints of habitation. No one to help.

Tripping forward, I wrapped my arms around myself—not for warmth as the humidity had well and truly returned—but for shade on my rapidly burning skin. Without sunscreen, my white flesh crisped like crackling.

Cutting across the clearing, I struggled to see anything thanks to the brightness of the sun. My eyes stung from seawater. My hair clung to my back in tangled ropes. I coughed against the soreness in my throat leftover from swimming in a raging storm.

Reaching the other side, I gladly ducked under a glossy bush and back into the shady undergrowth.

Looking back, I froze.

A windsock hung in the now non-existent breeze.

The clearing wasn't natural but man-made.

A helipad.

Sully.

The moment he entered my mind, my knees wobbled, and I collapsed cross-legged in the dirt.

Would he come for me?

Half of my body hummed with hope that he cared enough to search for me even though I'd defied him and left, while the other half of me went icy with dread.

If he did find me...what would he do?

Would he hurt me?

Kill me?

I shivered in my pile of leaves, willing my logic to wake up and lecture me. I'd always been fairly good at assessing a situation and choosing the most coherent and rational answer. I'd chosen to travel with Scott, even though we'd only known each other for a little while, because his goals aligned with mine, and it was safer to travel as a duo rather than as a single girl.

I'd decided to stop being naïve after the bonfire where the boy forced himself on me and I'd enlisted the help of my friend's sister to drive us away.

I prided myself on accepting my mistakes...if it meant I could salvage something from my screw-up.

And in a nutshell? I'd screwed up.

I shouldn't have left Sully's captivity. I should've known I wasn't a qualified seafarer to get far enough to be found and rescued. I should've fought for my future in other ways.

But...I'd tried and failed, and now, I had another choice to make.

Stay hidden and hope I didn't die from exposure, dehydration, and starvation.

Or...let him find me, accept the consequences, and fight for whatever came next.

Time skipped and looped as I remained sitting there, tearing a leaf into shreds, debating if death was preferable over being a glamorised whore for the next four years.

I'd like to be more of a martyr and choose an ending over the acquiesce of letting men use my body against me. But...I was a fighter. A survivor. The sea had spat me out to give me a second chance.

And Sully...

He's my second chance.

I sighed as the decisions settled weighty and wrong around my heart. By staying here, waiting for him, I willingly relinquished myself. I would return with him of my own volition unlike when I'd first arrived.

Then, I'd been delivered without any choice. This time, I would walk back knowing exactly what waited for me. I would let the gates close around my free will. I would say goodbye to any key I had at escape. And I'd give him four years of my life, hoping he'd stay loyal to his promise to let me go at the end.

You can't.

He's...dangerous to you in more ways than one.

That truth punched me in the belly.

If I returned. If I spent more time in Sully's company. If I allowed my fascination with him to overthrow my fear...I could risk losing so much more than just my body.

But...I don't have a choice.

I would rather endure what he had planned for me, rather than die here on this island.

A flutter of wings and a buffet of air wrenched my head to the side. The tiny parrot that'd kept me company descended with its little green wings spread out to float gracefully onto a perch.

I expected it to land on the fallen foliage in front of me—so used to the no-touching rule the feathered creature had set. However, this time, it eyed up my knee and tucked away its wings. Its sharp talons dug into my bare skin, clutching me for balance.

We stared at each other.

Tears sprang to my eyes for no other reason than acceptance of my choice. At least, if Sully didn't kill me for running, I would be able to continue hanging out with this trusting, tentative thing.

Holding up a finger, I very carefully reached out to touch it. "Are you okay? The storm didn't hurt you?"

The parrot eyed my hand moving closer. I braced for a peck, but it head-bumped my thumb instead. Its soft plumage so delicate and breakable.

A tear escaped, rolling down my cheeks, soothing sunburn and using up the last liquid in my body. "Thank you for travelling with me, but...we have to go back. It might take a few days for him to find us...but we're going home."

The parrot blinked. It bobbed its head and allowed me to scratch under its chin.

And fate once again stepped in to orchestrate my life.

It wouldn't be days.

It would be minutes.

Because in the distance, a helicopter sounded.

The whir of blades.

The thunder of retribution.

The arrival of a master come to claim me.



Chapter Fifteen

“FLY LOWER. KEEP YOUR eyes open.” I kept my hands clasped between my legs, not showing any sign of worry or rage. I’d flown after goddesses before. It wasn’t a regular occurrence, but it had happened, and we’d always found them.

This was no different.

She is no different.

My heart kicked my lie right into my belly.

Ignoring the ache inside, I kept my eyes locked on the stunning vista below. The storm had soaped, rinsed, and polished the world clean. Not an inch of filth or imperfection remained; only pure sweeping seas, glistening green jungles, and glowing golden beaches.

The ocean looked like a jewellery box full of blue gemstones. The depths glowed like deep sapphires, the shallows glittered like topaz, and the coral reefs twinkled with aquamarine, revealing labyrinths of anemones and sponges, shadows of stingray and shark, proudly showing the water world in all its glory.

We’d flown past Arbi and his boat of searchers a while ago. He’d found the kayak washed up on an uninhabited island named *Burung merak*. Peacock in English. I’d named each island in my atoll after animals, borrowing the native tongue of my chosen home.

Burung merak was named for the fan of palm trees that looked like a

peacock tail, vibrant and impressive but not granting much room for anything else.

Arbi's crew had walked the island and found no trace of Eleanor, so we'd flown ahead, dipping low over *Capung* (Dragonfly) and *Ikan* (Fish). Two islands that had a purpose in my paradise but didn't seem to have an interloper on its shores.

"Should we turn back, sir?" the pilot's voice crackled in my headset.

I peered closer at the sea, looking for signs of a washed-up goddess. A dead girl with seaweed-strewn hair. My stomach had knotted itself three times, never to untangle.

"No. Fly farther."

"Farther?" The static hissed in my ear. "But that's *Serigala* up ahead. None of the escapees have made it that far. We should bank and—"

"Keep going." My teeth bit the command. "Do as I say." The knots in my belly vibrated with instinct. Eleanor wasn't like the others, even though I wanted her to be. Therefore, it made sense that she'd attempt the impossible. *Achieve the impossible.*

She might have made it to *Serigala*.

She might.

Serigala was special to me. Named in Indonesian for Wolf, it'd become a sanctuary. Not for me, but for the part of my life that'd been the catalyst for so much pain.

The helicopter swooped forward, throwing its mechanical weight into the rotors. The gorgeous scenery below blurred as we shot over the remaining ocean and toward the first outcrop of trees.

This particular island had a helipad. The first I'd created and the most important. *Serigala* housed so many souls. If it protected a new addition, then Eleanor was lucky she'd found salvation on its shores.

The irony of that thought tightened yet another knot inside me. This one wrapped around my heart, complete with poisonous vines and venomous fangs.

If Eleanor was on *Serigala*...I honestly didn't know how I'd react. How my past would cope tangling with my present. How I would behave staring at a future I had never planned to face.

"We'll do the outskirts first," the pilot crackled. "Then we'll land and search the interior on foot."

"Fine." I kept staring out the window as we slowed and hover-crawled

over the entire island. I spotted many of the island's inhabitants. Creatures that belonged and so many that didn't. Perfect and broken, whole and in pieces, but nothing with two legs. Nothing that looked like a goddess who had the goddamn power to knot me up and make it hard to breathe.

She's probably waterlogged and dead on the ocean floor.

Something clawed at my throat and made it hard to swallow.

A spray of parrots took flight from a banyan tree as we drew closer to the centre of the island. Banded lorries and Moluccan Kings. All bigger and brighter than Pika but native to their homeland while Pika was a foreigner, brought by a cage and released by a teenager who'd buried his parents and fought his brother to retain a company that'd brought so much heartache.

"There!" I sat up, threw off my headset, unbuckled my harness, and kneeled on the floor to rip open the fuselage.

A burst of wind and drone of noise whipped inside.

"Sir! Close the damn door!"

My hand wrapped around the handle, my body pivoted on one knee as the helicopter swooped left, spotting what I had.

A girl.

A goddess standing in the middle of my helipad.

Bold and brave, hair whipping like Medusa's snakes, her power over me crackling like lightning, singeing with fire, pulling me down toward her.



Chapter Sixteen

WIND LICKED AND LASHED as the helicopter traded weightlessness for Earth's gravity, its skids disappearing into thick grass of the overgrown helipad.

I'd made the choice to step out of hiding and greet my escort rather than hide. I chose life over death—or at least I hoped I had.

I braced myself for Calvin to step off the helicopter, or the man who'd checked up on me three times the day before, delaying my departure by precious hours.

But...

Sully.

My stomach fluttered and feathered as he leaped from the chopper and turned back to yell at the pilots over the din. He gesticulated with his arm, shook his head, his anger turning his motions aggressive. The pilot argued back, but Sully was boss, he was god, his word was scripture chiselled into stone and obeyed at all cost.

Finally, the pilot nodded, waited as Sully slammed the door and stepped back, then added more power to the rotors to skim into the sky. My head tipped up as I watched the mechanical bird skip to the left, climb in height, and vanish in a burst of noisy speed.

Only once silence descended did I drop my gaze to Sully's.

He stood on the opposite side of the clearing. Fists in pants pockets, charcoal suit covering him majestically from head to toe; an aubergine tie

loose and hanging around his neck. Sweat gleamed in the hollow of his throat. His dark hair with its unpermitted sun-bleached tips was wild and wind-tangled.

He was undone.

The most ruffled I'd ever seen him.

He was no longer cold-blooded, standing in the tropics without any sign of discomfort. He vibrated with ferocity, boiling with need and fury.

Our gazes locked, and whatever minor dregs of dignity and energy I had left siphoned into the ground. My toes grew roots, anchoring me in place. My legs became bark, brittle and unable to bend. I planted myself into the soil, seeking purchase to weather another storm...the storm of Sullivan's temper.

I didn't know how this would go.

I didn't know if I'd be alive after it.

But...I would be brave.

I would not break.

I squared my shoulders and waited.

Without a word, he stepped toward me.



Chapter Seventeen

MY PSYCHE SPLIT DOWN the middle.

Part of me remained my own. It recognised my power, my rule, my right to hurt, humiliate, and harm the girl before me. It whispered monstrous things full of anger at being thwarted, temper at being denied, and rage at no longer having control over the situation.

The other part of me watched from a safe distance. The part that I'd always kept locked away because it was born from compassion, empathy, and rapport. Once upon a time, that part ruled all of me. These days, it had no sway in my decisions.

Yet, for the first time in forever, I had to admit I'd lost where this girl was concerned.

Only two weeks ago, my reign had been unmatched. This girl had landed on my shores, noticed my ownership of everything she touched, and began the journey to bow at my feet.

She'd walked to me.

But now?

Now, *I walked to her.*

Each footfall of my expensive shoes, each whisper of my custom-tailored suit, I recognised that something horrid had happened.

She owned this moment.

She could've hidden until we'd flown away.

She could've run the moment we landed.

Each time I thought I'd figured her out, she did the opposite, and it fucked with my head.

Unlike our first meeting when she stepped elegantly toward me, her head proud on her regal neck, her willowy body bruised from other men, this time she stood unquakingly fearless. Her hair salt-dusted and crinkled, seaweed braided in one strand and a vine with three leaves wrapped around another. A jasmine blossom tangled with the fine chocolate spun around her face, spilling white flowers down her cheek.

Her stomach rose and fell with each breath—the only sign of her panic. The black bikini hid the intimate parts of her but revealed swatches of delicate muscle and breakable bone. No longer alabaster, she glowed with an unhealthy red from sunburn. Her nose already peeled a little and her eyes were no longer a smoky grey but a brilliant, blazing silver.

The crown she wore hadn't slipped from her adventures on storm-whipped seas. If anything, it had grown from a small tiara to a diamond-encrusted headdress. Heavy and uniquely tied to the untapped well of strength she possessed.

It only made me snarl.

I wanted to snatch her, scar her, and ensure she never looked at me the way she was now—a blend of terror and tranquillity. Of acceptance and anxiety.

Her gaze never left mine as I stopped in front of her.

For the longest moment, nothing moved.

The world stopped, the sea stopped, the wind stopped.

We stopped.

Her.

Me.

Two paths opened up. A fork in my destiny that became as visible as any true journey. Signs even blazed with deliberate destinations.

Turn left and accept kindness and this girl could be my ever after. She was my equal in every way. Smaller and younger, fragile and fearless, I could taste the eventuality between us.

The relationship. The bond. The forever.

But turn right and choose ruthlessness and I would ruin any chance of happiness. I would remain who I'd become. Untouchable and all-powerful, sovereign and safe.

My heart pounded as Eleanor licked her lips to speak. To destroy me.
I had a single second to choose.

A fraction of a life to make the worst or best choice of my existence.

My hand lashed out, fisting in her hair.

To kiss her or to ruin her.

I don't know.

My tongue longed to taste, my cock begged to take, every part of me shook to claim her.

It fucking terrified me.

Our mingling energy electrocuted me.

Our connection screwed up my heart.

So...I chose the right path. I turned my back on the left.

With a surge of strength, I added pressure where I held her hair, buckling her legs, sending her kneeling into the grass.

Her eyes widened, looking up as I loomed over her, keeping her pinned, ensuring she crumpled in servitude. "I knew you'd have to try at least once to know the boundaries of your cage."

She gulped as I wrapped my fist tighter in her hair, bringing her up until she teetered on her knees. "I only did what any—"

"What any creature would do in captivity." I nodded. "I know."

"Then why are you angry?"

"Angry?" I kept tightening my fingers in her strands, tugging at her scalp. I wanted to break her apart. To shatter her into pieces so she was no longer a threat. "I'm not angry."

She scoffed, wincing as I held her. "Your temper is a visible thing, Sully."

"Don't." I shoved a finger in her face. "You lost all liberties to call me that."

"Just like I've lost the liberty of my freedom?"

"Precisely." Eyeing up her bikini, I untangled my hand from her hair and undid the bows on her hips. "You own nothing. Not even your right to decency." My quick decision to strip her came from both a punishing and protective mindset. I scanned her body with desire and clinical inspection. No blood. No obvious injury. "Are you hurt?"

"Don't—" She scrambled to keep the scrap of material together, but I swatted her hands away.

"Obey me." Reaching between her legs, I yanked the lycra from her

thighs and tossed it to the side.

She glowered but answered my previous question, even though I'd stripped her. "No, I'm not hurt." Her pussy remained hidden, thanks to her kneeling position, but it didn't stop my mouth from watering with excruciating need. "I'm thirsty and tired but not hurt."

"What happened?"

"Why do you care?" Planting her hands over the V of her thighs, she hissed, "What are you going to do to me?"

I swallowed a wash of fury. Her well-being was my concern, and she'd thrown that in my face. She'd stolen a kayak, most likely capsized in the storm, then exposed herself to the elements. I was fully within my right to be pissed. "Your lesson will come soon enough."

"Will I still be breathing after it?" Her eyes blazed with rebellion but also regret.

"Depends how teachable you are. How sorry you are."

"I'm not sorry that I ran. I'm sorry that I failed."

"And that is why I'll ensure you'll learn your lesson exceedingly well." I had my methods to curb unruly goddesses. I had a room back on my island where all troublemakers went. Most only lasted a night. Eleanor...she'd be subjected to a week.

A week of imprisonment and intense education on required behaviour.

I would personally see to her demotion from a woman who defied me to a possession who accepted her place.

Tears sprang to her grey eyes but she didn't stop me when I reached under the mass of her hair to undo the bow at her nape then brush aside the seaweed weaved in her strands to undo the one in the centre of her spine.

Her true lesson would have to wait until we returned home, but here... alone...I couldn't keep my goddamn hands off her. No Calvin to stop me. No goddesses to watch. Just pure and utter freedom to bruise what was mine.

To break what is mine.

Her head bowed as the black triangles fell away, revealing her breasts. The skin that'd been protected by the bikini still glowed white, etched with unsightly pink. "You deliberately hurt yourself. How am I supposed to achieve top dollar with your skin so burned?"

She gritted her teeth and didn't reply.

Dragging my finger around her nipple, I kept my voice low and provocative, tormenting both of us with the vein of wildfire crackling beneath

the surface. “You surprised me.”

Her chin tipped up, fight all over her face. “Surprised you? How?”

Pinching her nipple, I murmured, “You got farther than anyone else. You made it to *Serigala*, which no one has before. I’ll give credit where it’s due.”

“How far?” Her throat rippled as she swallowed hard. “How much farther until I would’ve been free?”

I squeezed her breast, then swooped to my full height, shadowing her. My hand still tingled from cupping her. “You would never have made it.”

“I might have if the storm hadn’t—”

“There are always inconveniences. Just like you’ve inconvenienced me.”

Her teeth bared. “How have I inconvenienced you? Did I ask for you to rip me from my life and hook me up to some machine for bastards to fuck me?”

I shuddered. What I wouldn’t do to be that bastard right now. “Your skin is burned. Your system is depleted. I’m surprised you’re not fainting at my feet like last time.”

“That will never happen again.” Her hands balled. “I’d never fainted before in my life.”

“What a compliment.” I forced a savage smile. “I make you weak.”

“You starved me.”

“I’ll starve you again for running.”

Her head bowed, her hands clenching with insubordination. She wanted to argue. She still had courage to wage battle with me, but self-preservation was equally as strong. She battled herself, just as much as me.

I respected that. I admired her passion and her poise. I wanted both sides of her—the fiery parts that couldn’t help clashing with me and the other that shielded herself in ice.

“At least you’re alive.” I ignored the residual ache around my heart. Thinking she’d died had scarred me with truth. I did *feel* something for her. Something I refused to accept. Something I wished would die. And that vulnerability only amplified my need to be cruel. To keep her far away from the parts of me that could one day belong to her.

“Will I stay that way?” she murmured, keeping her gaze on the grass.

My hands balled by my thighs as I weighed my answer. I’d always been merciless, but I’d never been unjustly heartless. I would punish her, but I wouldn’t kill her. Not for this. “Of course.”

Her gaze caught mine. “You don’t sound happy about it.”

“I’m not happy that you’ve proven to be a bad investment.”

Her chin snapped upward, her temper gnashing against mine. “Bad investment? I told you I wouldn’t bow to you. I warned you I would curse you every day that you kept me.”

My control snapped. I snatched her jaw, digging my fingers into her cheeks. “Oh, you cursed me all right. You’ve cursed yourself too. Do you honestly think you can keep playing this game with me? Fucking teasing me, making me want something I can’t have, and then running away instead of facing what you caused?”

She fought to get free. “What? You’re blaming this on *me*?”

“I’m blaming *all* of this on you.” I squeezed hard, then backed up, dragging a hand through my hair. “I wish I’d never requested you.”

She sat up on her knees, still bowing but taking back her power one piece at a time. “Let me go then. I’ve offered before, and I’ll offer again. I’ll pay. I’ll give you any figure you want. Let me buy my freedom, and you’ll never—”

“Never what? Fuck you? Hurt you?” I stepped into her until my shoe nudged her knee, threatening to crowbar her legs apart. “Never *fall* for you?”

She sucked in a breath, her voice turning into a squeak. “*Fall* for me?”

I froze.

Shit!

The smart thing would be to send her away. The only way to stay sane was to get rid of her. So why did the thought of never seeing her again do such monstrous things to me? Why had I flown thousands of miles with my goddamn heart bleeding out? Why did I stand here, trying to belittle and demean when I’d always been above such treatment?

I kept my girls in line without raising my voice. Without revealing my temper.

But her?

Jinx.

Goddamn *Eleanor*...she’d changed me, and I did not like who I’d become.

Her tongue licked her lips, her thoughts racing wildly in grey eyes. “Do you...eh...” She swallowed hard, goosebumps scattering all over her. She shifted as if afraid to ask, terrified to hear my answer. “Do you...feel it too?”

That question.

Shit, that question.

It hung between us, dangling on a fishing rod, waiting for me to take the bait and reel us together.

In five words, she'd hinted that she felt something for me. That I wasn't alone in this madness. That she hated the hostile takeover of her heart just as much as I did. Perhaps we were allies in that, not enemies. If she felt a tenth of what I did, then it must kill her. Destroy her to want the man who'd paid money for her soul. Who looked upon her as everything he owned—disposable and finite.

My knees unlocked, breaking my frozen state and making me pace.

She kneeled there quietly, waiting.

Once again, I faced a fork in the road, giving me another chance to choose a different path. And yet again, I refused.

Forcing myself to stop in front of her, I crossed my arms. Threateningly, aggressively, all the while fighting the debilitating urge to shove her onto her back and climb inside her.

The sunburn only added another dimension to her. It made the hidden parts of me want to soothe her, heal her, be responsible for her happiness as well as her pain.

"If you feel something for me...why did you run?" I struggled to say such revealing things.

"I didn't run." She held my stare even though she trembled. "I waited for you in full view."

"I'm not talking about this afternoon." I ran a hand over my mouth. "And you waited for me to land because you knew you had no choice."

"I did. I had a choice of you or death." Her teeth bared, a spark replacing the sudden softness. "I chose you."

I swallowed my snarl, but it still echoed in my voice. "Wrong decision."

"Is it?" She cocked her head. "I'm not so sure."

"All I'm sure about is you ran the moment my back was turned."

"I had no choice."

"Of course you had a fucking choice!"

Her eyes glossed with more tears, but she refused to let them fall. "I had to try, don't you see? You talk of value. You speak of money. But what about the cost of my own self-worth?" She went to stand, but I clamped my hand on her shoulder, keeping her bowing before me.

She shivered at my touch.

My fingers blazed with biting, burning fire.

I let her go, shaking out the agony.

She shook her head, confusion and calamity ripe between us. “I couldn’t stay without at least attempting to escape. I could never have lived with myself—despite what I may or may not feel.”

I stood upright, crossing my arms. “And what do you feel?”

“I don’t know. What do *you* feel?”

“I’ve already told you.” My voice lowered with a growl. “All I feel is inconvenienced.”

“Liar,” she hissed.

“Be careful, Jinx. Be very fucking careful.”

“Just like you’re careful around me? I see two sides to you, Sully Sinclair. I know there’s something between us—”

“There *is* something between us. It’s called a fucking contract, and the fact that I bought you.” Punching myself in the chest, I snarled, “That’s it, Eleanor Grace. Don’t romanticise this situation. Don’t mistake my islands for a backdrop of some fairy-tale. You work for me. You belong to me. I will do what I please with you, when I please it. If I want you in my bed, I will have you in my bed. If I want you to serve my guests, then that is what you will do. That’s all that’ll ever be between us. Understand?”

She clenched her teeth, glaring at the grass cushioning her naked body. “I will *never* understand how you can treat animals with such kindness yet hurt your own kind with such contempt.”

“Oh, believe me.” I chuckled blackly. “That part is easy.”

“None of this is easy!” She swiped at a lonely, glittering tear. “Why can’t you admit that—”

“I admit that I’ve been moronic when it comes to you. But this, whatever this is, ends. Right here. Right now. Accept that I will never treat you any different. Accept that whatever exists between us is over. I *own* you. That is the extent of our connection.”

A defiant whisper tumbled from her lips. “I don’t accept.”

I leaned closer, taunting her. “I’m sorry? I didn’t catch that.”

Her eyes locked on mine, blazing with smoke. “I said, I will *never* accept that you own me. You *don’t* own me. You will never own me.”

“Oh, no?” Ripping at my tie, I yanked it off and, with quaking hands, collared it around her throat. Pulling on the remaining length, I growled, “I paid money to receive you. I have the bill of sale. You eat my food. You

sleep in my bed. You sunbathe on my goddamn beach. And now...now you wear my leash." My nose almost brushed hers, our breaths mingling, our chemistry igniting. "If you aren't a paid pet, then what are you?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"So why are you trembling?"

She panted as my gaze locked on her mouth. Her sweet, perfect, delicious fucking mouth. "Why are you?"

"Because I'm seconds away from either fucking you or killing you, and I don't know which will win—"

Swooping up, she crashed her mouth to mine.

The second her lips touched mine...everything I'd fought for collapsed.

My control.

My willpower.

Gone.

Dust.

Desire.

Digging two handfuls in her hair, I jerked up. She rose to her knees, completely at my command. Deepening the kiss, giving her no leniency or kindness, I took and fucking took.

Her fingernails dug into my wrists, holding onto me as I plunged my tongue into her mouth.

Just like our previous kisses, there was nothing soft or sweet. It was war. Vicious and fiendish, sending lust licking like a whip.

She moaned and tried to stand, but I kept her hovering, subservient and submissive, trapped and tormented.

Our teeth clacked together. She fought back. Her tongue swiped against mine. Everything else vanished. The fact that I had to be back later for a guest's arrival. The fact that I'd commanded the pilot to collect us after I'd disciplined my goddess. The fact that I'd flown halfway across the goddamn planet, only to turn around again the moment I thought I'd lost this girl.

All of it. All my mistakes and downfalls disappeared as I turned the kiss into raw violence.

She cried out as I crashed to my knees and kissed her harder. She tried to get free, but I held her firm, sucking out her oxygen, her soul, taking everything she refused to give me.

I'd bought her, yet I couldn't control a fucking thing about her.

I can't control myself.

That had to change. She had to understand she couldn't say no to me. No to my authority, my requests, my guests. No to anything I wanted.

And what I wanted was her.

No matter how much I denied it, refused it.

I want her.

Beneath me, beside me.

I need her.

She gasped as I kissed her so deep, our noses pressed into corresponding cheeks. I suffocated on her, and she suffocated on me. We tried to inhale, but all we could steal was each other. Sharing air. Partaking in the other's lust.

Because it was lust that drove this battle.

She couldn't hide the way her nipples pebbled to hardened stone. She couldn't silence her cries as my hands slipped from her hair and fisted her breasts. She couldn't disguise the way her body turned to liquid as I shoved her backward, spreading her out on the grass as I crawled over her.

One hand dug into the earth by her head while the other swooped from her breast to cup around her throat.

Her pulse pounded against my thumb. She arched up as I kissed her deep, deep, deep. She spread her legs as I lowered myself between them.

Our argument and denial shredded any illusion that this potency, this wicked punishment, wasn't filled with things we refused to admit. We had chemistry. Chemistry that only appeared when two corresponding pieces met. A hum. A force. A link that vibrated at a frequency that knitted blood to blood, bone to bone, soul to fucking soul.

A groan ripped through me as her hips rocked against mine. She didn't just lay there, waiting for me to hurt her. She participated. She encouraged.

My cock physically throbbed to be touched, to be freed, to be inside her.

I drove into her. My suit into her nakedness.

She moaned and accepted my ruthless kiss.

I yanked on the leash around her throat, reminding both of us of our places in this war. The dominant and the dominated. She was my conquest. She had not won. This was me taking what I should've taken the moment she landed on my island.

Maybe then I wouldn't have my heart tangled with my desire.

Running my hand down her body, I arched my hips, fumbling at my belt and zipper.

My knuckles grazed her pussy, coming away with wet streaks of her

need. My lust amplified to dangerous levels. My goddamn trousers refused to come undone. I needed to stop thrusting against her to get my cock free, but I couldn't stop. Couldn't deny the friction I needed. She needed. The inferno that consumed both of us.

I'd come in my boxers at this rate. I'd fucking cover myself in cum all because I couldn't wait to climb inside this girl.

Our kiss turned deadly as her hands vanished to my belt. My brain short-circuited. Why would she help me ruin her? Why would she willingly let me take her final piece?

Because she feels it too.

It's inescapable.

I grunted as her tiny hand cupped me.

I bit her lip so hard, metallic blood bloomed between us, sending our kiss from violent to feral.

I rolled onto my back, keeping her plastered to me, driving up with my hips, fucking desperate to be balls deep inside her.

She dug her hands into my chest like she had when she'd been high on elixir and struggling to get off. She rocked over me, her mouth lax, her skin luminescent, her hair totally wild.

A part of me cracked and fell.

Fell into an abyss that I daren't fucking label.

But my heart knew what it was.

Death.

Death by a thousand acknowledgments that this girl would one day not only destroy me but also own me, kill me, consume me.

We both grunted like beasts, clawing to remove my clothing to finish this disaster. Our hands fought to rip my zipper down. Our chests panting for breath.

My back crushed grass, releasing the tart greenness into the air, the scent mingling with our musky desire. When my trousers finally released, a rush of savage need catapulted through my bloodstream.

I reached up and grabbed Eleanor's throat, ready to throw her onto all fours. Ready to mount her. Fuck her. Kill us both with rapture.

But a dive-bomb of sharp beak and vibrant feathers aimed straight toward my eyes.

The sharpness almost punctured my pupil as I turned my head and threw my hands up to protect myself. The missile came again. And again.

I rolled, shoving Eleanor off me. The attack kept coming even as I stood and ducked the flurry of ferocity.

“Stop. Hey! Don’t do that.” Eleanor tried to help me despite everything I’d done.

Bracing myself for blindness, I blinked and locked gazes with my attacker.

And the world stopped for entirely new reasons.

“Skittles?”

The second I said her name, the tiny caique stopped her mission to murder me, squawking indignantly and flying to land proudly on Eleanor’s shoulder.

My mouth fell open.

What.

The.

Ever.

Living.

Fuck.



Chapter Eighteen

SULLY SWITCHED FROM RABID to frozen.

His lips still glistened from our kiss and his chest still rose and fell with tattered breath, but all hint of carnal connection vanished the moment his gaze locked on the tiny bird that'd chosen that moment to claim me as its own.

Little feathers bristled by my ear. A tune of disgruntled chirps fell quietly from its beak. It reminded me of a disapproving relative—slightly afraid, mostly disturbed, but defiantly protective.

Sully swallowed and shook his head, his eyebrows tugging low over his blistering blue gaze. Ever so slowly, he zipped up his trousers, buckled his belt, and dragged both hands through his hair.

His motions were meticulous and refined, his moods mercurial in their swiftness.

Why did he care that a parrot had befriended me? He had one. He loved Pika more than he was capable of loving someone of his own species. Why couldn't I have a confidant like him?

I braced my shoulders, nudging my cheek against the feathered creature. The parrot puffed up, covering my cheek with beak kisses.

Sully actually groaned with dismay.

My heart flip-flopped. My stomach turned gooey. I'd gone from fighting my dangerous emotions toward Sully to falling madly in love with a bird.

Sully pinched the bridge of his nose as if warding off a headache. When

he finally dropped his hand, a thin veneer of composure covered him, but something behind it ached with pain. His sea gaze snatched mine. “Care to tell me why you stole my caique?”

I balled my hands, activating blisters from rowing. He could take away my freedom. He could steal away my heart. But he couldn’t accuse me of theft when I hadn’t done so. “It followed me when I left in the kayak.”

“It?” He cleared his throat. “It’s a she.” A softness glimmered in his stare. “She came from the same clutch as Pika.”

I tasted something I hadn’t had before. Conversation. A glimpse behind the curtain that made up the man before me. “They’re siblings?”

“I suppose you could call them that.”

“Where did they come from?”

His lips pressed together, refusing to reply, but Skittles squeaked and flew around Sully’s head. She didn’t land on him, though. She returned to me, settling lightly on my shoulder as if she’d always been welcome there.

He sighed heavily as if pissed by this change of events, hurting by the fact I’d earned affection from something he believed was his own. “Fourteen years ago, I found her in a wire bottom cage.” His temper flickered, threading with his sudden gentleness. “I stole the eggs and hatched them. They’ve been with me ever since.”

I turned to stare at the tiny parrot. Her wing speared upright as she nibbled at the feathers underneath. She seemed perfectly content and trusting, when only yesterday she’d still watched me warily—almost as if she’d been judging me, examining me for any sign that I wasn’t worthy before deciding I was hers.

I’d never had a pet before—never had that bond between creature and human—but it wasn’t from lack of trying. I’d constantly begged my parents for any sort of animal to adore. A squirrel, hamster, cricket, frog, even a cow, goat, and pig. I’d already asked for the standard dog, cat, and rabbit only to be refused any of them. To me, they all deserved love and kindness—not just the ones sold in a pet shop but also the ones born for slaughter. That was probably why I’d become a vegetarian. I couldn’t separate the pets from the consumed. They were all the same.

I was exceedingly aware I stood naked before Sully, adorned by a single bird and his tie around my throat, but I ignored my vulnerability in favour of talking. If I could figure out what had caused him to become the way he was, maybe I had a chance of undoing the tangles around his heart. “Why doesn’t

she hang out with you and Pika?”

Sully sighed again. “She doesn’t like people. She prefers the wild.”

Stepping carefully toward him, I asked, “Then why did she land in my kayak and travel with me?” I reached up, testing the incredible new connection with a feathered flyer and waited until she hopped onto my finger. She did so without hesitation. Her talons wrapping tight, her eyes inquisitive and smart.

Sully scowled as I brought my hand closer to him. I offered Skittles as a peace offering, a reminder I hadn’t stolen her, she’d stolen *me*. He looked as if he’d back away, but at the last second, he raised his own hand, our fingertips touching.

A zing of power shot from his blood into mine, making our breath catch. Skittles permitted him to stroke her head, but she refused to transfer to his offered perch. Skipping up my arm, she snuggled back into the dip of my shoulder and neck.

Sully dropped his hand with a guarded, black look. “It appears she has chosen you.”

“Does that bother you?”

“She’s free to make up her own mind. For some idiotic reason, she’s picked you.”

“Why?”

His eyebrows tugged together. “Why? Who knows.” His gaze skimmed over my nakedness. “Perhaps she feels sorry for you. Maybe she thought you would die and decided to chase suicide beside you.”

I ignored his deliberate barbs. Too much had passed between us not to see through his rage. He felt something. Something he couldn’t control.

And he didn’t want it. He didn’t trust it. He was determined to kill it before it could grow any deeper. Which was fine by me because I also didn’t want it, trust it, or was strong enough to endure it. By allowing him to find me, I’d sentenced myself to four years.

Four years of sleeping with a stranger once a week.

That would be all I could handle.

I couldn’t cope falling in love with the monster who served me to those strangers too.

“Maybe...or maybe she found her person, just like Pika found you.”

He froze. “You’re claiming my parrot now?”

“She claimed me first.”

“She’ll soon realise it was a mistake.”

I stiffened. “Are we still talking about a bird, Sully? Or—”

A crash sounded behind me. Sully’s head snapped up. His eyes shuttered, hiding any hint of connection we’d shared.

“Stay where you are!” His hand swooped up as I turned to look over my shoulder. A man appeared. Local to Indonesia, lean and lanky, running toward us. The guy heard Sully’s shout, skidding to a stop, his face animated and impatient.

Where the hell did he come from?

I blushed as the guy’s eyes zeroed in on my nakedness, blatantly drinking me in as his mouth fell open in shock.

The rustle of clothing ripped my head back to face Sully. With a furious look, he shrugged his charcoal blazer off his shoulders, followed by his silver-grey shirt beneath.

My stomach clenched as his arms bunched, undoing the buttons, then pulled it away and revealed the perfection of his chiselled chest. I gawked just like the man behind me gawked at my nudity.

I’d seen Sully half-naked a few times. For a man who wore suits like armour, he swam a lot, seeming much more comfortable in board-shorts and saltwater. But the impact of his perfection still stole the final strength in my legs.

My thirst returned with a vengeance. Only this time, it wasn’t just water I wanted to drink.

Before I could tear my gaze away from his impeccable physique, he wrapped his shirt around me. Skittles took off with an angry chirp, circling me while Sully roughly did up the buttons, hiding my naked form.

His rough hands brushed against my skin, his knuckles nudging my breasts, his teeth clamped on his bottom lip.

I grew lightheaded as he buttoned me up, going lower and lower until his touch skimmed my pussy and upper thighs. His scent enveloped me. Coconut and salt, jasmine and sandalwood. Intoxicating. Arousing. Heady.

I gulped as he finished and looked up. Our gazes snagged, and once again, all our lies burned at the stake of our truth. We wanted each other. His erection in his trousers and the wetness on my thighs proved that. But we wanted more than just sex. We wanted something neither of us could understand. Something fierce but tame. Catastrophic but endless.

Clearing his throat, he ducked to collect his forgotten blazer. Shrugging

into it, he looked even more divine. Glowing sun-etched skin, shadows of hard-earned muscle, and a flat-ridged belly all adorned with a masculine suit.

It's not fair.

Not fair that I was falling for someone who would ultimately break me in all the ways I never wanted to break. Not fair that I finally had to admit that I was falling, and the slippery slope had no safety rail.

I couldn't stop it.

My loyalty to Scott couldn't prevent it.

My desire not to feel it was useless.

It didn't matter he wasn't a good person or that I should be smarter than this.

Slip, slip, slip.

How long before I fall completely?

"Come." His voice sounded thick and gravelly, his eyes dancing over me now that I wore his shirt. Did it cause a visceral reaction for him too? To see something of his on me—his shirt swamping me, protecting me, touching me in places he wanted?

Snatching my palm, he paused and narrowed his eyes at my blisters and wounds from the oar. His teeth ground together, but he didn't speak. He merely let me go and grabbed my wrist instead, as if aware touching my hand would hurt.

The moment his fingers wrapped tight, he pulled me into motion, dragging me toward the guy who waited patiently on the other side of the helipad.

The grass cushioned my bare feet with carpet-like spring. Skittles floated down to resume her position on my shoulder, and Sully refused to look at me.

We slowed as the man came to greet us. "Mr. Sinclair. I saw your helicopter. I thought you were here to visit, but when you didn't arrive, I came to see if everything is okay." The man bowed, his black gaze skipping to me, then back to Sully.

Sully stayed tall and regal, despite not having a shirt under his blazer anymore. "That's fine, Andika. My arrival wasn't because of the sanctuary but because of other business." His fingers tightened around my wrist. "However, now that I'm here, I could return with you to check on your charges."

The guy beamed, shoving shaggy black hair from his eyes. "Oh, yes. That would be much appreciated, sir. We are proud to show off our latest

arrivals.”

“Good.” Sully nodded, opening his arm wide. “Lead the way.”

We fell into step behind him, Sully cold and silent, me with a tiny parrot keeping me calm.

My mind raced with questions. Did Sully know all his staff by name? If so, that was impressive. If not, why would he know this man’s name on some remote island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?

“We’ve been successful in rehoming the last shipment, sir,” the guy said over his shoulder. “We aim to be equally as successful with the upcoming arrivals.”

“I’m glad.” Sully sounded distracted, but his hold on my wrist never loosened. He kept me leashed as surely as he had when he’d knotted his tie around my neck. “Let me know if you need more supplies.”

The man ducked his head in embarrassment, as if asking for things went against his culture even if Sully was his boss. “We could do with another vet, sir. And another import of your animal-approved pharmaceuticals.”

“Consider it done.” Sully smiled stiffly. “I’ll ensure my company sends whatever you need. And I’ll enlist my assistant to begin interviewing acceptable candidates for an extra vet.”

“You’re very kind. Thank you.” The man pressed his hands together in prayer, bowing respectfully. “Very kind.”

Sully lost his edge of coldness for a moment. “Not kind. Just grateful for the great work your team does.”

“Only because you are our role model, sir.”

Sully scowled. “Don’t push aside credit when it’s due. You picked up my work when I grew too busy to continue. I’m grateful for you, not the other way around.”

The guy just smiled evasively and bowed again, accepting Sully’s compliment but also refusing it.

I hid my wince as we traded soft grass from the clearing to the prickly undergrowth of a jungle path. This one wasn’t manicured with orchids and palms but wild and barely tamed. Parts were so narrow, Sully had no choice but to let me go, frowning with sternness. “You follow my every step. You run, and the punishment I have planned for you will be a thousand times worse.”

I nodded.

I’d already attempted escape and now knew the futility of such a thing.

I wouldn't waste my energy trying again. Instead, I'd search for other ways to claim my freedom. Ways that might include bartering my heart in return for gaining the reluctant one in the chest of my enemy.

The rest of the ten-minute walk was silent, all while my mind tortured me with guesses of what my punishment would be. Plotted a seduction that I wasn't brave enough to try. And did my best not to watch Sully's sleek and powerful body, striding before me.

* * * * *

I'd had many experiences since being snatched from that backpacker's kitchen. I'd endured more than I thought I'd ever have to face. Yet when we arrived at the home base of the staff who'd come to get us, I struggled to combine all those experiences and all those endurances into one cohesive existence.

I'd expected to be beaten, abused, and ultimately craving death by now. And yet...I drifted through a paradise. Not a paradise like the island Sully had created for girls he called goddesses but a paradise for creatures who'd suffered.

Tears sprang to my eyes as Sully and his staff strode faster, familiar with what they'd created here, unable to see the magic and compassion painting the very air within.

I stopped in the middle of a small city.

A small city hidden and protected by an island in the tropics. Huge pens made of bamboo and vine held animals of their same species. Dogs romped in one. Platforms with beds, tunnels, toys, freshwater, and food. The huge space encouraged the canines to form packs, friendships, and loll in happy contentment.

It could've been a scene from a Doctor Doolittle movie or some strange kind of zoo, if it weren't for closer inspection. Each dog had something not quite perfect. A few had ears missing, a leg, a foot, a tail. Some were bald with cream smeared or bandages wrapped, some hopped, some ran—all recovered from some injury but all of them seemed so unbelievably happy. They glowed with joy. They were the epitome of grateful bliss.

Drifting forward, I peered into the next township. Skittles inched closer to my ear, almost as if aware that this place changed everything. That it broke the final chain preventing me from free-falling.

This one held rabbits. Just like the dog's enclosure, this one housed hidey-holes, cubbies, and holes in the ground for warrens. Big piles of grass

were nibbled happily by fluffy critters, their noses twitching, their bodies alert but calm. And just like the dogs, none of them were perfect. So many of them were missing an eye, an ear, and even a paw.

It broke my heart to see such bravery from such timid, vulnerable things. They didn't ostracise each other for their disability. They didn't let depression steal the joy of today. They were wise in their acceptance of whatever they'd endured.

Sully glanced back, noticing I wasn't close by. He snapped his fingers, and I sprang into speed. Catching up to him, I noticed another large enclosure, this one full of mice. Wheels and tunnels, nesting boxes, and food bowls. The tiny rodents ranged from hairless to horribly scarred.

"What is this place?"

Sully grunted but didn't reply.

His staff held no such qualms about talking to me, though. He didn't question why I was there, where my clothes were, or how I came to be in Sully's control, and was proud to show off his charges. "This is *Serigala*. It's wolf in my language." He beamed, waiting for Sully to pass him by to slip beside me. "Mr. Sinclair called it wolf because we have teeth to protect the weak and a pack to heal the sick."

I gawked as we entered a modern-day structure. Thatched roof and sweeping beams but the inside spoke of technology and competence. Embarrassment filled me to be in such a place dressed only in a shirt and tie. My bare legs were visible. The silver-grey of Sully's shirt barely hid my decency.

"Where do the creatures come from?" I asked quietly, awed and slightly frightened by the magnitude of empathy, the size of the heart required to build such a place.

Sully cleared his throat. "No need to answer all her questions, Andika."

"Oh, I'm happy to inform her, sir." His chest rose with pride. "All these animals have been liberated from labs around the world."

"Labs?"

"Yes, you know. They were *binatang coba*...eh, guinea pigs." He grinned. "We also have guinea pigs. We have otters and cats and fish and hamsters and pigs and—"

"Enough," Sully interrupted. He turned and crossed his arms, his gaze navy with secrets.

"But..." I shrugged helplessly, looking around at the sanctuary this man

had created. “How can you walk me through here and not give me answers?”

“This is not a school excursion, Jinx.” His face stayed remote and closed off. “You weren’t supposed to be here. This part of my life does not mingle with my main enterprise.”

“Why? Because it shows you have a heart, after all?”

Andika cleared his throat, moving off toward a paddling pool with no barriers or bars.

Inside frolicked three otters, all sleek and swift, rolling and darting through the water. One had no tail, and the other two had patches of waterproof fur missing. It didn’t matter that the tiles of the foyer were covered in water from their antics or that their happy barks pierced the otherwise sedate silence.

They were perfectly at home.

Sully looked to where I stared, flinching as an otter launched itself from the water and zipped quicksilver fast to twine and rub against Sully’s suited leg. The adorable squeaks and insistent affection whittled at Sully’s temper.

With a glower at me, he dropped to his haunches and scooped up the wriggly, besotted creature. All signs of anger and cold-heartedness vanished as the otter squirmed in his arms, rising up to rub his head against Sully’s chin. “You’re looking much better,” he murmured, stroking the sore looking skin on the otter’s spine. “I’m glad we’ve finally created a waterproof cream that’s helping.”

I couldn’t help it.

I fell.

I tumbled.

I wanted.

All control over my own emotions had been stolen by this enigma of a man. Beastly to humans. Saintly to animals. How could I not fall for a man like that? Crave to know a man like that? A man who saw the world in such black and white. Who understood what humans were capable of and turned his back on his own race to defend the creatures at our mercy.

God, how would I ever survive him now I knew this existed?

I stepped closer to Sully and the otter squeaking joyously in his arms. I didn’t know what to say, how to speak, or how to stop the smarting in my soul. I remained quakingly silent as Sully ignored me, kissing the otter as it strained to nudge his chin again, then ever so gently placed it on the ground.

The otter didn’t run off, though; it stayed twined around Sully’s legs as

if showing him thanks, speaking in otter tongue with all its gratefulness that Sully had found it, saved it, healed it.

A loud oink sounded from behind a closed door. Sully turned to look just as the door opened and a black and white pig bowled free. A woman with long black hair and wearing a cream coat ran after it, calling in Indonesian. She noticed Sully and slammed to a halt, letting the pig dart to the man every creature seemed to adore. It oinked and nosed the otter out of the way, wanting its own chance to say thanks.

I gasped, studying the pig's skin. Where healthy colour and flesh should exist, he was almost translucent. Sores pockmarked his body, and the parts of skin he did have revealed veins and arteries that looked sickly and weak.

Sully once again ducked and rubbed the excited animal. He touched him exceedingly carefully, stroking only the healthy areas, aware of causing pain. "Hey, Cuthbert. You're also looking better but not ready to join the main sty yet."

"Sorry, Mr. Sinclair. He heard you while I was administering his antibiotics. He has learned how to open doors." She shrugged, a capped needle in her gloved hand. "He is too smart."

Sully smiled. "He's relaxing...learning he's safe."

"Yes." The woman smiled back. "He takes his medicine well. Even with the injection twice a day."

"Is the new formula working better?"

She nodded. "It seems to be. His condition has cleared up quicker this past week. Soon, he'll be able to go to the powder antibiotic instead of the needle."

"That's good to hear." Sully studiously avoided my stare.

I was sure my mouth hung open as my curiosity blazed bright. I wanted to grab him and demand to know *everything*.

But Sully moved away, motioning for the woman to follow.

I stayed glued to the sandstone tiles, suffering a more profound change than I had when I'd been washed and prepared for sale.

Who was he?

Who is Sullivan Sinclair?

Andika moved quietly to my side, his attention on Sully and the vet but his words just for me. "I see your confusion, ma'am. Do you want to know what this place is?"

I turned to look at him, desperation in my gaze. "Please, tell me."

Andika cast a look in Sully's direction again before giving me his full attention. His black eyes glowed with affection for his employer and pride at his vocation. "When Mr. Sinclair took over his family's pharmaceutical empire, he rewrote the rules. He banned all animal testing in his labs. Those already there, he took with him on his sixth day in power. He healed the ones he could, humanely euthanized those in too much pain, and made it his purpose to deliver a life worthy of the soul his scientists had almost destroyed. Most still live on the island, some have been transferred to other islands to live the way nature intended, and others have been gifted to loving homes—all with very strict follow-up contracts to ensure continued well-being—but all of them are happy and healthy."

"I...I don't know what to say."

"There is nothing to say, ma'am." Andika shrugged. "After he liberated the animals from his own labs, he set about changing the rules for everyone. He, eh...went to war for them. He did unspeakable things. He...um, chose animal lives over human life and set up this sanctuary for them." His eyes dropped to the floor. "He lost so much by fighting for those who couldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—"

"Jinx." Sully broke us apart, shooting a livid gaze at Andika. "The helicopter is here. We're leaving." Holding out his hand, he shook Andika's. "Thanks for your excellent care. I'll ensure you receive your requests."

"Thank you, sir." Andika shot me a final look before bowing and stepping back.

Sully glowered at me, his gaze probing mine, searching to know how much I'd been told. His features etched with anger as his hand lashed around my wrist again and yanked me outside.

Behind the animal hospital, the helicopter waited.

Ready to fly me back to hell.



Chapter Nineteen

SILENCE REIGNED BETWEEN US.

Not through choice but necessity.

The helicopter whirred too loud to speak without a headset, and any conversation between Eleanor and I probably wouldn't be suitable for pilots.

How much had Andika told her? Why the hell had he opened his mouth? What I did on *Serigala* wasn't for public knowledge. It was my...hobby. My one saving grace.

Eleanor sat stiff beside me, her gaze alternating between Skittles trembling in her blistered hands and the view of my utopian empire outside. The sun shone extra bright this afternoon, making up for the storm that'd swept through, leaving a few trails of destruction from broken trees to flotsam besmirching the postcard-perfect beaches.

I studied her out the corner of my eye. She sat straight-backed and supremely royal. It didn't matter she only wore my shirt, that seaweed still clung to her long, tangled hair, or that her sunburn turned her from snowy to pink. She had an aura about her that hadn't slipped since arriving on my island. She hadn't lost her tenacity or inner strength. If I had a sister (and found it appropriate to use such 'girly' words), I'd say she hadn't lost any of her *sparkle* since becoming mine...if anything, she glittered brighter.

From cubic zirconia to a Hawk diamond. Unbreakable, untouchable, unaffected by time or pressure—the strongest stone on earth. Yet despite her

diamond exterior, I tasted a delicate girl beneath. She'd hidden that from me. She still did.

It was Skittles who'd shown me the truth.

Skittles who I'd raised and protected, who'd always appreciated my involvement in her survival but had never fully accepted me as Pika had. The moment I'd moved to my island, she'd flown off to be with other flighted creatures, visiting occasionally, welcoming a touch periodically, but most of the time, happy to remain on her own.

I'd never expected Skittles to seek out Jinx. To not only seek out but to choose her as *her* person. Out of all the women sharing my shores, not one had ever been deemed worthy enough for Skittle's shy affection.

It changed *everything*.

It fucking terrified me at how much it'd changed things.

I no longer had a single feeling for her. I had a fucking blizzard full of temptation and want. I was...confused. Twisted up, lost, and blindfolded on what the hell this all meant.

When we'd first went to board the helicopter, I'd eyed Skittles as she took off from Eleanor's shoulder. I waited to see what my goddess would do. A test of her character. A revelation into her truth.

She'd stuck an arrow in my heart when she'd backed away, shaking her head. "I can't go on that. Not if Skittles is too afraid. She can't fly the distance back to your island."

"She'll be fine."

"No." She'd looked worriedly into the forest. "She rested a lot in the kayak...it...it wouldn't be fair to leave her here alone."

I'd crossed my arms. "She wouldn't be alone. There are other parrots she can befriend." Of course, I had no intention of leaving a bird I'd raised and cared for over fourteen years but I wanted to see how strong Eleanor really was. How far she'd go to stand up for a creature who she'd only just met.

"I can't." She shook her head. "I'll...I'll row back. I give you my word that I'll return. But...I also gave Skittles my word that I'd keep her safe."

Her reply clenched my stomach with barbwire, twisting me up until I bled.

Without thinking, I'd waved my hand at the pilot, cut the helicopter's engines, then whistled the special call when it grew quiet. Skittles flew from the jungle and straight onto Eleanor's shoulder. I didn't want to stress or harm the caique, but if I had to throw a blanket over her or trap her in some

way so she'd accept the mechanical flight, then so be it.

But Eleanor gave me a soft smile and walked away. She held up her hand for Skittles to perch on. She murmured something to the bird, pressed a kiss to her delicate head, then gently planted her free hand over her wings. Holding her sandwiched between her hands, cradled into her chest, she walked past me with her sexy bare feet and climbed into the helicopter.

And

fuck

me.

If I'd been worried for my sanity before? It was all over.

I'd lost it.

Right there.

Forever.

I'd clambered in after her, watched her the entire time the engines whirled back to life and we traded gravity for flight, all while my heart pounded as she soothed Skittles on her lap.

Shaking my head, I dispelled the memory.

I was turning into a fucking fool. Just because she was kind to animals, I had stars in my fucking eyes?

Get a grip, Sully.

Needing to do something, I snatched a bottle of water from the cooler on board. Tearing at the lid, I went to take a swig when Eleanor's gaze locked onto the icy dripping bottle. She swallowed hard, then forced her stare back out the window.

She'd been capsized hours ago. She'd swum fuck knew how far. She was sunburned and palm blistered. Yet she didn't ask for water.

Without a word, I passed her the bottle.

She flinched as the cold condensation dripped onto her lap. Skittles chirped and tried to squirm from her hold, but she stroked her thumb on the parrot's head and cooed. "It's okay. You're okay." Meeting my stare, she added, "I can't let her go. I need two hands. It's all right. I can wait until we land." Her mouth said one thing, her eyes begged another.

She was thirsty, probably desperately so.

But she put Skittles before herself.

I wanted to do so many goddamn things.

Kiss her.

Thank her.

Throw her out of the goddamn helicopter so I didn't have to feel this way.

With my teeth locked together, preventing myself from saying something I'd regret, I held the bottle to her lips.

Her eyes widened as I cupped the back of her head for balance, fighting the glide of the helicopter, making sure I didn't bash her teeth with the bottle.

Goosebumps shot down her arms as my fingers automatically cradled her nape. My cock thickened in response as the expensive, sleek fuselage filled with sparkling, electrical awareness.

Ever so slowly, I tipped the water into her mouth. Some spilled down her chin, darkening my shirt, pebbling her nipples beneath. The colour matched her grey eyes perfectly, bringing out threads of silver that once again hinted at the iron will inside her. The unbuckling core that no amount of smelting or beating could break.

I waited until she'd drank the entire bottle before placing a droplet on my finger and holding it to Skittle's beak. The bird drank greedily too. Eleanor's stare never left my face, making my blood act strange, whizzing and hissing, hijacking my body with energy.

Pulling away, I tossed the empty bottle into the cooler, drank my own refreshment, then glowered out the opposite window.

Ah, fuck.



Chapter Twenty

HOME.

For the next four years.

I accepted it now. Or at least...I accepted it *for* now. Maybe someday, I'd get free. But until that chance came, I would learn to be grateful for what I had, rather than the false freedom that I didn't.

I was *lucky*.

So, so lucky compared to so many others. I would do my best not to complain or despair about my situation when I had a roof over my head, food in my belly, and an owner who had some ability to care for me.

Sully commanded the helicopter pilots to turn off the machine, the sound of the rotors winding down still loud in my ears. Skittles hadn't stopped trembling the entire flight, but at least she'd endured my makeshift prison, pressing gently on her wings so she couldn't fly around and get hurt.

Not that she could've gotten hurt in the luxury cocooning us. I hadn't taken notice of the interior when I'd been flown here the first time, my neck aching from the tracker being removed and my wrist itching from my new tattoo, but all of Sully's belongings glowed with class.

The helicopter was no different.

Elegant cream material covered the large bench seat, fluffy padding softened the five-point harness, and the ceiling had pinpricks of light mimicking far-flung constellations.

When the rotors finally hung heavy and sullen, Sully moved. Sliding

open the large door, he climbed out regally, a magistrate back in his kingdom.

I waited for him to storm off, pissed at my running, angry that I'd stumbled onto an island that had been his secret. Instead, he turned around with his hand up, as if waiting to escort me from the aircraft.

My heart tripped and hiccupped. With the sun sliding into late afternoon, its rays were no longer as harsh, transforming Sully from rigid ruler to golden-hued gentleman. He was unbelievably handsome. I'd never grow used to the perfect shape of his lips, the dark shading of his five o'clock shadow, or the effortless way he wore a suit.

Flashes of his naked skin beneath his blazer ensured I needed another bottle of water for my sudden thirst. He made my body malfunction. My heart stuttered, my breath faltered, and my brain short-circuited in favour of some ancient intelligence.

There *was* something there.

Between us.

Between captor and captive, aggressor and slave.

But there shouldn't be.

This bonded connection shouldn't have evolved in these circumstances. I didn't know if that made me stupid or Sully a hypocrite. Either way, we could deny what we felt for the rest of our time together, but unless we accepted it—*truly* accepted it, talked about it, confessed it...then only disaster would follow.

Sully's brilliant blue gaze glowed brighter, waiting for me to place my palm in his. With the heaviest sigh born from fear of losing myself and heartache over what would come from this, I opened my hands and let Skittles fly free.

For a second, she remained where she was, confused by the weight of my hand disappearing from her dainty wings. She cocked her head and chirped, then spread her green plumage and took off.

She fluttered out the door and into the palm trees, accosted by a second green bullet that I assumed was Pika welcoming her back. They both vanished into the greenery, leaving Sully and me alone in our own challenging, chemistry-charged existence.

Scooting over the cream seat, I reluctantly, eagerly, warily placed my palm in his.

Our skin caught fire. Our souls were undying coals. Our link a glowing

rope binding us.

I shivered as his fingers wrapped tight around mine, giving me a brace to lean on while I slipped from the helicopter and back onto his shores.

The moment my feet touched the dock, he removed his touch, subtly shaking out the tendrils of heat. I didn't shake mine away, allowing them to tingle and scatter up my arm, infecting me like the worst kind of infection. An infection that had no cure, complete with a terminal diagnosis.

The pilots remained in the cockpit while Sully stalked ahead of me down the jetty and onto the sugary perfection of his beach. The jade green kayak I'd commandeered had beaten me home; its lacquer bright and bold with no signs that it'd been used in a jailbreak.

Sully's shirt licked around my body, shielding me just as his island shielded me from the outside world. If this was my home now, I had to make peace with all of it...not just the tropical beauty around me.

Who knew if Sully would ever let himself be alone with me again.

After what'd happened on his other island, I couldn't be the only one terrified of the instantaneous reaction to one another. I'd fought against my heart, but I couldn't win against my body.

It'd learned how to be freer in its sexual hunger from Sully's elixir...it was a traitor that could be the catalyst to why I had no power against Sully's advances. Why every time he touched me, it felt different from anyone else. Why each time he looked at me or talked to me, it was as if I'd been studied and conversed with someone who finally talked the language deep, deep inside me. A language I wasn't fluent in until the whisperings and wantings began for a man I should not want.

Sand buried and cascaded off my feet as I followed Sully. The sun warmed my back, stinging my sunburn but erasing my chills. Chills given from my attempt at accepting and being brave when all I wanted to do was *scream*.

Scream for help.

For advice.

Scream just for the sake of loosening the tight ball of anxiety and need in my belly.

"Sully..." I licked my lips and tried in a stronger tone. "Sull—I mean, Mr. Sinclair."

He spun around, his mouth thin and cheeks stark. "You can call me Sully."

“But you said I’d lost the right to—”

“I prefer it over Sinclair.”

I nodded, allowing hair to tumble over my shoulders. I smelled of sea and sun. I wanted a shower and sleep. To dream of a happier ending to my attempt at fleeing.

Unlike when I’d been brought here before, I had a sense of finality this time. Two weeks ago, I’d believed this was temporary. My courage came from a happy ending I was so sure I deserved. A champion breaking free of her chains. A girl who would run, call home, be rescued. A girl who couldn’t be held or used against her will because that just couldn’t happen.

I was *special*.

This sort of thing wasn’t allowed.

God.

I’d grown up since then. I wasn’t special—any more so than the other girls in that Mexican prison cell. I was just a forgettable person hidden in a mass of humanity.

That’s what I am...forgettable.

To Scott.

To my parents.

To my life before this.

It hurt deeper than I’d imagined—kissing goodbye to a past that had once been my future, but it didn’t hurt as much as learning that I had no one to trust...not even myself.

I was my enemy.

My body was a traitor.

My heart the worst sinner of all.

And I had to make peace with that too if I stood any chance of surviving.

Closing the distance between Sully and me, I hoarded the final moments of aloneness. Soon, other goddesses would vie for his attention, guests would arrive, and business would summon, but for now, I had him all to myself, and I smiled.

I smiled at my jailor and spoke from the heart. “You’re a good person, Sully.”

He froze. His mouth parted as his eyes widened. His stunning complexion highlighted with shock. “What?” His voice thickened with a bark.

I stood taller, knowing how grandiose and how silly I would seem. A

shipwrecked girl in her master's shirt, totally at his mercy for food, shelter, and care. And I had the audacity to tell him he wasn't the monster he portrayed—at least not all of him.

"You treat your own kind with a merciless disgust that is frankly terrifying. You have no patience or empathy, which makes you cruel and unforgiving—"

"Eleanor—" His brows set heavy, shadowing eyes that turned dark cerulean.

"No, let me finish." I sucked in a breath, forcing myself to say, "You might not have tolerance for your own species, but you do for others. You are endlessly kind and achingly emphatic toward animals, and that...that I can respect." I shrugged. "If you treat me half as good as you do your creatures, then I will trust that you will look after me and let me go in four years."

Tears clutched my throat, exhausted tears, unhappy tears, tears misguided and misled by my stupid, idiotic heart. "All I ask is...that you stop looking at me as a goddess...but as one of your animals. I have no hidden agenda; I plot no war against you. I am merely a creature existing at your mercy, just like Skittles, just like Pika, just like those poor beasts we saw today. I would rather be an animal to you than human—"

"Stop." He stepped into me, both his hands capturing my cheeks, sliding into my hair, dragging me to him. His height folded around me, acting as a shield. His forehead pressed against mine, our noses brushed, our eyes locked. "You are not an animal."

I struggled to breathe, inhaling him, consuming him. "If it means you'll like me, then I want to be."

"Why do you think I'll like you if you're an animal?" His thumbs traced my cheekbones, dipping to the crease of my lips. He pressed gently, teasing with his touch, dipping into the corners of my mouth.

"Because you like all animals." I tasted his skin, unable to stop my tongue flicking over the tip of his thumb. "And maybe...you could learn to like me."

He shuddered. "I could never like you." With a groan, he pulled away, still trapping my head in his hands.

My insides folded in on themselves, my heart into my stomach, my stomach into my core. Acid and passion and hope all mingling in a painful concoction.

"Why?" My question feathered with breathlessness. I'd hoped I could

strike a bargain before we went our separate ways. I'd wished to form some sort of contract that would ensure I wouldn't have to fight against him anymore.

That we could be...friends.

He dropped his hands from my cheeks to my throat, his thumbs pressing on my windpipe, his fingers clutching my nape, buried under my hair. It was a position of power and threats. He could crush my ability to breathe with one squeeze. He could snap my neck with one twist. But he held me tenderly, all while black desire filled his gaze. "I could never like you, Eleanor Grace, because you could never be an animal." He pulled me close, running his nose along my neck, nuzzling at my ear. "Animals don't fill me with rage like you do. They don't make me lust like you do. Animals are weak. Even the ones with fang and poison are ultimately at our mercy." He pressed a kiss against my temple, all the while holding me trapped. "I grant creatures my fortune and protection because I owe them a debt. Meanwhile, I owe you nothing." Pulling away, he looked deep into my eyes. "To call yourself an animal is the biggest lie of all. To try to gain my affection through pity and obligation will never happen." His thumbs pressed harder against my windpipe.

I swallowed, fighting to dislodge his control. "Why?" I shifted, unintentionally rubbing my body against his.

His eyes snapped closed, a growl rumbled in his throat as he pulled me to him. His voice continued to echo with something primitive as he murmured, "Because you are not weak. You are not defenceless. If you were an animal, then you'd be the most dangerous of them all. You would have the power to shred me limb from limb. Your claws would kill me. Your teeth devour me. If you were an animal, Goddess Jinx, then I would have to fucking bow to you."



Chapter Twenty-One

I STOOD IN FULL view of goddesses and staff, clutching a girl who'd broken me.

She'd been the first and the only to figure me out.

The first to paint herself in a light that ensured I'd never be able to see her as just human, ever again.

"I would rather be an animal to you than human."

"Because you like all animals."

"And maybe...you could learn to like me."

Christ.

Three strange, simple sentences, yet...once again, it changed everything.

She changed everything.

She changed *me*.

Her voice slammed through the walls around my heart, smashed the remaining islands and oceans that kept me removed from my own species, and gave me no room to hide anymore.

So...I lied.

I held her firm and told her I could never like her, but I told her the truth when I said I would have no choice but to bow at her feet.

I would bow there and then.

My knees threatened to buckle. My lips snarled to crash against hers. I'd used both her names: her legal name to convince her of my broken truth, and

her goddess name to remind her of her place.

I admitted that she meant something, all while demoting her from woman to plaything.

She didn't move in my hold. Her lips apart, her eyes grey moons, her face flushed with a rapidly racing heart.

All it would take was a kiss.

A single kiss.

Right there.

On the shores of my untouched world.

And it would all be over.

I'd claim her. Take her back to my villa. Taste her. Touch her. Talk to her.

Trust her.

And that...that was far, far too dangerous.

It only took a few seconds from her request and my confession, but it felt as if the sun had spun around us and returned. I honestly didn't know how to let her go—to separate from this girl and leave her behind.

So...I should've been grateful for the guest who did it for me.

"Ah, you're back, sir." Arbi's accented tone wriggled its way through the tense awareness between the girl held captive in my hands and my own ridiculously disobedient heart. A man stood beside him in the requisite pressed shorts and polo of expensive holidaymakers.

A new guest.

Shit.

I swallowed and dropped my hands.

Eleanor swayed.

I turned my back on her, digging my hands into my pants pockets. Arbi nodded respectfully even though his eyes held questions. Questions he'd never get answers to as it wasn't his fucking business.

My gaze skipped over the rest of the shoreline, hoping no goddesses had spied on me, that no one else saw my downfall.

Only one woman stood in full twilight.

Jealousy.

The moment my eyes snagged hers, she bowed and darted back into the shadows. She already knew something was amiss. How could she not after I'd practically fallen out of the bathroom after kissing Jinx?

"Sir...this is Mr. Roy Slater." Arbi motioned to the man who sipped on a

pina colada one of my staff would've made him.

Roy grinned, revealing white, straight teeth. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Sinclair." He held out his hand, eagerly pumping my palm when I extended welcome civility.

Jinx stepped forward, out of my shadow and straight to my side, her willowy frame stoic in the sand. A small sea breeze fluttered my shirt around her thighs, threatening to reveal her nakedness to this new guest.

I didn't know why that bothered me. Why another man appreciating the girls I offered to rent made me want to shed my skin and turn full murderous wolf.

"Welcome, Mr. Slater." I swallowed, doing my best to eradicate the thread of violence in my voice. "I trust your journey wasn't too long."

Slater nodded and sipped his cocktail. "The flights were monotonous, but what a place you have here. Totally makes up for the jetlag and shitty airplane food."

I forced a smile. Normally, I was here for each guest's arrival. They weren't allowed a moment extra on my island if they weren't vetted and approved. How long had he been here? Guarded by Arbi?

Arbi sensed my question, saying, "Mr. Slater only landed fifteen minutes before you, sir. I advised him you would personally welcome him." Arbi smiled and bowed. "I'll leave you two gentlemen. Excuse me while I ensure Mr. Slater's villa is ready for him."

I kept my back ramrod straight as Arbi left and I eyed this new guest.

Slim, medium height, brown hair, late fifties but obviously looked after himself. His arrival dossier stated he'd been a dental surgeon with his own practice until his son took over. He then used his savings to buy fifty/fifty shares in a new start-up company that'd revolutionised dental implants and bone grafting for serious jaw impairments. He bought the shares at pennies; they were now worth forty dollars each. That sort of instant wealth went to his head, and he started indulging in legal and now illegal forms of expenditure.

Slater shifted a little under my intense stare. "Everything okay?" He chuckled self-consciously. "Do I have coconut froth on my chin?" He rubbed at his face.

I twisted my lips into a smile. "I apologise. Just part of the arrival process." I narrowed my eyes, unable to decide if he was a well-concealed heathen or a respectful man who just wanted to indulge in a sexual fantasy.

His file said he had a close relationship with his son and newly wedded daughter-in-law. That he gifted them funds to build a house, set up their own nest egg, and stated he couldn't wait to become a grandfather.

His eyes gave nothing away about a dirty bastard inside him.

Begrudgingly, I admitted he could stay.

Almost immediately, I wanted to revoke that acceptance as his hazel gaze left mine and latched onto Eleanor beside me.

Desire instantly ignited his face. His hands clutched tight around his gay-ass cocktail. His body straightened and stiffened all at once.

It took everything I had not to snatch Jinx and shove her behind my back, away from his greedy stare. I wanted to rip the clothes off my body and drape them over her to hide her beauty from this leech.

I already knew he'd request her.

What hot-blooded man wouldn't? Even with her skin pink, hair wild, and body wrapped in a creased shirt?

It wasn't clothing or make-up that made her stunning—it was her very essence. The power and strength, the aloofness and impenetrable nobility.

Without looking at her, I commanded, "Leave. Go back to your villa."

"But, I—" Her gaze heated my skin. "I didn't—"

"I said—" I spun, pinning her with all my frustration and fury "*—leave.* I'll deal with your insubordination later."

Biting her lip, she looked between me and the guest. For the longest moment, she looked like she'd disobey. Finally, she nodded and, with elegant steps and long legs, bypassed the guest, then stormed up the beach.

Slater couldn't tear his eyes off her, drinking in her every move.

The breeze caught the back of my shirt, revealing her toned ass and long thighs.

My fists curled as the guest beside me sucked in a breath.

We didn't speak until Eleanor had vanished down a sandy laneway. I fought the urge to suckerpunch him in the eyeballs for ever seeing a fraction of her nakedness.

Rubbing his mouth, he turned to me full of seriousness. "I booked this trip because I was assured you'd created something otherworldly. I'm already fully impressed with the privacy and quality of your accommodations, but I'm absolutely blown away by the gorgeousness of your women." He slipped into business mode, bracing himself for a negotiation. "I would like to request that creature. I would very much like to enjoy her...eh, company in

my fantasy tomorrow night.”

All my insane pieces grew fangs and prepared to rip out his jugular.

But the final sane piece begged me to be smart.

Eleanor had broken me with a simple request. If she could do that in two short weeks, what else would she do to me? We had four years together. Four years that I seriously doubted we’d both survive.

The difference between men who were attracted to women and myself was...I didn’t *want* this attraction. I didn’t want the weakness, the indebtedness, the connection. I wanted to remain free.

She’d already proven she could tie me into fucking knots.

I’d almost fucked her on *Serigala*. I would’ve been inside her and most likely drowning if it hadn’t been for—

Skittles.

The tiny parrot hatched from a hapless egg. A firm reminder of why I didn’t do humans and why I would never trust another. Friend, family, or foe. They were all the fucking same.

Skittles had almost shoved me heart first into Eleanor’s curse. But... because of her chosen affection, she’d also saved me from the worst decision of my life.

I had to keep my distance.

I fucking refused to do anything else.

And what better way to keep my distance than to remind myself and Eleanor that our bond began with a contract and ended with a contract.

When I didn’t agree, Slater did what all men did when faced with something they desperately wanted and couldn’t accept losing. “I’ll pay any extra required. I’m happy to work with whatever figure you want to ensure a night with that girl.”

My throat closed up as I fisted my hands.

Eleanor was due in Euphoria.

A week from her first experience had passed. She was a commodity who had to work to deserve her place.

She’d run from me.

She’d destroyed me.

She was owed retribution for both unforgivable sins.

Inhaling hard, I held out my hand. “An extra two hundred thousand and she’s yours.”

A figure that any rational person would baulk at.

The most expensive sex on earth.
But Roy Slater didn't even hesitate.
His palm slipped into mine.
We shook.
It was done.
I didn't know who would be more ruined.
Eleanor.
Or me.



Chapter Twenty-Two

MY FINGERS DUG INTO the wave-inspired vanity.

Water dripped from my clean hair. Tears dripped from my lashes. Sun and shame painted my cheeks.

You're so stupid, Ellie.

My reflection mirrored a girl who'd tripped out of the shower. Who'd washed her burned skin a thousand times and rinsed her hair a hundred, trying to bathe away the atrocity of her situation only to slam face to face with reality.

That guest.

That guest who stared at me as if I were some prime leg of lamb, bleeding and freshly butchered in a shop window.

And Sully.

His touch when he'd confessed to me. His iciness when he'd told me to leave.

In this circumstance, I wasn't naïve. I'd known the moment he'd asked me to leave what he'd offer the guest.

Me.

He offered me.

My nails dug deeper into the smooth vanity.

More tears cascaded down my cheeks.

I hadn't bothered to grab a towel—preferring the air to dry my skin. I was clean, but I couldn't wash away the attempt at freedom. Tiredness

smudged under my eyes. Bruises marked my body where I'd bashed against the kayak when I capsized. Scratches nicked my chest and arms when I'd walked through the undergrowth.

Each imperfection brought yet more idiotic tears to my eyes. I cried because I was back here. I cried because of what I had to face.

Would Sully take me to Euphoria tonight? Would that be my punishment? To serve a man with elixir in my veins, draining me of my final reserves?

Or would he let me recover?

Will he forget his promise to make me pay?

Don't be idiotic.

I sneered at my reflection, cursing my long hair that needed a brush, hexing the stupid girl who thought she'd finally understood enough about Sullivan Sinclair to at least protect her body and soul...just a little bit.

He won't forget.

He had even more reason to punish me now.

I asked him to see me as an animal!

I dropped my head, clenching my teeth hard.

What was I thinking?

That wasn't the right thing to say. What did I expect? That he'd suddenly be *nice* to me? That he'd treat me like he treated Pika and Skittles?

That he'd *love* me?

God!

A noise wrenched my head up.

I spun around, facing the bedroom.

I hadn't closed the door—what was the point? I expected to see a tiny parrot, but instead, I found a goddess with my silver liliated robe in her hands.

With a sad, understanding smile, she entered my bathroom and passed me the dressing gown.

Jealousy didn't look at my nakedness, and I felt no shame in being bare. I felt more protected and dressed being nude with Jealousy than I had wearing Sully's shirt in front of that guest.

Tears itched my eyes, and I took the robe with a half-shrug.

I'd been kissed, mauled, fucked, and manipulated since I'd arrived on this heinous island, but I hadn't been hugged. I hadn't had sympathy. I hadn't had a friend.

Jealousy vibrated on my frequency, and without a word, she stepped into

me. My robe pressed between us as her arms went around my damp body.

The moment she encircled me in an embrace, I let go.

Tears rained but no noise accompanied my breakdown. I'd brought this upon myself. I'd gambled with Sully and lost. I'd fought for my freedom and failed.

Whatever came next, I had to be strong enough to face. Otherwise... well...

How else will I survive four years?

As my tears flowed, I slowly hugged Jealousy back. Her embrace switched from consoling to clutching. A hug wasn't enough anymore. We needed more. We needed pain to affirm we could still fight. Still battle this life we'd been given.

We *clung* to each other. Strong women and strong hearts, letting their façades fall in the safety of each other's arms.

I didn't know how long we stood there, but by the time we broke apart, I no longer cried.

So be it.

I would be summoned soon.

I would sleep with another stranger who wasn't my boyfriend. A boyfriend who probably thought I was dead.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

Jealousy let her arms drop. Something flashed black.

Grabbing her right hand, I twisted it until her wrist faced me.

A matching tattoo.

Biting my lip, I aligned my own inked wrist to kiss hers. Two barcodes. Two girls stripped to merchandise and sold.

"Mexico?" I whispered.

"Brazil." She stroked mine, tracing the small numbers that meant nothing but demoted me to a belonging. "I ran away from home. Got a job on a cruise liner as a cleaner. We docked in Rio de Janeiro. While at sea, we worked six and a half days a week. It so happened that my lousy five hours off was in port, and I jumped at the chance to explore a vibrant city." Her eyes hazed over with memory. "I heard the ship's horn sound, warning for passengers to be on board to depart, just as I was stuffed in the back of a van. They took me to some warehouse that smelled of old fish and..."

When she didn't continue, I filled in the blanks myself. I'd lived those blanks and didn't need her to speak. "I'm sorry." I squeezed her fingers,

looking again at our matching tattoos.

They might have been the same operation or totally different, but either way, our similar ink granted a strange kind of sisterhood. The oddest friendship bracelet any two friends had shared.

"I'm sorry too..." She moved back a little, giving me space to shrug into the robe, tie the belt, and grab a hairbrush. "That you didn't make it to safety."

"It was a one in a million chance I would."

Backing up, she reclined against the wall. "I don't know. You were pretty smart. The supplies you gathered would've lasted a week or so. You could've gotten far with that amount of time."

My eyebrows shot up. "How...?" I stopped brushing. "How did you know?"

She smiled gently. "I know most things that go on around here." Dropping her gaze to the tiles, she added, "Just like I know that Sullivan is cracking."

"Cracking?"

"You're not like the rest, Jinx." Her eyes followed my arm as I struggled to drag the brush through my shipwrecked tangles. "Not to him at least."

"Does that bother you?" I asked quietly. "That there's something... between us."

She shook her head adamantly. "Of course not. I'm not in love with him." Her hazel gaze twinkled. "However, I suspect *you* might be."

I dropped the brush. "*Me?*" I blushed, ducking to pick it up after clattering on the tiles. "No. Just...misguided. Misled. Stupid. *Idiotic.*" I sighed, resuming my brushing but turning my back so I faced the mirror. Not that it concealed any of my truth, the mirror reflecting my flush of shame.

"Why did you run?" Her gaze remained on mine.

"Didn't you run, once upon a time?" I shot back.

She spread her hands in surrender. "Do I sound weak if I admit I never tried?"

"No." I sighed, keeping eye contact. "Because I know your family didn't treat you well. You found a better existence here, so why would you leave?"

"Others would ask why would I stay? Why allow men I have never met and will never see again to fuck me when I could be free."

It was my turn to shrug. "Sex is the oldest profession in the world." I forced a chuckle. "Some might say it's a sound employment choice."

She laughed too. “Perhaps. Or...I don’t see the sex as a deal-breaker when Sullivan gives us so much in return.”

With my hair sleek and long down my back, I placed the brush on the vanity and turned to face her. “I ran because I have feelings for him that I don’t want to feel. That I *shouldn’t* feel. That are totally moronic when I take into account how I met him, why I’m here, and the circumstances in which he keeps me.” My confiding revelation spilled out. “I feel like I’m some silly statistic in a newspaper. Girl gets kidnapped. Girl falls for kidnapper. Girl is blind to reality. Girl gets killed for being an idiot.”

Jealousy pursed her lips, nodding as if she totally agreed with me. “But what if it’s the same for him?”

I froze.

My heart ceased mid beat. “*What* did you say?”

She pushed off from the wall, padding toward me. She wore a simple baby blue summer dress, short and floaty, making her seem young and far too innocent for our sensual subjection. “I mean...what if he’s fighting the same things you are?” She took my hand, urgency filling her pretty face. “Jinx... there’s something you should know. The diamond that he gave you...from the man you slept with last week—”

“*Jessica*,” a seethed snarl came from the door, ripping both our heads up. “I suggest you silence yourself before I do it for you.”

Sully stood with his arms crossed, glowering at both of us.

We jumped apart as if we’d been caught doing something illicit, our shared friendship that’d sprung from tentative to steadfast, a glowing string between us. I’d rowed away from an acquaintance but had flown back to find a trustworthy confidant.

A confidant who knew more than she let on.

What about the diamond?

The diamond I’d left in my bedside drawer when I’d run. The diamond I hated because it made me feel dirty and wrong whenever I looked within its glittering perfection. It made me remember the caveman who’d thrust inside me, made me orgasm countless times, and been both rough but gentle.

A man named Markus Grammer who I’d never see again.

“Calico is serving in Euphoria tonight,” Sully growled. “Make yourself useful and help her prepare.”

Jealousy bowed and slipped past him. She darted out of my villa without a backward glance.

The thin dressing gown I wore suddenly felt as inconsequential as air. Sully's stare stripped me to the bone, to the bare essentials, to my broken soul beneath. "You're clean. Good."

I shivered at the rigid remoteness in his tone.

"Am I to serve in Euphoria too?" My hands fisted with false bravado.

His jaw worked, but he shook his head slowly. "Multiple goddesses can serve on one night, but no. You will be fucked tomorrow."

Greyness feathered over my sight, faintness once again stealing the firmness of my world. So it *was* true. I hadn't feared for nothing. I wasn't his to keep for himself, just a toy to rent out.

Dropping my chin, I nodded, doing my best to keep any emotion from my face. I searched for something to say, but words were mysteriously absent.

Sully shifted, moving toward the exit. "Come with me."

My eyes shot up. "But you just said—"

"I said you're serving in Euphoria tomorrow. Not that you were free from punishment tonight."

I gulped. "But—"

"No fucking buts." He snapped his fingers. "Follow me." His eyes narrowed. "Or I can throw you over my shoulder and carry you there." He stepped threateningly toward me. "Which would you prefer?"

"I'll walk." I arched my chin, refusing to be intimidated even though every blood cell quaked.

"Fine." He spun on his shiny shoes and stalked from my bathroom, through my lounge, and out the front door. He didn't stop to ensure I obeyed him. He'd changed clothes since our last encounter, slipping into a black suit and black shirt, leaving his throat bare from a tie.

My eyes skated to my bed and the tie he'd wrapped around my throat on *Serigala*. I'd thrown it there when I'd stumbled into my villa an hour ago, and it lay against the virginal white sheets like a deadly premonition.

I had no time to change or grab any supplies—already he'd almost vanished down the sandy pathway.

With a muffled curse, I darted after him. Doing my best to keep my robe tight around me rather than loose and revealing.

He didn't slow his pace, guiding me through parts of the island I'd already explored and into the jungle where I hadn't. Orchids faded in favour of glossy banana plants and other fruit trees I didn't recognise.

Darkness had descended, stealing the rest of coppery twilight and making everything monochrome. The sand still radiated heat beneath my bare feet, and my hair rapidly dried in the warm humidity.

The skies above, stencilled with palm fronds, were endlessly clear. No rain would fall tonight...not after the storm that'd ended my escape.

I continued chasing Sully until he turned down a side path, overgrown and not nearly as welcoming. Wariness ghosted down my spine as we entered a clearing within an enclave of thick bushes and silken foliage.

No Pika flew with him. No Skittles flew with me.

We were utterly alone as he marched toward the rundown villa sitting squat in the centre of the clearing.

Waiting for me to catch up, he pinned me to the spot with a sinister stare. "You ran from my generosity. Therefore, you must return to my unkindness." Turning the door handle, he shoved the entrance open and threw me inside.

I tripped over the threshold, blinking in the blackness.

A switch clicked and lights rained from above, spilling into shadows, chasing away obscurity.

Once again, the villa had sweeping high ceilings, thatched roof, and exposed beams like its other counterparts, but unlike the animal hospital on *Serigala*, Euphoria and its fancy technology, or my cosy elegant villa, this one held nothing of wealth.

This one held cages.

Lots and lots of cages.

Some small and stacked on top of one another, cob-webbed laced and dust sprinkled. Others had fallen from their tower, laying on top of one another with opened wire doors and bent metal walls.

And two large ones sat in the middle of the room, large enough for a primate...or person.

The air smelled metallic and rusty with the faint whiff of cadaver.

Goosebumps scattered down my spine. I did not want to be here. The memories of these cages. The stories they told. The suffering that'd happened inside them. Some of the bars still held maroon stains of shed blood. Others clutched at tufts of fur like trophies with tight wire hands.

Where did these awful things come from?

Sully wrapped possessive fingers around my nape and marched me forward.

I shuddered from the scalding, sinning electricity that ricocheted from

him to me.

It didn't matter that we caused a blend of heightened energy whenever we touched. It didn't matter that my heart went from worried to winging.

Everything about our connection was chaotic, including the absurdity that my core clenched from being held so primitively.

I'd read that humans had evolved from animals so long ago that we could no longer be classified as beasts. However, the instinct whenever a male clasped the nape of its lover triggered a feral response. An impulse to cower and obey. To submit entirely.

I fought against that instinct as Sully pushed me toward one of the large cages. Without a word, he threw me inside and slammed the metal door shut. With a padlock from his pocket, he locked me in.

My bare feet bruised from the wire beneath them. Claustrophobia rose, seeking desperately for a way out.

My breathing turned shallow, but I forced myself to stand there. To lock gazes with the man who'd just proven his point extremely eloquently.

His island might be a trap, but he granted our every whim.

This was true captivity.

A cage that I could barely stand up in. A box that wouldn't allow me to lie down, nor held any comfort or kindness.

A true emblem of imprisonment.

For the longest moment, Sully stood on the other side of my cage. His jaw clenched and hands shook. He looked conflicted with regret but also cruel with resignation.

I wished I knew how to speak to his regret. To know the right things to say—to entreat to the part of him that *did* care. The man who held an otter with such sweet affection and who kissed a parrot on his head.

But for all my belief that I'd begun to understand him, I'd only made it worse.

Please think of me as an animal, so you'll like me.

Ugh!

What a *ridiculous* thing to say.

I drowned in embarrassment, flushing with heat.

Shaking his head, dispelling the same pain I'd seen in him when Skittles had landed on my shoulder, he raked a hand through his hair and straightened his spine.

Holding out his hand, he ordered, "Give me your robe."

I backed up until my shoulder blades clanged against the bars behind me. “Please...can’t I keep it?” I looked around at the bareness. The island temperatures ensured it remained warm, even in this horrific place, but the historic screams of the cage’s prior inhabitants turned the air icy.

I didn’t know how long he intended to keep me in here, but I didn’t want to be naked. I didn’t want to be so...vulnerable.

“Robe, Jinx. I won’t ask again.” His hand remained steady by the bars, waiting for me to obey.

I’d never been very rebellious as a child, but the inner brat inside me wanted to throw a tantrum. To rattle the bars. To bounce in the box. To scream and refuse. To turn as wild as this cage said I was.

But...decorum was my final threshold. Everything else had been stripped from me.

With a tattered breath and feeble rise of my chin, I undid the belt and slipped the softness off my shoulders. I winced as the wire beneath my toes hurt, moving toward him to press the only thing I had into his awaiting hand.

The moment it filled his palm, he yanked it through the bars and tossed it on the floor. Silently, he stalked to the back of the villa where yet more cages rested. Some long, some skinny, some rusted beyond use, and others scarily new.

He returned with a tray and a stool.

Every footfall of his expensive shoes echoed in the depressing place, bringing him back to me. I wrapped my arms around my breasts as he slammed the stool in front of my cage then unlocked the door and placed the tray at my feet.

Stepping out, he slid the padlock back into position before unbuttoning his blazer and sitting majestically on the stool. Legs spread with arrogance. Power dripping from his perfectionism. His beauty once again a monstrous sin.

He kept revealing parts of himself, keeping me walking a tightrope of hope and despair. One moment, I believed he was redeemable...lovable. The next, I wanted him to die a horrible, miserable death.

His stare travelled over my body while his voice gravelled with aggression. “This is what’s going to happen. You are going to obey my every request. If you do what I ask, we shall negotiate your length of residence in this cage. If you don’t, then I’ll decide how long you need to be punished.” His ocean gaze darkened. “And believe me, Jinx...you have a lot to be

punished for.”

Twice he’d called me Jinx.

Not Eleanor.

Tonight, it seemed he wouldn’t slip between names. He was resolute with his torture, teaching a runaway a lesson.

Fine.

I would obey. Purely because I wanted out of this place as soon as possible.

“That bottle with the cream label.” He arched his chin at the tray. “Apply that to your skin.”

I cringed at the thought of putting on a show for him. Of dropping my arms from my breasts and revealing everything. I also shivered with the similarities between the horror movie of a psychopath who made women rub lotion into their skin to make a suit out of their stripped carcasses.

Sully was a man with murky morals, but surely, he wasn’t a psychopath.

Keeping my eyes from his, I bowed into obedience, regardless of my thoughts.

Needs versus embarrassment.

I chose the need for freedom. Just as I had with the kayak and potential death.

Ducking, I collected the bottle he’d mentioned. The label held scientific mumbo jumbo. A recipe or ingredient list, rather than some fancy stickers of cosmetics. The only thing I recognised was the SSG logo on the bottom corner. A logo that I’d seen on stationery in his office.

I didn’t know what it stood for, but I popped the lid and squirted a generous amount of clear looking serum onto my palm.

Not looking at Sully, I liberally applied the ointment. My belly, legs, arms, and face. Every inch covered with odourless, colourless salve. Almost immediately, a cooling sensation overtook my tingling sunburn, actively removing the heat, and soothing my skin from the outside in.

My eyebrows rose at the seemingly impossible magic.

“A human tested after sun cream.” He narrowed his gaze, drinking me in. His trousers had tented, revealing he’d grown hard watching me apply it. “Proven to reduce the longevity and pain of sunburn.”

I swallowed back the stupid wash of desire knowing he was hard. Knowing I’d made him hard. Even in this damn cage, I was still being an idiot with lust.

I almost wished he'd poured elixir down my throat...then I had a scapegoat for the tiny trickle of wetness that'd gathered.

"Tomorrow night, you'll be touched by a man. At least now your skin won't smart when he puts his hands on you." His voice had turned black. His face brooded with hate. Hate at me or the guest he'd sold me to?

Pointing at the tray, he growled, "The tube. Apply the contents to your hands."

Doing my best to keep from revealing too much of my nakedness, I deposited the bottle and collected the tube. Again, the packaging wasn't pretty or marketed with bright labels designed to allure shoppers with a miracle cure. Bare and basic, but if Sully's scientists had created these products, I had no doubt they were the best available.

The contents of the tube were thick and gluttonous, refusing to squeeze out until I applied pressure. The small blob sat in my palm as I returned the ointment to the tray and rubbed it thoroughly into the backs of my hands, fingers, and palms. The open sores and still oozing blisters stung a little, but just like the sunburn cream, relief followed almost instantly.

I looked up, expecting him to tell me how he'd created such things, but he only stared back with fierceness.

I held his stare even though it cost me. "You knew about my hands."

He scowled as if I'd offended him. "Of course. I noticed the second I found you."

"And you gave me something to heal them?"

His throat worked as he swallowed. "You're not worth much when you're bleeding." His tone thickened, making my ears twitch and heart trip. "Roy Slater found you...alluring. He's paid above and beyond what I usually charge for a night with a goddess. Just as I charged Markus Grammer. I intend to deliver a quality product."

I stiffened. "Will you tell me how much I'm worth to them?"

He crossed his arms, not trying to hide the tightness and impressive bulge in his trousers. "Why? Does it make you feel wanted?"

I shrugged. "I suppose. In a strange, awful way."

He froze, his jaw clenching.

I threw bravery to the wind. "What would *you* pay...to fuck me?" My question started strong but faded into a whisper. I shivered as his entire body seemed to grow in stature, command, and threat.

"I could fuck you for free."

“You technically already paid for me.” I gulped. “So...I’m not free.”

“You’re right.” His head cocked, sending a scattering of bronze-tipped dark hair over his forehead. “But you’re still worth more to my bank balance than my own selfish desires.”

My fingertips had the insane urge to swipe his hair away. To touch him. To beg him to let me out of this nightmare and try to find somewhere we could co-exist.

In his bed, perhaps?

The thought came and went. A flash of fantasy of him between my legs instead of a total stranger. How would he feel inside me? Would he be strict or sensual? Rough or worshipping?

Once again, chemistry crackled between us as he cleared his throat and commanded, “The vitamins are to be taken tonight and tomorrow morning. They’ll replace whatever you’ve lost in your seemingly delicate system. And the food and water will ensure you don’t starve tonight.”

A silver-covered lid hid the plate of food he mentioned and the pill bottle that I’d become familiar with since my last fainting episode waited next to a large bottle of water.

Worry crashed over me with icy slush. “You’re...leaving me here?”

“I am.”

“But...this cage isn’t big enough to lie down.”

He clasped his hands together between his spread thighs. His knuckles turned white with ferocity. “No, it’s not.” He pierced me with a stare, daring me to argue again.

I looked around at the painful metal wire and then down at my naked skin.

He’d promised punishment.

He’d delivered it.

I tried a different tactic. It wasn’t just about me. These cages hadn’t been designed for human use. Some were mouse size, other rabbit, most big enough for a dog.

Animals had been trapped inside.

Animals who now resided on *Serigala*?

The truth struck me square in the chest, demanding I suck in a shaky breath. “These cages...they came from your labs...didn’t they?”

He bared his teeth, taking his time to reply. “Do you know what I am?”

I wrinkled my nose, doing my best to form conclusions. I’d heard him

mention his scientists, his company. I'd experienced his elixir and other medicines. He seemed revered by those who thought he was a genius. I spoke my educated guess. "You're a scientist."

He chuckled once, endlessly dark and threateningly bleak. "I'm much more than just a scientist."

"You own the company? You rule many scientists?"

His brow fell sternly over his blazing eyes. "Clever." He looked perplexed but also pained. "You keep surprising me. I don't care for it."

More goosebumps peppered my bare flesh. "Don't like that I'm piecing together your past?"

He laughed coldly. "Believe me, if you'd figured out my past you would not be conversing with me so easily." He leaned toward my cage. "You would not let me touch you so willingly. You would not kiss me back."

My chest rose and fell as I sipped shallow breaths. "Why?"

He leaned away, crossing his arms. Ignoring my question, he demanded, "Tell me. Tell me what else you have pieced together."

It's a trap. Don't answer.

And I wouldn't if Sully had always been this nasty and arctic toward me. If he'd been a beast since the moment I'd arrived, I'd ignore him. Endure his torture and flatly refuse to interact with a monster. But he'd been generous. He'd been kind. And in a few fleeting moments, he'd been more than that. *We'd* been more than that.

Sliding down the bars, I sat cross-legged by the tray. I kept my hands between my legs for decency.

His gaze flashed with things I couldn't decipher. His jaw worked and misery blackened his face for a single second. Wordlessly, he snatched my robe from the ground and stuffed it through the bars.

I waited as the soft material puddled on the cage floor before reaching across the small space and dragging it over me like a blanket. "Thank you."

He snorted as if my thanks was misplaced and unwanted. His teeth flashed as he muttered, "Tell me. Tell me what you think you know about me."

Slightly happier with my body covered, I fisted two handfuls of robe for strength. "I think something happened. Something to make you hate humans."

He stiffened but didn't interrupt.

"You rescued animals from laboratories and brought them to your

islands. You brought their cages too...to um, destroy?" I looked around, understanding seeping into me like a steady drip through snow. "No, you brought them to remind yourself. To remember...that..." I struggled to link why he'd keep these terrible traps, hidden in the heart of paradise. The filth hidden beneath beauty, the pain beneath pleasure.

And it clicked.

My eyes locked on his; my heart leaped into my mouth. "You keep them to remind yourself that humans made these cages. Humans hurt defenceless creatures. Humans...can never be trusted."

Sully swooped to his feet so fast the stool smashed against the floor.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Twenty-Six Years Ago

I LIVED IN A big house.

My parents had money—according to their boastful toasts at dinner parties with other equally wealthy people—and I'd been lucky to have been born into such an accomplished, loving family—according to my teachers.

But most days, I didn't feel very lucky.

Most days, I was lonely...and those were the good days. The days I was invisible to my older brother, Drake. I'd choose being ignored over being taunted. I willingly hid in the treehouse all day if it meant my parents didn't force Drake to hang out with his poor baby brother.

For seven years, I put up with his bruises, punches, and nasty shouts in my ears. One day, he shouted at me so bad, right into my ear canal, my eardrum popped. Blood dribbled and dried on my cheeks until my parents realised I wasn't answering their questions at the dinner table and rushed me to a doctor.

They'd asked me how it happened. And like always, I kept my mouth tightly shut.

I'd learned very early on—in fact, it was probably my first memory—not

to tattletale on my brother.

He was the chosen one.

I was the runner-up.

As long as I stayed in his shadow and did what he said, he permitted me to live another day.

My loneliness faded a little when I found my first stray.

A skinny mange-riddled poodle in the park where I sometimes snuck to before Drake could find me. It'd curled up under a bush, just waiting to die. It didn't even open its eyes when I touched it. Didn't growl when I scooped it up. Didn't whimper when I carried it all the way to a vet downtown.

The receptionist tried to call my parents, to alert them that their seven-year-old was unattended, carrying a mangy stray, and begging for medical attention that he couldn't pay for.

But the vet—a young woman who hadn't been jaded by the hopelessness of the world yet—had ushered me into her surgery.

She'd treated the dog and kept him for a few days to make him better.

I went everyday to hang out by his cage. I held his paw. I told him stories. I found a friend in that bag of bones, willing the sick mutt to live.

When he was released, I dumped my entire contents of my piggybank on the counter that I could barely reach. I'd been a good boy. I'd done my chores and earned my ten dollars a week since I was five.

My mother told me to put the money in a bank, but I'd kept it. Secretly saving every penny...to run away if my brother ever did what he threatened and tried to kill me.

I didn't know why he hated me so much. I'd done nothing wrong. I'd only ever tried to be nice. I'd worshipped him. I'd wanted to be him. And that made him hate me.

Now, I wanted nothing to do with him.

Which was perfect because I found my escape in the bony poodle. I willingly gave up my runaway fund to save him, and I didn't regret a penny. Even when I went home that night and Drake was waiting for me. Even when I noticed our parents were out at some scientific seminar and the babysitter had her boyfriend round, sucking face on the couch.

He'd marched me out back to the large backyard and tied a rope around my ankles. He'd told me to run while shooting me with his BB gun. I'd done my best to hobble with my legs lashed together, but in the end, I'd laid there and taken it, wincing with every shot but not crying out.

My tears were what he wanted.

But knowing I had a life depending on me—a grateful dog that'd wagged his tail and whimpered when I'd left him under his bush—kept me going.

Every morning, I snuck out to feed and brush him. Every night, I went to make sure he was okay. I missed him so much when we weren't together. His whines hurt my tiny heart when I had to go, and his joy at my arrival made me wish I never had to leave.

But I knew better than to bring the dog home.

Pongo the poodle I'd called him—from 101 Dalmatians. I took him scraps from our kitchen and smuggled him into the treehouse when it grew too risky to let him live alone in the park.

I shared my blankets with him. I told him my secrets. And he'd lick my hands and face and snuggle close.

He became my best friend. My world.

So when Drake found out, it shattered everything.

He didn't just kill Pongo slowly...he tortured him—just like he tortured me.

He placed him in a cage so he couldn't run. He poked him with sharp sticks until he bled. He threw rocks. He yelled abuse. He placed a hose into the top of the cage and left the water running for hours.

I tried to stop him.

I wriggled until the rope he'd bound me with gnashed through my wrists and ankles. According to the doctors, I'd rubbed myself down to bone.

I was almost glad when he finally killed Pongo. When he used his BB gun and shot him in the eye at point-blank, over and over until his whimpers went silent.

At least my poor friend was free.

When Pongo went silent, I screamed.

I didn't stop screaming until my parents found us at the bottom of the huge garden, hidden far from the house, tucked away in the woods.

That time, Drake couldn't pretend he hadn't hurt me. He was sent for counselling. Men in white coats talked to him in sympathetic voices. And my parents actually cared about me.

My mother nursed me back, she tended to my wounds, but I never fully smiled again. She was gentle and kind, and I began to trust that maybe I would be okay.

Drake returned after some time away and things were okay between us.

Our dad monitored our playdates, and our mum never let us go far from the house. Life went on, even if Pongo's ghost stayed with me.

I didn't smile until a year later when I found another stray. At first, I wanted to keep walking. I'd promised mum I'd be home in time for dinner after going to the park on my bike. My memories of what'd happened to Pongo made me almost vomit in the grass as a cat hobbled from the trees with a broken leg.

It meowed at me.

Its eyes so big and wet I was sure it cried.

My bike was used as an ambulance as I shot across town with the poor kitty. A different vet this time, but they didn't turn me away. I used up another year's worth of allowances and waited for days for the cat to be discharged.

By the time the skinny tabby was placed into my arms with a bright pink cast on its leg, I vowed I would protect it against anyone and anything. I kept it far from Drake. Far from my parents or home.

I made a shelter for it in the park. I brought it beds and bowls and food. I nursed it while the cast set its leg correctly, then took it back to the vet to have it removed. For four months, I cared for her, but I never gave her a name.

Each time I went to give her one, Pongo's final whimper would clamp my lips together. If I didn't name her, she'd be safe from my brother.

In the end, I learned another valuable lesson.

My brother wasn't to be trusted, but neither were other humans. Other kids in the park, teenagers who went to get high, found my cat's shelter and smashed it. They chased her up a tree, waving sticks and taunting.

I had to wait until they'd all gone before I could climb up and grab her shaking, terrified body. And I made the choice that ensured my life would never be the same.

I carried her home.

I walked straight to my parents' bedroom and I went in without knocking.

My mum sat at her dressing table applying make-up for yet another seminar dinner. She rose in shock as I huddled the tabby close and asked for the only thing I'd ever requested.

"Please...help me find this cat a safe home."

She said I could keep it.

I shook my head and said I couldn't.

We both knew why.

I trusted her.

I shouldn't have.

I trusted her to find a loving family, and the next morning, when the tabby was loaded into a box and placed in the back of her car to travel to its forever family, I was so relieved. So happy. So grateful.

It gave me purpose.

It gave me something to cling to when Drake resumed his extra activities on me.

From seven years to seventeen, I rescued over forty animals. Rabbits found on the side of the roads, cats who'd been feral for years, dogs who'd been kicked out of home, even wildlife who'd been hurt by humans. Birds who'd been hit by cars, squirrels that'd been stuck in traps, and raccoons who'd been mistreated.

Each one, I spent my allowance on and then my pay cheque from working in my parents' company doing odd jobs while I finished my studies.

Each one, I made healthy and happy, trusting of human care and ready to be adored by a family far away from mine.

And each one, I gave trustingly to my mother to rehome. Sometimes I asked if I could go with her to check up on the people who'd been so kind as to welcome a stray into their lives. But each time, she said it would be too hard on me. That I had an empathic heart and it would break with goodbyes.

She wasn't wrong.

But she also wasn't right.

I wanted to see for myself they were cared for, but I didn't want to ruin the system. I'd saved lives. I wouldn't put my own wants before their needs.

But of course, I should never have trusted.

And it was Drake who told me the truth.

On the night of my eighteenth birthday, my older brother passed me a beer with a gloating smile. As I'd grown older and matched him in height and size, his torments had stopped to just verbal. He knew if he picked a physical fight with me, I wouldn't cower anymore.

I'd strike back.

I'd probably win thanks to my regime of outdoor exercise and rock climbing.

So...he bided his time until he could cut out my motherfucking heart and destroy me forever.

He told me what my mother did with all the strays I'd lovingly rescued, repaired, and rehomed. He took me for a drive to Sinclair and Sinclair Group, unlocked the laboratories with his key card and strode past rows upon rows of lab equipment before unlocking a back room.

He'd grinned as I'd stepped into the room and promptly crashed to my knees.

Bile roiled and acid shot into my mouth.

Because there, in a thousand cages were all the animals I'd 'saved'.

The raccoons from the streets, the dogs from the slums, the rabbits from the roads.

Each one in misery.

Each one a test subject.

Each one poisoned and injected until their skin fell off, their internal organs failed, their will to live non-existent.

My mother, the one person I trusted above everyone, took the souls I loved and locked them in hell.

The animals, who'd trusted me, had been locked into a fate worse than death.

I wasn't a saviour of animal kind. I was the procurer of torture.

A scientist's child who provided an unlimited amount of lab rats.

A steady stream of souls.

So many free bodies for their experiments.

"Sully...Sully!"

I shook my head, shoving back memories that had no fucking jurisdiction over me. I'd atoned for my sins. I'd redeemed myself by saving thousands of lab sufferers since.

But no matter how much I did, no matter how many I saved, I couldn't get rid of the guilt.

Metal rattled, wrenching my attention to the cage trapping Eleanor.

Too much of my past still swirled in my mind. Seeing her behind bars did something to me. It made me want to rip her free. Get on my knees and apologise.

To let her go.

Not just from the prison I'd put her in but the island I'd brought her to. She still had a soul—just like the animals I'd rescued.

She was still a living, breathing creature who didn't deserve to be treated like an object. Who was I to own her body instead of her? Who made me god, controlling her lifespan instead of fate?

But...she wasn't an animal.

She wasn't some helpless creature who needed me to be her champion.

She was *human*.

She had the capacity that all humans did—to choose herself over the lives of others. To be superior against feathered or furred. To willingly ignore that their pain was just as excruciating as hers.

But Skittles trusts her...

“Sully!”

I raked a hand through my hair, noticing the quake in my body. “Stop yelling. I’m right here.”

Her hands wrapped tight around the bars, her face strained and worried. “But you weren’t...you still stood there, but you...your mind wasn’t here.”

I snorted, doing my best to dispel the rest of my past.

I didn’t know why it’d chosen that moment to swarm me. To come so thick and fast. Normally, the memories found me when I was asleep, forming into nightmares I couldn’t escape from, clinging to my thoughts long after I’d woken up, fighting ghosts and mourning those I’d failed.

I never usually let them take hold. Never usually allowed that stupid kid inside me to make me suffer moral behaviour. I dabbled in human flesh because each time I’d trusted someone, they’d turned out to be a devil in disguise.

I happily bought and sold women because frankly, they deserved it.

I had no qualms about men being killed or bad things happening to the human race because we’d caused so, so much worse to other species. It was karma. Justified. Warranted.

Wiping my mouth, I struggled to remember what we spoke about before my trip down unwanted memory lane.

Ah, yes.

She’d guessed what I’d known since I was a boy. She’d been the trigger for my relapse.

Humans aren’t to be trusted.

You’re right, Eleanor Grace. And that is why I will never trust you.

It’d always turned out to be the ones closest to me that failed me the most. Therefore, I wouldn’t give her the opportunity.

Throwing her into that chimpanzee cage, allowing her to be oppressed and confined just like Ace the aging, disease-riddled ape had been before I'd rescued and euthanized him, had been one of the hardest things I'd ever fucking done.

It'd gone against my basic make-up as a man, but it'd also been necessary.

She was a threat.

To me.

To Skittles.

To my motherfucking heart.

It was time to leave.

Necessary to get the hell out of there, before I said or did something that went against every rule I'd followed since I found out that my mother had been using the animals I rescued as her own personal lab tests.

For years, I'd funded her experiments.

Stupidly handing over healthy, tamed animals that no one would miss.

Fuck!

My hands balled as I backed away from the cage. "Goodnight, Jinx. I assume you won't sleep well."

She shook her head, her gorgeous long hair licking over her arms and shoulders. She was once again regal and refined. "No. Don't go. Not yet. I want to know. I need to understand. Please—"

I tutted under my breath. "There is nothing to understand. Don't reduce yourself to begging. If you last one night with your dignity intact, then you will return to your villa. You will once again be given anything you desire. You will feel the sun on your face and the rain in your hair. You will sleep on softness and spend your days doing whatever you wish." My tone turned black. "However, if you disobey me again. If you talk to me out of line. If you attempt to connect with me. If you continue to chase something that isn't there to be chased, then this will be your new accommodations."

Panic painted her cheeks, but she held her tongue from begging. Pushing off from the bars, she stood in the centre of the cage as regal and as noble as any priestess. Greek goddess, Egyptian sylph, or powerful enchantress, nothing compared to her.

Even in a simple robe, she was dressed in a gown of riches, dripping with magic that made me fight the constant urge to bow to her.

"Goodnight, El-Jinx." I turned and stalked toward the door.

Her gentle voice tiptoed after me. “I understand your desire to protect animals from cruelty, Sully. I’m the same. I get that drive. I have the same bleeding heart to help. So I won’t curse you for locking me in a cage that some poor animal has probably died in. But...” Steel gilded with silver filled her tone. “I will never forgive you for doing exactly what others have done to the same souls you stand up for. Regardless of what you say, I *am* worthy of the same protection. I feel the same level of helplessness. I’m just as dependent on you as they are. And this is what you’re doing to me. This is how you’re treating me. That’s not justice. It’s hypocritical.”

I didn’t turn around.

I stepped from the villa that housed a hundred contraptions of persecution and locked the door on a goddess who spoke the truth.



Chapter Twenty-Four

I STOOD UPRIGHT, STRETCHING out the kinks in my entire body.

All night, I'd alternated between sitting and trying to sleep leaning against the bars, lying on my side curled into a tiny ball, or standing to alleviate the biting pain of the bars into my thighs.

The wire bottom was the worst part. It wasn't the lack of space or claustrophobia; it was the constant fiery lashes of metal biting into the soles of my feet, my legs, my ribcage.

It made me pity animals whose homes included such torture. Mice that lived on wire. Rabbits that lived in hutches. The agony of just a single night drove my mind to jagged points, let alone being my permanent state of existence.

I'd slept intermittently—another bad night's sleep compounding onto the previous few. I would've willingly traded sleeping under a bush to this monstrosity.

After Sully had gone, I'd resigned myself to the darkness, the silence, the strange fear that'd sprung through me when his eyes had gone blank with the past. His mask of indifference and callousness had dropped, revealing a man who carried tangled agony in his heart.

If I could've bent the bars to get to him, I would have. I would've crawled into his arms and dragged him back from whatever hell he relived. Maybe if I'd touched him, things might've worked out differently. But

because I hadn't, his walls reconstructed, his mask repositioned, and whatever connection that'd stealthily bloomed between us was shot with an arrow and left to die on the cage floor with me.

Standing on one leg, I did my best to give my left foot a rest from the wire. When the red welts faded a little from my skin, I gave my right foot a rest, balancing easily and training my mind to stay calm instead of chaotic. Occasionally, I stood on the tray Sully had placed inside with me, but the slippery surface was as equally tortuous as the wire.

I wanted out.

I'd never wanted anything more in my life.

But losing my mind wouldn't make my release come any faster.

Instead, I watched the sunrise through the windows crowded with cages. I nibbled at the food and rationed the water so I wouldn't have to use the bucket in the corner. As hours ticked past, I steadily lost my tenacity and became teary with exhaustion.

By afternoon, I'd reduced myself to pissing in the bucket and slouching against the bars in some broken marionette pose. At least such tiredness meant I was able to sleep, able to ignore the pain from the metal wire.

My eyes shot open at the scrape of the villa door opening.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but instead I slipped on the tray and crashed deeper into my discarded puppet pose.

Masculine footsteps paced methodically toward me as I turned to look over my shoulder and braced myself to see Sully.

After a night in this jail, my heart had hardened toward him. I had no tender hope where he was concerned, just smouldering anger. If he could lock me up and leave me here, then he didn't deserve any understanding. I refused to beg for attention. I would never lower myself to his affection if this was what he was capable of.

I moaned as I clawed my way to my bruised feet.

A pair of green eyes met mine.

Not Sully.

Calvin.

He's returned from wherever he flew off to.

His stare dropped from mine, skating over my body.

I gulped and rapidly retied the robe. The top had gaped, revealing a breast and the now no longer sunburned skin, thanks to Sully's serum. No hint of redness existed, and the blisters on my hands had healed practically

before my eyes.

No more pain from my attempt at running away.

Only pain delivered as my punishment for returning.

“Good morning, Jinx.” His lips spread into a harsh smile. “I see he found you.”

I puffed up my chest. “I *let* him find me.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“And how far did you make it? One island...two?”

I cocked my head. “You tell me. He found me on *Serigala*.”

His eyebrows rose with a faint tinge of respect. “Impressive.”

“How many islands is that?” I’d asked Sully, but he hadn’t replied. I’d also asked how far I’d still had to paddle before I would’ve been free. He’d also refused to answer that.

“Five.” Calvin pulled a key from his pocket and inserted it into the padlock. “Farthest a goddess has managed, so kudos to you.” His mockery made my anger flare.

I stepped from the cage, doing my best not to limp as he opened the door. “How many more miles before I was out of Sully’s dominion?”

Chuckling, he strolled to the exit, expecting me to keep pace. “Another thirty or so. But that doesn’t include the neighbouring islands that are owned by other rich bastards. Some holiday there, some live permanently, and some never visit at all. Either way, it’s a one hour helicopter ride to Java, so I doubt it would be kayakable...especially for someone untrained.”

“Why are you being so open with facts all of a sudden?” I placed a hand over my eyes as we stepped outside, granting much-needed shade from the golden glare. After being locked inside for most of the day, my body felt the slap of heat, brightness, and intensity of the island all the more.

“Because you’ve tried and failed. You won’t try again.” He smirked. “No one does. They accept. And... I’m guessing, you’ve accepted. Now you’ve spent a night in the lab?”

I shivered, still sore on my soles even with the soft sand beneath them. “So those cages did come from his labs?”

“His...and others.” He chuckled under his breath. “I keep telling him to bring a scientist over and test on the goddesses that are unruly. He refuses to allow animal testing...but human testing is okay.” He nudged my shoulder with his as if we were friends walking through a tropical paradise. “Pity he

doesn't heed my advice and just uses the cages as a timeout. If you'd been injected with half-cooked inoculations or smeared with untested ointments, then you'd have the true experience."

My chin arched, doing my best not to be affected by Calvin's taunts but suffering a chunk of ice in my stomach. "If he's forbidden animal testing, how does he create products that work?"

He grinned like the devil. "By paying idiotic humans to be guinea pigs, of course. They're the ones who use the stuff. They're the ones who should die if they fail."

I swallowed hard.

I agreed with Sully about refusing to test on animals, but I didn't agree with testing on humans either. Wasn't there some way to create a lab generated molecule that mimicked a human's skin or system? I'd heard of meat being created in test tubes for a future set to be plant-based. I'd watched documentaries on scientists gleefully proving their ability to copy the enzymes in animal tissue and creating the perfect steak without ever having to butcher a cow.

Couldn't something like that be conjured to be tested on?

My questions filled my head, and my feet drifted toward the fork that led to my villa. I needed to use the bathroom. To sleep. And then to eat...in that order. I'd always be grateful for the privacy and sanctuary of my own villa.

But harsh fingers wrapped around my elbow. "Ah, ah, ah. Where do you think you're going?"

I forced myself to meet his cold eyes. "To rest. I've served my punishment. Surely, I'm free to—"

Calvin chuckled. "You truly are high and mighty. Sullivan has let you get away with far too much." Dragging me away from the path that led to my villa, he added, "You'll rest after."

"After? After what?"

He smirked. "After Euphoria, of course."



Chapter Twenty-Five

I MANAGED TO STAY away longer than last time.

I spent the night pacing my villa, watching Nirvana splash in its never-ending water suicide, catching myself again and again as I stalked to the door with intentions of retrieving Eleanor from her cage and letting her go.

Of bringing her back here.

Of spreading her on the bed and—

Fuck.

Tens of times. Hundreds of times, I stopped myself. An endless night full of repentance and unease.

By the time the sun rose, I dragged myself to my office to work.

I did my best to bury myself in lab notes and read through pages and pages of successful and unsuccessful trials of new products.

By the time Calvin flew in from his little excursion, I sat with my hands buried in my hair and Pika sulking on my desk. The poor parrot had tried to cheer me up. Dancing his crazy dictator dance, throwing paperclips on the floor, shredding a Post-it note, and twittering a love song in my ear.

When all that failed, he'd plopped himself down on my laptop and stared up at me. He didn't even try to tear out one of my laptop keys, his little wings drooping and eyes sad.

I tried to console him, but all I could think about was Eleanor.

Still trapped.

Still locked away like so many other pitiful things.

I'd wrenched up my head and tried to be the bad motherfucker who ruled his empire with no leniency as Calvin stepped into my space. He gave me a grim look, then folded into the chair facing my desk. Jetlag and overwork etched around his eyes. Just like me, he didn't like international travel or large masses of humanity.

Thankfully, he provided a welcome distraction.

He told me in crystal detail the type of warning he'd delivered to my brother.

Courtesy of me. An extension of my wrath and violence.

Drake no longer had an operational lab in my building. He had a smashed and destroyed room with beakers and test tube glass glittering on the floor. The man himself no longer had an operational body either.

Thanks to Calvin's chat, Drake had two broken fingers, bruised ribs, and possibly a fractured ankle.

I shouldn't take such glee in my brother's pain, but...he fucking deserved it.

I owed him plenty more. Most of the bones in my body had been autographed by his torments in our youth. And, apart from the incident where ropes had gnawed their way down to bone while Pongo was murdered, my parents never fully took my side again.

They buried their head in the sand that they'd birthed an abomination. A boy who had a taste for mutilating his kin.

The board had also been dealt with.

Calvin had explicitly reminded them that just because they oversaw my interests, gave advice on our standing on the global market, and provided day-to-day care of my investments, it didn't mean they were above the law.

Above *me*.

Five were fired.

Six heavily reprimanded.

Three served warnings.

Meanwhile, Peter Beck and his lab assistants had been given a million-dollar grant to focus on whatever leads he felt worthy of pursuing. And another million to invest in additional lab equipment.

Calvin had done well.

It still fucked me off that he'd been the one who'd laid a hand on my brother, but...if I had to choose again, I would still have chosen to run after

Eleanor.

And that was the goddamn, disgraceful truth.

After our discussion, I'd snuck another look at my watch.

Three p.m.

I'd agreed for Roy Slater to enter Euphoria at four. I still had to program his fantasy. A fantasy that I frankly found disgusting based on his close relationship with his son and daughter-in-law, but the money had already been deposited into my account.

A deal was a deal.

A bargain non-negotiable.

Opening the software to begin cyphering the virtual reality world that would whisk Eleanor from my control and into Roy Slater's, I fisted the key from my pocket and tossed it at Calvin. "I appreciate all you've done and, you'll receive a bonus reflecting my thanks, but get back to work. Go and release my goddess. Take her to Euphoria."

Calvin's eyebrow rose. "She serving?"

I pinned him with a stare that dared him to speak out of line. "You know she is."

He stood with the key to her padlock fisted in his palm. "You'll prepare her...like last time? I don't suggest you do that. Your cock was inches away from—"

"Stop." I bared my teeth. I went to say of course I wouldn't prepare her. That I wasn't stupid enough to touch her again. That I had more sense than to let my lust control me. I should shake my head and lock myself deeper into this nightmare I'd found myself in.

If I went to her now, who knew what the fuck I was capable of.

But my eyes strayed to the apothecary cabinet holding the vials of elixir, and I found myself standing and burying my fists in my desk. "She is mine to do with as I please. Just as you are employed to obey me." Sitting back down, I fixed my stare on my laptop, ready to code a fantasy. "So go do what you've been told, and inform her she has one hour."

* * * * *

Three-forty p.m.

Twenty minutes before Roy was due to have the best goddamn sex of his life with the girl I couldn't stop wanting, and I'd once again made a colossal mistake.

I entered Euphoria with the elixir vial burning a hole in my palm. I

strode past Jealousy, who'd no doubt offered moral support for Jinx while she'd prepared herself, and entered the virtual reality room where Eleanor already waited.

She'd been washed, cleansed, and harnessed.

Naked and magnificent, her body glowed perfect alabaster instead of sun-pinked. The minor scratches on her chest had faded, the painful sores on her hands reduced. With her luxurious hair that begged to be fisted and her grey smoky eyes that held countless secrets, I was hard within a fucking millisecond.

A staff member appeared from the bathroom door, wheeling the trolley with all the sensory applications to turn a fantasy into reality. The girl stopped short and waited for a command.

I shouldn't be here.

I should place the elixir on the trolley and leave.

But my hand rose, and I waved the staff away.

Eleanor's head tipped up as the girl nodded, left the trolley, and hightailed it back into the bathroom. The same bathroom where I'd yanked Jinx from the bath, stuck my tongue down her throat, and come to the shit-scary idea that I wanted her more than just physically.

My lust hid something deeper.

Something that made me die a thousand deaths a second.

Our eyes caught as I stepped toward her. Her nipples pebbled, her skin puckered with goosebumps, and she shuddered in her binds. Her body welcomed me, but her eyes blazed silver fire, smouldering with ire.

Placing my hands into my pockets, I clutched the vial of elixir as I stopped before her. I demanded my fingers to remain inside the material and not to cup her swollen breasts. "Pleasant night?"

She bared her teeth like a feral cat, showing sharp canines and rage. "I didn't think you'd show."

"Disappointed?"

"No...relieved."

I sucked in a breath. "Relieved?" A scowl pulled my brows low. "How so?"

"It means I can stop repeating all the things I want to say to you. A speech I've rehearsed while my feet bruised from the wire and my dignity was shredded thanks to peeing in a bucket."

"So you didn't find the cage inviting?" I cocked my head. "What a

surprise.”

She sniffed with temper. “I have so many things to say. So many curses I want to deliver. I want to tell you that you’ll never put me back in that place...but I know there’s no point. You can, and you probably will.”

Her head tipped up as I stalked toward her. “You have control in that, you know. Obey, and you live in luxury. Disobey, and the cage becomes your new home.”

She stiffened. Her belly filled and flattened as she inhaled. Her nakedness caused my lust to swarm like a thousand wasps, hissing through my veins, filling me with venom to take. I hated that I’d done that to her. But I’d do it again if it meant I could protect myself from her.

This woman.

Christ.

“That cage...who did it belong to?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You say who, but don’t you mean *what*?”

She frowned, mulling over my point that all humans spoke of creatures as a thing and not a soul. “Did the animal have a name?”

My stomach clenched. “Of course.”

“Then my question still stands. *Who* lived in that cage?”

My heart shed off its heavy hive of lust in favour of a deadly pounding potion of interest. She continued to surprise me. And each surprise punctured my defences a little more.

Clearing my throat, I murmured, “Ace. A chimpanzee.”

“How long did he live in there?”

“Before I sent him into whatever afterlife there is for apes? Years. Decades.”

She blanched. All colour slid from her cheeks, faded from her chest, pooled by her feet. “Decades?” She shook her head, sending hair whispering over her perfect skin. “On that wire floor?” Tears coated her grey gaze, turning them into rain clouds. “God.”

I’d come here prepared to battle with her temper. To antagonise her into fury because having her hate me was the only way I could fool myself into thinking I didn’t want her. But I wasn’t prepared for her empathy. Or for the way her mind switched from her own uncomfortable night, translating that to the pain of the cage’s prior resident.

A poor monkey whose days included being injected with drugs, hair shaved, and chemicals applied to delicate skin, being placed into crushes so

he couldn't move while scientists dropped all manner of so-called miracle medicines into his eyes to see if he'd scream. No part of his body was his own. His ears, his mouth, his anus, his flesh. All of it had some role for testing.

I cleared my throat again, chasing away the chill under my suit.

Eleanor blinked back her grief, her shoulders no longer tense with fight but rolled with sadness. She actually laughed once. A single sound of mirthless misery. "You know...I actually thought I was coping pretty well with my new reality. I refused to talk to the traffickers because my silence put me above them. I lived through your sexual initiation. I set aside my embarrassment and faced Euphoria as best I could. I didn't let a chance of escape pass me by even though I knew it was probably futile."

Licking her lips, she added, "I even felt a bit of pride. Can you believe that? *Pride* that I hadn't broken. That I stood up to you. That I kept waking up each day myself and not some broken replica. But wow..." She shook her head again, dropping her gaze to her feet, standing on one leg to study the faint red marks on her sole, courtesy of the cage wire. "I'm nothing compared to Ace."

A tremble began in my thighs, infecting my body and hands. I wanted her to shut up...before she could ruin me in an entirely new way.

But her delicate voice fell with a harsh whisper, "Abuse comes in so many forms. A single moment or prolonged event. After one night, I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to never spend another in that cage...and because I can talk to you—because we speak the same language, I probably stand a good chance of achieving that goal. However, a poor chimp or dog or cat—any creature at the hands of prolonged abuse—doesn't have the ability to speak. Even though they're probably begging for death, they still wag their tail when their owner comes, hoping that today will be the day they get a scratch instead of a kick. Each time the cage opens, they trust that maybe they've been good enough to be freed. That there is an end to a punishment that they didn't deserve. And each day the kick comes, and the cage closes, and they wonder what they did wrong."

A tear spilled down her cheek unchecked. She didn't try to wipe it away. She didn't stop staring at her feet as if the tiles had become a crystal ball, a seer's tool to peer through classifications of mammals and segregations of species to not just witness the animal's nightmare but to live it. "So...in answer to your question if I had a pleasant night? I want to change my reply

and not complain about myself. I won't complain about my discomfort because the other inhabitant of that cage couldn't. He couldn't voice his pain. He couldn't beg for a reprieve. He just endured. Every damn day. For decades."

When she looked up, I struggled to keep my façade in place. The mask I'd worn for so long that I'd forgotten I had another face beneath it. A mask that caused grievous bodily harm because it was his right to do so. A disguise that allowed me to be the monster my brother was, the heartless people my parents were, the superior over everyone.

She saw that slip. Her gasp gave her away. Her eyes danced over mine, diving deep, tearing through my walls until I felt her inside me. Her tiny hands clutched at my sins. Her dainty feet ran over my scars. In a heartbeat, she'd run riot in my psyche and left utter destruction in her wake.

So I did the only thing I could do.

I dropped the barrier against my lust and my sanity.

I ripped my hands from my pocket and dove my fingers into her hair. Our bodies went flush, fitting together as if we'd always had, her female liquidity against my male rigidity, and...

I kissed her.

I pressed my mouth to hers and tore my way into her just like she'd torn into me. My tongue was a knife, slicing her to ribbons; my saliva was a poison, killing her before she killed me.

The harness around her body held her steady, but her arms were free to move. I jolted as her touch scalded my neck. I shivered as her fingers became nails, digging into me as I dug into her. My hands dropped down her spine, gathering her harder against me so she'd feel how much I struggled. How much I fucking wanted her.

Her lips widened under mine, and I kissed her harder.

I kissed her until all I could taste was her, all I could remember was her, until bruises painted our lips blue.

I needed to stop.

Everything.

But I only kissed her deeper, struggling to breathe. My body turned savage and weak all at once. My mind swam, lightheaded with need. Snatching her off her feet, I stumbled off balance.

Our lips disengaged, and I automatically released her so I didn't pull her down with me. The harness kept her standing while I fell to one knee.

Somehow, I'd ended up doing what I'd fought against since she landed on my beach.

I bowed.

I bowed at her fucking feet and looked up at the most stunning girl I'd ever seen. A girl who wasn't a goddess, after all, but a golden-hearted human who was even rarer than myth.

Her lips were swollen and pink. Her gaze no longer filled with rain but lightning bolts. I needed to prepare her for Euphoria, but all I could do was stare up and ask the most damning question. A question I'd asked before but still didn't have a fucking answer.

"Who *are* you?" My tone had tangled with darkness and desire, weighed down with sand.

Her swollen lips parted, perhaps to give me some cosmic answer delivered by fate's arrow, or maybe to curse me with an even greater spell. Either way, I wasn't prepared to listen.

I didn't have the goddamn strength.

Wrapping my arm around the top of her thighs and clamping a hand on her hip, I dragged her forward. I gave her no room to argue or struggle as my mouth clamped down on an entirely different part of her body.

The moment my tongue touched her clit, the harness creaked with her full weight. She went lax and locked tight all at once. "Ah...God. Sully —no."

No?

I didn't understand that word anymore.

No was something you said about inconsequential things.

This?

Tasting her? Tonguing her?

This was not inconsequential.

This was fucking *consequential*. The biggest consequence of my life.

My tongue drove inside her.

She cried out, swinging in her binds. Wetness welcomed me to dive deeper; her inner muscles clutching around my invasion. Her body flushed with heat as I released her hip and brought my hand between her legs.

While my tongue circled her clit and her desire made her pant, I pressed two fingers inside her. The second her body swelled and settled around my touch, she moaned so guttural and raw, my hips pumped into air.

I couldn't control the instinctual need to replace my fingers with my

cock.

Everything about this girl made me drunk. It made me forget my boundaries. My promises. It made me go rogue with the need to take everything I could. To steal her senses. Her sanity. To make her as tormented as me.

My teeth unsheathed, biting her clit as I rocked my fingers deep. Her hips undulated against my face. I growled as she whimpered, her body releasing another silky wet welcome.

My tongue lavished every part of her. She tasted of citrus and frangipani from her bath that all goddesses had access to before serving in Euphoria. She smelled wild and ripe with need.

I thrust deeper into her, driving my fingers as far as they'd go. My knuckles pressed against her pussy lips. My tongue lashed and teeth teased.

And I broke her into pieces.

Her orgasm swelled and shattered in a single heartbeat. The force of it milked my fingers with tight pressure, rhythmic and primal. The beast inside me wanted to respond. It knew what the bands of muscles and the fading cries of Eleanor's pleasure meant.

She was at the pinnacle of passion. She'd come, but that only made her more receptive, more open to deeper claiming, harder fucking, rougher connection.

She wasn't pleased.

She was primed.

Primed to be mounted and taken.

The thought of removing my fingers from her still pulsing body and removing my tongue from her delicious taste almost kept me locked on my knees, but the feral hunger to thrust my body into hers jerked my hand from between her legs and forced me to scramble upright.

She swayed in her harness. Eyes hazed and nipples hard. A trickle of her release glittered on her inner thigh.

As my hands went to my belt and undid the loop, I made yet another colossal mistake.

The worst one yet.

I allowed our eyes to lock.

I allowed myself to *see*.

To see the same thing in her that had grown unavoidable in me.

Something that shouldn't exist. A demon that began in the heart and

slowly ate its way through mind, sense, and soul.

Despite everything that I'd done. Despite our roles in each other's lives...that demon had grown. Mirroring pieces that looked a lot like budding, unfurling, dangerous, treacherous love—

No.

No fucking way.

I backed away.

I tripped.

My phone alarm went off.

Announcing it was time for Eleanor to be fucked by Roy Slater.



Chapter Twenty-Six

I COULDN'T KEEP UP.

Two moments ago, Sully had his tongue between my legs, his touch inside me, and a blistering orgasm—invoked purely by emotion and connection, instead of that cursed elixir—had ricocheted through me.

Now, a stranger stood before me. A man with an unreadable face, black-blue eyes, and an ever blacker mood.

Wrenching the trolley to stop beside me, he opened the boxes he'd used during my first preparation for Euphoria.

My heart cracked as he poured oil into his hands and spread it over my body. Clinical and angry, no lingering over the parts of me that throbbed for his attention.

Once the oil gleamed, he inserted the earbuds, the eye lenses, the astringent scent under my nose, and made me swill with whatever magic that changed my sense of taste. His hands were icy as he clutched my fingers and placed the sensor pads on each. His nostrils flared as he ensured the harness that another one of his staff had placed on me was locked securely.

Part of me swelled with tears. The other part snarled with anger.

How *dare* he kiss me? How dare he bring me to an orgasm? How dare he drag feelings I didn't want to face to the surface and then witness those feelings bobbing like a capsized boat in my eyes, waving a white flag in surrender, begging him to save me.

For a second, I'd thought he'd scoop me up and release me from my

position of whore. I envisioned a conversation that unknotted the twisted, tightening, electrifying rope between us. I'd seen a mirroring boat in his gaze, packed full of similar feelings. But unlike mine offering surrender, his was a pirate ship ready to plunder.

Raking a hand through his hair, he refused to look at me as he stepped back and pulled up an app on his phone.

He'd prepared me so fast, I couldn't see very well through the lenses. My vision hadn't accepted them yet. My ears rebelled against the hushed world behind the buds. My fingers itched to feel truth not lies.

I didn't want to go into Euphoria like this.

I didn't want to go in at all.

I didn't want another man to touch me after Sully had made me come.

It made me feel dirty and worthless. A coin passed from one billionaire's pocket to another. Useless and unwanted.

With the app open, Sully placed his phone onto the trolley, then swallowed hard and pulled the dreaded vial from his pocket.

I cringed away, fighting against the imprisonment of the harness. "Sully...please. Don't." I searched his sea-blue gaze for any sign of what he'd shown before. Any hint that I might not be the only one drowning beneath such horrors. But his eyes were closed off, impenetrable, resolute.

Stepping into me, he pulled the stopper out and cupped the back of my head.

Wordlessly, he held the vial to my lips.

I clamped them shut and shook my head, pleading silently to stop.

His chest heaved as his fingers dug into the back of my head. He fisted a handful of hair, and with a sadistic yank, he pulled my head back, igniting pain over my scalp.

With my lips open in a soundless scream, he tipped the elixir onto my tongue.

I wasn't fast enough to spit this time.

His large hand clamped over my mouth, pinching my nose at the same time.

Our eyes locked again, but unlike last time, our roles were very clear. No muddy guesses or tentative hope that this meant more. Just tyrannical clarity that I was his to use, rent, abuse.

I swallowed.

I swallowed the elixir, my stupid hope, my eternal optimism, and most

of all, I swallowed any unruly affection until I could no longer feel its fluttering wings in my belly.

I wanted it to die.

Forever.

With a tortured noise in his chest, he ran his thumb along the seam of my lips, gathering up whatever lingered. With a darkness etching his eyes, he placed his thumb into his own mouth as if tasting the residue of elixir he'd fed me.

His eyes snapped closed.

My heart quickened.

Maybe, he wouldn't go through with it. Perhaps, he'd keep me—

He snatched his phone from the trolley.

And before I could speak, he pressed the button.

The world went white.

My system overloaded.

I traded real world for illusion.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

I WASN'T A MAN.

I was pure rage.

Rage and confusion and turbulence.

Churning storms full of blurring lines and major fuck ups.

A monster with a heart that'd suddenly remembered how to *care*.

I *cared* about her.

I *wanted* her.

I *love*—

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck!



Chapter Twenty-Eight

I STOOD ON A doorstep.

A simple, suburban doorstep in a cookie-cutter neighbourhood. I glanced around, trying to figure out what the hell this meant. A potted pansy rested by the front door, bright red paint highlighted the entry, and a perfectly mowed lawn swept all the way to a snowy white fence and flamingo-shaped letterbox.

I tried to stay focused on the strangeness of this normal world, but a dangerous bubbling had already begun in my blood. An insidious hint that the elixir Sully had poured down my throat had attached itself to my nervous system and begun its swift takeover.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I fought it as best I could.

I tried to understand this new universe.

I didn't know what I'd expected, but I'd braced myself for another cave. Another fire crackling, blizzard blowing, mildew painted prehistoric cave. I shuddered at the thought of another caveman coming to mount me without any introduction.

A moan tried to claw up my throat as my nipples hardened and a flush of heat worked its way down my belly to my core. Wild need licked under my skin, searching for relief.

Hugging myself, I tried to contain the bubbles and rapidly pinging lust within. I hadn't prepared to find myself standing on some stoop with sun that felt so real beaming on my skin and the squeals of kids playing on their bike

down the road.

Where was the man I'd been sent to?

Who would help me when I could no longer function as a girl and became a writhing creature instead?

Please...

My pussy clenched on nothing, sending another flood of heat through my insides.

Oh, God.

Sully might've given me an orgasm before my arrival, but it wouldn't be enough. One would *never* be enough.

I need...

God, I need.

No!

Stop it!

Sweat broke out over my forehead as heartbeat by heartbeat, my body became prisoner to its carnal wants.

Ignore it.

Just...ignore it.

Another full-body clench squeezed every cell. I swear each atom and molecule died a tiny orgasmic death. I shivered as my clit swelled for touch.

Not just any touch.

Rough handling and brutal use.

I wanted a man to cup me whole and let me grind on his palm. I wanted him to push me against this wall and fuck me.

Oh—

I jolted with gluttony. Sexual gluttony I couldn't ignore but had to feast on. My hand dropped to press against my pussy.

I tripped forward, losing my balance, and bracing myself against the doorframe.

My palm hit a button, sending a shrill ring slicing through the quaint neighbourhood.

My lust hiccupped, faced with a new threat.

The doorbell echoed within the house, announcing my arrival.

I waited to be found out. To be chased off this persons' porch before I fell to my knees and tried to have sex with their doormat.

When no one came, I buckled over as another wave washed over me.

A hot and hungry wave, thick and cloying, filling my mind with sinning

desire. As I swallowed hard, a horrendous thought filled me. If there was no one here. If Sully had sent me to a world where I was alone, I would resort to what I'd become when I'd first arrived. My fingers would ache from getting myself off. My wrists would snap from the pressure I'd use to pleasure myself.

I didn't want it.

But...I couldn't fight it.

I tore at the tie around my neck.

Tie?

Glancing down, I gasped.

What the—

I wore...a restaurant uniform.

White shirt, blue tie, and grey skirt. Black high-heels, white knee-high socks, and a cute fishtail braid completed my café worker look.

Fear quickened my heart rate, tangling with my deranged lust.

What sort of fantasy had I stepped into?

Looking back at the curb, I debated running and knocking on all the doors. To try to find someone who could help me. Someone who I could tell my true name and had the power to pull me from this virtual program and save me from molestation.

But if I did that, I would provide them with a show.

A one-woman peepshow where all my inhibitions faded and the only thing that mattered was bliss. I wouldn't care if they watched. I'd probably invite husbands to join me. I'd become someone I despised, all because I couldn't stop the licking, hissing, snarling need in my blood.

I yanked at my hair.

No!

I don't have to give in.

I don't!

Even as I cursed my weakness, I pressed my thighs tighter, adding friction to my throbbing clit. My breasts ached beneath my shirt. I fidgeted and fumbled, desperate to remove my clothes but still sane enough to fight.

I probably had another minute before I'd be reduced to masturbating on this doorstep.

Please!

I crumpled over, hugging my traitorous body as the door swooped open. Instinct ordered me to move away.

I tripped backward, swallowing a groan at the delicious whisper of clothes over sensitive skin.

I straddled the border of climaxing and being severely tormented by a release that refused to shatter. I gasped as sweat ran down my spine, my body in the throes of passion when doing something as simple as standing on a stoop.

Feet filled my vision.

Bare, masculine feet that belonged to long legs encased in faded jeans. Wrapping my arms tight around my roiling belly, I dared look up.

My gaze locked on the face of a roguishly handsome man in his early forties. Trimmed dark hair swept off a handsome face. Lips full but still uniquely male and piercing blue eyes.

Sea eyes.

Sully eyes.

My heart flopped and suffocated, not knowing if it wanted to pump with passion or die with hate. I could still feel his tongue between my legs. Still feel my wet shame on my inner thigh.

Another smear had joined the wetness Sully had given me.

Soon, I would be drenched thanks to a drug that attacked my brain, twisting me from complex human into mindless animal.

Tears sprang to my eyes as my mind played a highlight reel of Sully on his knees before me, his head between my spread legs, his tongue diving inside me.

God.

He'd successfully made me come without elixir.

He'd been the first male to do that.

In our five-month relationship, Scott had never made me come. I'd had to help myself along, if I'd felt inclined, while we'd slept together.

But Sully...it'd taken him mere minutes. He'd driven his fingers and tongue deep inside me until I—

I buckled as a repeat orgasm spindled and threatened to burst me apart.

Yes.

No.

Yes—

"Hello." The man smiled, interrupting my release, freezing me with mortification.

For a blissful minute, the elixir gave me a break, and I stood upright

instead of hunched like a crippled thing.

His smile never slipped as his eyes ignited with matching lust. Seemed my need was contagious. We stared for a long moment, sparks crackling and desire flowing from his body to mine.

At least I wouldn't have to self-administer my antidote.

This man would help.

He was the one I'd been sent to.

I didn't know who he was.

I didn't recognise him, but he would help me because I would willingly shed my clothing right here. I'd beg him to put me out of my misery if necessary.

He backed into his house with a shadowy stare, opening his arm in invitation. "Come in. You must be hot out there." His body moved with elegance, his legs long and torso broad with muscle.

His invitation reeked of sex.

If I entered, I wouldn't be getting out untouched.

This stranger and I would be on exquisitely intimate terms by the time I left. *If* I could leave. If I could walk after he'd finished with me.

"Come in...please." He bowed; a strand of dark hair fell over his forehead. "My son won't let me hear the end of it if I let his girlfriend die of heatstroke outside."

His words were innocent.

His voice was not.

Pure potency brewed with darkness and yearning.

I shook my head, trying to clear the elixir steadily creeping back over me. This stranger might be unknown to me, but he was a guest on Sully's island. This was his avatar to hide behind, a long-held perception of himself who he'd always wanted to become.

The illusion was so real.

The neighbourhood so tangible.

The happy cries of street kids so cherub-like.

Even the scents of potted flowers and home-cooked baking danced on the air.

When I didn't move, trapped between knowledge of what this place was with the denial of the truth, he reached forward and held out this hand.

"Come. Let's get you inside."

Just because I understood this world a little better, thanks to Sully

explaining how his magic worked, didn't mean I could force my brain not to buy into this seamless hallucination.

My hand rose to meet his.

Our fingers touched.

My knees buckled.

He dragged me inside and slammed the door.

The second the outside world vanished, I no longer cared about my surroundings. A generic lounge with two black couches, a TV, large picture windows to a pretty garden, and a white kitchen in the distance.

I didn't care about any of it because the man shoved me against the door and pressed his body to mine.

I whimpered as he rocked his erection into my belly.

"Fuck, I've missed you."

I wanted to ask how he thought we knew each other. Why he cared so much about his son's girlfriend, but his lips crashed onto mine.

Instantly, the final army I had against the elixir's invasion threw down their weapons and yielded. It felt as if my chest cracked open, revealing a too-fast heart, unzipping me from the inside. My need was exposed, dripping in bright red blood and crackling gold lust. I lusted right down to my bones. Desperation infected me from the top of my scalp to the bottom of my feet.

He could touch me anywhere, and I'd probably come.

"I want you so fucking much. I think I've *always* wanted you. How can I exist knowing that *you* exist? How can I survive if I don't take you for my own?"

His lips bruised mine.

I moaned into his kiss, into his declarations, swept away by my body but held hostage by my mind.

Sully.

I only wanted to kiss Sully.

Not this man.

Not Scott.

Not anyone.

Just Sully.

His tongue swept over mine, and my thoughts crackled with bad reception, sending hissing snow, burying my misplaced loyalty with yet more uncontrollable elixir.

I didn't know what I was most upset about.

That I would willingly kiss a stranger back. That I would clutch at his hair and rock my hips into his, or that I felt disloyal to Sully...not Scott.

That my heart cried because I wanted the monster who bought women to be the one kissing me, not my caring, travelling partner who shared my life goals and destinations.

What sort of minx did that make me?

What a goddamn harlot.

I hated myself.

I wanted to punish myself.

So I kissed him harder, throwing myself at the stranger's mercy.

With a guttural groan, he ripped himself away, reeling backward as if I'd done the wrong thing submitting to him. "No...we can't."

I blinked. My lips burned from his. My breasts heaved with breath. With him gone, all the urgency and potency from my own desire returned tenfold, and my fingers fluttered to finish his task.

I curled my hands, doing my best not to pinch my nipples, or to rub my clit in pain.

"You're off-limits. You've always been off-limits." The man paced with his hands buried in his hair. "I can't have you. It would kill me if I did..." He rubbed his mouth. "And it would kill him...my son."

I struggled to follow, resorted to a writhing, wanting mess. "Why...why am I off-limits?" My voice was unrecognisable—thick and throaty, lusty and seductive.

"Because you're his!" He spun to face me, his hands falling helplessly to his sides. "Because you're dating my son."

"Oh." I blinked again, everything hazy with the need to be taken and used. "Is...is he here?" Had I messed up this daydream? Was I supposed to sleep with this man's son instead? How was I supposed to know what my service was to be if Sully never told me who to pleasure?

I didn't *want* to pleasure anyone else.

I wanted someone to pleasure *me*.

That was the whole purpose of elixir—to take away my morals and leave me a gasping, begging beast.

Well, I was one.

I'd reached the end of my limit.

I had nowhere else to go, nowhere else to fall.

I needed to come.

Now.

Immediately.

Please!!!

Claustrophobia wrapped me with tight thorny claws, and I reached for the tie around my throat. Tugging it off, I threw it to the floor, then worked feverishly on my shirt buttons.

“Wha-what are you doing?” The man stopped and stared. His gaze turned to blazing blue gems. “Please...stop.”

God, what was with this messed-up illusion?

Stop?

I couldn't stop!

That was the *problem!*

Sully had turned me into a monster who needed, positively *needed* to be fucked. I didn't care how or who by...only that someone did.

Stepping toward him, I worked on my skirt. The button popped off my hip, followed by a zipper. I shivered as I stepped out of the grey material, leaving it pooled on the floor.

I kicked off my heels.

He jerked, his gaze locking onto my legs. My bare legs. The only thing I wore were my white high socks, white shirt, and whatever underwear this fucked-up fantasy had given me.

His voice broke. “Do...do you need me as much as I need you?”

I nodded, biting my lip.

A tear trickled down my cheek at how wrong and delicious this was. How drunk I was, knowing I was breaking him. How distraught I was, knowing I broke myself.

He groaned, biting his fist. His mouth opened then closed. Then black determination covered his face. “Then show me.”

It was as if someone else had taken control of my body. Just like in the cave, my soul had sunk deep, deep inside me until only basic, raw desires remained. Words were so hard. Comprehension even harder.

All I wanted, all I lived for was sex.

And he wanted me to show him how much I craved it?

Fine.

Trading the shirt buttons for my underwear, I yanked them down my legs, letting them puddle and reveal a glistening wet patch in the crotch. I moaned as cool air licked my throbbing flesh.

Another almost-orgasm grated my teeth together. My hand drifted between my legs.

“Stop.” His command was vicious and sudden. “Come here.”

I tripped and almost crawled to him, rubbery legged and in pain, pain, *pain*. He gathered me close as I fell into his arms.

He felt so good.

So strong.

So tall.

So *male*.

I pressed my face into his black t-shirt, inhaling him.

The delicious scent of man’s aftershave and books. A papery heavy smell that brought more tears to my eyes because it smelt so comforting. Comforting but sexual. Sex was my entire reason to exist.

“I can’t look at you.” He kissed the top of my head, his entire body vibrating. “I won’t be able to stop if I look.”

I cried out as a full-body attack made me buckle. I was losing myself. Losing everything. “Please...” I clutched his shirt. “Please.”

“You’re begging me now? You’re meant to be here for my son.”

I licked my lips, our mouths so close. “*Please*.”

His eyes snapped shut and he cupped my cheek. “You’re fucking killing me.”

You’ve already killed me.

His refusal was the sharpest knife, stabbing through each rib, puncturing my lungs until I couldn’t breathe, slashing at my chemically conquered desire.

“I need. I *need*—”

I arched in his hold as another crippling pain ripped through me. A release destined to butcher me unless I let it have me. Unless this man let me come before I splintered and pulverised.

“Okay...” he murmured. “I can’t look but...show me in other ways.” His hand trailed from my cheek and over my breast. “Let me feel you.”

I nodded frantically, unable to stand straight as his hand continued its downward journey and dipped beneath my skirt.

His fingers slid along my fevered thigh, creeping higher and higher until another gush of wetness sprang to welcome him.

When he finally touched me?

I screamed.

I had no embarrassment. I gave in to the violent, vice-like explosion.

“Ah, fuck.” His gentle touch became a swift impale. “Fuck!” Three fingers in one. A shaft of pleasure, piercing me and sending me skyward.

My core sucked greedily at his fingers. I bowed in his arms as he jerked me close and drove into me again and again. He let me ride him, grunting and groaning in time with my own rabid cries.

The orgasm lasted for too many bleeding heartbeats. By the time the last wringing wave left me trembling and useless, I begged to sleep. To close my eyes on this nightmare and wake up in my villa.

But...it wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

I needed another one.

And another.

More.

More.

More.

The man removed his fingers, holding his hand up as if shocked at the coating of my desire. Thick threads of lust decorated him. Shame tried to make me pull away. Exhaustion and need won over.

I hung helpless in his embrace as he gawked at my wetness.

The blatant symbolism of how much I needed to be fucked made his knees quake. He tripped with me in his arms to the couch, and we tumbled onto the black leather. His body bounced on mine, our hips aligned, and I grunted as his hard cock wedged against my oversensitivity. “Do you know how much I’ve wanted you? How I’ve dreamed of you? How many times I’ve fucked my hand thinking of you?”

I moaned as he arched his hips, driving into me.

Finally.

Yes!

But then, he was gone.

Standing over me while I stayed strewn on the couch, he unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans with shaking hands. “I’ll show you what you do to me. How much I long to stick this so fucking far inside you.” Fumbling at his clothing, he pushed his jeans and boxer-briefs to his thighs, fisting a huge erection.

The head bled pre-cum, the veins on the sides looked angry enough to pop. He choked it as if he wished he could cut it off and remove the sinning

desire in his heart. I understood that. I'd give anything to be free of my lust.
But...we could be free together.

Scrambling onto my knees on his couch, I couldn't tear my eyes off his cock.

"That's all for you. I've never gotten this hard for anyone. Never needed to be inside someone so much."

Without a word, I spun around and grabbed the headrest of the couch. I arched my back, giving him full permission. My white socks slicked on the leather, and my shirt rose up. I put on a display, hoping to God he'd finish us. That he'd put us both out of this crippling agony.

"Christ, I can't do this. I can't fuck you because I'm already in love with you. And if I have you...how can I give you back to him...my son?"

"I don't care." I growled. "Just...please." I rolled my hips, in the perfect position for him to mount. "Fuck me."

He made a noise of tangled torment and furious fury. His body heat blazed me from behind.

For an endless second, he refused me.

He refused a dripping girl who gagged for it.

But then...he refused no more.

His fingers dug into my hips, jerking me back. One hand soared up to clutch my nape, grabbing my braid and shoving my face against the couch while his other fisted himself and teased my entrance with his cock.

I bit the leather, rocking and wriggling, fighting his predator's hold.

His hips shot forward.

His grunt of victory dripped down my back as he took me.

We went from two separate entities to one. Joined by sex. Bound by the need to mate. His cock spread and filled every cavern of me.

Thick and long. Throbbing and taking.

Nothing had ever felt so good, so filling, so *right*.

He didn't wait for my body to accept him before withdrawing and slamming back in. My breasts jiggled beneath my shirt as he thrust over and over again. The couch squeaked on the hardwood floor as he ravished me, plundered me, crawled deep, deep inside me and made me his.

My cries were fed directly into his furniture as I arched as much as I could, begging him to take everything.

And he did.

He groaned and grinded, drowning me beneath his passion.

He hurt me.

He didn't hurt me enough.

He drove me high, high, high and at the very top of the most blistering orgasm, he granted me wings and flew with me.

Spiralling, thrusting, riding each other on the climax vortex, our cries blending into one as our bodies drained each other of pleasure.

We gave each other what we needed.

We came over and over.

We chased our joy until our pleasure turned into pain and we had nothing else to give.

He collapsed onto his knees, dragging me off the couch to fall on his chest.

His cock stayed inside me, twitching and hungry.

I didn't care I lay spread and lewd on top of him.

And there we stayed, catching our breath, covered in sweat, waiting for the next indecent wave.

The next thirst.

The next monstrous urge to fuck.

* * * * *

It felt like mere heartbeats passed and he was ready again, thickening inside me with new desire.

Withdrawing, he rolled me onto my back and kicked the coffee table away, pressing me onto the grey carpet at the foot of his couch. Sliding over my body, our skin brushed, my nipples pebbled, and his blue eyes glowed so similar to Sully's intensity.

My stomach clenched with pain, wanting this illusion to stop, wishing it was Sully who looked at me the way this man did—full of awe and incredulous gratefulness that he got to touch me.

It felt nice to be wanted so desperately.

Nice to see the brokenness inside him, knowing I alone had the power to cure him.

His hand cupped my cheek gently.

I flinched at the power hissing between us, a bond that was fake compared to the truth between Sully and me—the truth he tried so damn hard to deny.

I needed, needed, *needed*.

Angling his hips, the man settled between my legs, spreading me,

groaning as his hardness slipped into my wetness.

“Oh...” I moaned, confused and teased by his controlled possession.

My body screeched for a hostile takeover. To be abused and used, to be wrung dry and pleased. But...having him so deep and still inside me was a new type of delicious torture.

I hadn't expected slow or sweet. No fierce impale, no anger or argument. Just a glide of his body into mine, an invasion of his soul knocking on the door of my own.

My core squeezed around him, begging him to rock. The size of him stretched me until all my focus locked where we joined.

I'm so close...

I wanted to come again, to use his body in my quest of never-ending bliss.

“You know...” He bent and brushed his lips against mine, dark disbelief in his tone. “I’m helplessly in love with you.”

I jerked at the sincerity he kissed me with, the absolute joy and miserable horror that followed as an aftertaste.

“I’m not supposed to be in love with you,” he growled. “It should never have fucking happened.”

I kissed him back, my pussy clenching around his cock again, hungering for something other than sweet. As much as love notes and heart confessions ought to woo a girl...I didn't need wooing.

I needed fucking...*now*.

“What about your son?” I murmured, arching my back and rocking my hips into his.

He groaned, grinding with me, changing my rhythm into an erotic beat. “What about him?”

I frowned as the man drove upward, thrusting deep, signalling whatever softness existed was now over. “You can't do that to him. I'm his.”

“As far as I'm concerned, I have no fucking son.” His jaw clenched as need sizzled hotter between us. He smiled viciously as he claimed me. “You belong to me now, and I'm not the sharing type.”

He thrust harder, quicker, digging my spine into the carpet, adding fuel to the elixir in my blood. My body hummed with pleasure, making me dance on the precipice of another release.

“You're mine.” He continued rutting into me, deeper, faster. His hair flopped over his forehead as he planted his hands into the carpet and fed

every inch of his cock into me. “And fuck if that’s not going to be the crux of so many problems.”

He said things I wanted to hear...but his voice wasn’t right. His face wasn’t the one I wanted to see. He meant nothing to me other than someone to scratch my sexual itch.

So...I closed my eyes and pretended.

I permitted every atom to spindle and spiral in my core for someone else.

Sully.

“Yes. God, yes.”

“Fuck, I want you.” His nose nuzzled my throat as I let go. “Come for me. That’s it. *Come.*”

I obeyed.

Wave after wave, rapture and paradise and nirvana and every other word that Sully had copyrighted—owning them with his euphoric fantasies, owning me as I served within his command—raced through my mind as I milked him.

Sully!

I swallowed his name but I came for him.

I came as another man fucked me.

The guest followed me into bliss, growling his release as he jerked deep inside me.

The second he finished climaxing, he withdrew, splashing a milky droplet of combined moisture on the carpet and flipped me onto my knees. I barely got my balance on all fours before he was inside me again, yanking me back as he thrust forward, feeding me every inch of him, still throbbing from his orgasm.

“Come again.” His body bowed over mine, his hand going between my legs and finding my swollen clit. “Come while I’m balls deep inside you.”

Dirty words, hot erection, and illegal elixir all ensured I did exactly what he asked.

I screamed as I spit down the middle, fireworks spilling from my core, sparking and hissing around the room as I exploded.

My elbows buckled, sending my cheek to the carpet. His hands latched around my hipbones, holding my ass high, driving his cock over and over again.

He felt so good, so dominating, so furious.

He felt wild...exactly what I’d become.

Yes! Yes. Yes.

I went loose in his hold, allowing him to manhandle me, use me, fuck me as elixir reached the second stage...the freedom stage.

I let go entirely.

I was his.

No one else's.

I was the goddess of fucking and I crackled with superpower.

* * * * *

I moaned with bruises and burning skin as he slipped inside me again.

A few hours had passed. Our bodies held no more secrets. We'd claimed every inch of each other in a carousel of fellatio, copulation, and kisses.

No denial of our fate. No argument of what we were here to do.

We were two animals who no longer had to vocalize our thoughts, we felt them.

I knew he loved me.

I knew he worshipped me.

We'd stepped out of the role-play and no longer mentioned his son.

We were just us.

Together.

Free.

Stripped to our core, removed from our humanity, coupling and rutting, chasing the same unattainable goal of blissful, bonding tranquillity.

By the time my body had splintered through copious orgasms and broken any remaining pieces I had left, I had no muscle, no bone, no more elixir-given power.

I was a puddle of pleasure.

Curled up in my fantasy's arms.

Finally succumbing to another call of basic nature.

Sex had been my cruel, sadistic master.

Now...it was merciful sleep who owned me.

In some shadowy pocket of my heart...I would miss this guest. I would miss the way he idolized me. I would miss his incantations of love.

But...I missed another—someone who was *real*, even if he would never feel the same way.

I closed my eyes.

I cuddled closer.

And it was over.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

I STOOD OVER HER.

She hadn't woken when I'd carried her from Euphoria. She didn't open her eyes when I placed her gently on the bed and removed the sensors from her fingers, eyes, and ears. Calvin had followed me, there of his own accord and not at my request.

He stood in the shadows, his judgement once again thick. He never took his gaze off me, seeing every tattered breath, every heavy stumble. His scorn poured acid onto my bleeding, open wounds.

But he wasn't the only one who judged me.

Another pair of eyes bored into me. Black and brilliant, belonging to a tiny parrot that'd chosen this girl over anyone.

Skittles roosted in the villa's rafters, staring down at me while I stared down at Eleanor. The glow of green feathers and fluffy white chest reeked of innocence and faith. Faith that Eleanor would love her in return. Belief that nothing would come between them now she'd chosen her mate.

Regardless of species or sex, Skittles was Eleanor's to the day that tiny parrot died.

I *hated* that.

I didn't know how to cope with that.

Eleanor had been in my life only fleetingly, yet she'd upheaved it in the most painful of ways. She'd smashed through my convictions. She'd

wriggled her way into my devotions. She'd stolen my goddamn parrot.

As well as my motherfucking heart.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, warding off the headache brewing, knowing it was too late. The pressure had been building since Eleanor rowed away from my prison. Compounding with agony as her disappearance showed me just how far I was prepared to go.

I did my best to do what I'd always done and segment myself off from such weakness. Affection for me only came with pain. Every time I'd fallen for a stray or given my heart to something that needed me, I'd ended up losing a piece of myself when they left. And those pieces shattered into dagger-sharp shards when I found out their fate in my parents' lab.

Love had made me blind. Weak. Oblivious.

I would never become so again.

And because of that, I'd reached an ending that only had two options.

Keep her.

Or...

Get rid of her.

Eleanor held more power over me than anyone. More than my brother. My board. My company. In two weeks, she'd changed me, reverted me, dis-evolved me into the kid I'd left in my past.

She had the power to make me fall head over fucking heels for her, and then, it would be all over.

I wouldn't be responsible for my actions if anyone tried to harm her.

I wouldn't be controllable if she ever tried to leave me.

I would kill to keep her and kill to protect her.

I would kill her...eventually.

All the things I'd ever loved had perished.

Dropping my hand, I sighed heavily.

I couldn't keep doing this.

She was mine. I'd paid good money for her servitude. Yet she was costing me far more than I was prepared to pay.

Regardless of her value, she couldn't stay.

I wanted her gone.

Before it was too late.



Chapter Thirty

SULLY CUPPED MY CHEEK.

Unlike his touches before, his hand was gentle, idolizing, burning up with need.

His eyes no longer held barriers and locked doors but were as clear as the sea after a storm. Refreshed, reborn, free from old hurt. “Jinx...fuck.” He pulled me into him, kissing me, tasting me.

My belly fluttered with fireflies, their light illuminating me from within. I moaned into his kiss. I kissed him back. Our tongues touched and stroked, slow and sensual.

Pulling away, he kissed his way down my throat, sending whirls of desire over my skin. “Jinx...I need you.”

I smiled as he placed me on my back, his nakedness against mine, our souls stripped bare.

Jinx.

That name was no longer a demotion to my stature as a goddess, but a nickname born in truth. Once upon a time, I’d been a girl called Eleanor. A girl who was normal and naïve.

But Jinx?

She was a goddess with control over a god.

I was immortal because I’d found the person I was meant to find.

He’d bought me.

But I’d jinxed him.

I'd cast a spell, summoned voodoo, conjured the most powerful hex to ensure Sullivan Sinclair became mine.

I wore that title with pride and honour.

I shivered when it fell from his mouth because it sounded as if he'd accepted my power. I'd become a charm, a priceless, irreplaceable piece of his heart.

His fingers entered me.

My back bowed.

His mouth devoured mine as his body hardened, and his fingers slipped away to allow entry for his cock.

As he aligned us together, he fisted my hair and kept me locked in his stare. We never looked away as he sank deeper and deeper, giving ourselves completely, both tumbling into a void where only we existed.

As he sheathed himself fully, his lips found my ear, and he whispered, "You've destroyed me." He groaned as he thrust into me. "Every piece now belongs to you. Broken and bloody but yours." His cock thickened, his teeth caught my throat. "I'm yours, Jinx. I always will be."

I shattered.

I came.

I woke up.

My eyes flew wide as my body clenched around nothing. I moaned and dug a fist into my lower belly as the lapping waves of an intense climax faded.

I'd come from a dream.

The elixir remained in my system, heightening my lust, ensuring I had the capacity to keep orgasming, even though I'd been wrung dry the night before.

The dreams were the worst side-effect. The constant craving for sex. The endless want for *more*.

Only once the final dregs of pleasure left my system did I brace myself for aches and bruises and sit upright in bed. The sheet fell from my breasts, pooling around my waist. I didn't remember how I got there. Who removed the sensors. What sort of state I'd been in after I'd passed out from too much sex, but I was unbelievably grateful to finally be in my villa.

Away from cages and nightmares.

Away from Sully and his demands.

Twice, he'd given me to other men.

Twice, I'd thought he'd change his mind before it was too late.

I knew he had feelings for me.

I know he does.

But his desire not to feel such things overruled the reality of our connection. I could fight for him to love me, but I couldn't fight him to accept it.

My body was bruised and battered from a stranger's touch. My insides throbbed from being used so thoroughly. My lips cracked from kisses. My throat sore from moans. But it wasn't just exterior parts that carried my battle scars. My heart also shadowed with bruises. It'd turned purple and blue with how Sully had played with it.

But...no more.

Today, I had a new goal. Trying to escape had allowed me the hard-swallowed realisation that this was my home for four years. It gave me a scapegoat and excuse if I never tried to run again.

And last night...that allowed me to accept that Sully was and always would be my master. That was it. That was all he'd ever permit. He would never tell me he loved me. He would never hold me as delicately as he had in my dream.

It was time to accept that. To stop standing up to him. To fade away into his happy harem and disappear from his attention.

It's the only way I'll survive.

Hissing between my teeth, I hobbled out of bed and into the bathroom.

Just like last time, a warm bath waited to soothe away my suffering. I slipped into it with another hiss, tensing as the water lapped against my sore pussy. Ten minutes passed before I had the strength to reach for the smoothie that waited with painkillers and vitamins.

Green this time.

Mint and apple, spinach and spirulina. The flavours punched through the taste of day-old kisses, helping to freshen my mouth and body, bringing me back to life.

After a few painkillers and vitamins, I crawled from the bath in much better condition than the last time I'd faced Euphoria. Either my body had begun to increase in stamina or the first fantasy had been more vigorous. Either way, flashes of being bent over the couch, having a man press his fingers inside me, thrusting his body into mine...they came and went, casting

my skin in shame and puckering my nipples with need.

I dried off and cleaned my teeth, avoiding the sorest parts.

Doing my best to walk as normally as I could, I dropped my towel and piled my long hair onto my head in a messy knot. I had no energy to brush the tangles today. Maybe after food I would.

For the first time since I'd woken, I looked outside. I expected to see bright sunshine. A welcoming afternoon just waiting for me to flop into the sand and allow its rays to heal me like last time. Unfortunately, twilight cast the island in dying sunlight, shadows crept from their corners, etching palm trees with darker colours and the sand a muted gold.

I slept all night and day?

I frowned, trying to work out timeframes. It'd been late afternoon when Sully stuck his tongue between my legs, then loaded me into his new guest's illusion. He'd made me come then sent me to be molested by another man.

My heart folded into itself.

How could he?

Shaking away the question, I balled my hands.

He can because he owns me. I'm nothing...even if I'm something.

I didn't know how long the fantasy had lasted or when I'd been brought back to my villa, but I could've slept for eighteen hours or so.

Turned out the kayaking adventure, cage, and Euphoria had all taken their toll.

Heading into the walk-in wardrobe, I tried not to focus on the hangers missing clothing that I'd taken and lost in the storm. With a shaky hand, I chose a loose-fitting black maxi dress. The soft material kissed the top of my feet while the straps rested low on my shoulders, creating a floaty boho look. With tendrils of my hair escaping my topknot, I looked so young.

Young but ancient.

Innocent but well-fucked.

Tearing my eyes from the mirror, I walked to the centre of my villa. Outside on the deck, an array of delicacies waited to be eaten. My stomach growled to devour every morsel.

But...last time I'd stay cloistered in my villa after Euphoria, Sully had visited. We'd eaten together. We'd stolen moments from our otherwise clear-cut existence and muddled them with desire.

If I wanted to avoid being emotionally tortured anymore, I had to become something he avoided at all costs.

I had to become Neptune and Calico and Jupiter. I had to turn my back on Jealousy who had secrets about Sully, who genuinely believed something could happen between us, and become a goddess he couldn't care less about.

That was my protection.

The space I needed to survive.

With my hands balled, I stepped from my villa and headed toward Divinity.

* * * * *

"Jinx..."

I sucked in a breath, freezing in the middle of the path.

A male voice, not female.

Tears pricked my eyes for no other reason than I'd had my fill of men. My body still carried two men's marks, one physical, one emotional. My mind wasn't ready to face more turmoil.

Footsteps quickened, linking the detached voice with its owner.

Roy Slater.

The man from the beach when Sully and I had arrived from *Serigala*. The man who probably heard me ask Sully to like me as an animal before he sent me away so he could negotiate my service.

Roy Slater was the guest who fucked me last night.

All colour drained from my body.

I stared at a total stranger.

A stranger I knew absolutely nothing about but had been extremely intimate with. He seemed normal, kind even, watching me with concern and affection. But...the fantasy last night? God, why did he have such twisted desires to sleep with his son's girlfriend? Was that true in real life or simply an erotic daydream he'd acted out with me?

He was handsome for an older man. Trim and healthy with a perfect white smile. He raised his hand as if to touch me.

I couldn't control my response.

I reeled backward, almost tripping into a spray of purple orchids. Orchids that gave their magic to Sully to make his foul elixir.

"Whoa, careful." He reached for me again, cupping my elbow with gentle fingers. "You okay?" Once he knew I had my balance, he let me go, retreating to a more appropriate distance.

I didn't speak. I choked on words and had nothing to share. I didn't know how to unscramble the fact that this man had been inside me. He'd

been on his knees with his entire face between my legs. He'd made me scream. He'd driven into me over and over again.

Yet he'd covered up who he was by choosing the face of another. He'd asked Sully to program him as slightly younger, slightly taller, and probably a lot more endowed.

"Jinx, I—" His cheeks pinked. "I'm glad I found you. I've been searching for you all day."

His embarrassment granted a salve to my own shame. My knees locked, and I stood straighter.

Just as he'd camouflaged who he was, my goddess name deleted everything I'd ever been. Would he still stare at me with lust and awe if he knew I'd only finished school a couple of years ago? Would he still remember touching me, fucking me, with satisfaction and pride if he knew I'd been stolen from my family and friends?

My stomach clenched on self-pity.

I'd promised myself I wouldn't wallow. Catching up on sleep ought to give me courage to keep going in this torturous existence, but my heart was drained. My heart that gave me a well of strength and optimism was empty, wrung dry by a man who cared more for an ant than he cared for me, and cracked thanks to this guest who took what he wanted from me and now had the audacity to believe there was mutual affection.

"How...are you?" he asked softly. His gaze staying on my face rather than trespassing on my body.

My nostrils flared with a blend of fury and frustration. Fury that this guy was *nice*. That he'd done something as gross as paying to sleep with me but had the compassion to check up on my well-being. And frustration because, it seemed Sully was right. Humans couldn't be trusted. This man probably had a doting wife at home who believed he was at some work conference. We were all liars and selfish to our own gains...over other's misfortune and pain.

At least my temper gave me my voice back. Squaring my shoulders, I replied, "Do you honestly care how I am?"

He flinched, dropping his gaze awkwardly to the sand.

Was I expected to ask about his welfare? To be grateful? Did Sully have a handbook on how a goddess was to treat a guest after Euphoria? Because in my mind, this man had taken all he'd get from me last night. Today, I hadn't been forced to drink a drug or have my senses stolen from me.

Today, I wasn't for sale.

I have another week until I'm up for rent again.

The morbid thought made me want to laugh for no other reason than helplessness. How many did Sully say I'd have to sleep with? One-hundred-and-ninety-two?

I still have one-hundred-and-ninety to go.

I sighed heavily, wrenching the guy's gaze back to mine. He no longer looked at me with rosy-coloured afterglow but an honest, raw expression that made my stomach tighten.

"Look, I know you'll think low of me. After all, I paid money to enjoy your company. I'm probably over double your age. And you most likely didn't enjoy our night together as much as I did." He rubbed a hand over his mouth. "But...I need you to know that I enjoyed every minute of it. I loved how eager you were. How receptive. How damn beautiful you are. I know your participation came from the serum Sinclair has created but I just wanted to say you gave me something I've been missing since my wife died ten years ago."

I froze as his voice wobbled without warning.

He smiled even as tears wetted his eyes. "Fuck." Swiping away his grief, he added, "Sorry, I don't know why the hell talking about her is affecting me so much. It's been years but...after last night...it reminded me just how much I miss female company. How much I miss being touched and touching someone. How much I miss looking after someone."

I flinched as he strode toward me and took my hand.

I wanted to pull away, but the imploring look on his face made me pause. He didn't strike me as evil or that I was at risk of being made to sleep with him again while alone on this sandy laneway. He honestly looked lost. Lost, alone, and terribly sad.

"Do you judge me for my fantasy?" His eyes tightened. "That you were in the role of my son's girlfriend?"

I wriggled my fingers in his, trying to get away. I couldn't exactly tell the truth, but I wouldn't lie, either. Then again, why *couldn't* I tell him the truth? Hopefully, he was leaving tonight, and we'd never see each other again.

Pinning him with a cool stare, I said, "Yes, I judge you. Why have such a fantasy if it's not based on truth? Why fantasise about your son's girlfriend? If you miss your wife like you say, then why not fantasise about *her*?"

He sighed, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles. Unlike when Sully

touched me, I had no sizzle, no spark. Just the annoying stroking of a man who carried far more baggage than his happy-go-lucky veneer suggested. He needed a therapist, not a goddess.

"I think about my wife constantly." He shrugged. "But I don't think about her when she died. I remember her how she was when we first met. Young. Vulnerable. Trusting and full of unconditional affection. Unfortunately...my daughter-in-law looks very similar to my wife... with the same blind devotion."

"Devotion to your son. Not you."

"I'm aware of that."

"It's abhorrent to lust after your son's partner." My nose wrinkled. "What sort of father does that make you?"

"A bad one." He flinched. "I'm aware it's a disgusting confession. But you have to understand, my son met his girlfriend on the two-year anniversary of my wife's death. When he brought her around, I almost fell to my knees thinking my Jody had been reincarnated in her. Watching them fall in love, seeing how much they cared for each other, being forced to realise that I would never have that with my wife again...it..." He sighed again. "It scrambled me a little. I witnessed them falling in love and went along for the ride. I fell for my daughter-in-law, not because I loved *her* exactly, but because I loved what she would give my son. What a relationship meant. How damn lucky they were to have each other. How much I missed that bond."

Ever so slowly, I extracted my hand from his control. "Look, I'm sorry you're hurting, but you can find another to love. Losing someone to death is tragic, but you need to allow yourself to heal." I blinked, surprised that such compassion had risen, despite my reservations of this whole interaction.

"And I suggest you keep such unacceptable desires hidden."

My stomach growled, reminding me I needed to eat. I needed to seek out the other goddesses and try to find a way to become one of them so Sully left me the hell alone in the future.

Roy Slater rolled his shoulders and nodded sadly. "I know. And I have tried, believe me." He licked his lips. "I've dated. I've done the online thing and even let a few friends set me up, but..." He chuckled low. "All women my age either have their own heartache, are too independent, or just want me for my money." His gaze rose, once again snaring mine. "I want a girl I can dote on. Someone young who *needs* me, not just wants me. I'm a wealthy

man, and I want to spend that wealth making her happy. It would...fulfil me and stop me being so empty."

I swallowed, searching for a reply. "I'm, eh...I'm sure you'll find such a person."

"I did." He arched his chin. "I found you."

"What?" I coughed. "No, no. You found a *fantasy*. That's what this whole island is. An illusion."

He shook his head. "You're not. You're special. You're different."

How often had I thought those words about Sully? How sometimes, I thought he felt the same way about me. Different meant '*You stand out to me over all the others.*' Special meant '*You could be what I'm looking for.*'

Both those words did not relate at all to this situation with Roy Slater. *Ugh.*

I didn't know being a whore also came with being a counsellor too. I wanted to leave. I stepped away to do so, but Roy murmured, "I'm in love with you. I know that's crazy to say after just one night, but the moment I saw you get off that helicopter with Sinclair, I knew you were it for me. I want...I want to take you home with me. I want—"

"Wait." I laughed.

I couldn't help it.

"You want to take me *home*?" I rolled my eyes. How ludicrous. How absolutely fucking crazy. Truth suddenly overflowed and exploded from my mouth. "You know I already *have* a home, right? A home that I was stolen from, family who probably think I'm dead. Do you know Sully doesn't hire us but buys us to pleasure you? Why do you think I want to go home with you, when all I want to do is go back to where I belong?"

Roy stiffened. "I'm sorry if I said the wrong thing."

He didn't act as if hearing of my captivity was news. He didn't respond like a normal man should after hearing a woman was trapped and used against their will. His sob story of missing his wife, of wanting a replacement to dote on...it wasn't sweet, it was sickening.

He wanted a toy to play with, a mannequin to dress up, and a blow-up doll to fuck.

Well, fuck that.

I'm done.

"Coming to this island was the wrong thing," I snapped. "Thinking you can buy me like he did? The *worst* possible thing." Storming up the pathway,

I shuddered as his voice followed me.

“I love you, Jinx. I do. I’m not lying. I love you, and I’m going to find a way for us to be together.”

I broke into a run.

Skittles fluttered from the undergrowth, her little wings snapping and zipping her through the air beside me.

She sensed my turmoil. She collided with the eddies of my distress, sorrow, and rage.

But she never left me.

And together, we flew as far away from men as we could.



Chapter Thirty-One

“I’LL GIVE YOU A million.”

“Excuse me?” I looked up from my morning coffee, sitting on the veranda overlooking the guests mingling below.

Roy Slater stood in front of my table in the exact spot where Eleanor had launched into me with all her bottled hate and disgust two weeks ago. It’d only been our second official meeting, but even then, I knew she was different...special.

That I had met my match and would severely fucking pay.

Placing my iPad next to my coffee that held a screen full of medical text on a new Alzheimer drug that Peter Beck wanted to test on a trial of fifty willing and paid human guinea pigs, I studied Roy Slater.

He was due to fly off my island tomorrow morning. All his bills were settled. His signed NDA locked in my safe with copies lodged with my lawyer. He’d come to paradise, slept with a goddess, and now would return to his humdrum life and forever remember the experience that I’d given him.

I wanted to fucking kill him.

But...I wouldn’t.

Because that would be bad for business.

He ran a hand through his hair, looking dishevelled and rushed. A far sight from the man I’d met on the beach who’d negotiated for Eleanor’s company. “A million.”

I cocked my head, my silver aviators protecting my eyes from the tropical sun. The sun had reached a scorching thirty-eight degrees centigrade today, ensuring I wore a cream linen suit, rather than dark cashmere. Even with a white shirt and no tie, I still fought my body's urge to sweat.

After work, I planned to vanish into the sea for the rest of the afternoon. To allow the ocean to wash away my heat and my constantly consuming hunger for Eleanor.

I could still taste her.

Her pussy on my tongue. Her release in my mouth.

Fuck.

I'd woken with my hand fisting my cock this morning and cum all over my stomach. Denying myself while awake ensured I'd started dreaming of her at night. Even with distance between us, I was slipping. Falling in ways I couldn't fucking permit.

"A million for what precisely?" I asked softly, smoothing my lapel. A Hawk diamond flashed in my cufflinks.

I narrowed my eyes. Had Roy Slater bought her a diamond? Would Jinx earn another precious stone? If each guest fell in love with her, she'd have a fortune by the time I let her go.

Goddammit.

That thought blew another hole in my chest.

My hands itched to grab the spoon by my coffee to scoop out his eyes. To remove all his memories of the girl who belonged to me in every fucking way.

"For Jinx." He swallowed hard. "I want to...eh, buy her. To request a trade."

I stiffened in my chair. "A trade?"

"Cash for your goddess." He nodded. "I give you my word I'll look after her. I'll respect her. I would never share her, and she'd be given a life fit for any princess." His voice lowered with need. "I want to look after her. To love her."

Ah, Christ.

Men were so goddamn predictable.

This wasn't the first time a guest had asked to take a girl home, and I'm sure it wouldn't be the last. I never said yes. Ever. I could never be sure of the girl's well-being or trust the word of a gentleman who came to my shores.

But...

Ever since standing over Eleanor while she slept, I'd done my best to fix my problem. I wanted her gone but didn't necessarily know how. If I just let her go...she could tell anyone about my little operation here. If I killed her, she'd haunt me for the rest of my fucking days.

But...if I sold her...

My heart crashed and collided with my ribs, but I yanked hard on its leash, making it cower in the corner.

Something had to be done.

I couldn't keep this up.

I couldn't keep avoiding her.

I couldn't pretend she didn't exist or ignore that something bound us together.

The only way to be free of her awful curse would be to get her off my island.

For good.

And a solution had just fallen serendipitously into my lap.



Chapter Thirty-Two

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS AFTER Roy Slater accosted me on the path, I received a summons.

For a full rotation of earth, I'd existed in a heightened sense of fear. Last night, I'd tried to find Jupiter, Calico, and Neptune to eat dinner with them but only found an empty dining room. Jealousy wasn't there, either, and I'd returned to eat the food waiting on my deck, then sat up for most of the night watching the moon track its way through stars.

This morning, I'd chosen to stay in my villa. I didn't want to run into Roy Slater again, or any other man for that matter. My ability to converse had been well and truly stripped away.

Breakfast had been delivered by a usual pretty staff member, a few new clothes arrived to replace the ones I'd lost, and I tried to lose myself in a book loaded on an e-reader that I'd found in the bedside drawer.

It didn't work.

My eyes skimmed words, but my brain remained firmly fixated on Sully. On what he was doing, why hadn't he come to check on me, how could I stop the complex mix of dislike and desire.

So when the summons came at twilight, I was almost glad.

I was ready to face anything if it meant it gave me something other than him to focus on. Something to *endure* rather than being forced to relax on a perfect island with unlimited delicious food and every wish I ever wanted.

It was the blissful existence between serving in Euphoria that ruined me.

How could I lay on a lounge, dressed in expensive bikinis, eating ripe organic fruit, and reading a simple romance like I was on holiday, when none of that daydream was real? How could I forget that I paid for such luxury with my body?

Re-reading the note that Arbi had personally delivered, goosebumps darted down my spine.

Come to my office at ten a.m.

Such a simple sentence.

A collection of words that gave nothing away to Sully's intentions or requirements of our meeting. So why did utmost dread slip like cyanide through my veins? Why did Roy Slater come to mind and his parting words that'd chased me down the path echo like a drumbeat for an execution?

"I love you, and I'm going to find a way for us to be together."

My legs gave out, crumpling me to the floor.

No.

I scrunched up the note, tighter and tighter, then threw it into the corner of the room. It bounced off the driftwood couch, smashing into a potted fern. Skittles chirped indignantly from her chosen spot on the side table lamp. She'd taken up residency on the shade, her daily preening interrupted by my terror.

An awful premonition filled me.

Could Roy Slater have asked to claim me? Had he approached Sully with an offer he couldn't refuse?

But he wouldn't...would he?

He won't sell me.

Why would Sully sell something that he'd only just bought? Something that was still new and valuable to his empire?

I buried my face in my hands, unable to lie. Skittles winged her way to perch on my shoulder, tweeting worriedly into my ear.

I couldn't respond, too frozen with horror.

He'll sell you to be rid of a problem.

To be rid of the mess between you.

I couldn't breathe.

I hated taking elixir. I hated serving in Euphoria. I hated having my own body and mind work against me.

But at least, I could trust in my boundaries. I had a friend in Jealousy. I had shelter and food and clothes.

I have a parrot who chose me for her own.

The thought of having all that stripped away? Of being given to another man who might not grant the same level of care? Of being taken to another country? Of being nothing more than a possession, bouncing from master to dictator?

I...I can't.

A silent sob swelled in my lungs, suffocating me.

God, why didn't I try harder to escape?

Why did I step out onto the helipad when Sully flew above me?

Needing fresh air, I bolted to my feet and flew out of the villa. Skittles chased me, squawking with fear over our potential separation.

I didn't stop running until the warm tide licked at my ankles and the sun slipped in a fiery crimson blaze into the sea.

I wedged a fist in my stomach as the last dregs of sunlight faded, seeming so final, so resolute.

A sunset on my time here.

* * * * *

Nine forty-five a.m.

I studied myself in the mirror.

My skin held a cast of ghostly white with foreboding, my eyes rested in shadows from lack of sleep, and my pulse pounded visibly in my neck from panic.

As a girl who'd barely slept, whose own life didn't belong to her, whose future was so uncertain, I was a mess.

But for a goddess who'd been summoned before her owner, I was every bit a bewitching immortal.

It'd taken me since dawn to perfect the mirage.

Sully traded in chimera mockery and deception, well...I had learned from the master. I might not have elixirs and sensory deceptors, but I did have determination and the undying need not to be sold.

If I left this island.

When I leave this island...

I would be going home. Not to someone else's bed.

Skittles sat quietly on the vanity, nestled in the cotton buds that I'd strewn across the surface in my haste to complete my fallacy.

I didn't recognise the girl staring back at me. I'd lost the ability to call myself Eleanor Grace because that was a human name...and today, I was no longer human.

I was as myth-like as I could get without sprouting angel wings.

My hair was loose. Washed with coconut and kaduka plum, rinsed in icy water to bring ethereal shine to each and every strand. Sepia and bronze, mahogany and henna, the length and glossiness hung in a heavy veil down my back. Frangipani flowers decorated the length, randomly placed so I looked as if I'd been birthed by the very island that Sully adored.

My paleness had been hidden with finely applied make-up. I'd never been talented with a brush or pigments before, but I'd kept washing and reapplying until I'd achieved an otherworldly look.

Dewy lips, smoky eyes, harsh cheekbones, and perfect glowing skin, even my breasts had been amplified—a lash of bronzer down my cleavage to highlight their fullness.

But it was the dress that turned me from normal to extraordinary.

A gown I'd found in the wardrobe, tucked in a zipped bag in the shadows.

Champagne glitter and fawn crystal.

Straps kissed my shoulders, breaking into a V down my chest to swoop low between my breasts. Intricate panels of jewels hugged my belly and hips, before hanging heavy and full of glamour to the floor. It moulded to me like a second skin, granting the illusion that my own flesh had been inlaid with caramel gemstones and flawless diamonds.

I'd never worn something so glitzy, nor felt quite so unlike myself.

Nine fifty a.m.

Ten minutes before I would come face to face with Sullivan Sinclair.

Ten minutes before I strode into battle wearing an amour destined to break thy enemy.

This dress wasn't for Roy Slater.

This masquerade wasn't for Sully Sinclair.

The glowing goddess who stared back in the mirror was for *me*.

My parting gift to men who thought I could be demeaned with a price tag.

If Roy wanted to buy me and Sully wanted to sell me...then so be it.

But I would make both men see just how much I was worth.

I would make them understand that money was worthless.

That I was priceless.

That this whole sick charade was over.



Chapter Thirty-Three

NINE FIFTY-NINE A.M.

She's late—

Calvin's grunt ripped my head up from studying my watch. Roy Slater practically fell off my couch. And I—

I fucking ripped out my pumping, spurting heart and laid it bloody and warm at the feet of the most *stunning* creature I'd ever seen.

My body malfunctioned.

My cock hardened to stone; my pulse went haywire; my eyes couldn't drink her in fast enough.

Fucking

wow...

Eleanor strode from my garden, past the mermaid fountain and bird table where local sparrows ate their fill, and padded barefoot into my office. Her dress trailed after her, gracing a trail of golden sand as if she'd been summoned from the very sea I idolized.

Skittles sat on her shoulder, making Eleanor more than woman but a nymph who could talk to feathered and furred alike. The gauzy curtains swayed around her with a non-existent breeze, afraid to touch her, swirling like entities drunk on her power.

My fingers dug into my desk as I struggled to breathe. Her hair. Her eyes. Her body.

*Fuck
me.*

I wanted to snatch her, savage her. I wanted to rip her from the heavens and bring her firmly into my hell.

Every time she breathed, her body glittered in jewels, refracting around my villa, blinding me to anything else.

I couldn't goddamn move.

I'd seen the by-product of men meeting my goddesses for the first time. Some lost their minds. Literally lost their fucking minds. They lost language ability, motor skills, and stood there as blank as if they'd been hypnotised by the most powerful witch.

I'd always pitied such fools, proud I'd never been so weak.

But now...now I was that motherfucking fool.

Who was I?

What was going on?

But most importantly, who the hell was *she*?

I wanted her more than I could breathe. I wanted her so much my stomach ached, and my chest burned, and my cock throbbed with agony.

I needed her to give me back my soul—to kiss words back into my mouth, to rake her hands through my hair and gift me back my mind. If she could give me back my manhood, then she could take my heart.

Fuck, she'd already taken it.

It was right there, slowly pumping and gasping on the floor by her flawless feet.

Calvin was the first of us to recover. "Jinx...good job. You're on time." He cleared his throat, his voice thick with desire.

My vision went red.

How *dare* he desire her? How dare he *look* at her? How dare anyone see just how fucking *resplendent* this woman was?

I shot from my seat, blinking back stars, unable to tear my gaze from the immortal queen who'd entered my office.

Her crown was no longer invisible. A diamond-frosted mirage that blended fantasy and fact, making me doubt if she'd always been royal. If she'd always been so, so far out of my reach.

Roy Slater stumbled toward her.

Skittles took off, zipping out the door.

I tore from my desk to intercept him, to stand between him and what was

mine. Crossing my arms, I snarled, “Deal’s off.”

“What?” His face contorted. For a second, it looked as if he’d cry with desolation, but then rage painted his true colours. “We had an agreement!”

“An agreement I’m breaking.”

“You can’t do that.”

I leaned toward him, my fists curling tight. “You’re on my island, Slater. Watch your goddamn tongue.”

Eleanor’s presence itched me from behind. Her heat. Her power. Her proximity. Tiny lightning bolts shot under my black suit, finding the cave where my heart used to reside. I could barely stand upright. Could hardly function as a man. The longer I stood in front her and fought for my right to keep her, the more I slipped into an animal.

A male at the height of his musk, wanting to mate, ready to destroy any competition by whatever means necessary.

Calvin joined us, making our standoff a trio. “Sinclair, can I talk to you for a moment?”

No fucking way was I moving.

I glowered at my second in command. “We’ve said all we need to. Get the helicopter. Slater is leaving.”

“Not without her,” Slater snarled.

“Leave now, you go with your life. Try to argue and you’ll die.” I hadn’t meant to reveal my cold-blooded side. Hadn’t meant for my voice to show that it wasn’t an empty threat.

I knew what death tasted like.

I’d delivered it in my past.

Killing this man would not keep me up at night, but losing Eleanor...I’d never sleep again.

“You’d throw your life in jail just to back out on a deal?” Slater snapped. “You’d kill me, all for a girl you rent to others?”

My hand lashed out, finding his throat like a bullet with a laser sight.

I squeezed.

Hard.

Eleanor’s voice slipped over my shoulder, freezing all of us. “How much, Mr. Slater? How much did you offer to pay for me?”

I ripped my head around to look at her. She’d moved from behind me to beside me, her eyes narrowed on my fingers around my guest’s throat. She didn’t look at me. She acted as if I was inconsequential.

I'm not fucking inconsequential!

I squeezed harder, making it impossible for Slater to speak.

Calvin's hand landed on mine. "Stop. Let's talk about this."

I don't know why or how, but I released, uncurling my burning fingers from Slater's throat and shaking out the urge to kill.

Slater turned his attention to Eleanor, his gaze turning liquid with lust. "One million. I offered him a million to take you home."

If I had a gun, I would've shot him in the heart. I would've taken sadistic joy in watching his blood stain my tiles.

Pika flew in from the garden, searching out my shoulder. His little talons barely landed before he squawked and took off again, sensing the animosity in the room.

Both him and Skittles wanted nothing to do with death teasing in the corners.

"A million," Eleanor whispered. "Is that the going rate for a whore?"

Slater flinched. "A whore? I'm not buying you as a whore. No way."

He went to touch her, but I shoved him back with a fist in his solar plexus.

It took a moment for him to cough and wheeze, sucking in oxygen to continue. "I want you as a wife." He flatly ignored me, even after my punch, his gaze imploring her, making my head swim with violence.

Goddammit, I couldn't do this.

Calvin wrapped a fist around my arm, keeping me in place when I advanced on him. I could strike him. I could pin my wrath on Calvin and then on Slater—I had more than enough to go around, but Eleanor bypassed me, going to stand in front of Slater.

I swallowed a groan, drinking in the sight of her back.

Her long, long hair kissed her ass, falling seamlessly into the jewels of her gown. Flowers decorated randomly, begging me to pluck them out and push her onto all fours.

"A wife?" Shock echoed in Eleanor's question. "You're buying me, not as a whore, but a *wife*?"

Slater nodded. "I'll marry you when we get home. No pre-nup. No restrictions. My wealth is yours. I'll give a million to this asshole, but the rest will be yours." He spread his hands in surrender. "Your only rule would be that you'd have to stay with me. Forever. You'd be mine...just as I'd be yours. But you can never divorce me. Never go back to your family. Never

tell anyone the truth of our beginning.”

Eleanor stiffened, her hair twitching down her back. “Don’t you think purchasing a wife is the wrong way to begin a romance? Find someone who you don’t have to pay for.”

“I’ve found you, and I’ll do whatever I have to do to claim you.”

Eleanor nodded slowly, then turned to face me.

I shook Calvin off but didn’t move. I quaked on the spot and crossed my arms, doing my best to seem as if I had myself under control.

“How much did you pay for me, Mr. Sinclair?”

Sinclair.

Not Sully.

I snarled inside, fighting so much, battling a part of my nature that was murderous and mayhem, rather than human. “I don’t discuss figures with—”

“More than a million?” she interrupted. “Less than a million?”

How could I tell her the truth?

That the traffickers I used sold her to me for a rock bottom price. I would never admit that her soul was valued to those disgusting men—me included—at five hundred thousand.

A bargain.

An insult.

Half of what Slater was willing to offer.

I would *never* admit that.

Ever.

But I was also never letting her go.

Already, she’d almost paid back her initial cost. The profit margin from selling her to Slater would’ve padded my bank account.

Last night, I’d tried to convince myself that was the only reason I was selling her.

But I couldn’t swallow my own lie.

The *only* reason I’d agreed to this atrocity was to buy back my own sanity. And a million was far too cheap. She was worth so, so much more. She was utterly fucking priceless and it made me sick to my guts that we were two men discussing her ‘bride’ price in front of her.

This didn’t concern her.

I shouldn’t have summoned her.

I should’ve done the deal and never even said goodbye.

Now, I had to either kill this asshole or lash him to my helicopter. Either

way, she wasn't fucking leaving.

Stalking to my exit that led to a corridor and another lounge, I snapped my fingers. "Slater, Calvin. Let's discuss this. Alone."

"Alone?" Eleanor's eyebrows shot up. "Why summon me if you're just going to—"

"Enough. Stay there." I pointed at the floor as if she'd lock herself to the spot.

Calvin gave me a wary look as he followed me toward the door. Slater didn't move.

I would make him move—in every painful way possible—but at the last second, he gave Eleanor a twisted smile and followed me.

The moment I was away from Eleanor, I sucked in a breath. The first breath in minutes, the first untainted oxygen, free from her magic.

My heart restarted into a normal beat, my mind dropped its red haze of violence. I returned to myself, fractured and furious. I still wanted to kill Slater, but I could stay in my suit rather than wanting to turn into a wolf and shredding him to pieces.

How had she affected me so much? Why did my entire body feel bruised?

Calvin pulled me away from Slater, farther into the other room. "What the fuck happened in there, Sinclair?"

I glared. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know *exactly* what I mean. You practically pounced on her the second she arrived."

"Are you gonna lie to my face and say you didn't get hard when she appeared?" Each word came out gnawed by my clenched teeth. "Did you not see how fucking stunning she is?"

He winced but nodded. "I can appreciate a beautiful woman. And...she is beautiful. I'll give her that."

"And that's why I'm keeping her. She's too beautiful and too sought after to get rid of. Guests pay above and—"

"Stop." Calvin clucked his tongue, cursing under his breath. "For fuck's sake, that isn't why you want to keep her."

"Yes, it fucking is."

"No, it fucking isn't." His temper clashed against mine. "You changed in there, man. You were ready to kill that guy just because he looked at Jinx like any other guest looks at their goddess. It fucked you off that he wants her—"

wants her for always, instead of just one night.”

Perhaps I’d have to dig two graves today.

I spoke with black-edged control. “You are once again overstepping your boundaries—”

“Look.” He swiped a hand over his face, struggling to figure out what he could and could not say to me in my current fury. “The way I see it, you have two choices. And don’t hurt me for pointing them out.”

I looked over my shoulder where Slater still stood in the corridor, away from Eleanor and away from hearing distance. Slowly, I crossed my arms and nodded. “Fine. What are my two choices?”

“You sell her—”

I growled.

He held up a hand. “You sell her, and you regret it for a few days...a week. You have blue balls, and you go and fuck a goddess who will willingly spread her legs for you. Jinx goes to a place that ensures she’s out of your life. Your world continues the way it should—the way you fought for it to be. Things don’t get fucked up.”

I squeezed my arms tighter, trembling with the urge to shut him up. He spoke rationally; he made sense. That was what scared me about hearing his second point.

I already knew what he’d say.

I already fucking agreed with him.

“Or...” Calvin sighed, looking pissed but also regretful, already tasting the change that would happen if I kept Eleanor instead of removing her from my world. “Or you keep her. You fall in love with her—if you’re not already. You fuck her. You adore her. You realise that she’s exactly like all the animals you’ve liberated in the past. That she’s caged here, trapped against her will, and you...you let her go. You let her go, and she either ends up in a worst situation or—”

“Or I hurt her myself.”

He nodded. “You don’t exactly have the best track record.”

“What happened wasn’t intentional.” My voice bled free from rage, leaving only horror behind. Horror of what I’d done when we’d saved so many animals from their nightmarish cages.

“I know. But...it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.” Calvin stepped away from me, unable to read if I was about to kill him or accept who I was.

Eleanor wasn’t safe with me.

In any capacity.

Only those I felt contempt for were immune.

Suddenly, the anger thickening my veins dispersed, leaving me nauseous. I'd agreed to sell Eleanor for my sanity, but sending her away would also guarantee her safety.

Roy Slater was a bastard, but he wasn't an evil sonovabitch. He would do what he said. He'd marry her, protect her, and if their marriage didn't work out, then Eleanor would have the funds to fight him.

Turning to face Slater, I snapped my fingers. "Come here."

I had to do this before I changed my mind. Before I reverted to a love-struck, pathetic fool.

The man hurried toward me, his face bouncing between hope and hate. "So? Do we still have a deal?"

I tried to breathe, air whistling through my heart-empty chest, but I nodded. "On one stipulation."

His eyes narrowed. "What stipulation?"

"The price has gone up. A million to take her from my shores and a million to marry her."

He opened his mouth to argue, but I finished, "The second million goes directly to her. Cash. She hides it where she wants. She has a bolt fund to leave you if you ever step out of line."

Calvin sucked in a breath beside me as I raised my hand.

Slater paused for a moment, biting his bottom lip as he ran over the consequences and calamities that could possibly come from this transaction.

Finally, he inserted his hand into mine. "Done." His fingers pulsed with conviction. "But I want this in writing."

"And I need a fucking drink." Dropping his hold, I stalked back to my office, wishing I had some way to stop my internal bleeding and something to wedge into the emptiness where my heart used to be.

With my hand on the door, I braced myself to look at Eleanor one last time.

To escort her from my paradise which had somehow become everlasting hell.

I went to say goodbye.



Chapter Thirty-Four

THE STOLEN VIAL OF elixir bruised my palm.

I trembled as the three men returned, striding through the door, all three staring hungrily at me. I tried to give each equal attention, to hide my thievery, but I couldn't keep my eyes off Sully.

I'd seen him kingly and imposing, undone and furious, sea-drenched and secretive, tortured and solemn.

But this was different.

When I'd arrived in his office, second-guessing my warfare of wearing a ball gown at ten in the morning, he'd frozen the moment he'd seen me. A shroud fell over him, a deep midnight curtain where his morals vanished beneath want.

His hunger had been palatable. His need for me reached across the room and made me wet. I couldn't deny that my skin had prickled and my nipples had pebbled and every reaction I wished I didn't have sprang into an intensity that reeked with damnation.

I wanted that man.

I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone.

And that made guilt braid with desire because I'd never wanted Scott the way I wanted Sully. Never felt a trickle of wetness just from his stare.

Sully had become my elixir.

His stare, his voice, his body...all custom-designed to make the animalistic parts of me rise, pushing down my decorum to the depths of my

being where it belonged.

I was *free* when he stared at me.

Free in his need, knowing he felt it too.

Free to admit that there was something horribly wrong between us that had driven us into destruction. Born from hate and transmuted by fate...a conduit from his soul to mine.

That was why I'd stolen his elixir.

Why, when the men had vanished from his office, and the low murmur of voices floated back, I'd dashed to the apothecary cabinet and opened hundreds of little drawers, seeking, searching, hoping to find the one thing that might allow me to stay.

Each drawer I'd ripped open, I'd filled with deeper conviction. I allowed my mind to sample both scenarios. To envision a life being sold to Roy Slater and ultimately ending up his wife. Of sleeping beside him, of sleeping *with* him, of allowing age to turn a man already my senior into a grandfather before I was in my thirties.

The money would mean I would never have to work. My future would be paved with wealth and laziness. I might find a semi-decent existence. A marriage with him was no different than a contract with Sully—I would still be cut off from those I knew, still be dead to my family.

But the bars of my cage would be invisible, held fast by just a marriage certificate and my word instead of a vast turquoise sea.

I should fight for that option. I should fling myself on the helicopter and depart this place with a man who seemed kind.

But...

But.

Roy didn't make my heart fist and flounder. Roy didn't make my body tingle. Roy didn't make common-sense bleed into chaos.

Roy wasn't Sully.

And Sully...doesn't want me.

By the thirtieth drawer, I found what I was looking for.

A tiny box holding multiple glass vials of elixir.

Tiny and innocent, its contents a trapped magic just waiting to wreak havoc on its victim.

I'd been its victim three times now. It'd irrevocably changed me into this wanton creature who was constantly wet in the presence of the monster who'd bought her. It'd shoved aside my ethics and scruples, leaving me as

wild as the god who ruled this utopia.

A god who might fight against our connection.

But a mortal who would break beneath my choice.

And my choice was...to stay.

To accept that I'd come to this island by black designs but perhaps...fate had known where to send me. Maybe there was a future here—a future of freedom and truth...if I was brave enough to try.

Sully's throat worked as he swallowed and tore his gaze from mine.

I clutched my vial tighter, hoping my pilfering hadn't been noticed.

Now that he'd returned, he'd changed once again.

His lust was still evident, but he'd wrapped a chain tight around it. An unbreakable barrier that kept him from claiming me. His hair was disorderly, sweat decorated his temples, his eyes blazed a feverish blue.

What had happened behind that door?

What agreement had they come to?

Calvin was my hint, heading toward Sully's desk, muttering, "I'll draw up the bill of sale."

My stomach fell.

He sold me.

Roy gave me a victorious grin, nodding with glee, and Sully stalked to the sideboard where a small silver fridge waited, keeping its contents cool from humidity.

Ripping open the door, he pulled free a crystal decanter. Amber liquid sloshed inside as he pulled the stopper free, then roughly, sloppily poured three glasses.

With a haggard inhale, he shot one of the drinks down his throat, wincing. His handsome face twisted in defeat.

My stomach twisted to match his pain, fighting the need to go to him, to tell him whatever plan he'd made...I was about to unmake it.

I wasn't going to let him say goodbye.

I wasn't going to let men play monopoly with my life.

This was *my* choice.

If I made the wrong one, then that was on me.

But I had to try.

Had to see.

Have to know.

Pouring another shot, Sully shoved the decanter back into the fridge,

then grabbed two glasses. Turning his back on his drink, he stormed with brittle steps to give one glass to Roy and one to Calvin.

I didn't wait or second-guess.

I'd stolen Sully's elixir, but I hadn't planned on how to make him take it. I'd clutched it like a talisman, hoping, somehow, an opportunity would come up.

This was that opportunity, a fraction of a moment, gone forever if I didn't snatch it.

With measured footsteps, I went to Sully's awaiting drink, hoping no man watched me. With my back to them, I untwisted the cap with shaking fingers.

My heart pounded so hard I almost dropped the tiny bottle.

Almost.

Clamping my teeth into my bottom lip, I quickly tipped elixir into the amber alcohol then wrapped my fingers around the vial.

"Jinx...what are you—" Sully stormed toward me, suspicion deep in his tone.

I grabbed his glass, swirled it a little, and held it up for him as he arrived before me. "Bringing you your drink. So you can toast my eviction." I flicked my gaze to Roy and Calvin, wondering if the wobble in my voice revealed what I'd done.

But Calvin continued typing up a sale contract, and Roy stared dreamily at me with his drink untouched in his hand.

Only Sully narrowed his eyes, his nostrils flaring.

I held his stare, gathering all my courage to be impenetrable.

I wouldn't ruin my one chance.

We stared for the longest heartbeats. I swayed with each pound of my pulse, my stupid heart magnifying in size until it filled me everywhere. I could barely hear around the thunder; the pressure throbbed in my skull.

And then, Sully took the glass from me.

Our fingers grazed.

Our eyes latched tight.

A matching moan fell from both of us as the electricity that'd constantly threatened to strike tinder found a rogue dust of gunpowder and ignited.

A blaze of heat. A buffet of hunger.

A wildfire gust of *need*.

Sully's jaw worked as he brought the alcohol to his lips and...

...tipped the contents into his mouth.

My knees threatened to buckle, but I held his stare until he'd swallowed. I waited until there was no turning back from this.

As his throat moved, pushing the drug into his belly where it would branch off into all directions, dilating his arteries, overworking his heart, sending desire between his legs, I let out my tattered sigh.

His eyes flared. His tongue ran over his teeth.

His taste buds recognised the fragrant flavour of his elixir.

Absolute horror drowned his face. "Oh, fuck...what have you done?"

With tears clawing up my spine, I opened my palm and showed him the empty vial.

Was I prepared for this? Would I be alive after this? Would he choose to relieve himself with me or run to another goddess?

What if this is a terrible, terrible mistake?

"Shit." Sully acted as if I'd just sentenced both of us to death. "*Shit!*"

And who knew...maybe I had.

His eyes snapped closed as he wedged a fist against his belly, already feeling the first effects, the first inhibitions, the first howling to fuck.

With a guttural groan, he turned to look at Calvin.

"Cal—" His voice had turned into rough, tumbling gravel. "Christ."

Calvin looked up from the laptop, his gaze shooting from Sully who twitched as if the elixir had already ensnared him and me standing behind him.

I shook so badly, I dropped the vial. It plummeted to the tile and smashed into tiny glass shards.

The smash shot Calvin into motion.

He knew what I'd done.

He knew what was about to happen.

Sully roared with rage, "Get Slater the fuck out of here. Now!"

Calvin bolted around the desk and snatched Roy Slater from his stupor. Roy's glass fell to the tile too, another explosion of glass and liquor.

"Hey! What are you—"

"We need to go." Calvin dragged him to the door, not caring that Roy fought. It didn't even slow him down. Stuffing him through the exit, Calvin turned back to look at Sully. "What do you want me to—"

"Just go. Keep the goddesses in their villas. Don't —" Sully groaned, tearing at his blazer as his skin licked with lust. "Don't let them fucking near

me.”

Cal didn’t dally.

He swung the door closed and left Sully and me alone.

Sully paced away from me, dragging his hands through his hair. He tore at the strands as if he could rip out the elixir by the roots.

I tripped forward, my gemstone gown whispering on the floor.

I actually felt sorry for him. So intimately aware of the pain of having your self-control stripped away, your body becoming a slave to starving libido.

Hearing me behind him, he spun on me, grabbing me by the throat.

“What the *fuck* were you thinking?”

I swallowed hard. “I...I didn’t want to leave until—”

“Until?”

“Until I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“What exists between us.” I forced bravery into my voice. “Before I knew why I can’t stop wanting you.”

His eyes snapped closed again, his fingers feathering hard around my throat. Marching me backward, he shoved me out onto his deck, struggling to release me and step back. “Go. Leave. Fuck off.” He doubled over as he fought another crippling wave of lust. His cock thickened until it strained against his trousers, searching for a way free.

Should I help him? Undress him? Undress myself?

Was I prepared for him to grab me?

I was wet enough for his quick entry but should I remove my clothes and

—

“Go, Eleanor!” His snarl sent pure fear through my heart.

“I-I’ll stay and...help.”

“*Help?*” He laughed cruelly. “Help? Fuck, you don’t know what you’ve done. You can’t hel—” His groan cut him off. He fisted himself through his trousers, fumbling with his belt.

The clink of the buckle coming undone sent another wash of wetness through me.

Seeing him so unhinged, knowing what was to come...it turned me on. It turned me on until I felt as if I’d taken the elixir too. I wanted him. So much. I wanted him inside me. I wanted to know why we felt this way.

But as his hand wrapped around his cock and pure passion fogged his

stare, I also felt fear. A primordial fear that this wouldn't just be sex. This would be painful and ruthless and quite possibly the last thing I'd ever do.

"Run," he hissed, masturbating in front of me. His lips glistened from his tongue. His hips rocked into his palm. "Run...*please* fucking run."

I shook my head, stepping toward him, my hand outstretched to replace him with me. To tell him it was okay to use me. That I'd drugged him to force him to admit he wanted this.

But he fell to his knees, holding his cock as if he could throttle it into submission. His chest heaved as he looked up at me, his eyes wild and body even wilder. He looked on the verge of breaking, on the precipice of no longer being human.

Our gazes locked.

His savagery poured gasoline on my fear and struck a match.

I shivered with realisation of what I'd done.

Sully Sinclair no longer had any control.

And that meant very bad things would happen.

Very bad things would happen to me.

"Run, Eleanor." His voice slipped past feral and straight to barbarian as he growled, "Run. Run. Fucking run!"

His anger didn't make me obey...it was his desperation.

He dropped the shields from his gaze and allowed me to see how truly terrified he was. How much he didn't want to hurt me. "Please...Jinx." His voice vanished to a tortured whisper. "Run..."

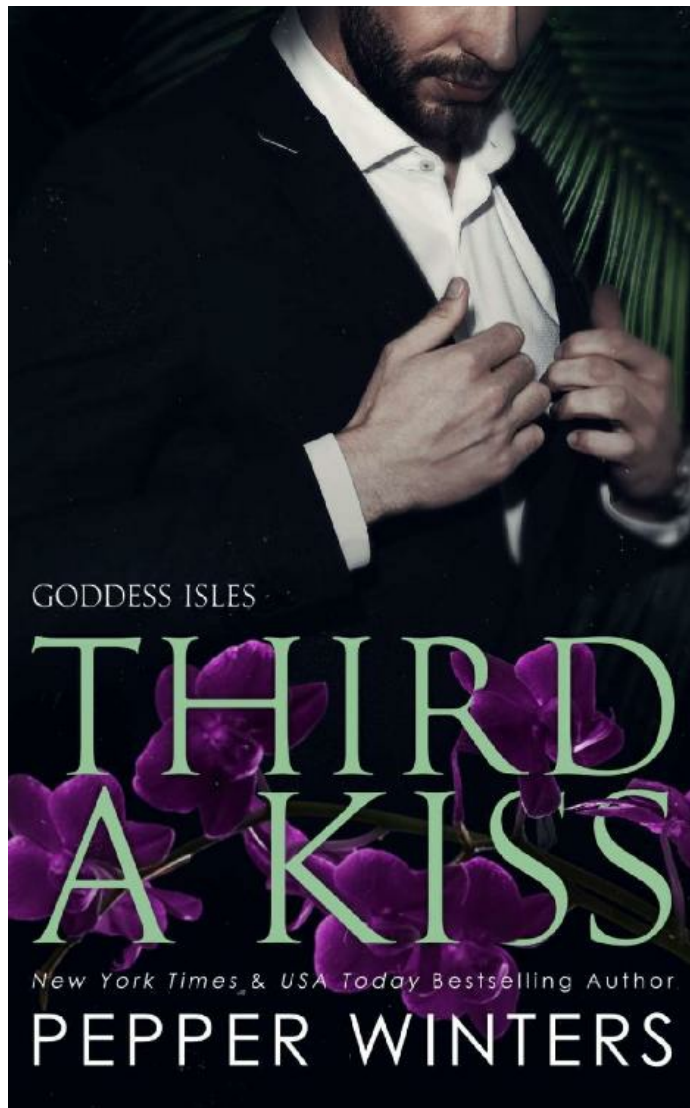
"I'm-I'm sorry."

He shook his head, curling in on himself, his hand still locked around his cock.

With a final look at the broken beast before me, I ran.

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PLAYLIST

King & Country – Amen
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Little Girl – Mia Mormino
Haunting – Halsey
Believer – Imagine Dragons
Symphony – Clean Bandit
Something just like this – The Chainsmokers and Coldplay
Half a man – Dean Lewis
Love and Hate – Michael Kiwanuka
Whatever it takes – Imagine Dragons
Natural – Imagine Dragons

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I hope you continue to enjoy Sully and Jinx's tale!

Pepper

xx