

**VICTOR BRIGGS**

**THE QUEST GIVER'S GUILD 1**

**DRAGON  
SHIFT**

# **DRAGON SHIFT: THE QUEST GIVER'S GUILD**

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A HAREM GAMELIT ADVENTURE

VICTOR BRIGGS

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## About the Author



## CHAPTER 1



**M**y boots squelched in a thick pile of mud. Or elephant shit. I couldn't tell because everything in this jungle smelled like it came out of a hippo's ass, myself included.

I wrestled through the green ferns and stiff bamboo and squeezed myself between the palm trunks. I wanted to rip off my soaking shirt, but that would put me even more at the mercy of the death bugs.

Sweat dripped down my brow.

Whose fucking idea was it to come to Thailand in the summer? It couldn't have possibly been mine.

Only an idiot would think of something like that.

Still, despite my exhausted body and frayed patience, I was certain it would be worth it.

An old woman from the village I'd just left had claimed the spiritual energy of this mountain had increased tenfold over the last month. Neither she nor the other villagers dared come up here.

Most would let such a statement go, looping it in with the ravings of a pantless man begging for change outside of a Subway.

But things had changed.

Now, such far-fetched rumors tugged at my ear, promising adventure and distraction.

The entire world had gone haywire, and I'd become determined to search out and experience as many anomalies as possible. Ever since I'd been 'relieved' of my position as CSO in my family's business, I'd found it too challenging to fade away into normal life.

Coming down from a position of such power, a seat where my ambitions could so readily be pursued, had turned me bitter for a

time.

And though I had plans to emerge once more, take what little I had left and invest in something new, doing so now simply wasn't possible. Not after reality decided to take a left turn without telling anybody.

I'd been traveling the world for the past few years. Ever since the first 'event,' captured live on some girl's TikTok video, I'd been hooked. In the middle of repeating the same inane dance moves a thousand others had done previously, Stacie Bradfield of Omaha, Nebraska had spontaneously combusted before her 1.7M viewers.

The video was one of a thousand now.

Magic existed in this world, or at least it had in the last handful of years. Earth had been going to shit for longer than I'd been alive, but recently, something else seemed to be eating away at the edges of reality. Some were hoisting up the 'End of Times' flag and marching it around proudly.

Most simply pretended it didn't exist though. They sat at home, ignoring the phenomenon all around them.

I was one of the few who had done the opposite.

A part of me had wanted to make this all more pragmatic. I bought cameras and a tiny fucking laptop you could send an email with while snorkeling. I could become an adventurer type. Gain a following and leverage my book when it came out.

But those plans died as soon as I'd seen The Nymph of Acheron with my own eyes. It, or she, I suppose, was a shimmering veil of living water that a young Greek couple had first sighted when trying to find a suitable place to make out. When the event was reported, I took two plane trips and an endless bus ride.

Watching the creature appear from thin air, though, I knew I was hooked.

This felt similar. Maybe it was the subtle tingle of energy in the air. I almost believed I could sense these things now. For one, my ears always itched when I got close to what scientists were calling 'metaphysical phenomena.'

Whatever was on this mountain had my ears itching all over again.

I was never sure what I'd find, but that was half the fun.



I could be cursed with nightmares for a year. I might have a transcendent experience that granted me some quirky powers like glowing skin or metallic hair.

There was nothing quite like the thrill of myth chasing.

Some people liked booze or weed. I liked magic and sex. It sounded stupid when I said it like that, but who cares ?

It was my goddamn life, my goddamn high.

The truth was, ever since my involuntary 'retirement,' I'd lived with few rules.

I never sacrificed my freedom for anyone, I kept restricted relationship ties, and made as many human connections as possible.

Oddly, the last two weren't contradictory. I just wanted to experience everything that I could, which meant new people and places. But when the party was over, I'd leave them behind and seek something new.

The trail was steeper now, but thankfully the ground was firm. My feet weighed ten pounds each, and I was tempted to find a stick and scrape off some of the mud. I was close though and couldn't force myself to slow down.

After my mom died, a shitstorm had broken out at Stone Corp. We were a family company that invested in finding one of two resources: 1 - entrepreneurs who had everything but capital to make it big, 2 - failing businesses that had the potential to make profit but lacked the savvy.

Mom had been grooming me for the CEO position, but my brother and uncle had different plans. The four of us were the company's backbone. Investors had a share of the power, though, and that was how my uncle seized control.

The first lawsuit came at me not a week after she'd been buried.

When it was all over, I was in my late twenties, no longer truly wealthy, and was completely over it all.

I hadn't been home since.

Ducking under a particularly wet fern, I came face to face with the first hard evidence my improvised trail had paid off. There it was, cracked down the middle and covered in algae. When I spread the sheltering ferns away from the ground, I saw more of the paving stones trailing on up the hill.

I whooped loudly enough to scatter a flock of nearby birds.

“Hello, baby,” I told the path lovingly before pushing ever higher up the mountain.

There was an old temple at the top, and it was likely where the energy was coming from. The woman said I’d be close when I hit the original stone trail.

My mind wandered as I climbed the steep incline.

Not everyone I’d met on my journeys appreciated my lifestyle. Some even thought I was flaky. There’s a difference between intentionally distant and flaky though. I had a habit of not making any promises I didn’t want to keep.

I met a girl from Colorado when I was traveling in Mexico three years ago. Her name was Kiara, and after we fucked around on a beach in the middle of nowhere, we drank and talked way too much.

When I confessed my usual penchant for flying solo, Kiara had told me, “Garret, it’s like, your form of undeveloped self-care, born out of a lack of proper boundaries. You’re not irresponsible, sweetie. You’re afraid.”

I laughed and told her I wasn’t afraid of anything. Why else would I seek out every broken corner of the world?

Though I left that beach and never saw Kiara again, her words had stuck to me like the pounds of Thai mud on my boots. Even now, as I hiked through the humid jungle in Thailand, I could hear her sweet voice mocking me, asking, “Still running, Garret?”

I pushed her memory out of my head and trudged on, replacing her under-inspired analysis with the image of her straddling my hips and moving above me.

There. Much better.

But even these pleasant thoughts melted away when I saw the crumbling wall ahead. It must have only been a barrier wall, nothing of significance, but to me it meant I was almost there.

I hardly noticed the smells, or the bugs, or my own dripping sweat as I doubled my speed. That familiar adrenaline took over and masked the burn of my muscles. My hand slid over a sharp stone and though I felt my skin tear, I barely registered the pain.

The trail began to grow clearer. The jungle thinned. The blazing blue sky peeked through the canopy.

And then I found the temple.

Compared to what I'd seen in India, this would hardly count as a temple at all.

More like a ruin.

Broken columns and cracked-off faces of old statues covered the ground. There wasn't a roof to speak of, either. Just a stone circle with statues lining the perimeter.

Something felt off about the place, like someone was watching me.

My ears itched, and the hair on my arms stood on end.

The sensations weren't unlike those I'd had when arriving at other event sites. This was amplified though, like someone was hammering out a tune from huge subwoofers at a frequency just beyond what my ears could pick up.

I reached for the knife at my belt and twisted around to scan the circle. Listening. Watching. But nothing leapt out and no one spoke from the shadows.

That's when I realized why it was unnerving. It was silent. The bugs didn't buzz. The birds didn't squawk or sing.

In the ceaseless chittering of a summer jungle, silence was wrong.

I chuckled with satisfaction. Oh, yeah. There was some major energy here.

The best part was that I'd be the first to experience this one.

Possibilities spun through my mind.

Sure, my blood could congeal like that poor kid from South Africa. It wouldn't be a pleasant way to die, but what was? Or I could get lucky. One man not only found a tree that had been turned into pure gold, but he'd been seduced by the spirit who inhabited it.

By the time the local authorities found him, he'd been dead for a week. Leaning against gilded bark, his pants around his ankles, the spirit had literally fucked him to death.

It would certainly be more entertaining than dying of old age or a damn heart attack.

Still, I had to admit, I was hoping for something more. Maybe this could lead me to something that would change my life forever. I had it in me, I knew it, to have the strength to start over again. I'd had my

life stolen away from me, and the pain still kept me up at night. But I was thirty-two, damn it.

I deserved a second chance.

I strode into the center of a circle of stones, examining every detail I could make out.

Carved columns ran around the ring, still working to hold up a roof that had long since collapsed. Within the base of each column, though, elaborate figures remained, some remarkably well preserved. A bear, wolf, lion, and a tiger were clear enough, their features fearsome and well-wrought.

The next three were all so worn down and broken, I couldn't decipher what the artist had intended. But it was the last that caught my eye.

A dragon.

I strode over to it. Etched scales ran around the beast's body, a pair of wings folded over its back. It was beautiful, in a way, but it was the raw power and unflinching will that seemed to burn from its empty eye sockets that appealed to me the most.

It was a familiar look. I'd had the same before my fall. I'd been filled with ice-cold resolve, confident that my ambitions would take me exactly where I needed to go.

Fondly, I reached out and touched the dragon's snout.

My heart leapt into my throat as searing pain tore through me.

I tried to remove my hand, but it felt glued in place. More than that, I could swear the statue was pulling me into it, absorbing me hand first.

The temple lit up with blue, a vibrant, electric blue that seared my eyes. I had only a second to register the arcing frame of a doorway forged of pure lightning.

It came from within the dragon, and from within me as well. I was in a temple in Thailand, but I was also in an empty plane of existence, tipping toward a single charged portal looming before me.

I lost my feet as I hurtled ass over teakettle through the doorway.

The darkness within swallowed me whole.



## CHAPTER 2



I landed hard on a wooden seat, my hand throbbing where I'd touched the dragon statue. Blinking around in shock, I was sitting in the middle of a room that could have been described as normal, if it hadn't been on fire.

Through the licking flames, it seemed like any office's reception room.

In my stunned awareness, I noticed a sign that said, "Welcome, new citizen! An assistant will be with you shortly to guide you through the assimilation process. Please be patient."

What the flying fuck?

When did I get to this room? Where was I?

I could still smell the jungle on me. Sweat coated my skin from Thailand's humid air. I knew where I'd just been, so why did this feel so real?

Cautiously, I reached a hand out toward a stack of burning papers. When my fingers hovered over the flames, I snatched them back. Well, it was hot, so probably not a dream.

Maybe I was hallucinating.

Maybe the energy in the temple was giving me visions, and I was imagining the physical sensations of this fire.

But I wasn't entirely sure. Sensory experiences could be imagined, but I've never heard of a hallucination that makes you think you have smoke in your lungs. And I've never experienced something so vivid, so solid. I kicked the chair I'd just been sitting on. It tumbled into the flames and slowly began to smolder.

I squinted and studied the billowing smoke, but I couldn't see deeper into the office. No one screamed or called out, either.

Was there a chance someone was in there?

Then, from deep within the inferno, an otherworldly screech cut through the air and sent shivers down my spine. A cold, sinking dread filled me when I saw a dark shape emerge from the flames.

Black eyes. Scales that looked like metal forged with shadow. It had huge bat-like wings and inky eyes. Blood dripped from stark white teeth in a maw that grinned when it saw me.

I needed to get out of this office.

I bolted from the burning room.

Spinning around, I slammed the door shut. Given how strong the creature had appeared, I doubted it would hold long. Better than nothing though.

I scrambled away from the building, smoke already billowing out the corners of the roof.

My boots hit cobblestones, and I found myself in the street of a strange city. It wasn't like any place I'd ever been before. Not only were the buildings around me constructed with an alien architecture, somehow defying any style I'd ever seen, but above, hovering in the sky, were a series of floating platforms.

I would have been scared if I wasn't so pissed.

*Did I accidentally take acid?*

Had the old village woman laced the tea she'd so kindly offered, and was even now preparing to sacrifice my corporeal form to the old gods? It would certainly make a lot more sense than what was going on around me.

I didn't have time to consider as the door behind me exploded outward. I ran as rubble rained around me and growls erupted on all sides. *If* this was real, and that's a big *if*, I needed a place to hide and plan.

Knife in hand, I took an alleyway that opened up to a field with a treeline a mile out. *There*. A forest. More importantly, a place that wasn't on fire or teeming with demon creatures. I paused and flattened myself against the wall as a flock of screeching devils passed the alley.

My boots crunched on something on the ground. When I looked down, my heart sunk. There was a pair of four-foot-long insect wings

shattered beneath my feet. They were beautiful, silver and shimmering, except for the splatter of blood over them.

Feeling sick, and somehow knowing those wings had been *attached* to a living being, I moved toward the field. But there, in the cover of darkness, I saw something that made me reconsider my plans.

Three of the black, winged creatures bounded along on twisted legs, each carrying a person in their talons. Two were men with bloody faces and gashes through their necks.

The last struggled to keep hold of a woman who screamed and fought with everything she had. Though I only got a glimpse, I swear the woman had a tail.

She bucked, throwing an elbow in the creature's gut, but it hissed and clamped down tighter. The woman wasn't giving in or going easily, but she couldn't match the physical strength of the monster.

A terrified rage pounded in my veins, and I felt my resolve solidify into something dense and unyielding. If this was a hallucination, there would be no consequences or death. If this was real, that woman needed help.

Gripping my knife, I ran after the devils.

But as my feet hit the grass, the bones in my legs shifted. My churning emotions had triggered something deep within me, and though it felt oddly familiar, I had no idea what was happening to me.

The skin on my back and chest erupted in fiery pain, just like it had when I touched the dragon statue.

My body felt tight and hot all over.

And then, as my t-shirt ripped open, I watched in horror and fascination as my chest expanded, as my biceps rippled and grew. Even my jeans tore at the seams as my legs and hips swelled in all directions.

There was a rushing sense of energy cycling through me. Torturous ecstasy wracked my nerves till I felt close to losing consciousness.

A growl erupted from somewhere.

No, not somewhere — from *me*. I stretched my fingers as they elongated, talons punching out of the tips.

Scales marched up my arms.



Power tore through my back.

And then I was a beast flying ten feet in the air and barreling toward the girl. My outraged mind was pushed to the back of my consciousness.

I was an ancient creature.

I was power.

I'd become death incarnate, and I would rip my prey to shreds.

The creature holding the woman froze when it saw me. Its inkdrop eyes glinted with hatred as it let her go and faced me. I tried to command her to run and hide, but all that came out of my mouth was a roar.

She flinched back in fear, and the creature lunged into the air. Its black body blended into the night, but my vision was sharp.

I flew higher to coax it upward. The further we were from the girl, the less likely she'd be injured in this battle.

Flight felt natural to me even though my wings strained to accommodate my instincts. And how could I blame them? They'd only just broken free from my back.

My prey swooped in quickly, delivering a ragged gash across my ribs.

I struck like a viper, my teeth clacking shut with a jarring crack.

The creature cackled, tasting the blood it had drawn from me by licking the end of one of its talons. Emboldened by its success, the monster dove at the side of my long neck, hoping to bring me down with a vicious bite.

That was its first and last mistake.

My legs shot out, grasping a black body with taloned fingers. The creature managed to slip free of one of my hind paws, but the other sank around its thigh. I crushed down with all my strength, feeling my talons puncture flesh, my powerful grip pop a femur.

My prey reacted with a screech, slashing at my chest and face with its claws. It tried to flap free, its wings moving frantically, but I sunk the talons of my forelimbs into its shoulders.

*This is over, you bastard. Time to shut the fuck up and die already.*

I folded my wings and dropped to the ground. The weight of my body crushed the monster against the stone street, cracking its

wings beneath it.

It didn't move, just stared up at me blindly with those inky eyes.

My enemy was dead and the woman had been saved.

I would see to her later though. The beast I'd become needed to finish this monster off completely. I'd taken a life. Now it was time to eat.

I bit into tough flesh, tearing my prey to pieces. A flush of pleasure stole through my body as I swallowed first its head, then chest. Each portion of the creature's body tasted delicious. Black blood poured down my throat, and I relished in knowing I was consuming something powerful.

Its wings and limbs followed.

At last, only a swollen belly remained. And though my appetite was nearly sated, I refused to leave anything behind. There was room yet for a little more.

I noticed a faint glow seeping through the creature's leathery skin. Distantly, I thought it looked like an orb of some kind had been buried inside.

This hazy observation didn't stop me from opening wide and swallowing the last bite.



## CHAPTER 3



**M**y body hummed with energy. Whatever I'd swallowed, either the monster or what had been inside of it, glowed within me like coal in the center of a spent fire.

My body shifted and sagged. The same mixture of pleasure and pain rippled through me, and in a few moments, I was back in my human body.

My normal body.

I stared down at my shivering form, covered in black blood, dick swinging in the wind.

The girl rushed up to me, fearful but relieved.

Her lips were moving, but all I could notice was silver hair so light, it looked like snow under moonlight. And her eyes were a bright, stardust silver. The kind that you see in glaciers and winter mornings.

There was a ringing in my ears, persistent and irritating. I touched my ear. My hand came back bloody.

The girl was glaring at me now, mouth still moving. So, my hearing was out. I guessed that creature had injured me worse than I'd thought. Good thing I'd torn it to shreds with my powerful, saurian jaws.

Nope. I wasn't ready to admit that just yet.

I didn't need that big of a logic bomb to deal with right now. Not while I was injured and naked.

I focused on the woman's beautiful face. Two silver-tufted ears stuck out of her shining hair. She was strange-looking, compared to

any woman from Earth, but undeniably gorgeous. And her eyes were kind.

At least I'd managed to save her.

She took a step closer, her hands beginning to glow with soft white light.

Great, now something must be wrong with my eyes, too.

I made to pull away as she moved her hands over my ears. When I saw her concern though, I figured a little trust was in order. My ears hummed, clearing somewhat as if emptying of water, and the constant throbbing pain dulled somewhat.

Finally, I could hear the words she was saying, "Come on. We have to get to the bunker." Her words echoed over and over in my head. I nodded, fully capable of realizing that yeah, a bunker might be a good place to hide when demon bat things were on a murder rampage.

She gripped my hand and led me toward the alley I just came from.

We were headed *back* into the devil-infested city.

Fabulous.

I managed to pick up my knife from the pile of shredded, jungle-stinking fabric that I used to call clothing. Even my boots were destroyed. This just wasn't my day.

The girl was strutting forward with determination when the back of my neck prickled. I glanced up just in time to spot another winged creature dropping down from above.

"Ga!" I bellowed, shoving the girl to the side and bringing my knife up in an arcing swing.

My desperate attack had caught the thing off guard, and my knife plunged into the creature's side. Black blood spilled from the nasty wound. Talons pierced my arm, and the beast moved to bite the back of my neck.

Before it could do so, I rammed the butt of my weapon deeper. It clicked against something hard. Then a pop sounded, almost like a light bulb bursting on the ground.

The beast shrieked and shuddered.

Its wings drooped, and the body thumped to the ground in a heap.

“You’re really fast with that knife,” my companion commented. Despite her nonchalant words, her back was pressed into the wall, her chest heaving.

“I can be quick when I’m about to die,” I replied, scanning the strip of night sky above us to make sure there weren’t any more ambushers.

Then, I held out my hand. “I’m Garret, by the way.”

She reached out and clasped her hand in mine. “I’m Delia.”

I released her grip and inclined my head. “You mentioned a bunker?”

To my surprise, her eyes trailed down my body. But then they widened and snapped up quickly. “Right. Not too far away. Let’s get you covered up first at least.”

Delia held out her hand and a rough-spun blanket popped into existence on her upturned palm.

Shaking my head at seeing one more physics-shattering event, I took the blanket and wrapped it around my shoulders.

I followed her as she led us through a small, inner-city park and down the shabbiest street I’d ever seen.

The entire place looked like it had been burned and torn down long ago then left to gather dust. Even the weeds were pitiful.

Seemingly unperturbed, Delia strode toward the nearest house, the numbers 319 rusting away below a broken-out window. She pushed open the door, an act of sheer bravery as the entire structure leaned to the left at a dangerous angle.

The word ramshackle came to mind.

I shut the door and followed her through the shadows.

She marched through the house like she owned the place, kicked aside a rickety chair, and opened a trapdoor that had been beneath it.

“Is this the part where you kill me?” I asked wryly as I descended the concrete steps behind her.

A dim light from below illuminated the side of her face as she glared at me over her shoulder. “Was that supposed to be a joke?”

“Depends. Am I right?”

Delia sighed and took the rest of the stairs without comment.

The room at the bottom was simple and bare. A single bed with dusty blankets stood out in the middle. Through an open door, I could see a bathroom to my right. To the left were shelves stocked with jars of preserved food, and plastic-wrapped dried meat.

A brilliant white light shone from a torch on the wall in this room, and in the bathroom. But other than that, the place was empty. It was all rotting wooden floorboards and spiders clinging to the wall. The only interesting feature was the irritated woman with beautiful silver hair, glaring at me.

“What?” I asked.

Her mouth worked for a time, seeming completely at a loss for what to say. Finally, with hands on hips, she asked, “Who are you?”

I studied her for the first time in clear light. She had smooth, tan skin. Her lips were a dusky rose-petal-red. And hell, she had the most incredible curves.

But it was the ears on her head that made me pause. “I’m Garret. We’ve already exchanged names, remember? What are those?” I asked, pointing at the top of her head.

Her eyes narrowed. “Haven’t you seen ears before?”

It was the most absurd answer. I’d seen them, alright. On *animals*. “Okay. I’ll play that game. Why are they furry and sticking up like a dog’s then?”

She snorted and her cheeks turned a deep shade of pink. “Dog? What kind of stranger saves your life one minute then mocks you the next. And I didn’t mean your name. What kind of a creature are you?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m human,” I replied, a touch of exasperation coloring my words.

She stalked forward and poked me in the chest. “Every human that comes to this world has a human half and a creature half. I’ve never seen anything like what you turned into. It was almost as if you’d become a—”

I held my hands up, waiting to be enlightened. “What? Almost as if I transformed into a raging beast? Listen, I’m... new here. I’m super confused. And I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure I just ate a monster.”

She blinked, all anger gone. "You did. It was..." She shuddered. "Anyway, weren't you assimilated?"

I shrugged.

Her pretty mouth parted in surprise. "When did you arrive?"

"Ah, maybe thirty minutes ago? All I know is that I ended up in an office that was on fire. One of those black creature things was about to have me for dinner, so I booked it and found you."

She closed her eyes. "Wow. You don't know anything." Delia took a frustrated breath, looking like she might yell at me again. Then her eyes softened as she examined my sorry condition.

Concern wrinkled her brow. "You're still bleeding. And you stink."

"I was hiking in a jungle. So, lots of sweat, possibly elephant shit, and the black blood from those things. Whatever they were."

"Night stalkers. Demons, for short," she supplied. But her voice was softer, and all traces of accusation were gone. "Come with me."

Delia led me by my elbow into the bathroom. Despite the decrepit nature of the house, there was a huge porcelain tub set into the ground. It was big enough for five people, and looked like it belonged in a fancy spa. More odd than its size was how clean it was, as if someone had taken a jug of chlorine to it and neglected the rest of the room.

She turned the faucets then rifled through a nearby cupboard. Removing a bar of soap, she tossed it into the tub.

The water filled quicker than it should have given the tub's size, and I wondered at what kind of water heater this place had tucked away somewhere. Though Delia had already seen me naked, I still felt a bit strange when I let the borrowed blanket fall away from my shoulders.

Yet I would not choose modesty over cleanliness. I was filthy, and my stomach rumbled as it tried to digest the nightmare I'd snacked on.

"Can you tell me what this place is?" I asked, rubbing my belly.

Her ears turned an inch, and she scratched her cheek absently. I noted her fingernails weren't exactly human either. Bone white, her nails were more like claws, thick with sharp, pointed ends.

They were trimmed and groomed, though, so in a way they appeared just as strange and enticing as the rest of her.



What was she?

“This land is called Sintar. You are here because your planet is dying.”

“What? I mean, are you sure? I know things were getting bad, but Earth wasn’t dying,” I argued, my own words sounding hollow.

Delia sighed. She looked as exhausted and fed up as me.

Not only were my injuries bothering me, but there was a sharp, pinging noise in my ears that was driving me insane. It was staccato and constant, almost like the noise my phone would make when I got a text.

I cupped my hands over my ears and growled. “And what is that damn pinging noise?”

“For the love of god, just get into the bath. Once my nose doesn’t feel personally offended, I’ll explain everything. I promise,” she snapped.

Lacking the will to resist the call of a hot bath any longer, I obeyed, noticing the way she looked at her feet while I climbed in. When I sat on the bench, the water was already at my waist. It burned a little, somehow that perfect temperature at the limit of my tolerance.

I groaned.

*Fuck, this feels nice.*



## CHAPTER 4



I scoured my body with soap and a bath brush Delia had tossed in after me.

In moments, the water was turning a murky gray, and Delia asked me to remove the plug. The countless gallons of soapy hot water drained away in less than ten seconds.

I gaped at the hungry drain, thankful it hadn't sucked me down along with it.

Then, as if she weren't messing with the laws of nature, she spun the faucets once more to fill the bath.

I laughed, doubting my senses. Since the woman seemed oblivious of what might be strange in this situation, I just asked. "Okay, well that is just charming. But I have to ask, how is there so much hot water available in a house that can barely stand up?"

"It runs on credits. I found the bath here a while back. Somehow, it must have been overlooked. No real reason to have it down here in the bunker, but I'm not about to complain. Only costs three credits each time you need to refill it."

Questions bloomed in my mind, warring with my desire to relax and let the water ease my pain. I watched Delia for a time. She was squinting, almost seeming to read some invisible book as her eyes flicked back and forth. Every once in a while, she'd lift a finger and tap the air.

"Delia. Thank you so much for the bath, but there's still a lot I don't know. Like what the hell do you mean credits? This world, Sintar, has magical credits that make stuff work?" I asked. The woman kept poking the air before her face, so I raised my voice a

little. “And what the hell are you doing? It makes you look a little half-cocked!”

She smiled, and a bottle appeared in her hand.

I stared at it. I *know* that wasn't there before. That thing literally just popped into existence, just like the blanket had.

She lifted the magically summoned item. Then, in a tone one might reserve for an especially slow child, explained. “This is a healing potion. I just removed it from my Inventory. In Sintar, that's how things work. You can find your Inventory too by giving mental commands through your Internal Display. Everyone has an Internal Display, or ID as we call it. I'm not crazy, Garret. Just try it.”

“Seriously? Okay, here goes.” I thought clearly, *Internal Display*.



Name: Garret Stone  
Form: Dragon  
Creature type: Reptilian Endothermic  
Metabolism: Carnivore  
Evolution Level: 2



“IT SAYS I NEED AN ACTIVATION,” I told her. “I can't see anything except for my name, creature information, and Evolution Level.”

I had progressed to Level 2. Not bad for a first night. Though I didn't know what the hell that meant, I figured it was a good thing.

“Ah, you need someone to assimilate you. Usually a specialist greets new arrivals and does this for them. But from what you mentioned, the office is destroyed. We'll visit the Governor tomorrow and get that sorted out,” she said. There was a note of nervousness in her tone, and she fidgeted with her nails.

Was she nervous about me or the Governor?

Delia handed me the bottle. “Drink this. It's a basic healing potion. I fixed the worst of the damage with my own spell, but this should patch you up the rest of the way.”

I was still having trouble getting my head around this, but I asked, "Is that why your hands were glowing?"

"Yup. Drink up. Or do you not trust me?"

Oddly enough, I did trust her. I imagined that no matter where Delia went, she'd be the one in charge of taking care of the people around her. She was fierce, had nerves of diamond, but beneath it all, I sensed a heart of gold.

She'd nearly been killed by demons tonight, but her main concern was healing *my* ungrateful ass.

I examined the bottle. It was a tiny thing with pink liquid inside. "Delia, I don't want to waste your stuff." I looked up to find her watching me with a soft gaze.

"It isn't a waste. You need it, okay? Drink up," she said, her voice weary. Then, turning her back to me, she started to unbutton her shirt.

My eyes shot to the ceiling, and I heard her chuckle. The sound of her pants falling to the floor followed, and then the plop plop of her feet entering the bath.

"Calm down, Garret."

Thinking she was covered up, I glanced at my lovely host. She was searching about with her hands, her breasts quite unabashedly exposed.

By all the gods of lust, I loved brown nipples.

Well, that wasn't fair. I loved all the nipple shades. But right now, I *really* loved brown nipples.

Delia's breasts shifted as she continued to pat about the bottom of the tub for the soap. Then, catching my dumbstruck gaze, threw me a wink.

She didn't mind me watching at all. "The potion," she reminded me.

I cleared my throat. "Right. Yes, ma'am." I uncorked the bottle and shot the liquid down. It tasted like lavender and brown sugar. A combination that made me consider what Delia's hair smelled like, or the taste of her mouth.

Delia gave up and lowered herself into the bath, submerging her head beneath the water. When she came up, she had the soap at

last. Ignoring me, she began massaging her neck and shoulders with it.

“So, what’s this about a dying planet you said?” I asked, needing to fill the silence.

“The portals only appear when a planet has entered its final stages of life. They populate in places of concentrated energy so that a few survivors might find a new world to live on and begin anew. Up until a short while ago, many people would come to Sintar each day. But things seem to be going to shit here as well. You’re the first to arrive in months.”

When I didn’t interject with new questions, she continued, “There are an infinite number of parallel universes. Everyone on Sintar came from some version of Earth.”

I decided to go with it. No use expressing shock at every comment she made, even if it was mind-blowing. “Okay. I’ll bite. What Earth did you come from?”

She considered this. “Well, in my Earth, WWII was started by the French and Chinese initiative to enslave the inhabitants of their joint colony we called Australia. Yours?”

My mouth fell open.

She shrugged. “It’s a good way to establish which worlds we’ve all come from. Somehow, names and major events seem to stick. It’s the details that shift.”

I replied, “Our WWII was started by German bullshit eugenics and a guy with a tiny moustache.”

Her brows rose. “Hitler was a bad guy on your Earth too? Interesting. He helped the French with their war efforts, but the Germans never gained much power.”

I shook my head. “No, he was one of the worst. Him, Stalin, and Mussolini.”

She gasped. “Stalin was a saint on my Earth! All those people he saved after Yosemite erupted? We erected statues of him in every country.”

“What?” I said. “No way! We didn’t have an exact count, but scholars and historians estimate 20 million people died under Stalin. Most of them he just starved.”

She paled. “My Earth wouldn’t have allowed that.”

I clenched my teeth. “Sweetheart, the human race always allows too much. But let’s not get sidetracked. Has your Earth died yet?”

She stood up and turned around. The water washed down her backside, giving me the most exquisite view of her backside I could ever ask for. Delia opened the door of a small cupboard and removed an old brush. Then she sat back down in the water, as if nothing at all had happened, and started working through the tangles in her hair. I tried not to stare at her wet ears, but they were so... well... cute.

Delia caught my gaze and smirked. “I shift into a wolf. When you’ve been here long enough, you start to take on a few characteristics of your creature form. Has nothing to do with Evolution Rank, as far as we know. Just time. As for your question, I don’t know. I’ve been here for two years but have no idea how long the portals had been on my Earth before I discovered one. There’s no way we can go back to check. I just assume it’s gone.”

*If this is real, then I’ll never get to visit my mother’s grave again. I also won’t have my crazy brother and uncle coming after me with yet another lawsuit.*

Was I relieved or terrified? I really couldn’t tell.

“So,” I said, “what did I look like in my, uh, creature form?”

She took a deep breath, suddenly reluctant. “Like a dragon.”

“Sounds like you think that’s a bad thing.”

She moved closer, and to my surprise, sat next to me. Her soft, bare thigh barely brushed against mine. “Garret— how do I say this — well, there aren’t any dragons in Sintar. Not for hundreds of years. They were all killed.”

I turned to face her. “That definitely sounds like a bad thing.”

She gave me an apologetic wince. “It probably is. *But*, I personally know the Governor of Vade, which is what this city is called, by the way. We can talk to him tomorrow and see that you’re properly assimilated and given protection. Maybe you can work in the Capitol building too!”

I rubbed my temples. “Yeah, sure. That sounds great.”

“Hey.” She placed a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t stress. We’ll figure it out, and I’ll help you. Just like you helped me.”

I nodded, then asked something else that had been bothering me. "Please don't take this wrong because honestly, I'm enjoying myself. But is nudity between the sexes different in this world? Back on Earth, most wouldn't be caught dead sharing a bath with a stranger."

She looked amused. "Sorry. It is so easy to forget the old world. Yes, nudity is different here. Things are more... practical. I have bathed in front of strangers many times. But on my own Earth, I'd have been arrested for doing so. You sure it doesn't bother you?"

My laugh seemed enough of an answer, so I fell silent again.

She continued to brush her hair rhythmically, and moved a little closer. I didn't mention it. I wanted her to stay close, and not just because she was beautiful, but because the tension in my muscles disappeared the moment she settled in beside me.

I felt this pull toward her that I couldn't understand. It wasn't just attraction. That was as common as crows. It felt more like attraction mixed with an eagerness to protect.

I found her other hand in the water. I held it between my own. Her eyes went wide in surprise, but I plowed on and said, "I'm sorry. I want you to know that I'd never intentionally make fun of your adorable ears."

She blushed and looked away. "Adorable?"

I opened my mouth to reply, paused, and asked, "Can I touch them?" This last hour had been a nightmare mixed with a fantasy. I should be in complete shock, but for some reason, I wanted nothing more than to run my finger along the soft, wet edge of Delia's wolf ear.

Her shoulders inched up, and I caught a whiff of fear from her. But she held my gaze, and I saw the resolve in them when it came. She took a deep breath and relaxed. Then she closed her eyes and nodded.

I studied her face. She looked different when she was at rest. Younger. I laced the fingers of my right hand with hers and lifted my left.

I reached for the left ear, which started to twitch in anticipation. How did she know I was going for that one? It flattened for a second, and then straightened again. I started at the front base and ran the



back of my knuckles up the soft edge. Delia shivered, and her lips parted.

I stroked up and then down the other side. They were similar to a dog's, only more rounded at the top, and less floppy. They were the same color as her long hair.

"You have a totally silver coat? When you transform that is?"

She hummed in affirmation.

"Your ears are beautiful," I told her. "And quite sexy." Her eyes flew open, and I retracted my hand. "Too much?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes but the corners of her mouth had curled up into a smile.

"How are your wounds?" she asked, changing the subject. She moved in front of me and placed her hands on my stomach, right over the demon claw wounds.

I sucked in a breath. She was inches away from the hard-on bobbing in the water right beneath her hands.

She concentrated and said, "The damage was severe. I was certain the potion would knit everything together, but I can still sense lingering injuries. Let me try again. I'm only a Level 3, so I might not be able to fix everything tonight."

*Did I just hear her right?* "You were here for two years," I stated numbly, trying to focus on the far wall. I was battling my own erection and the tiny sense of dread building inside me.

"Uh huh."

"And you're a Level 3?"

She gave me an annoyed look. "You're very good at repeating facts after I say them, Garret. I'll give you that."

The pain in my abdomen vanished. Then her hands reached up to cup my ears, which were both throbbing like a bitch. The tops of her breasts lifted out of the water, but I kept my eyes fixed firmly on her face.

My worry grew as I summoned my internal display and verified that I had indeed made it to Level 2. It was only my first night. Why was she so far behind? "How does the level system work?"

She sighed. "Killing monsters and fighting in the arena will get you some progression. But most of us wait for the Quest Office to assign us quests when we're eligible. There's a limited amount that

comes through the system, so we have a waiting list. Some people have to wait years between them. I was lucky, though.”

She blushed a little. “The Governor has given me two quests in the last eight months. It’s almost unheard of, but he’s been very kind to me.”

I suddenly hated this Governor. It was probably because of the way she tried to hide her smile when she talked about him. But even more than that, something felt wrong about what she said.

“In Earth video games,” I said tactfully, “players can level up far quicker than that.”

She snorted. “Oh, you *are* new. Yes, of course they did. It was the same on my Earth, too. But here, it’s real life. There just aren’t enough quests to go around.”

Frustrated with her answer, I tried a different angle. “Do our creature forms become stronger as we level up?”

She tilted her head to one side, pondering my question, or perhaps thinking instead as to what angle I was getting at. At last, she shrugged and answered. “Yes. Your human and dragon form become stronger with each level, of course, but two other things change. You’ll get to choose a spell and a new physical trait.”

Okay. At least now I knew what to look forward to after I got assimilated and could access my ID.

“I understand,” I told her. “So!” I clapped my hands loudly and grinned. “Why the *fuck* are demons attacking us?”



## CHAPTER 5



**D**elia gave me a quizzical look, and then burst into laughter. “What?” I asked, still smiling. She shook her head. “It just took me off-guard.”

I decided I liked her laugh. I spread my arms out. “Well?”

Delia sighed. “The demons have always been here. They attack the city for hours every night of the full moon. We have bunkers like this, which are warded to guard against them. And everyone in the city knows to hide away during the full moon. Every month, people still get taken.” She was completely somber now, likely remembering her own close call just an hour ago.

“How did you end up out there?” I asked quietly.

She looked to the ceiling and made an irritated noise. “Because I made a mistake. I was in the Southern Peace Office, where I was assigned to hide out during the attack. You see, I help maintain the wards in the city, but apparently, I screwed up the ones on the front door of the SPO. The demons crashed through like it was nothing, and took us.”

Anger surged through me. “Why drag you away? Why not just kill you then and there?” My voice was so low it came out like a growl.

*Huh. That’s new.*

“Demons drain energy. They’ll kill several people and suck them dry in a night, but they also like to keep a few people alive. Like me. If you hadn’t come, I would have probably been a living juice box until I kicked the bucket. Not that I would have given them much as a Level 3, but that’s why they take a few dozen people every month. Josiah and Ian were both Level 5.”

All of this was said in a reasonable, logical manner.

So, demon raids were common, and the beasts thrived off of draining our energy. That sucks. “And the Governor? What level is he?”

I wanted to know what the limits were on Sintar.

Delia blanched. “No one knows. He and the others don’t share.”

“The others?”

“The Originals. There are five major cities on Sintar. Each one is governed by an Original, descended from the first ones to arrive on Sintar. That’s all we really know.”

“Damn. They must be old bastards.” I leaned back and laced my fingers behind my head, not missing the way Delia’s eyes trailed down my chest. It was strange. I was 32 and had always been a fit guy with all the hiking and moving around. But since arriving, my body had changed.

I felt thicker, more heavily corded with lean, solid muscle.

If I was drinking the Kool-Aid, I’d guess the change was due to my new dragon status.

“Why are you smiling?” Delia asked. By the proximity of her voice, I guessed that she’d inched closer.

“It’s just crazy that I even believe this stuff. A part of me still thinks I’ll wake up and be back on Earth.”

“But you know you won’t,” she replied softly.

I lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know anything. Only time will tell. But I’m used to adapting, Delia.”

Suddenly, her ears twitched. They perked up like they were angling for a better signal on a sound I couldn’t hear. Her eyes lifted to the city above us.

I opened my mouth to ask, but she pressed a finger to her lips with a meaningful look my way.

*Right. Time to be quiet.*

After thirty seconds of breathless silence, she gave me a wary look. “Demons scuttling through the streets above us. I know this bunker is supposed to be safe, but so was the SPO. No use testing our luck tonight, right?”

“Right.” I grabbed the towel and stood. I wiped myself off and found a spare pair of pants and a plain cotton shirt in one of the cupboards. The clothes were huge and scratchy.

I placed a fresh towel on the ledge beside Delia and headed into the main room. I searched through the jars of preserved food and picked out some strips of jerky, a few nuts, and some pieces of dried fruit.

I wondered if I should take some out for Delia, but realized I didn't know what she liked. Over my shoulder, I called, "Hey, carnivore! Ready for some jerky?"

Her laugh made something brighten inside me. It was soft and feminine, but still had a throaty quality to it. It was sexy, and made for something genuine and evocative. "Just a few of those dried pears."

A minute later, Delia walked out in a pair of sweatpants, a tight white tank top, and pink fuzzy slippers. In answer to my questioning look, she said, "I have several changes of clothes in my Inventory. But you do wear that potato sack well."

I glanced at the dried pears. They were green and wrinkled as an old man's hand, but I didn't get how Delia thought these would hold her over.

In perfect timing, she answered me by leaning against the counter, tapping her personal Internal Display screen, and then palming a metal bowl filled with a sort of meat pie.

She didn't explain. I didn't ask. Really, what else was there to break down? This chick just pulled a meat pie from the goddamn air. Now if that wasn't one hell of a life goal, I didn't know what was.

We ate in silence. Neither of us looked at the bed. When I finished my last strip of jerky, I stood.

"What are you doing?" Delia asked around a mouthful of her pie. She curled over her bowl with a relaxed, sleepy smile.

I laid out one of the blankets on the wooden plank floor. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Getting the bedding all dirty."

"It was covered in dust. I literally just saw a family of spiders crawl out of the bed."

She went pale. "You did not."

I didn't, but I got a kick out of scaring her a little. I dropped one of the pillows on the ground and surveyed my work. I'd slept on worse things, hadn't I? "I know the secret to making the best beds," I replied with a wink. "Want to know what it is?"

She looked bemused. “Do enlighten me, oh powerful one.”

I gave her a small bow and stretched out on my back. “You lie down imagining you’re about to stretch out on rocks teeming with scorpions and vipers, so when you lie down on a dusty patch of wood,” I sighed dramatically, “you realize it feels just fine.”

She was shaking her head at me. “Suit yourself, dragon boy.” The bowl popped out of existence, and she strode over to the bed.

I relaxed when she didn’t insist I sleep with her. I needed some physical space, and waking up to a strange and beautiful woman wouldn’t help me think properly when the morning came.

When I did sleep, my dreams were fitful.

The old woman from the Thai village kept telling me I’d burned down her jungle with my breath. Somewhere in that blaze, was Kiara. No matter how high I flew, I couldn’t see her. But when I reached the top of the mountain, a silver wolf was waiting for me with a horde of demons at her back.



I WOKE to someone pounding on the ceiling. Before I could rise, Delia was unlatching the trap door. Three men in expensive black suits descended the stairs and waited wordlessly at the bottom.

Fuck. This place *was* real, wasn’t it?

I’d been half hoping I’d wake up somewhere in a Thai jungle with a bad headache, missing finger, and pierced taint.

“Garret, get up. We’re going to meet the Governor,” Delia said. “You’re going to be assimilated, and I’m going to... never mind. Get dressed.”

I groaned in protest, but followed her order. I wanted access to my ID as soon as possible.

We were escorted down the street by six guards in total. The place was lined with buildings, rotting and chipped like old teeth. Each house was decrepit, a hollow skull with cracked gutters and siding drooping like petrified sinew. Any paint that had decorated these buildings was chipped off or faded.

The broken windows appeared to stare at us.

The street was pocked with missing cobblestones. Green and black puddles were scattered about like the ground was bleeding out poison.

There was a sign at the end of the street that read 'Easy Street.' Its black paint was so faded it had turned a weird pale gray-green, and it swung from a single nail. It creaked like some foreboding start to an old Western film.

Claws marks ran across the metal plate, and I didn't need to ask Delia where those had come from.

But I did notice she was nervous.

"Are you afraid of the Governor?" I asked.

"No."

"Then why do you look like you're walking toward a death sentence?"

Her ears twitched. Her tail swished in agitation. "I messed up the wards, okay? I was in charge of securing them last night. My colleagues were killed because of my error. I survived, and the blame will be placed on me. I'm going to have to face that."

"That's absurd. It shouldn't be your responsibility to fight off a legion of demons in the city. Wards or not," I reasoned.

"The Governor won't see it that way."

"Then the Governor is an idiot." I gritted my teeth as we continued.

*If she gets punished for last night's events, I'm going to be pissed.*

Delia growled softly and shot me a glare. "Don't say that out loud. It isn't okay."

"Is he some kind of a god? Or more of an ex-boyfriend?"

She shook her head and kept walking. "Neither. The most powerful person in the city. How about that? And if anything... kind of like a father."

The buildings grew taller and taller the deeper we walked into the city. They were made of the same stuff from back home, with a few oddities.

Like the giant metal disc hovering in the sky. That was new.

It had a flat, silver bottom, and metal walls. That's as much as I could discern from down here. "Let me guess. He's up there."



“Smart man,” she shot back.

The guards led us into a plain white building that looked like the inside of a dentist’s office.

“So, what kind of punishment are you expecting?” I probed.

The firm line of her mouth softened, and she moved closer to me. “Well, I’m not going to be executed. I’m likely going to have a level removed.”

“Oh.” *That isn’t so bad, right? Better than dying, that is.*

Like she could hear my thoughts, she said, “Trust me, it’s not a mercy. Level reduction isn’t part of the natural order. It hurts. It’s torture. And I’ll likely be incapacitated for weeks afterward.”

Some of the acid in her expression softened when she saw my thunderous face.

We followed the guards down three staircases, through five doorways with 15-digit lock codes, and into a dark chamber. I was halfway expecting the Governor to be sitting on a throne, cloaked in shadows, with a glowing scepter in hand.

Instead, there was a plain silver doorway that opened into a milky blue center. It looked like a movie effect, with all the swirling smoke and void-like appearance.

The guards were posted beside it. One man had his hand on the frame, touching some sort of screen.

Delia strode forward and stepped through the doorway.

She disappeared, the bluish haze engulfing her.

Swallowing, I followed. I didn’t want to seem like a noob, and obviously this was some kind of portal. It was just too weird not to be unsettling.

My foot fell through thin air as I passed into the doorway. For a second, I was breathless, the wind being sucked from my lungs as the blinding light seared my eyes.

And then my foot met smooth marble.

“Mr. Stone. I’m pleased you joined us,” a deep voice said.



## CHAPTER 6



**T**he portal closed behind me with a loud rush of air. I hoped that meant we'd take another route back down to the street level, and not that the Governor planned to keep us up here.

As for the man himself, he was huge.

I was 6'2", but this guy had to be at least half a foot taller than me.

But what made me truly pause were his cool, cunning eyes. Ice blue and sharp as a blade, they offset the Governor's genial smile. They told me that no matter how charming this man was, he would be watching me closely.

I returned the smile with my own. "The Governor, I presume? An honor," I told him.

"The honor is mine. Our city hasn't seen a dragon in many years. Tell me, Garret, what do you think of Sintar?" the man asked, his voice sounding sincere. He was dressed in the same type of expensive suit as his guards.

"If this city didn't have a pest control issue, I'd have a higher opinion of it. As it is, I can't help but say it's somewhat lacking."

Delia made a strangled noise beside me.

The Governor tilted his head, like he just realized a fly could talk. "The demons are an unfortunate reality of this world. I'm sure Delia informed you."

He gave me a brilliant smile, showing off his straight white teeth, and I was struck by a strong desire to please this man, to win his respect and favor.

Where the hell did that come from?

The sensation filled my entire being. I might have been feeling this simply because this man was powerful, and he was looking at me like I had the answer to some incredible question.

It felt unnatural to me, however. Too much out of my own character.

He clapped me on the shoulder like we were old buddies. Affection oozed from every one of his pores. "Vade should have welcomed you, the first dragon in hundreds of years, with open arms. But instead, you were dropped into a city under siege. For this, I apologize. If there is anything I could do to make amends for such a poor reception, feel free to let me know."

That strange urge was telling me I should just ignore the Governor's casual offer, and be as accommodating as possible.

I crushed that thought with all of my strength and said instead, "Thank you, Governor. As it happens, I do have something in mind. Delia thinks she's about to receive a terrible punishment for something she most likely didn't do." I made sure to match the man's saccharine expression with one of my own. "Any way we can sweep all that under the rug?"

The Governor's eye glittered as he replied. "A businessman, I see. And a reasonable proposal. I'm afraid I will have to deny the request though. The Council will want someone to answer for the mistake, and we've all read the reports and observed the tapes. Delia is the one responsible for her office's fall."

I bristled, but that cool resolve had wound its way through me. I was in the zone. "Bullshit. Your city. Your people. Those deaths are on you, Governor. And I think you know it."

The guards rushed forward, midnight-black blades sliding from their scabbards.

Delia cried out, and I braced for a fight.

The Governor, though, seemed like he'd just won a fucking carnny prize.

"It is unfortunate, Garret, that you've made such an accusation. For now, you too, have committed a crime. You'll both be punished." Turning to my wolf friend, he asked, "What of you, Delia. Do you have any objections to my authority?"

Delia's answer came at once. "No. Governor, I accept any consequences."

I cleared my throat and tried a more tactful approach. "Governor, excuse my language, but this isn't fair."

"It is the law, Mr. Stone. And my patience with you does not extend much further." He oozed predatory danger.

I was wondering why he was putting up with me at all. A guy with this much power could just kick me out or kill me.

He wanted something from me.

I just had to find out what.

"Do you trust Delia?" I asked.

The Governor crossed his arms imperiously.

I took that as a yes and continued. "I might have only known her for a day, but you'll be jeopardizing a valuable asset if you carry out this punishment. Delia saved me last night. I know I'm just one person, but she showed a rare level of bravery and level-headedness. Give her another chance. In a time of unrest and invasion, we all need more people like her. With their freedom and strength intact."

The Governor bristled. He was really defensive about the quality of his city, wasn't he? I wanted to lightly tap his buttons, not antagonize him.

I had to be careful.

"I have countless assets, Mr. Stone. As fond as I am of Delia, I will not show favoritism or undermine my own laws. However, your words are not without merit. I am willing to entertain a compromise. Would you hear the terms of my deal?"

Delia nudged me and nodded. There was desperation in her eyes.

"Okay," I said. "I want nothing more than to compromise."

In a flash, the Governor's smile was back in its usual place. "Good to hear! Nothing better than a reasonable man. And I do hope you'll both be reasonable."

He paused and wrapped his hand behind his back. "I'm interested in giving you and Mr. Stone an assignment. It will be dangerous, but I have been looking for people who might fit a less conventional role."

“Seems my presence alone is unconventional. Can you explain?” I asked.

“Well said. There used to be dragons in Sintar, but they were destroyed by the demons long ago. After the race was decimated, the dragon spirits no longer chose new arrivals. Other mythical beasts endured, but the dragons did not reappear. You see, demons target those who possess great power. The higher the level, the more energy they can take from the person. The dragons were once unmatched in strength... and yet...” He gave me a look that said the rest.

*And yet, they were wiped out.*

A shiver ran up my spine. I wasn't imagining it when I felt a threat in those words.

I was not safe here.

Swallowing hard, I said, “I'm very eager to hear more about this deal.”

“Very well. I will assign you to a service. It will not be pleasant. After all,” he paused and gave me a charming grin, “it is a punishment.”

The Governor seemed suddenly animated. He made his way around his epic marble desk and sat in a chair too similar to a throne to dismiss. “Gorf! Where did you find Delia and Mr. Stone again?” he cried out while shuffling in a drawer.

The taller of the two armored guards shifted nervously on his feet then replied, “In a house on Easy Street, Governor. In the bunker.”

The Governor's eyes flashed. “Very cozy, I'm sure you two were. Easy Street was overtaken three years ago. It's on the outskirts of the city and faces the forest. Every month under the full moon, the demons tear through that street and use it to enter the city. No one has been willing or capable enough to reclaim it. If you can manage to do the impossible, I will excuse your crimes and reward you with three quests apiece.”

Alarm bells went off in my head, but I kept my voice pleasant when I replied, “Why haven't you assigned your forces to retake the street? Respectfully, sir. I only wish to understand the context and the needs here.”

The Governor didn't notice my apprehension. He was flicking through something on his Internal Display. Probably sending the message to the council, or something. Sealing our fate. "My forces are meant to protect *living* citizens," he explained absently. "I can't risk lives to reclaim a dead street. It's been abandoned, and the only useful portion is the bunker. I have to put resources on the fertile soil, Mr. Stone. Not fortifying a rotting skeleton."

Confused, I asked, "Then why ask us to reclaim it at all?"

His hand waved over his ID. There was a furrow in his brow as he completed these tasks. "You are a dragon, Mr. Stone. I am hoping you may have some ingenuity. The demons continue to encroach on our city. We are losing ground, and eventually, we will need to make a stand. I suddenly find myself with two rather disposable *assets*. I am sorry that you and Delia will be on the front lines, but it is in the city's best interest."

"We'll do it!" Delia blurted. Her cheeks were red, her eyes wild and glossy. She froze and lowered her eyes. "I mean, it would be an honor to try." She was practically vibrating with excitement.

The Governor turned a knowing smirk on her. "Eager to grow in strength, I see. Well, I look forward to seeing what you do. However, I must tell you both that if in three months' time, you have not erected a proper border on the outer edge of Easy Street, I will be forced by the Council to punish you both by more traditional means."

*Three months. We can do three months, right?*

Delia glanced at me with a raised brow.

I gave her one sharp nod.

Her lips tightened and she turned back to the Governor, who was watching us with thinly veiled humor.

"Very well," he said. "Mr. Stone, would you come with me? I do believe you are lacking an assimilation."

"Thank fuck," I sighed, and then winced. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't start apologizing now," he said. "Delia, you are free to go. Please gather all belongings and take them to Easy Street. You will both be residing there until your assignment is fulfilled. Gorf will escort you out."

The Governor spent several minutes on his ID while I waited in the grand office. When he met my eye again, I asked, "So how long

have you known Delia?”

“Oh, she’s been working for me for a while. Smart girl. Excellent healer,” he complimented. “Though I am quite interested in learning how you both managed to survive. Several eyewitnesses reported seeing her captured, and her SPO peers dead. I assume you had something to do with her escape?”

*Aw, shit. I can’t tell him about eating the demon, can I? I’m pretty certain it’s the thing that made me level up, and since that’s a luxury in this town, I have to keep it to myself.*

So, like a proper American, I omitted the truth.

“The demon carrying her was injured. I didn’t know I could change into a dragon, so when I ran after her and turned into a dragon, I just flew at the thing. The others ran off with the dead men, and I got lucky and killed the other that had been carrying Delia.”

I didn’t add any more details. Best to stick to the basics.

“That’s quite a story,” the Governor commented. “Demons are fierce creatures. Even a dragon can be killed by one.”

I shrugged. “It almost did kill me. Delia patched me up.”

“Of course she did,” he said as smoothly as a snake weaving through the grass.

He asked me to open my ID, and when I did, there was a message waiting for me.



ALLOW GOVERNOR VADE ACCESS?



THERE WERE “ACCEPT” and “Deny” buttons.

I knew I had to accept it. Which meant the Governor would see my level progression.

Well, at least I hadn’t outright lied. That would put a strain on our professional relationship.

I smiled at the man and tapped Accept, giving him even more control over me than he already had.





## CHAPTER 7



“ I see you’ve had quite the boost, Mr. Stone. Level 2, and only a day old in this new world?”

I tried to explain, but the Governor held up a hand. “Mr. Stone, did you do the impossible and manage to steal a quest from another person?”

“No, of course not.”

He nodded. “Then the demon you killed must have been mighty, indeed! Must have been a large and dangerous one to have earned you an Evolution Level. I’m impressed. However, I hope you do take care in avoiding the core. Carnivore that you are, it will take you a while to master your urges, but consuming a demon’s core will kill you.”

“Are you referring to the glowing orb thing?” I asked, trying to remain nonchalant.

“Precisely!”

“I guess I was lucky. I do remember a claw hitting something in the demon’s body. Felt hard, and then it popped. After that, the demon died instantly,” I said, weaving in some of the experience from the second demon.

“That was no doubt its core. It takes a good knock to damage it, but doing so is the surest way to kill one.”

I was casual when I added, “I’m surprised the cores are so dangerous to consume. Are they toxic?” I needed him to reveal more about the cores, and specifically, how long I had to live.

He lifted a perfectly groomed eyebrow. “No. Those who consume them are corrupted. The core overtakes their body and turns them

into a demon within the span of a few hours. It's a terrible thing to witness, really. Grotesque."

My heart was pounding in my chest. Shit, shit, *shit*.

The Governor unlocked my screen and began pointing out the different features of my ID. He started with my Inventory.

I listened and followed along, but in the back of my mind, I was reeling.

I felt fine. Didn't I? Was the demon core corruption just delayed, or did something else happen? The demon I killed wasn't particularly big. It was strong as hell, but not any larger than the others.

I got my shit together and focused. I'd panic later, but in the meantime, I'd pay attention and learn as much as possible.

Using his fancy Governor override code, he added clothing into my possession. I immediately selected the clothes, and they appeared on my body. Pants, briefs, a cotton shirt, socks, and simple street shoes replaced the oversized clothes Delia had lent me from the bunker.

"Wow," I said in appreciation.

He gave me a knowing look. "Each person receives a set of clothing when they arrive. We're careful to accommodate and take care of our new citizens in Vade. Basic Inventory information, here. You have thirty slots that can be filled by food, weapons, clothing, potions, and other general items. Small items like coins or anything of similar size will be consolidated into one slot with their own kind. Inventory weight will not change as you add or take away items. Understand? Now, moving on to your profile on the front page again. You can return to it at any time by tapping here." He touched a glowing orange button with a dragon head etched onto it.

The screen dissolved and reformed to show me the list I already knew:



## **PROFILE**

Name: Garret Stone

Form: Dragon

Creature type: Reptilian Endothermic  
Metabolism: Carnivore  
Evolution Level: 2



“AS A CARNIVORE,” the Governor continued, “you will be of higher strength, dexterity and speed. However, your stamina will be your weakness. Learn how to play to your strengths, Mr. Stone. We all do.” I said nothing as he tapped a blue button with an etched number two on it. A different screen appeared.



### **EVOLVED Traits**

None.



I MUSED, “I suppose I’ll get new traits with each evolution.”

He pointed to my notification tab on the upper right hand corner. “Correct. It looks like you have rewards waiting here. Since you evolved, you can choose a new trait and spell now.”

He continued. “Every time you evolve, your physical prowess will increase on all fronts. Strength, stamina, dexterity and the like. But your trait is more or less unique. You’ll be given a choice between two options. The choices you’re given are influenced by the actions you take while leveling. It’s a simple yet intuitive system. I can’t wait to see what you pick up for your first trait.”

I chuckled. “You’ll be the first to know. If I don’t get killed in the next demon attack, that is.” *Or by the fucking demon core sitting in my stomach.*

The Governor snorted. “You and everyone else in this city. If I could eradicate those creatures...” His upper lip curled into a snarl. I definitely didn’t envy his job.

“We’ll see if Easy Street can help,” I offered sarcastically. Right now, that graveyard of a road had nothing to give.

His eyes twinkled with humor. “I’m actually optimistic about you and Delia. She’s resourceful, as I’m sure you know. And you? Well you’re the wild card. Only time will tell me what you’re made of.”

“Right now? Mostly noodles, jerky, and dried fruit.”

His brow furrowed. “Noodles?”

“The portal was in Thailand.”

He shook his head. “I’ve heard of this Thailand, but it didn’t exist on my Earth. The British owned all of the South Asian islands, and named them each after their kings and queens.”

“Ah,” I said. “So they were all named George.”

“Henry, actually.”

“Fucking Englishmen,” I sighed.

“Amen,” he agreed. “But let’s return to the assimilation.”

“I’d like to choose my trait and spell,” I said. My logic told me it would be better if I did this in private, but I was feeling at ease with the Governor and excited about choosing.

On the Evolved Traits screen, he tapped a blinking bar at the bottom. A new window appeared.

\*\*\*

## Level 2 Evolution Traits

### CHOOSE 1

**CLIPPED WINGS:** By choosing this trait, your dragon form will evolve more streamlined wings. While the trait does not reduce overall flight speed or distance, it dramatically increases agility. Your human form will benefit also from increased speed, stamina, and agility.

**SCALE CLOAK:** Scale Cloak will allow you to transform your red scales into a shifting black hue that absorbs light. When activated, this trait increases stealth by 50%. In your human form, the absorptive scales remain microscopic. While your appearance changes little, the Scale Cloak trait will still increase Stealth by 50% in your human form.

\*\*\*

WELL, shit.

This was going to be difficult.

Initially, my instinct was to choose Clipped Wings. The Governor did mention that stamina would be my weakest point as a carnivore.

My finger hovered over the trait, but I hesitated. If I was going to be haunting Easy Street for the foreseeable future, demons were my main concern. I'd camped in enough wild lands to know that predators are everywhere, and sometimes staying hidden is the best resort.

After a full minute of wrestling with myself, I still tapped Clipped Wings.

No matter my need for stealth, I knew I wouldn't be hiding during every demon attack. I had to increase my physical abilities first. As a dragon, I'd already made one kill while flying. It was my natural advantage, and I wanted as much of an upper hand as possible.

I let myself feel the thrill of watching the selected trait glow and contract into a button with a wing etched onto it. I knew that if I clicked that button, it would expand and show me the details of that trait when I needed it.

The rest of the screen fell away, leaving only the *Evolved Traits* title and the Clipped Wings button below it. And yes, my chest did puff up in pride.

I was going to enjoy this part of my new life.

Sue me.  
A new page appeared.

\*\*\*

## Level 2 Evolution Spells

**THE FROZEN ROAR:** By reversing the energetic pathways of your fiery breath, Frozen Roar sends out a cascade of frigid ice. Activation of this spell will stun any unprotected living organism within fifty feet for at least one minute. This spell is only available when in dragon form. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

**TENACIOUS TALONS:** When an enemy is within range of your talons, this spell will launch an automated attack at high speed. The talons of all four legs will lash out at once, causing severe slashing damage. This spell ignores 50% of enemy's worn or natural armor. This spell is only available when in dragon form. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

\*\*\*

AGAIN, both choices were tempting. Being able to dish out even more damage with my already-fierce claws would go a long way in a fight. But stunning the enemy? Making them freeze up, and for up to a minute?

I just couldn't resist.

I selected the spell and navigated back to the home screen, which displayed my basic information. I tapped on *Evolution Rank* and a progress bar popped into view. Most of the bar was gray, with a little green sliver showing how far I had to go to get to Level 3. I tapped the bar again to see the point amounts, but nothing appeared. All I could see was a marker that showed 2%.

The Governor noticed my confusion. "There are no experience points here, Mr. Stone. Only progress percentage. You can slay monsters, fight in the arena, or wait for a quest to further your evolution. But don't be discouraged. You can still gain wealth, learn, build a trade or service business in the city, and grow your personal economy."

Why were the quest mechanics so stifled here? If this were a game back on Earth, no one would play it.

"Makes sense to me," I said instead, plastering on what I hoped was an easygoing grin. "And you and the Council manage the quests."

"To an extent. We receive the influx of quests from the system and assign them where appropriate and fair," he replied and flicked to the bottom of the screen. At the base, in tiny white letters, was a number.

316

"THAT IS the number of days until you'll receive your first quest, Mr. Stone!" he declared like it was Christmas morning and I just got a new jet plane. "That's not too far into the future! The system clearly wants you to succeed. Very fortunate."

A message bar on my screen informed me that the Governor had exited my ID, and that I'd have to grant him access again if I wanted him to return.

"You will be escorted out of the Capitol by my personal guard, Mr. Stone. I'm told Delia is waiting for you in the city. Do be sure to look for her. You can access a map of the city in your ID under the



*Accessibility* button beneath your quest day count. And now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting."

I saluted his retreating back and sighed when he disappeared.

I couldn't tell whether I wanted to impress the Governor or hate him. I settled for distrust, just to be safe.

One of the black-suited guards cleared his throat. "This way, Mr. Stone." He walked out of the room and into a fancy hallway.

Everything in this building oozed modern luxury. Enameled wood, shining metal, and gleaming crystal took up every space. Most wall surfaces were mirrored and glinting with candlelight.

It was all enough to make me remember the luxury of my own office. CSO of a global corporation at the age of twenty-five. I'd been destined for Forbes.

I was drawn to the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that looked out onto the endless blue sky and the city below. Only a few people could be seen, moving about like ants.

Beyond the city was the forest.

Beyond the forest was an entire world just waiting to be explored.

As the guard led me to a chamber that featured another lovely glowing portal, I imagined myself trekking across this new land and finding the limits of my new home.

And I would, if the demon core didn't kill me first.



## CHAPTER 8



I stumbled back out onto the cobblestone street below, my heart pounding with the exhilaration of teleportation.

*God, is that something I'll ever get used to?*

More guards stood around me in a small circle. By the looks on their faces, they might have had their collars bound a little too tight or else the lot of them could do with a bathroom run.

But they weren't looking at me. They were watching the silent garden we were standing in.

Tall hedges blocked us in. Roses and fruit trees blossomed around me in a mosaic of color and life.

Only one pathway, the one I was standing on, led out.

I looked behind me and into the open portal again. The sound of steel sliding out of a sheath made me stiffen.

"You do not have clearance to re-enter the portal, citizen."

I cocked an eyebrow at the guard, a shorter man with a pointy beard sharper than his black sword jutting from his chin. "Don't I?"

He visibly bristled. But his colleagues saw the small smirk on my lips and didn't react.

"Don't think I won't punish you for civil disobedience!" he warned. His weight shifted to his tiptoes, and his shoulders hitched up higher. I think he was trying to make himself look bigger like some creatures do when facing a predator.

Which apparently, I was.

A feral sort of satisfaction rushed through me. Silky like melted chocolate. Sharp as a blade. Deadly as fire.

The dragon within me apparently came with its own easily coaxed ego. I would have to watch that.

I stared coolly into the man's green eyes. His pupils flared wide, and I could taste his fear on my tongue.

His posture faltered, and he looked from side to side, as if his fellows would support him. This only heightened my adrenaline. Everything around me fell away. The only thing that mattered was me and this... curious creature.

I took a measured step toward the man, a cruel grin on my lips.

This time, the guards *did* react. Each removed a weapon and pointed it at me.

"On you go," a woman from my right barked. "Hunting is forbidden in this city, carnivore! Don't make me sedate you."

Her words filtered through the haze I was feeling. My brow furrowed. Carnivore? Hunting? I looked from her to the trembling guard trying his best to hold his ground. And then I saw it.

A tan, fuzzy tail twitched and curled behind him. Rodent. Mouse, maybe.

My mouth watered.

My awareness of the situation caught up to me at last, and the greedy thing in my guts finally retreated.

What the hell? Did I want to eat this guy?

My stomach lurched in disgust. No, not me. It was the dragon. It had to be. I've never been a mouse eater or a cannibal in my life. Which meant the dragon had been taking control. It wasn't the strength of the impulse I'd felt but the subtle way in which it manifested control.

I hadn't even noticed.

Why hadn't the Governor told me about this kind of impulse when he was supposedly preparing me for my new life?

*Assimilation, my ass.*

I strained mentally, wrapping a tight leash around the ravenous beast within. "Sorry," I rasped. "I'm new here."

I didn't wait for a reply. I just walked away, keeping my pace steady as I strode down the path. It was closed in by the two hedges, and for twenty seconds, I was able to enjoy the silence and feel my dragon simmer down.

"Get some chill," I mumbled to it. "I'm in charge here. Get it?"

He and I needed to create a working relationship where he didn't take over my instincts and force me to attack and possibly eat people.

I found Delia standing out on the street with her arms folded tightly over her chest. Her silver eyes narrowed in on my face and surveyed my new clothes.

She had changed into a leather getup. It was all black and skin-tight. Her tits were pushed up by some kind of corset thing that I needed to know the name of, and the curves of her waist and hips stood out in incredible relief.

"Took your time, did you?" she said.

"Thank you, Garret," I replied.

Confused, she asked, "What are you trying to say?"

"I mean, maybe you should thank me for negotiating your sentence," I clarified.

"Oh." She looked away. "You're right. I mean, thank you, Garret."

"But it's a good thing you're stuck with me. I don't see anyone else offering to head back to the worst part of town in hopes of fighting back a horde of hungry demons."

The embarrassment in her expression melted away. "Nope. Everybody else is so firmly attached to their lives. Annoying huh? Come on. Let's get back to Easy Street."

Did I admire her round ass as I followed? Yes. Apparently, today was a day where I learned just how powerfully my dragon wanted to eat prey and fuck women.

At least we had this last thing in common.

I'd have my guard up from now on, prepared to subdue my inner beast the moment it tried to break free and ruin the party.

But I didn't think a few stolen seconds of backside worship would hurt anyone.

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A huge part of me wanted to get the fuck out of this city.

I could head into the woods. Screw the quest wait. I could figure out a way to survive and not rely on the system to grow.

Because already, after just one day, I was too tied down. I was trapped by this city, the Governor and his bullshit punishment for the so-called 'crime' I committed.

But as we arrived back at 319 Easy Street, I took in Delia standing immaculate and high fashion in her leather. Yet, as sleek as she looked, she couldn't pick up and fly away with me. She was more vulnerable, needed my protection.

I'd stay for her, and if this shitshow didn't pan out, I'd snatch her up in my claws and fly us both as far away as possible.

We surveyed the two-story bunker house from the outside. We were on the southern end of the street, which was technically residential, though none of these houses looked fit to live in.

The bunker house might have been painted blue before. Or green. I couldn't tell. But the pale, faded shit was peeling and flaking off on the entire house. The left side was crumbling from rot, and the roof had at least three holes in it. Not leaks you could spot from water stains inside, but like, big, visible holes.

And then there was the precarious lean of the whole building.

"This is a lot of damage," I commented.

Delia said, "This street isn't warded. Without wards, civilized areas will decompose quicker. It's the nature of our Earths, too, but on Sintar, it's intensified. If you can't protect your home with spells, the magic of this world will retake the land."

"Epic," I said in an exhale.

"Most people would say disturbing."

I gestured around. "Like you said, it's the nature of our Earths, too. So, your charming mentor mentioned that the demons typically use this street to enter the city. Why is that?"

Delia sighed, looking disappointed. "Everything comes down to credits in the end. Easy Street leads into the poorer parts of Vade, which aren't warded very well. This is the path of least resistance, I guess you could say."

That was an infrastructure issue if I'd ever heard of one. The city officials should be invested in protecting all of Vade, no matter what.

Either there was profit to be made from neglecting the poor side of town, or the leaders of Vade just didn't care if the disenfranchised died. For some reason, the Governor and the Council weren't actually doing 'everything' they could to stop the demons.

At least I knew Sintar was as corrupt as the world I left behind. It was strangely comforting. Not that I wanted a bunch of poor people

to be slaughtered by demons. I just knew how to navigate in such conditions.

Still, my heart fell as I took in our shabby residence. How were we going to fortify this house, much less an entire border street? The magnitude of the task settled on me like a weight.

Resisting the urge to feel defeated, I reasoned, "This house is in the best condition and will be the easiest to work on."

She nodded and smoothed the fur on her ears. "Yes. We'll get a warding spell for 319, and then start expanding it inch by inch. It's time to put you to work."

"Work?" I asked, following her into the house.

She glanced over her shoulder as we descended the stairs. "You have to be good at more than just saving damsels and looking sexy," she purred, showing the high-flying auDeliaty to wink.

But when Delia put me to work, it wasn't the kind that my dragon or me were hoping for. She handed me a broom with a busted handle and a dustpan, and told me to start on the top floor.

I explored the decrepit space and began to sweep. Piles of dirt, some animal feces, rotted materials that might be fabric, and other unidentifiable things .

It was nasty work, but it was necessary.

If we were going to make this place livable, it had to be something more than a biohazard.

I used a rusted-out soup pot to dump the debris into and dispose of in a dumpster in the alley behind the house. Afterwards , I spent an hour hauling shattered furniture, broken glass, and a pile of weeds that had begun to grow through the floorboards in a spare room.

Staring up, I noted that two of the three roof holes marred the ceiling. That would need to be one of the first things we fixed. But where could a guy buy tools in Vade?

As for my wolf companion, she was making a racket downstairs, occasionally coming up with her own piles of refuse. There was nothing clean or delightful about the work, but I had to respect the smile she wore like a badge of honor. Here was a girl a man could really rely on.

I cleaned whatever windows weren't broken and started making a list in my head. As soon as I thought about it, my vision filled with a transparent sheet, ready for me to add to. Well, if that wasn't convenient.



SHIT FOR 319 EASY STREET:

#### BUSTED-ASS ROOF

Five windows

Replace two sets of iron bars missing from windows

Barricade for front and back doors?

Or can wards be erected, summoned, whatever?

Kitchen sink/plumbing

God forbid a shitter

Table and chairs

Some freaking weapons

Baller-ass bed for Delia and I



I CHUCKLED TO MYSELF, cleaning the window above the sink that had amazingly survived. Having my exact thoughts transferred to my mental list could be entertaining. Still, I scratched off that last item, knowing if things progressed, they would do so without my needing to prioritize them.

There were about a thousand other things, but this was a start.

We were three days from finishing off the dried goods from the bunker. Thank god my carnivorous metabolism only kicked in when I was in my creature form. I could eat the dried fruit and nuts. Though, the task of hunting might be worthwhile sometime soon, so I quickly added that as well.



We were as dirty as the house we'd spent all day cleaning when we were done. Though I was starving, I wanted nothing more than to wash up first. The prospect of consuming dust and mold along with my dinner didn't appeal to me for some reason.

That night, I announced I was starting the bath, and before ten minutes went by, Delia joined me.

I was neck-deep in hot water, contemplating how on earth this blessed tub functioned.

Steam danced on the water's surface. She'd undressed in front of me, showing me only her back.

She hadn't said anything. No teasing. No flirting or arguing.

When she turned to me at last, she was looking at me with interest though. Her expression was curious, as if wanting to ask *Who are you, Garret Stone?*

I returned that inquiry with a clear answer, solid as the earth beneath our feet. *I am who I've always been, Delia.*

She studied our silence.

Her eyes flicked around the room as her wheels spun, then closed completely for a full minute, and finally resumed their examination of me. By that time, I'd already washed myself and thought of a hundred witty things to say to her, dismissing them as quickly as they'd come.

"Is it the adventure you want?" she asked at last. The sound of her sweet voice cut through the steam and wrapped around my bones.

"Pardon?"

"I'm trying to figure it out. What you desire, I mean. It's not money or power. No, otherwise you would have tried to win over the Governor. Not argue with him on my behalf and rope yourself into my mess."

She tilted her head back until the crown of her head was submerged. Her hair floated around her, looking like the steam's mirror image below the surface.

Emerging once more, she began to lather soap in her thick hair. "You aren't greedy. You aren't even a glory-seeking fighter, or you'd have asked about the arenas already."

Delia kept her chest beneath the water as she moved closer to me. “Is it money you want, then?” she asked softly, her voice low and sexy.

I could reach out and touch her wet cheek. I could see the water clinging to her dark-gray lashes like dew. Her mouth was damp and pink and soft. Everything about her face was like a marble sculpture I’d seen in Europe or paintings of the old gods.

The dragon was quiet, like he too wanted to capture this moment in a bottle and keep its magic forever.

“Not money,” I said. “Not for its own sake at least.”

“Then what?”

I shook my head. Was she about to...?

She moved an inch closer. “What about the adventure?”

I thought about it. Adventure was the closest, but not quite there either. I wanted to tell her what I wanted. Needed to give her an answer she could hold on to. “For a long time, I didn’t know exactly what I wanted. Adventure, sure. A thrill? Hell yeah. But I think there’s something more to it. Ambition maybe. I want the adventure of building something new, something great, something that will outlast me. Does that make sense?”

It was the truth. A bit vulnerable for my taste, but there was no other way around it.

I stared at her, straight into her coin-silver eyes alight with interest and caution.

And lust.

Her wolf ears shivered. Her cheeks were red. Then she reached forward and stroked my abs with her soft fingers.

I swallowed a groan. “Delia. Now it’s time for me to ask you a question. Why are you doing this?”

“Because I want to,” she replied huskily.

“Are you sure? You don’t seem to like me half the time.” Her fingers were like fire on my skin, even beneath the water.

No longer shy, but instead looking caught in a spell, she moved closer, facing me in the tub. “I like you just fine, Garret Stone. Do you like me?”

I clenched my jaw and bit back a curse as she parted her knees and straddled my thighs.

Right there, just an inch from my rigid salute, her sex spread invitingly. I thought about finding it with my fingers, teasing out her particular features. Every woman, and I mean, every woman, was unique.

That's what made them so damned lovely.

The dragon was urging me on, commanding me to take this woman. To claim her and ravage her until she was unable to deny...

*Deny what?* I wondered. *Deny she was into me? That much was clear.*

But after such a long, shitty day, I supposed I could take part in some stress-relieving activity. I deserved it. We both did.

She slid her hands up my chest. "You are someone to me, Garret Stone," she whispered. Her words were like hot oil on my body. Her thumb traced the edge of my lower lip. She watched it, mesmerized. "Do you feel it, too?"

In preface to my answer, I trailed the bottom curves of her full breasts beneath the surface of the water. It took all of my strength to remain gentle when all I wanted was to take her. Make her mad with lust then break her with pleasure.

There would be nothing gentle about it.

I relished the way her eyes fluttered. How her lips parted with a sigh. Then I moved completely on instinct I didn't know was mine. I grasped her jaw in my hand and forced her gaze to me.

Her brow furrowed in confusion, and she tried to lean away. But when I didn't relent and she saw my hard expression, she gave me what I wanted.

She sat still. Well, not *still*. Her hips rolled in a gentle circle on my lap. It wasn't a grind, just the way a woman wants to move when she's perfectly turned on.

That could remain, I decided.

I held her gaze for several seconds. Only then did I answer her. "Yes, Delia. I feel it." Despite just meeting one another, there was a pull between us. Fate and chance threw us together into an unlikely partnership, and I'd learned to look closely at what most people would describe as 'chance.'

Delia whimpered and arched her back, the move lifting her chest up and her nipples out of the water.

A small part of me scolded myself for not kissing her sweet mouth first. But that voice disappeared as I slid my hand down to her throat then leaned down to take one dusky nipple in my mouth.

Her body trembled with pleasure in my hands, and a low growl vibrated in my chest.

She clutched the back of my neck as my tongue flicked over that sensitive bud. I held her other breast too and ran my thumb over its taut peak.

The noises she was making — *fucking kill me*. Every desperate moan and whimper was a question — no, a plea — to keep going. To keep touching her and giving her pleasure.

And in that, finding my own.

I was rock-hard and brushing against her belly, rubbing against the front of her mound. Just enough to feel a delicious friction that made my muscles shudder. I teased her other nipple with my teeth and gave it a warning bite, earning a sharp cry and nails digging into my shoulders.

And then I trailed my palms up her muscular thighs and over her curving hips.

Delia's body jerked as I gripped her ass with both hands and yanked her that final inch forward. Her mouth crashed into mine in the same moment that I pressed against her hot slit.

We devoured each other, tasting, biting.

Her lips slid up and down the bottom length of my shaft. Somehow, she felt hotter than the steaming water. Her slick sex rocked against me as her tongue invaded my mouth, and mine hers.

She tasted like the night sky.

Crisp and clean and bright in the moonlight.

I wanted her scent to coat me like a second skin.

"Please," she gasped against my mouth. "Please touch me."

Considering we were touching each other in nearly every way already, I knew exactly what she meant. I nudged my hand between us, making sure to caress her flat, smooth stomach all the way down.

The scenic route.

Her lips puckered with disapproval. "Don't make me wait, dragon," she warned.

I watched her sexy mouth move around the words, then flicked my eyes to hers. She was giving me as much command as she could. But it didn't matter that she was still a level above me.

I was the alpha here.

"I do as I please, wolf." I sunk my hand into the yielding softness of her hips, and she gasped. "Have I made myself clear?"

Her sassy expression melted, breaking into desire as I found the crease of her thigh, right near that delicious apex.

Delia nodded.

She knew what I meant. This wasn't me taking away her consent. This was the two of us entering into a very particular contract, one I'd never formed with a woman before. Delia had accepted my new role. Outside of the metaphorical tub, we were partners.

But within, I was in charge.

I refused to give her what she wanted. Not yet. This ecstatic tension was too good to speed up. I was going to take my time making my wolf come.

I released her thigh and found her left nipple again, teasing it with one hand while I ran a finger up and down her slit with the other.

"Oh god, oh *fuck*, Garret," she whimpered. She was trembling and tense. She ground herself against my hand, and then cried out when I took it away.

I met her accusing stare with a wicked smile. Fuck, who was I right now? I wasn't ever a dominant lover. I was fun-loving. Light. I didn't make women beg or obey me. I had a good time, and then usually bounced. But right now, there was no other way to exist.

Besides, Delia was riding the same wave. Why stop now?

She held perfectly still as I parted her lips with two fingers and toyed with her entrance. When her thighs began to tremble slightly, I slid them up to her bud.

She gasped. Her eyes fluttered closed and her face tilted up.

A moan made of pure ecstasy filled my ears as my fingers teased her.

She held my shoulders, for balance or because of the delicious agony I was giving her, I didn't know.

Her hands released my shoulders, and for a moment, I missed her desperate embrace. Then she cupped her own breasts and

whispered, “Oh, yes. Yes, Garret. Just like that.” She pinched her nipples and her body started to move once more.

Mesmerized, I watched her begin to soar.

I wanted her to take her own pleasure from me, too. She rocked against my hand, not trying to take over like she had before.

Her breath grew quick as a panting wolf.

Her body was flushed and hot. Her brow wrinkled, and she couldn't decide whether to keep massaging her tits, kiss me, or hold onto me for dear life.

As her shaking legs grew more and more unsteady and her moans turned frantic, I laced my free hand with one of hers. She clutched onto it like it was her lifeline.

Strands of her silver hair stuck to her chest.

A light sheen of sweat coated her cheeks, her chest, her shoulders.

The candlelight glinted off of her, making her look like some goddess incarnate.

I wanted to remember how she looked here, like this, open to me and singing like a tuning fork. And then I pressed my thumb against her more firmly, keeping the same pace.

It was enough.

Her eyes flew open in shock as I felt the first jolt in her body.

“Yes, baby,” I crooned. “Just like that. Come for me.”

I held her as the orgasm exploded through her, rocking her body over and over. Her sex pulsed against my palm. When her eyes met mine, they were glazed with desire. But this was far from over. If she thought she knew what was coming next, I would be happy to surprise her.

I wasn't going to fuck her just yet. I was going to taste her first. And then fill her with my fingers. I was going to take my damn time until she was so hungry for me, she'd finally show me those lycan teeth.

A smug, satisfied smile spread across my lips.

And then we heard the first roar.

We froze.

Delia gave me a horrified look, and the patina of pleasure fell from her.

It was like watching a waterfall dry up in a second . My arousal, my greed, my building passion collapsed; it was devastating on an epic level.

Then she said one word that changed everything. "*Demons.*"





## CHAPTER 9



**W**e scrambled out of the bath.

A chorus of maniacal roars increased the pucker factor tenfold, and we scrambled to get dressed.

I selected my clothing from my own Inventory, and they appeared on my body a moment later.

Delia winced as something crashed against the roof of the house. “They shouldn’t be able to get down here,” she said. “Actually, they shouldn’t be here at all. They’re supposed to attack once a month, not two nights in a row.”

“I don’t have a weapon, either,” I said. “My dagger got chipped last time I used it and it isn’t much protection.”

“You’re a dragon.”

“Yeah, and I can’t be a dragon in this house unless you want to see it destroyed.”

She thought for a second, and then a short sword dropped into her hand. “Take this. I found it on my last quest. It’s not very sharp, but it’ll have to do for now.”

In her other hand, a bo staff appeared. It was simple and wooden with five gemstones glittering in the center.

I palmed the blade while she gripped her staff. “Are they in the house?” I asked.

“I doubt it. They’re probably just banging against the house, but I’ll make sure the wards are intact. And just to be clear, that doesn’t have to be a thing... what we... almost did, I mean. I didn’t mean to be pushy, if that’s what it felt like.” She ended with a weak gesture to the bath, her cheeks pink.

“Oh it’s a thing,” I told her. “At least I hope so.”

“You do?”

A shriek sliced through the air, bringing us back to the present. “Later,” I told her in a growl. “First, we should attend to our guests. They’ve over stayed their visit, I think.”

“Right! The wards. Let’s go check those first.”

We walked up the steps side by side. When we reached the top, I ducked out first, short sword held awkwardly in my hands. *I am definitely going to have to find a better weapon and learn how to use it. Or my stay in Vade will be a short one.*

A scrabbling sound came from the kitchen. I waited for Delia to come out behind me, and then I nodded. “I’m gonna take down our friend here if I can,” I whispered.

She nodded back, and we moved together across the floor.

The house betrayed us, of course.

A floorboard let out an epic squeak, and soon I was face to face with an inky-eyed demon. I heard others moving in one of the spare rooms, but I ignored it. One little bastard at a time.

Thankfully, this demon appeared to be smaller than the others we’d faced. It stood maybe four and a half feet tall, but the murder in its eyes kept me on guard.

I slashed at the creature as soon as it came close. The demon deftly side-stepped my attack and repaid me with a swipe of its claws. Its razor-sharp talons passed through the skin on my face so easily, it took a moment for the pain to set in.

The cut was below my eyes, so I ignored it, happy the blood wouldn’t block my vision.

Deciding I’d need to use my head a little, I fainted this time, dropping my guard and inviting another counter attack.

Sure enough, the little demon lunged at me, its teeth snapping out at my leading leg.

I cut down, slicing open the thing’s back. My short sword was most definitely not sharp, though, and the blow glanced off the creature’s tough hide.

I almost felt the demon’s teeth snap closed over my thigh when Delia’s staff shot out from behind me and pushed it back. When the tip of her weapon landed, a soft pulse emitted, adding more force to the attack.

The creature faltered, trying to regain its footing.

I seized the moment.

I charged, using my enhanced strength and speed to punch the short sword into the creature's distended belly. Again, the core within burst.

There were few things in this new world more satisfying than seeing a demon die instantly on the end of my blade.

I smelled the being's flesh, and my dragon was incensed. Not only had this monster entered my home, my lair, but it had disturbed my woman.

*No, not the time to eat something nasty*, I fought back, clutching my hand around my sword. Still, I couldn't pry my eyes from the demon's fleshy corpse.

Then Delia's scream tore through the air.

The sound was like a jolt of electricity in my veins. All hesitation fled as I spun to see what was wrong.

She stood just ten feet away, surrounded by three demons. Huge, inky motherfuckers with black teeth and blacker eyes.

As I moved to stand beside her, my mind distantly registered that Delia was naked. *Naked! Maybe not the best move in a fight*, I wanted to shout at her.

Her eyes met mine just before she changed into a wolf.

*Oh. Right. Smart girl just saving her clothes*, I realized. It was a habit I would need to encourage if we made it out of the house alive.

Her skin was replaced by silvery fur. She dropped to all fours just as a demon lunged onto her.

It took me an instant to know that the blade in my hand wouldn't be enough. More roars and shrieks came from outside, and probability informed me I wouldn't get lucky like I had with the demon in the alley.

Not with a horde like this.

No. Fate wasn't on my side tonight.

I had to bring out my biggest weapon.

I sent my clothes and the short sword to my Inventory, and then allowed the dragon to rise within me. This wouldn't be easy, but at least I wasn't standing in the hall anymore. 319 Easy Street was

slightly bigger than average, and the room we stood in had a ten-foot ceiling.

Delia was a fierce fighter, but she was overwhelmed. The demons had begun by testing her out. They were wary of her, unsure of how strong or dangerous she was.

They'd been keeping themselves out of her reach, but the one on her left was getting confident. It lashed out with thick claws and swiped her side.

Delia growled, and the demon looked gleeful, having drawn first blood.

But they hadn't noticed my exponential growth in time to stop my transformation.

I didn't have a ton of space, so I bulled forward, trusting Delia would leap out of the way. I saw a streak of silver flash below me, and I knew she was clear. Before it could scramble away, I bit the head of the demon who'd attacked my wolf.

I didn't quite expect its head to pop off into my mouth, but I took great satisfaction in the way its body went limp on the floor, Delia's blood still on its claws. The other two turned on me, giving the wolf the perfect opportunity to sink her own teeth into one.

I brought my talons to bear on the same demon, finding it vulnerable when it spun to face Delia.

Too wounded to fight back effectively, I let the girl finish the beast on her own.

Delia lunged at the monster, aiming for its throat. Her teeth sunk into its leathery hide, and the thing shrieked.

The third demon hissed and flitted away, most likely retreating to find strength in numbers. That was their usual tactic, and it had worked in the past.

Delia's mouth was dripping with black ichor.

Her silver eyes were crazed.

But it was the red stain on her flank that changed everything.

I whipped my tail around, knocking out the wall of the house. I ran out into the night, Delia behind me. More demons dropped on us like vultures. Their claws and teeth ripped into my hide, but I hardly felt the injuries. All that mattered was escaping.

Delia was snarling and making a few of the demons pay for their attack.

I swung my tail again, knocking back three of our assailants. Another fell on the back of my neck, and I heard Delia yelp as a demon struck her in the face, the weight of its hand knocking her out cold.

She shifted back to her human form as she collapsed against the ground.

I leapt over her body, growling savagely. The demons knew they had me though, and were growing bolder by the second. Then I remembered that I had one more trick to play. I mentally shouted *Frozen Roar*, hoping the spell would trigger.

Immediately, a frigid pain rose up from the depths of my chest. I extended my neck, opening my mouth wide. A cloud filled with pale-blue ether and frost chips exploded from my lungs. All around me, I heard the demons' cackling cease.

I only stole a brief glance. The entire crowd of them had frozen solid.

I curled my front talons around her body. It was time to get the hell out of dodge.

Even as I unfurled my wings to take off, I saw the first of the demons already twitching, my spell wearing off. It was supposed to work for a while, but these were demons. They had a few advantages working in their favor.

I launched us both in the air. It wasn't cowardly to run when staying meant certain death. I wasn't here to be a war hero. I wasn't even here to be honorable.

I was here to save mine and Delia's asses.

I beat my wings as hard as I could manage. This was my second day with these babies, and I wasn't totally clear on what they could manage.

Except that wasn't entirely true, was it? The trait I'd selected gave me a speed and agility boost. Even from my last shift, I could tell that my body was a little different.

I just had to hope it would be enough to outrun the flock of demons that had spotted me, flapping in from other corners of Easy Street. I caught a gust of wind, and my body lifted high.

Most of the beasts flew up from where I'd frozen them, the spell dissolving completely.

Part of me was worried about flying too high or burning myself out with too big a burst of speed. Now, I unleashed my true potential.

As a flock of chittering demons followed me, I roared, exhilarated by the power of my wings. We flew higher, gaining speed with each flap.

I headed to the forest.

There was no knowing if the city was entirely overrun by demons, too, and I didn't want to set down into another death-by-demon battle.

And so I flew.

I flew until I couldn't hear a thing but the wind in my ears. I flew until the lights of the city were out of sight, even when I craned my neck back to look. I flew until my wings burned from the effort and my muscles began to cramp.

I looked behind me again, comforted to see only a black expanse of the night sky behind me, and kept going.

Delia was alive.

Her steady heartbeat thrummed against my scales, and the tempo kept me balanced and focused.

It might have been an hour. Maybe more, but finally, at the sight of a lake glittering beneath the moonlight, I descended.

I prayed to whatever existing gods that there weren't any hordes of devils waiting for us. I set down on the shore, my exhaustion making me land roughly. I held Delia up higher and took the brunt of the impact on my huge dragon ass.

I sat panting on the sandy shore, catching my breath. Glancing down, I saw Delia still naked and beautiful in her human form. I set her down, and slowly, her eyes opened. In another second, a large t-shirt appeared on her body, a loose pair of leggings beneath.

She pulled up the hem of the shirt and rolled to the side. Beneath her underwear line on her hip was a nasty-looking gash.

She was tapping something on her screen and then a bottle dropped into her hand. I growled, and she gave me a sharp look. "It's a healing salve. This isn't life-threatening, Garret, so don't flip out."

She poured the green goo onto her hand and smeared it onto her leg while I stared at the treeline. Watching. Waiting.

“You have injuries,” she commented in horror. “Oh my god, Garret. You’re bleeding in a dozen places.”

I felt her hand on my side and I flinched away from her, growling again. When my slitted gaze found her, she was surveying me with her hand on her hips. “Are you just being stubborn?”

I bared my teeth at her and returned to watching the trees. Checking the sky. Scanning the still surface of the lake. Nothing, and I meant *nothing* was going to attack her on my watch.

Not here.

Never again.

She stopped fussing over my wounds. A hesitant hand rested on my side, and she said, “You can rest now, Garret. You saved us both. You saved *me*. You can rest.”

But I didn’t. Delia’s wound was slowly closing up with the green salve, which meant she was safe. I was going to make sure she continued to be safe, even if that meant staying up until dawn.

My entire body radiated heat, so all she had to do was pull a blanket from her inventory and curl up beside me.

Her gentle presence kept my mind calm during my night watch.

My muscles ached, and twice, I felt the beginning of my return shift. Both times, I shrugged off my human self, intent on remaining watchful until I could see well enough to officially call the coast clear.

Hours passed, and finally, blessedly, the sun painted the sky a milky pink.

Delia stirred beside me.

She rubbed her eyes and yawned. Her hair was jacked up and sticking out on the sides. Even her ear fur was ruffled and mussed. I wanted to lick her face. *Is that weird? Probably.*

Then shock rippled across her features. She stood up in a hurry, her hands touching my scaly face. “Garret, are you okay? Were you in your creature form all night?”





## CHAPTER 10



I couldn't talk, so I just nodded my huge head.

Her mouth fell open. "Garret, you shouldn't be able to hold your creature form for that long, especially after all the time you spent flying. It's like all the rules are breaking around you. This is so weird."

I wanted to ask her why it was uncommon to remain in your other form for prolonged periods of time, but part of me knew already. It was a strain to do so.

More than just muscular, I almost felt as if my mind and soul ached with fatigue.

Delia muttered to herself for a time before summoning more appropriate clothes, shoes included, and informed me she had to pee. I watched her jog into the forest just beyond a cluster of shrubs.

I was totally on the same page, for the record, so I ambled a ways off and relieved myself as well. Weird doesn't even begin to describe the sensation of my first dragon piss.

When she returned, drinking from a canister of water, she examined me with an expert eye. "You're about 20 feet long. 7 feet at the shoulder, I'd guess." She circled me, prodding my tail and tapping her long claw-like fingernail on my talons.

I growled in response, then let my grip over the dragon relax.

"And a pretty boy, aren't you? Red, almost-metallic scales with black ribbed wings and white talons!" she said beneath her breath. "Oh yes, Garret. You should definitely preen. You've earned it."

“I wasn’t preening,” I said, gasping in my first human breath in hours. My reverse transformation was more painful than it had been before, and I fell to my knees. The air was chilly on my hot skin.

Delia helped me back to my feet, and we hobbled together to a nearby tree. Then she spread out the blanket for me and helped me lie down.

The worry on her face took away from her inherent beauty. I waved her a little closer, and when she stooped to hear me, I explained, “I was flexing. There’s a difference.”

She stood up and snorted. “No there isn’t. But I’m inclined to agree with your stubborn ass for the time being. Now will you finally let me handle your wounds?”

I sat still like a good boy while she smeared me with goblin goo, and I sighed in relief. I had bites and scratches everywhere. They’d begun to stitch up already. I guess I’d have increased healing, too.

But still, the green slime was heaven. It itched a little, but the heat of inflammation subsided quickly.

Delia *tsked* and fussed over me. I could tell she needed something to focus on, so I shut my eyes and let her have her way with me.

“Thanks, by the way. For jumping in to save me. Three demons against one wolf isn’t a fair fight,” she said at last.

My fists balled at the memory. Delia cornered. Demons on her. Her fierce eyes fearful and in pain. My voice was low and dangerous when I replied, “I thought the demons would attack on schedule. Once a month, right?”

She sat back on her heels, looking defeated. “They always do. There’s no real explanation for what happened last night.”

“Can they sense us? Living creatures, that is?”

She nodded.

I took a deep, calming breath. “Maybe they smelled us all over the house. We worked outside the whole day. Maybe our concentrated scent drew them out.”

“That doesn’t really make sense, Garret. There are so many more people *inside* the city. They don’t sense individual people. It’s like smelling cookies from a bakery three blocks away. You can’t pinpoint the building or even the street, but you can figure out the

direction. The city is a huge beacon. They wouldn't just detour and attack a house with two measly people inside. Especially not *that many* demons."

She shivered.

I flicked a pebble into the air and caught it with my other hand. "Take a wild guess then. Humor me. If you had to guess, do you have any explanation?"

She thought for a while. I kept on fiddling with the pebble, needing something to do with my hands.

Finally, she said, "I think they were after me."

The pebble fell through the air and skittered across the ground. "What?"

"They technically caught me that night you saved me," she clarified. "I was... I don't know... claimed by them? Maybe they have *my* scent, and won't stop until I'm theirs."

I bristled at her choice of words and their ramifications. A strange impulse was pushing me to claim this woman as mine, and mine alone. I would tear through every person or demon to protect her.

That is, if I was strong enough. It stung that my only advantage was my ability to run away faster than they could chase me. I mean, I was goddamn good at flying. But how long could I expect to survive like that?

I replied to Delia when it was clear she was waiting for my thoughts. "If that's the truth, then we need to rethink our strategy with the bunker house. How can we upgrade faster? There has to be a way that's more efficient than hard labor."

Delia sighed. "There is a way, but none that we can access. We'd need the Governor's help to upgrade. If we can't access the system, we can't use credits to purchase instant upgrades, and that is assuming we could get enough credits to begin with. Besides, I don't think that's how he intended for us to complete our assignment."

She was right, of course. That dude wasn't about to give us any more handouts. Now, we just needed a long-term plan that would withstand an all-out war swarming our doorstep.

Easy enough.

Still naked and covered in slime, I groaned and rolled over.

She snickered. "Tired?"

“You don’t have to rub it in.”

She chuckled softly, then sat beside me. Delia had that look in her eye again, like she’d had before the heat had turned up back at the bunker house. Except this time, it wasn’t lust, but something calmer.

She ran a finger down my side, weaving between the puckered wounds that were still healing.

I caught her wrist before she could pull away.

She nearly started spitting at me, but then she saw my expression. Worry and apprehension made her eyes tighten. “What is it?” Her fingers lightly touched my own wrist. She couldn’t help it. Wouldn’t pull away, and couldn’t help but touch me back.

“I need you to be safe,” I confessed. “We have to make a temporary home strong enough to withstand these attacks. I don’t think we’ve seen the last of them. It’s not over, and we both know it.”

She stared straight into my gaze. “You’re very serious sometimes.”

“This is life or death, isn’t it?”

She nodded and clasped my hand. “Okay. I have a few ideas.”

“Like?” I asked.

“Like you sleep for a few hours while I draft it up so you can carry us both home, you crazy dragon.”

The trunk of the tree seemed to sway before me, an indication of my exhaustion.

She had a point.

I fell asleep wishing, hoping, *needing* a real solution. Because Delia may have had a plan, but I didn’t see much hope in our predicament.

Then again, I was study-all-night hungover and didn’t know all the pieces on this chessboard. *Maybe*, I hoped while the world drifted away, *maybe there’s something I don’t know, something that will make this whole ball of confusion fit together.*

I smiled to myself.

That was the answer. Blind determination and well-planned ambition.

We were going to take Easy Street and turn it into a freaking sanctuary. And we wouldn’t turn away those less fortunate than us.

As any businessman would, I'd find a way to make them pitch in as well.

After that, who knew?

There was an entire world for me to explore.

I felt the sun bathing us in golden rays, a gentle breeze playing over the blanket.

Way too soon, and far too sudden, I woke to a terrible noise grating in my skull.

I launched to my feet, startling Delia, who had been performing Sintar's version of a yoga pose. I surveyed the shore and the forest line, expecting attacks.

But there was nothing.

The noise came again, but this time, I realized it was a notification.

Just like the little pinging sound that came when I transferred something in and out of my Inventory, or clicked on an icon.

Except this was different. Louder and more urgent.

I opened up my ID, and my mouth dropped open. In bright, blinking blue text were the most unexpected words in the world.

\*\*\*

DEMON CORE ASSIMILATED



## CHAPTER 11



“**N**ot gonna die!” I cheered, the lingering fear over having swallowed a sphere of corrupted energy falling away from my shoulders.

Delia turned to me, a bit upset that I’d startled her. “Great to hear. Did you need to shout it out so loud?”

I held out my finger to her as I scanned my ID. I selected the prompt and more information populated in my vision.

\*\*\*

**CONGRATULATIONS!**

You’ve assimilated a powerful demon core.

Rewards: Granted Unique Class

Unique Class - Administrator: By ingesting the demon’s core, and surviving assimilation, your soul has been linked to Sintar’s Arcane System.

AS ADMINISTRATOR you now have the ability to access Sintar’s Arcane System and grant quests to yourself or anyone living in or on any given or purchased property belonging to you.

\*\*\*

BY THIS TIME, my wolf companion had given up on hearing me out and returned to her stretches.

I gave her another jolt when I shouted again. "Sorry! Sorry, but listen. My ID just told me I assimilated the demon core. I'm not only not gonna die, but Delia, it says I'm a freaking Administrator! How rare are those?"

Her brow furrowed. "I don't know what you're talking about. Seriously. Does it explain what it means?"

"Yes. Apparently, I have the almighty awesome power to give out quests! Well, to myself or anyone living with me at least."

"Really? I think your ID is broken, Garret. None of that makes sense. Only an Original can do that."

The girl might have had a point there. I didn't see any other instructions, no buttons to toggle. Slowly, I closed my mouth and thought about it. *How in the hell can I give out a quest? Just think, quest!* I tried lamely, but nothing happened.

I sighed, dreaming about how convenient it would be if I could actually grant quests. If nobody else in the city could but the stingy-ass Governor, this could change everything.

How it was done though, not a clue.

I tried saying it out loud, in my head, different sentences containing the word quest. Again, Delia gave up on me and resumed her exercises, and then eventually pulled out some food and started eating, watching me all the while.

At last, I gave up and sat down across from her.

"Told ya so," she muttered.

I took a strip of jerky from her and chewed it absently.

*If I can figure this out, how amazing would it be? Delia and I could both level up. We could get credits, and who knows, maybe my system access could help us fix up 319 Easy Street.*

And just like that, a quest notification popped up.



For the third time that day, I scared the shit out of my cute, furry friend.

“Nailed it! Haha!” I shouted, jumped up and performed an awkward jig.

“That’s not funny,” Delia snapped, scowling at me.

I pointed to the quest invitation, which she couldn’t see, of course. It was in my Internal Display after all. Still, I couldn’t help the gesture. “It isn’t funny,” I agreed. “But it’s as real as my Great-Aunt Sally’s pet llama.”

Her brows shot up to her forehead. “And what in the wolf’s name is a llama?”

Her Earth didn’t have llamas. A goddamn shame. “Fluffy giraffe-sheep that usually live in the mountains. You can burn their shit for warmth. But that’s besides the point. Can I invite you into this, or something?”

“No, that isn’t possible,” she answered.

I searched anyway, and sure enough, along the bottom border of the quest display, was the word Invite. Once I pressed it, Delia’s name popped up. I hesitated before selecting it though.

“I have to tell you something first.”

She arched an eyebrow at me, unimpressed.

“Watch your sass,” I said with a wink, and then blurted, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier, but I have an Evolution Rank of 2.”

The confession felt like a betrayal as I watched the rage spill over my wolf’s features.

“You already leveled up?” she demanded, venom dripping from her words.

“We both know your ears work fine,” I replied.

“How?”

“I killed two demons and ate one. Might have been the core that leveled me up. I’m not sure how,” I explained. “But I did. And apparently, the core isn’t going to kill me.”

I’d survived far longer than the few hours the Governor had described, so for the sake of my sanity, I was just going to assume I’d be fine.

She swallowed this information. “Okay. That’s amazing, but can you tell me what the quest says at least?”

“I’ll do you one better,” I responded, selecting the toggle bar with Delia’s name on it.

She shrieked, slapping me a dozen times in a flurry of excitement. “How did you? Oh my god! You’ve invited me to your quest! Garret, do you know what this means?”

“Baby, it means we’re going on an adventure.”

She cut me a glare. “Don’t call me that.”

I shrugged.

She doubled down. “Just because you gave me —”

“An ooey gooey wonderful orgasm?”

“Yeah, one of those. Doesn’t mean...” Her voice trailed off, then she giggled. “Who cares. I can’t believe I’m going on another quest!”

I grinned, flashing my eyebrows. “Well, are you going to accept my quest invite or not?” A thrill of adrenaline pulsed through me.

I didn’t just love adventure or walking into the unknown.

I craved it.

The anticipation was almost too much.

Delia, still looking dazed, tapped the air before her, sending me the notification of her joining. She stared at her own ID and read the details of the quest along with me.

\*\*\*

QUEST: Firefly Fiasco

EASY STREET NEEDS YOUR HELP! The bunker house has been badly damaged, and you’re in need of quality materials to rebuild your abode.

INSTRUCTIONS: Find the local firefly grove and harvest some wood! Firefly Cedar contains magical compounds that not only repels dark

creatures but is fire-resistant and increases longevity and strength of wards.

REWARDS: Minor Progress toward Evolution, Firefly Cedar

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“FIREFLIES!” she exclaimed. “Those don’t sound too hard to kill. Then again, things on Sintar tend to get a little amped up.”

I shrugged. “One quick way to find out. You wanna go chop down a tree with me?”

She smiled and held out her hand. Her staff appeared suddenly and she struck it on the ground, sending out a small ring of blue force. “What?” she asked. “No points for style?”

I summoned my short sword, running a finger along its edge. “Really should get this sharpened if we can. Hope it works for now.”

Without delaying further, I snagged her arm and pulled us into the forest.

I checked my map and saw that the quest marker showed a grove of Firefly Cedars not too far away. There was no other information other than a red circle around a section of green landscape.

It was enough.

I was used to traversing unknown land. Just like I’d made my own path up to the ruins in Thailand, I could find this grove. Eyeballing the map, I guessed it was about two miles away. The terrain would be tricky. Nothing about this new world wasn’t.

I only had to keep sight of the sun to make sure I was going in the right direction. Thankfully, this one moved from East to West, too. If the forest grew too thick, I’d just have to rely on checking the map more frequently.

Like Delia could hear my thoughts, she asked, “Can’t you just fly us over?”

I shook my head. "I can keep track of two miles on foot. From the sky? I honestly don't know. Not yet, anyway. Hey, don't give me that judgy look."

"I've no idea what you're talking about. I'm sure you're perfectly capable."

I frowned at her. "Are you doubting me?"

"I don't even know you, Garret," she replied blithely, sweeping past me and into the forest.

*Sassy wolf.*

The foliage became dense as we advanced. Not only did the plants grow closely together, but massive trees became more and more common, towering over the shorter vegetation. This was legitimate triple canopy terrain, the kind I lived to hike through.

The sun grew weaker and weaker through the trees, leaving us in an almost blue-gray atmosphere in the shelter of the ancient wood.

I could imagine getting lost in here, panicking, and then discovering my brain once more like some long-lost, mystical treasure.

I was a pro from years of practice.

There was a creek running somewhere to our right, likely leading to the lake. It was a perfect guide. If we got really lost, we could follow the creek back without wasting our energy.

I sighed in relief as the trees began to clear up, expanding into an open, leaf-covered clearing. The sun peeked through hopefully.

"Garret..." Delia cautioned.

Why, I couldn't guess. "What is it?"

Delia shoved a finger to her lips. Her eyes shimmered, looking decidedly more wolfish than human. She tightened her grip on the staff and pointed.

She picked up a stone and tossed it into the middle of the clearing.

I'd never seen a pond monster in my life before. And I daresay I wished I never would. But the thing that exploded from the swampy water was exactly that.

The water had been covered with a thick blanket layer of forest detritus, fooling me into thinking it was an innocent clearing.

But now, two dozen tentacles swirled and lashed in the air, flinging muck, dead leaves, and sand.

I never liked sand. It got into your junk and chafed your thighs.

It looked amazing stuck to a woman's ass cheeks, but that was just about it.

This experience was definitely going to seal my disdain for the substance.

We dove to the side as a tentacle came slashing toward us.

Delia landed on me as the monster flailed.

"Why did you wake it up?" I demanded over the ear-splitting roar coming in a tireless stream.

*Is this thing on cocaine?*

Delia was covering her head, but looked up to say, "I was checking for the sand pit! Not a liquan!"

*A liquan. Fantastic.*

*Now what in Cthulhu's dark cleft is that?*

Delia leapt up. I had three milliseconds to see her body tense as a tentacle came arching overhead toward us, when her staff flashed out.

It struck the underside of the sandy tentacle. The horrible thing, which was as thick as my thigh, went limp. The roar decreased until it was completely silent, and my ears were left ringing.

I stood as all two-dozen tentacles slithered back into the sand pit.

All was quiet.

I was breathing hard. Adrenaline buzzed through my veins. "Wait, is that it? Spaghetti monster makes a big show then runs away at the first sign of danger? What a wuss!"

"Might just thrive off of smaller game. I agree though. That was a little too easy."

Shaking my head, I asked, "How did you know hitting it would make it stop?"

She smoothed back her hair and adjusted her shirt, looking embarrassed but proud. "I didn't. But we shouldn't wait. We have a quest to complete." And with that, she stomped into the forest.

I cleared my throat.

She turned around with narrowed eyes. "What, Garret?"

I pointed behind me. "It's that way."

Her spine stiffened, a flush coloring her cheeks. “Oh. Well then. I’ll just...” She strode past me, a little less insistent this time.

As I stepped forward, something shiny caught my eye. *Hm. That’s interesting.* I picked up a shining pink stone. A gem or a crystal. It was covered in slime. I wiped it away and marveled at the beauty of the stone.

“Hey, look at this,” I commented lightly.

Delia, still embarrassed, only glanced back briefly. “The monster probably had it stuck in one of its suckers. Just stash it in your Inventory. Let’s go before the liquan changes its mind!”

I did as she ordered and popped it into my Inventory just as a tentacle lashed out, wrapped around Delia’s ankle, and yanked her into the water.



## CHAPTER 12



In less than a second, I was diving headfirst into the swamp, my shortsword in hand.

The water was cold, murky, and dark.

There was no way to see past the explosion of bubbles around me. I didn't even have a plan, but I knew I was going to grind this nasty monster beneath my boot one way or another.

A tentacle wrapped around me. I stabbed it, and my blade punched through. Gripping the slimy flesh in one hand, I dragged the sword down its sucker-covered length. Somewhere beneath the surface of the water, the beast screamed.

I was already running out of time, though. My lungs were already burning, and Delia was ahead of me by precious seconds.

I cut through another tentacle, which quickly retracted. I swam, searching furiously.

But I wasn't just a man with a blade, was I? Not anymore.

I swam to the surface, kicking and cutting at the slimy invertebrate. I needed air first, since passing out wouldn't actually help anyone.

Just as I cleared the water and took a huge gulp of air, the monster caught my ankle and dragged me back down.

*Well, this is your funeral, I wanted to say to it. Might as well fight your hardest, right?*

I let it drag me deeper, deeper.

*How far does this swamp go down?*



When my ears couldn't take any more pressure, I flipped the switch and let my dragon out.

The shift took longer this time, since I'd spent so much energy in my creature form in the last twelve hours. But my body relented, adopting the reptilian form again.

With my creature's eyes, I could see in the filthy pond, even with the sand and mud clouding everything. It didn't even hurt.

And there was the monster. A huge octopus thing with a round, gaping mouth full of jagged teeth.

The stuff of nightmares.

Curled in a tentacle close to its face was the unconscious form of Delia.

I wasted no time. I hooked my back talons deep into the muddy floor and surged forward, keeping my wings flat against my body. Those would get damaged if I wasn't careful.

The liquan retreated too late when it realized I was bigger. Stronger.

I didn't hesitate clamping my teeth over its bulging, soft head. Blood filled my mouth. My front appendages were more dextrous like hands, so I was able to grab onto Delia's body.

Even in death, the liquan wasn't letting her go. I couldn't rip her out of the tentacles. My strength would tear her human body to ribbons, and then where would I be?

I clamped my jaw down harder on the monster, and then I set my hind feet on the pond bottom and launched all three of us to the surface.

Sweet air filled my lungs as we broke into the forest once more.

I clawed us back to the shore, managing to keep Delia above the water.

I shifted to my human form and ripped through the stringy meat of the tentacle holding Delia. The python-like grip finally loosened and fell away like slack rope, spilling gray blood all over my legs.

I compressed her chest and breathed into her mouth, following the CPR training I took three years ago in Florida.

A minute went by. Two. Technically, you're not supposed to stop until professional help arrives.

*But no one is coming for us, are they?*

My head was swimming with fatigue and the dregs of amped-up rage. Was I going to stop? Hell no.

I felt her chest jerk beneath my hands right before her eyes flew open, and she vomited pond water onto my chest.

*Thank. Freaking. Heaven.*

“Delia,” I said breathlessly as she coughed and choked, spewing up more liquid.

She looked at me with grateful, pained eyes. “Yeah?” she rasped.

I pressed my forehead to hers. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“Me too.”

A notification rang in my ears, but Delia jolted in my arms, too. “Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

We opened our IDs simultaneously and saw the news:

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### **CONGRATULATIONS, Garret Stone!**

You Killed a Powerful Liquan.

Award: Your progress bar is now at 28%

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DELIA WAS LEANING against me and shifted in my lap. “Holy hellwaters.”

“I’ve progressed to 25%!” she cried out.

All signs of life returned to her cheeks. She looked strong. Invigorated.

*How did she do that? Look so normal after almost dying?*

I absently held her waist with one hand and watched her flip out with happiness.

It was entertaining.

“What’s your XP percentage?” she demanded, still fiddling with her screen.

“28% to Evolution Level 3.”

“Interesting. It looks like we got a different progression amount. Probably because I’m a higher level than you. Fascinating. I knew monster hunting was a way to get XP points, but I had no idea you could get *more* than arena battles! I mean, some of my friends at the arena only get 2 or 3% per victory. It’s almost as if they are rewarded less because they aren’t risking their lives. Accidents do happen, but the bouts aren’t to the death or anything.” She glanced over her shoulder at me, soaking wet and beautiful. “Think of the possibilities!”

She got to her feet, appearing quite chipper.

“How are you okay right now?” I wondered aloud. “You nearly died.”

Her mouth softened into an “oh”, and she blushed. “I suppose I should thank you for that. How did you do it, by the way?”

“Underwater shift. Chomped the monster. Propelled us all to the surface,” I summarized.

She knelt by me again. “Garret, you’re incredibly powerful. No one at your level should be able to use their creature form as often as you can. It’s... impressive. You’re the most powerful person I’ve ever met. At least regarding your creature form. But here, hold your hand out.”

I did as she asked, and she wrapped her elegant fingers around my wrist. She closed her eyes, and then her hands glowed a soft silver blue.

Instantly, my tired muscles strengthened. My head stopped pounding, and that aching mental heaviness lifted a fraction. I didn’t feel as good as I did that morning after I slept for 14 hours in Cabo, but it was a whole lot better than before.

She smiled bashfully at the look of amazement I gave her. “The least I could do. Besides, it’s what wolves are best at. We’re all about defensive pack magic. Wards, protection, and healing. I have one basic ward spell, and one healing spell I chose to boost during my last Evolution. When I heal you, it affects physical and magical

fatigue, as well as severe wounds. Only reason why I didn't use it on our scrapes earlier was because I had the potion, and I always use my potions before expending my spell magic."

"You healed yourself too," I realized, examining her with fresh eyes. "That's why you look so healthy. I didn't even notice you doing it."

She straightened with pride.

"Anyway, thank you. I feel a little bit closer to normal. Thanks." I stretched my arm over my head, relishing the way in which my muscles felt rejuvenated and revived.

It was great to think that we could tromp around in the woods and kill monsters, though to be honest, the liquan was too strong to hunt for regularly. Our fight had been costly. But still, almost a quarter of the way to my next level after a single kill!

That thought triggered another. I spun to face Delia. "Hey wait! What about the demons? I killed demons the first day, which should have given us progress. I assumed that's why I'd leveled. But I didn't get a notification," I pointed out.

My mind spun, and I continued to think aloud. "Maybe it was because I hadn't unlocked full access to my ID yet, because I was unassimilated. But even so, then we both should have gotten progress notifications after killing those demons back at the house! There's only one other explanation."

"Ew," she said simply, starting to get my train of thought.

"Hell yeah! Not sure if it works with other creatures, but if I eat demons, I can gain progress from them! Or else we're missing something. Still, could have been the core itself, but no way of knowing that without a little experimentation."

Delia's mouth went slack as she considered the issue. I could see she was grossed out but equally fascinated. Any way of leveling faster would be an advantage. "I'm not going to say that I hope demons attack again. If they come in numbers, it won't really matter if you can eat them for progress. Still, if we can live long enough to fortify the bunker house, maybe."

Still thinking, she strode away into the forest, a quizzical look on her face.

I walked behind her, contemplating all we'd just learned. We continued on our path until I checked the map again in a small clearing in the trees and corrected our path slightly. Around fifteen minutes had passed, and we were making fantastic progress.

We came to a fallen log and both leapt over it gracefully.

My new dragon-enhanced body was a pleasure to walk around in, especially now that I wasn't tired or simply spending half a day cleaning a grubby house.

Delia stopped and checked her ID before turning to me. "This is your quest, Garret. And it looks like we're almost there. You ready?"

I led her forward. "You bet your biscuits. Come on, wolf. We have a quest to dominate. If we're going to protect Easy Street, we need this lumber."

We walked in comfortable silence.

Too comfortable for people who'd only just met.

But that was just one strange thing about my new life here, and it was nearly becoming my favorite part.

Glares, snide remarks, and all.

The hike was just starting to become monotonous and boring when I heard an odd sound. It didn't belong in the middle of a forest. I held up a hand, stopping us both.

"What is it?" she asked. But then her ears perked up, noticing it too. "Oh!"

"Sintar doesn't happen to have helicopters, does it?" I mused.

She bit her lower lip. "Nope."

Then it clicked. My blood surged with anticipation. I studied the shadowy forest before us as the staccato buzzing drew closer, then said in a whisper, "Fireflies."



## CHAPTER 13



**T**he fireflies bobbed about like sentient lanterns.

Their transparent, shiny outer bodies gleamed like glass. Inside was the swirling microcosm of a sunset: red, peach, white, and orange.

Their wings were blurs of pale white, and the only sharp color on their bodies were the oily black of their eyes.

I'd have said they were beautiful, but they were as big as footballs.

I examined the grove from our hiding place. The creatures didn't seem to notice us or care that we were here.

Delia and I already noticed the trees, too. Where all the other forest trees were the normal brown or green, these trees were tinted with red.

"Are they aggressive?" I whispered.

Delia anxiously smoothed her ears back. Her tail drooped with worry. "No idea. They don't seem agitated. Maybe they know we're here and don't mind?"

A squirrel scurried across a low-hanging branch.

The closest fly stiffened, and shot a small spear from its abdomen. It skewered the rodent on the spot, and the small furry body hit the ground with a *thump*.

"Fast little guys, aren't they?" Delia mused. Her brow was furrowed, but she didn't seem to think we were outmatched.

*Can I shift into a dragon and scare them off?* I mused. *No. There isn't any space for my massive body to move. I'll be forced to change back to my human form.*

"I have a plan," I whispered to Delia.

I leaned in and murmured my idea. Her brows rose as I pulled back, but she didn't object. "Okay. But if we get stabbed, it's your fault."

Her clothing disappeared as she placed everything into her Inventory, and I got a flash of her honey skin before she transformed.

I reached out on instinct and scratched the spot in between Delia's ears.

She snapped her teeth at my arm, but I dodged, chuckling. "Good girl. Don't forget the plan." It was as simple as they come.

I retraced my steps about thirty yards back, disappeared my clothing, and shifted. There was enough room back here. My body elongated and scales climbed over me from head to tail.

I thanked heaven for Delia's healing power. Otherwise, I wasn't sure I'd be able to make this transformation again. Even now, it was a struggle.

I couldn't expand my wings here, so I clawed my way up a thick tree. It creaked and complained as I disturbed the branches and cracked pieces off. My talons scored the ancient thing, and birds and critters yelled at me in every language they had as I upset their homes.

I just needed to get high enough so I *could* take off.

It wasn't easy.

I had to balance my hind feet on two different trees, which were bowing under my weight. But finally, I spread my wings and launched into the air.

I flew, trying to spot the grove. My dragon's eyes were ten times sharper than my human ones, so it didn't take me long to notice the fire-bright branches dusted with soft green leaves.

Here goes.

I opened my maw, and for the first time, used my trait upgrade.

Fire exploded from my mouth. This wasn't a spell, wasn't something I had to practice to achieve. It felt as simple as gouging flesh with my talons. Ever since selecting the trait, I'd had an



instinctual knowledge of how to breathe fire. The only issue had been finding a situation where it wouldn't prove disastrous.

Just because the tree wood itself was fire-resistant didn't mean the leaves were. And sure enough, when my teeth clicked shut, the grove was crackling.

Two things were going to happen. Either the huge bugs would scatter deeper into the forest to hide, or...

My ears filled with buzzing. The flames on the trees died to smoking embers, and from beneath it rose a legion of fireflies.

*Or, they'll get pissed and chase me,* I'd told Delia. Now, her words about getting stabbed were hitting closer to home.

Before me, at least two hundred of the huge bugs floated like an undulating ocean of fire. And then, a small projectile came flashing at me. The firefly weapon bounced off my scales harmlessly.

*Ha!*

My humor died as a shower of the huge needles launched at once.

*Okay, that's not cool.*

One hit the underside of my shoulder, and I roared as the patch went numb. *Oh shit, these guys have tranquilizer darts.*

More of the bugs were rising from the trees, which meant I couldn't act just yet. I had to stall.

I soared around the treetops, making sure to stay in range of the grove as the colony joined its members in the epic dragon showdown. Most of the needles hit my hard scales and fell away. But some were sticking into the softer parts of my flesh, like the underside of my stomach or in between scales.

I was too big to be affected by a few, but right now, I had an alarming amount of numb patches creeping across me.

I wanted to yell at the dragon ancestors for this crappy design. Weren't dragons supposed to be naturally armored? Then again, I was willing to bet I'd run across a trait that would do just that.

I flew around, under attack, until no more bugs rose from the trees. They were all around me, over me, under me. My skin no longer prickled when a needle stuck into it, but fuck I was tired. It was like I had weights in my wings.

Wings that looked like pincushions, I was sure. Wings that I couldn't feel at all.

At last, they all seemed to be present.

I could finally act.

I had one spell under my belt. For the second time, I mentally prompted *Frozen Roar*. It claimed to be able to stun anything within fifty feet for at least one minute. The spell had worked well with the demons, though I was hoping these weaker creatures would be stunned for the full minute.

A red-barked tree below cracked and then collapsed. Delia must have started harvesting the lumber.

*Perfect timing!*

Just like I'd suspected, a portion of the bugs turned to investigate what was happening to their grove.

I opened my mouth and unleashed the *Frozen Roar*. Just like the fire breath inside of me, the spell was there, waiting to be used. It was as clear to me as having fingers and a beating heart.

There, in the base of my neck, the familiar frigid burn built up in a flash. It tore from me, bursting from my throat like a shock wave.

It hit the bugs in a wave, ice shards washing over their glowing forms. Their bright bodies dimmed, and like a cloud of embers, they fell down toward the trees.

On Earth, I might have felt sorry for the poor bastards. But not here. Not when I was a dragon, and not when Delia was below, relying on my protection.

I angled my wings and tilted downward until my nose pointed at the quivering grove. The trees were crumpling at a steady rate as Delia continued to harvest.

But we only had one minute until the bugs awakened.

I glided to the treetops, tucked my wings against my body, and dove into the forest. Branches snagged on me and snapped, but my scales protected me for the most part. This was better than a demon battle, that was for sure.

I hit the ground hard, my numb limbs too clumsy to be graceful.

"You're going to wake the dead," Delia admonished. But her concentration was on the tree. Thankfully, the woman had a crude hatchet that somehow convinced the system of this world it was

capable of chopping down trees. I watched as she struck the trunk of the tree for what might have been the tenth time.

Then, in a clean motion that wasn't a single bit natural, the tree crumpled downward, fragmenting into neat units of wood. They were rough planks, thick and unnaturally symmetrical. It was as if an invisible lumberjack with superhuman abilities speed-chopped and milled the tree in less than a second.

With one hand, Delia touched one of the boards. It vanished a heartbeat later, being stored in Delia's Inventory.

My chest rumbled in approval at Delia's skill and speed.

"You need to stay in your dragon form," she instructed me, moving on to the next trunk. "The flies are going to wake up again, and you'll have to think of something. Can you do another roaring spell?"

*Not without knocking you out, I wanted to say. And the cooldown isn't even close to finishing!*

I shook my head in answer.

I'd have to hold the bugs off and give Delia as much time and protection as she needed. By the unyielding set of her jaw and the steadiness of her body and hands, I could tell she was efficient and focused under pressure. I trusted her to complete the task.

I didn't want to sit around doing nothing though. Considering how well the under-sized hatchet worked, I might as well give my talons a try.

I faced a nearby tree and scored its trunk with my claws. The tree shuddered, but nothing happened. I tried it several more times, and on the fifth slash, I watched as the Firefly Cedar crumbled into a stack of usable lumber.

I managed to fell four more of the trees before the sound of buzzing insects announced the cloud of insects was beginning to stir.

*Can I hold off an army of anesthetic needles? Eventually, I'm just going to collapse.*

My body was strong, and though I was weakened by their weapons, I could hold out for a while. Hopefully long enough for Delia to gather all the wood and the both of us to run away.

I had to. There was no other choice.

Delia harvested one more tree before the first of the bugs came buzzing back into the grove. Then, one by one, they came at us. I did the only thing that I was capable of.

I doused those bitches in fire.

The flames enveloped them and the grove. It would have obliterated any other creature, but these little assholes were born in the heat.

They were blown back by the force of the fire, buying us some time.

But even though they weren't dead, the fireflies were stunned. As Delia ran around to collect the various piles of lumber, the bugs floated around in a woozy fashion.

I raised my front foot and stomped on a few, crushing them into crunchy pulp. But there were at least three hundred in total. Even with my big feet, it was a stupid strategy to maintain.

I considered slamming my tail about, trying to blast them apart that way, but Delia was in the way.

But then something strange caught my attention. As Delia harvested the wood, none of the bugs attacked her. I wasn't about to let my guard down, but something told me the flies had changed agendas.

They watched us with dazed attention. It reminded me of how kids looked when they stared at their favorite TV show. I nearly expected drool to leak from the creatures' mouths.

And then one of them advanced.

I growled at it. I shot a small stream of fire at it, emptying the last bit of flame juice I had left. When it wouldn't back down, I nearly crushed it with my foot.

There was something about the slow, unfazed way it approached me that gave me pause, however.

It must have sensed hesitation because the devil raced forward and smacked me straight in the snout, sticking to my nose.

I reared back and huffed. I shook my head a little, like a wet dog. But the little glowing bug stayed.

More began to approach us slowly. I gave Delia a warning growl, but she shushed me in her concentration.

I moved to swipe the bug from my face when I froze. Right there — on my nose — was a pinprick of warmth. You'd think that with a body constantly burning with heat, I wouldn't notice, but this warmth was different.

It was magic.

*What the hell are you doing to me, little firefly?* I wondered

It was the only thought I could muster before the entire swarm was upon me.



## CHAPTER 14



**D**elia's puzzled face appeared below mine.

She was staring at me in wonder, equal parts concern and curiosity at play on her features.

It was her adorable, placid face that kept me from flipping out and tearing the bugs off.

*What is she looking at? What are the fireflies doing?*

All I knew was that they covered me in a thick blanket, and warmth was spreading through my body.

It wasn't... bad. Not painful. In fact, the sensation was rather comforting.

*But you know what? So is heroin.*

Delia was grinning at me, obviously catching my distrustful and bewildered expression. "Garret? I think you've uh... oh by the moon. How do I say this?" She rubbed her hand over a giggling mouth and finished, "You've gained a fan base."

I tilted my head in the universal, *Excuse me, but what in the haystack do you mean by that?*

She shook her head, fully laughing now.

And that's when I noticed it. Me, a grand beast of the highest order, finally heard the noise. An unmistakably happy buzzing. It was how I'd imagine a bug's purr would sound, if, of course, bugs purred.

I gave Delia a panicked look next. What was I supposed to do with this? What was I —

A sigh of utter relief hissed out of my mouth.

My legs gave out and I sunk to the ground. The warmth the bugs were putting into me peaked, broke, and washed through me in a storm of pleasure.

The numb portions of me tingled back to life. The tiredness in my wings lifted. The needles fell from me and tinkled to the floor like rain.

*Healing.* This was what widespread healing felt like.

Delia's hand touched my brow, an easy task now that my head was lowered to the ground. "They must think you're some sort of god," she snickered.

I replied with a half-hearted huff. I was way too relaxed to care about her attempts at sarcasm at the moment.

"No, I'm serious!" she asserted. "They really seem to like you! I wonder why? You stunned them, burnt out their home, and smashed a few. I'll bet it's the fire."

I didn't give her any more genius replies. The blissful warmth was receding from my body, leaving behind a pleasant buzz in my muscles. The bugs then began to lift from me one at a time.

I cracked an eye to watch as Delia put the pieces together.

She was petting my huge head again. "Garret, look at them."

The bugs were zooming around their thick, albeit less crowded, grove.

Their football-sized bodies bumped into one another, but they weren't being violent or even clumsy.

They were excited.

*The little bastards just fed on my energy, didn't they?*

It was like each of them drank a cup of coffee, and were now content to buzz around excitedly achieving nothing. *They have a lot in common with humans then.*

I snorted and rose to my four feet again. There was no reason to be upset by my chitinous friends. I felt amazing, like I'd received a full-body massage then ended with a handshake.

"A symbiotic relationship," Delia said in a reverent exhale.

I gave her another snort.

"I think these fireflies are part of your ancestry. Not that you're related, but that your species benefit from each other. Did they feed on your magical energy?"



I did my best to shrug.

She nodded, expecting my answer. “And your body feels better? Relaxed? *Healed*? Oh, wow... It’s like how remora fish attach to sharks and clean their bodies for nourishment. The shark gets groomed and cleaned, and the fish gets to eat. Both species benefit.”

She took a deep breath and finished, “I think the fireflies just fed on the dross in your body. They pulled the energetic fatigue from you, which alleviated your body and *nourished* them!” She had both hands on her cheeks, completely absorbed in the realization.

Now, I understood what she meant by these bugs being ‘part of my ancestry.’ These little creatures acted completely on instinct. Which meant that they must have had a natural symbiotic relationship with dragons in the past.

Before we were hunted down and killed by demons, that is.

I didn’t know if it was the nutrition high they were on, but the fireflies seemed a lot happier too. Sunlight peeked through the grove, now that Delia had cleared out several trees. There was more space for their large bodies to fly.

They zoomed up trunks, twirled around each other, and played.

*Well, shit, Sintar. Aren’t you a smart world?*

The bugs needed more space. The grove was too thick for them to really enjoy it.

That means the system *gave* me, the first dragon in however long, a quest that would please the ecosystem and build the participating parties up on all sides. The bugs gained nutrients. My body was repaired. And we opened up their grove and gained a valuable asset for Easy Street.

Quests, it seemed to me, were all about this world maintaining its own balance.

With so few given out, no wonder things had begun to deteriorate.

Confirming my suspicion and clearly making the same connections as me, Delia added, “I only stopped harvesting because the quest page said we’d reached the requirement. In fact, I have 337 units of Firefly Cedar. I didn’t get any progress though. Maybe we have to return to 319 Easy Street to finish it?”

I nodded again.

She smirked at me. “You’re a lot easier to talk to when you can’t talk back. Did you know?”

I nudged her ass with my snout, making her stumble to the side.

She rolled her eyes. “Ready to go, Dragon Overlord?”

I tucked my talons away when she nudged them, expecting me to clutch her and take off. I enjoyed the look of astonishment when I lowered my head and pressed my body close to the ground.

“Absolutely not,” she gasped.

I gave a series of staccato huffs that I hoped passed as a laugh.

“That’s not safe! What if I fall off? I’m not sure I can hold on to you — oh, stop looking at me like that. I’m not *scared*. Please. Even the insinuation... okay, fine!” she shouted, gritting her teeth and hoisting herself up. Her legs straddled the place where my long neck connected to my shoulders.

It was a good fit.

She could hook her heels into the softer scales where my dragon armpit was. *Do dragons even have armpits? Who knows?*

In any case, Delia was firmly seated on me with plenty of places to hang on to.

She carefully wrapped her arms around my neck. Her thighs squeezed me from either side.

Taking off was easy this time, now that the grove wasn’t so suffocating and I was at full strength. There was a subtle weariness to my mind that wouldn’t subsist, but I knew a good night’s sleep would bring me back to normal.

As we approached Easy Street, there was a happy little pinging notification that went off in my head. I knew it would be telling me we’d successfully completed the task.

I heard Delia exclaim something, so I figured she was balls deep in her ID, freaking out over whatever progression we’d earned.

I landed in front of the bunker house and shifted back to my human body with a gasp. I didn’t fall on my naked ass in the process, so it was a win in my eyes.

“Check your ID!” Delia commanded with shining, excited eyes.

Her furry tail swished back and forth, only a couple beats short of a wag.

She unconsciously moved to my side until her body brushed mine.

Following her suggestion, I opened my Internal Display after prompting my clothing out of the Inventory and onto my body.

\*\*\*

QUEST: Firefly Fiasco

Status: Completed!

Reward: +60% Evolution Level progression; +300 firefly lumber pieces in total; +275 credits for each participant

\*\*\*

I watched in satisfaction as my XP progression bar slid from 28% to 88%. Then I nearly fell over as another notification popped up.

\*\*\*

Bonus Quest Achieved: Firefly Fidelity

Firefly Fidelity: Good work! You went beyond your quest's requirements and restored balance in the firefly colony.

Reward: +30% Evolution Level progression; Reputation with the Fireflies increased to Friendly; +125 credits for each participant

\*\*\*

I hurriedly exited out of the notification and looked at my front page profile again.

\*\*\*

NAME: Garret Stone

Form: Dragon

Creature type: Reptilian Endothermic

Metabolism: Carnivore

Evolution Level: 3

\*\*\*

“HOLY SHIT,” I mumbled under my breath. “Look out, demons. Garret Stone just learned how to train his mother fucking dragon.”



## CHAPTER 15



I convinced Delia to come into the house before we chose our traits and spells. I wasn't sure if the Governor was keeping an eye on us in any way, and didn't want to tip anyone off that we just went on a quest.

After ten minutes of deliberation, I had a new trait and spell.

I'd been given a chance to modify my wings once more. The Clipped Wings trait from my first evolution became Sleek Wings. It was the same thing but the benefits were enhanced. It was good to know that I could pass a trait by and come back to an even better version later.

Instead, though, I chose to increase my defense.

Reading the trait over one last time, I felt it was a good choice.

\*\*\*

**ADAMANTINE SCALES:** If this trait is selected, the scales on your dragon form will dramatically increase in mana density. This will result in a tougher overall hide but not add any additional weight. Your human form will benefit also from increased Endurance. Endurance allows you to take less damage from physical attacks.

\*\*\*

CONSIDERING how the demons had surrounded me and tore through my leathery ass with ease, I didn't feel any regrets.

My spell was a little more dramatic.

\*\*\*

Molten Talons: When an enemy is within range of your talons, this spell will launch an automated attack at high speed. The talons of all four legs will lash out at once, causing severe slashing damage. Enhanced by fire magic, this spell now ignores 80% of an enemy's worn or natural armor and causes internal burns. This secondary damage amounts to 20% of the attack's full damage potential. This spell is only available when in dragon form. Cooldown: 2 minutes.

\*\*\*

"Damn, I can't wait to roast some demon hide. The armor penetration and damage should make them easy enough to cut down. And," I emphasized with an upheld finger, "the cooldown is only 2 minutes! I can use it more than once in a fight."

Delia was lost in her own thoughts but humored me with a grunt.

Having chosen the trait and spell, I focused my attention on my body.

I felt stronger, faster than I had before. My muscles were more tightly wound, and though I didn't feel bulky, my arms and chest were denser.

Not sure of how to "feel" what increased Endurance was like, I gave up and sat on the ruins of the bunker bed while Delia raided the dried goods. I wondered if the old dragons of this world had mates. Wives and husbands. Friends.

Delia returned with an old plate laden with food. It was lacking in regards to quantity, but when I asked, she only shrugged. "It's all we

have. Gotta go shopping. But that's something we can think about later. I wanted to tell you about my spell and trait. I have a healing spell called Renew. It is pretty general, and useful to help heal most wounds. My new one, though, is called Cure. It can reverse bleeding, burns, poisons, infection, and other ailments. Cool, right?"

I crunched on a handful of nuts, nodding all the while. She was looking at me expectantly, so I added, "It's great. Can't have a party without a badass healer, right? What's your other spell though? You should have a third by now at Level 4, right?"

She glanced down and picked up a wedge of dried peach. Stuffing it in her mouth, I got the sense she didn't exactly want to explain.

I insisted. "Come on. We are working as a team. I should know what you're capable of. What's your third spell?"

"I chose it first, back when I thought it would be more useful. It's called Share Mind. If I'm closely bonded with someone, or even a group of people, I can share my thoughts and emotions through a mind link. It's useful in many ways. There are... other applications I'd rather not discuss. Not now at least."

Her eyes sparkled again, and she continued. "My trait is pretty cool. It was between Feral Fangs and Harrowing Howl. I would love to have enhanced chompers, but the howl trait just reminded me of your fire breathing so much I had to choose it. My vocal cords have been modified. They now have an additional organ that produces mana. When I howl, the mana is consumed and the result is... well, harrowing."

"I'm sold, but what does that mean exactly?" I asked, not feeling like interpreting the trait.

"It has a few effects actually. Depends on the type of creature I use it on. The description says it causes Fear, Confusion, or Madness, and when I use it close up, can even cause minor damage. The greatest part though... no, never mind. I'll just show you."

I stared at the woman, suspicious as she grinned at me. Then she tilted her head back and opened her lungs.

The howl that escaped her mouth was so inhuman and terrible that I nearly shat myself on the spot. I could see why it was called



“Harrowing.”

“Okay!” I called out, the hair rising on my arms and legs. “Closed space. Big-ass wolf voice!”

Delia fell over laughing.

After we finished eating, I told Delia I was going to wash up. Before I walked downstairs, though, she mentioned replacing the wards on the bunker house. “Not sure how useful they are anymore, but I guess they can’t hurt, right?”

I stopped her. “What are wards exactly? Keep away baddies, sure, but it isn’t an extra spell you picked up, is it?”

Delia handed me a tiny glowing stone. “It’s a crystal that’s been infused with a warding spell. They can be pricey depending on how powerful they are, but I have a dozen more. Was part of my job when I worked for the Governor. Might as well use them here. Anyway, enjoy your bath. I’ll be done in a minute.”

That night, we shared the same bed. We were both exhausted, and considering how hard sharing a bath had become, decided to keep things cool.

Still, when I woke in the morning, another notification ringing in my head, Delia was gone.

When I opened my ID, I sat up in a start.

*I have another quest!*

*This whole Administrator thing is really going to pay off. Then again, can I trust it?*

The very concept was unnatural in this world. I couldn’t decide whether to decline or accept. *Is the Governor trying to trick me?*

But everything I knew about Sintar told me I wasn’t supposed to be receiving them. I ignored it, and would continue to do so until I had a chance to talk to Delia about it.

A little caution could go a long way. The last thing I needed was to be the one person evolving at a ridiculous rate that made me stand out even more as the first dragon in ages. Just one more reason I had to leave when all of this was over. This city wouldn’t accept a lone dragon that had an absurd amount of accidental privilege.

Rubbing my eyes, I rose from bed. A crashing upstairs made me move a little faster. I stumbled up the first story half-expecting a

legion of demons waiting.

It was Delia messing around with a stack of Firefly Cedar planks that must have weighed half as much as she did. I opened my mouth to ask a question, then leaned against the half-collapsed door frame and watched.

She was biting her lip and grunting as she lifted the thick boards, trying to stack them for some reason. Her Inventory was a perfectly suitable place to keep them, so I was confused why she would even bother. She grunted a couple times, lifting the end of one stack. It slipped, the boards clapping down together, nearly smashing her fingers.

I had to wonder what in the hell she was intending.

But the view was fabulous, so I didn't mind standing around and enjoying myself.

She wore a plain white tank top, ripped blue jeans, and black leather combat boots. Her breasts were nearly falling out with the physical effort. Her lean, muscular arms were tight and tense as they battled with the lumber, and the messy crown of hair wrapped on her head made her look six types of crazy.

I tilted my head, a dazed grin on my lips, and watched her quads shudder with exertion.

Then the stack tilted dangerously to the side, pulling Delia along with it.

I moved quickly and with more grace than I would ever have been able to before. I caught the falling wood with one outstretched hand and Delia in the other. She made a cute little noise of surprise, not realizing I'd been there, and wrapped her arms around my waist on instinct.

Her chest smashed against me and one thigh was braced between my legs.

I stood steady while she blinked up at me with shock.

"Morning," I said breezily. When she didn't respond or move, I added, "Did you want these somewhere in particular, or...?"

She let go. Blushing furiously, she pointed to the massacred porch that had been ripped to shreds by me and the demons during the attack. "Just stack them up against the wall there." Her voice was breathy.

A throaty growl rumbled in my chest.

Misinterpreting the sound as an angry one, her forehead crinkled. "I didn't ask you to help me, you know. No need to get angry."

"Oh, I'm perfectly comfortable with helping you, Delia," I replied, my voice soft as velvet.

I watched in satisfaction as her mouth parted in understanding, and then I hefted the planks onto my shoulder like they weighed nothing.

Her mouth fell open even more.

I was surprised, too. I should have been straining at least a little.

*Perks of being a dragon, I suppose.*

Once I put them down, I asked, "Not to be insulting, but please, why spend the time stacking the wood when you could just leave it in your Inventory?"

She crossed her arms and stared at me in challenge. Her eyes were now stubbornly fixed onto my face. "How else am I supposed to be able to rebuild this damn house by hand if I can't even stack a hundred boards? I'm not good at this stuff, Garret, never have been. I guess I was just trying to get us organized and get a feel for the work."

"Are you sure there isn't a way to, I don't know," I waved my hand at the decrepit structure we were living in and finished, "Upgrade things? I don't know... automatically? The tub doesn't function normally, and you can pull things from thin air. You'd think the building would have modified mechanics as well."

She scoffed. "If you own the place, sure. But no one owns Easy Street. Not even the city. Like I said before, we'd have to talk to the Governor."

"So, let's try to fix that problem ourselves," I said.

"Not possible."

An ugly suspicion surfaced. "How did the Governor expect us to do anything with this street with manual labor?"

"Don't be so naive," Delia admonished. "That's the point of this punishment. Did you think he'd give us an easy task?"

"I figured the punishment would stop at rehabbing a place the crack addicts in LA would avoid," I deadpanned. "I also figured the task would be possible too."

She gave me a sad, resigned look. “Shit,” she said in a whisper.  
“Yeah, shit,” I agreed.

Not wanting to foul her mood, I added, “There has to be another way.”

I waltzed back into the house, Delia at my heels. I sat on a rotting wooden chair and opened my ID. I moved past the shit about myself and looked for the finer print.

I scrolled to the bottom of the page. I clicked through all of the profile and settings functions. And then, at the end of a deep rabbit hole, I found it:

\*\*\*

## ADMIN FUNCTIONS

\*\*\*

“JACKPOT!”

“What are you doing?” Delia demanded.

“Snooping. I found my admin page. I want to see exactly what’s possible here. Wish this ID came with a manual or something.”

I knew enough about websites and game tech to assume there were functions that should allow us to —

“There is no admin page!” she interrupted.

I scanned the list of three dozen links crammed together. Well, this wasn’t very user-friendly, was it? My gaze caught on one: Real Estate.

I tapped it and told Delia where to look for the admin page on her ID.

“Garret, it’s not there. I don’t have one.”

But I wasn’t listening. My CSO brain was in high gear at last.

I was looking at listings.

Listings for the entire city. “Well, shit. Our sweet Governor sure owns a lot, doesn’t he?” I skipped over the swanky parts of downtown and scrolled until I found the E’s.

“There! Right there,” I exclaimed.

Delia was growing impatient by now, but I ignored her. She’d be happy with my discovery.

Right between Dutton and Eckleson was our place. Easy Street. I tapped its name and a new screen appeared.

\*\*\*

Easy Street

Status: Abandoned

Ownership: None

Community Rating: Extremely Dangerous

Annual Revenue: 0 Credits

Valued At: 0 Credits

Death Rate: Unfortunately High

\*\*\*

I SKIMMED OVER THIS INFORMATION. I’d enjoy exploring the city valuations later, and I pretty much knew Easy Street wasn’t going to get a gold star rating.

No, I was looking for something else.

I sensed I was being driven toward this. Maybe my dragon shifter form carried some ancient intuition. More than likely, my too-long-buried business senses were flaring to life again, hungry for action.

I tapped a menu that said “Acquisition” and looked at the price point.

\*\*\*

EASY STREET: Potential Value: 6850 credits, Assessed Value: 250 credits

Purchase now for 250 credits?

\*\*\*

CONVENIENTLY ENOUGH, I had that cash. My 400 credits crashed to 150 when I confirmed my purchase and submitted the whole caboodle.

I was then pulled toward my front ID screen again, the one with my information and stats.

Now, below my Evolution Rank was another line that read Assets.

I tapped Assets.

Inside was every bit of information on Easy Street that existed. More than I could ever know was possible to see.

\*\*\*

## **EASY STREET**

- 1 single family home, 4 bedrooms
- 3 single family homes, 3 bedrooms
- 4 single family homes, 2 bedrooms
- 5 duplex units, studio apartments
- 1 triplex unit, 2 bedrooms
- 7 empty lots

## **RESIDENTS**

319 EASY STREET:  
Garret Stone  
Delia Wayland

310 EASY STREET:  
Rat

ROAMING\*:  
19 Assorted Cats  
57 Crows  
1 Three-Legged Dog

*\*ONLY INCLUDES beasts of notable size. Does not include assorted rodents or bugs*

\*\*\*

MY EYES WIDENED.

*That must be a big fucking rat if it doesn't count as a rodent!*  
My attention slid through the mash of mind-melting details.  
As I clicked through the pages, I finally found what I was looking  
for.  
Upgrades.





## CHAPTER 16



“**D**elia, I need you to transfer the rest of the Firefly Cedar over to my Inventory,” I said after summoning the stack she’d spent so much time forming.

She looked ready to shift and tear me apart.

I didn’t laugh. Not even a little. But the ironic grin on my face couldn’t have been helpful.

Delia spun on her heel and left the house. I followed, needing to know what was about to happen.

I found her standing in the front yard. She had a hand on her hip and a grimace on her face. “Want me to hand over the wood, Garret?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “That would be great.”

She held up one of her arms and a cascade of wood flew out, cluttering the weed-strewn yard with the other two hundred and some odd units of Firefly Cedar.

Delia held her hand out to the mess. Her smile was on the poisonous side of sweet.

“You could have just sent them to me. Using our ultra-convenient IDs,” I said dryly.

“You could have explained to me what you’re doing, Garret Stone,” she retorted.

I held up a finger. “It’s going to be worth the wait. I’ll explain, but please be patient.”

Thankfully, it was easy to summon the wood into my Inventory. All I had to do was place my hand on the few random piles that had been formed by Delia's act of defiance.

Once it was there, I returned to the Upgrades page.

There was a list of issues with the house. Destroyed walls, the mangled porch, rotting roof, mold issues all over the place, and more. Even the warded bunker below had some minor problems.

All of the upgrades cost credits. Some, like removing the mold, could only be fixed by shelling out money. Others had suggested materials that, if offered, would lower the price of the upgrade significantly.

I could use the Firefly Cedar for all structural problems *and* the roof. And since I had more than enough lumber, it would only cost me 128 credits.

Score.

"Garret, you're seriously starting to worry me," Delia said quietly.

"Patience, babe."

*This is going to be epic.*

I purchased the structural repair update. My credits went from 150 to a measly 22. My lumber inventory petered from 337 to 216.

"I'm going to ignore the fact that you just called me *babe* and — oh." She stared up at the house, mouth ajar.

319 Easy Street was emitting a pale-blue light. It grew brighter and brighter, forcing me to shield my eyes. Still, I could see the house tearing itself apart and reassembling once more in a storm of wood and debris. It looked like a telekinetic carpenter had just dropped their most powerful spell.

When it faded, we stared up at the house in shared awe.

The wraparound porch and posts were brand-new and sturdy. The siding was intact. The frames and trims were all perfectly constructed, as was a cascading shake roof. It looked a bit odd considering the parts that had been replaced lacked paint, but who cared about something petty like that?

It also didn't lean dangerously to the left anymore.

Delia moved toward the porch but I caught her wrist.

"Not yet," I told her, and kept going.

I didn't have any glass material, so the price to replace the windows was 317 credits, well beyond my budget.

More affordably, I saw an option to eradicate all pests and clear out the mold in the house for 20 credits. I spent most of the rest of my money happily. Now we could live in this house confident it wouldn't give us a disease.

"Do we want electricity?" I inquired.

"Okay, I'm going to return to the fact that you just upgraded this house *automatically* for a later discussion," she replied, blinking up at the house.

I couldn't tell if she was pissed or blown away. In the end, I assumed it was a mixture of the two. "To answer your question, we need to strengthen the *whole* street," she reasoned. "Why waste our assets on one house?"

The same quest notification popped up again, *Gain Delia's Trust*.

\*\*\*

MINOR QUEST: Gain Delia's Trust

DELIA IS uncertain about whether she can rely on you, or trust you to tell her the truth. If you hope to revive all of Easy Street, you'll need her on your side!

INSTRUCTIONS: Convince Delia Wayland of your loyalty and commitment to her and your joint cause.

REWARD: Progress toward Evolution, Reputation with Delia Wayland, Credits

\*\*\*

I EYED the blinking notice and said, “Delia, I don’t think we’re going to have trouble with money.”

*Not if these quests keep popping up like daisies.*

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup.”

“Just a feeling? I’m gonna need you to tell me why you think that,” she pressed.

I supposed this was a good time to start being more upfront. “That’s fair. I just got another quest. If all goes well, I’ll get more progress and credits.”

She threw up her hands. “Really? Well, I guess that’s a good thing. Sure, let’s go full electric.”

I sighed. “I’m short 68 credits for electricity and another 53 for plumbing repairs. I only have 2 credits left. Wanna chip in, or should we wait until we get more credits?”

A second later, a notification appeared on my ID.

\*\*\*

OFFER: 200 credits

Sender: Delia Wayland

\*\*\*

“I THOUGHT WOLVES COULD DO MATH,” I told her. “It’s only 121 credits total.”

She shrugged and stole a glance at my still-shirtless body. “You just spent all of your credits upgrading our house. This is a team

assignment. I'll make up for the rest and handle the purchases at the market, but you need to carry a little bit of credit cash. No one should walk around broke."

"You're very nurturing," I commented.

Her eyes narrowed. "So what if I am?"

I smiled at the absurdity of it. "I didn't mean it as an insult, Delia. I... I like it."

She looked at her shifting feet.

"Seriously, though," I continued. "You're instinctually ready to take care of people around you. Me included, who you've only just met. That's a very rare quality."

"It's stupid," she muttered.

"No," I countered. "It's admirable."

She gritted her teeth in frustration. Her ears were pulled back and flat. She seemed almost sad or ashamed.

"Can I say something else?" I asked.

"Sure."

I took a step closer.

This time, Delia did look up. Her expression was guarded, but she didn't retreat.

"I think it's about time we mix business with pleasure. We both deserve it."

Her ears perked up, but she still looked wary. "Pleasure? I hardly think it's time for another bath."

I gestured to the city. "We need more supplies, which means we're due for some shopping! There has to be a marketplace in Vade."

At this, her silver eyes began to sparkle. "Well. I already have that one planned out."

It was nice to see Delia looking happier. She carried a lot of responsibility around with her, and this whole turn of events hadn't been easy.

I purchased the electricity and plumbing upgrades, and again, the house lit up an icy blue. When it subsided, I reached out my hand and held hers. Then together, we scoped out the new house.

It was bare and clean. No musty smell or cobwebs remained.

319 Easy Street was a fresh canvas ready for color and life.

*And furniture, for Christ's sake.*

We took turns washing up in our new shower, a fixture that had always been there but now worked with the repaired plumbing. Then we put on some fresh clothes and headed into the city.

The streets of Vade reminded me of a mix between London and Seoul.

Some buildings seemed ancient, made of stone and severe corners, but then the windows would be all sleek glass and steel frames. Other buildings were built completely of reflective material that reminded me of liquid mercury.

When we entered the downtown area, the streets were flooded.

People of every creature type walked by. Furry bits and scaled skin, pupils of every shape and size.

I spotted a woman with huge, batlike wings, purple skin, and a forked tongue.

She watched me with predatory eyes and a devilish smile as we strode by.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked Delia. I didn't really care. I was thrilled to be exploring this new city with her as my guide.

"Patience. It's just around the corner." She looked me up and down. "It's high time we get you some new clothes, dragon."

"I take that as a personal insult," I said with mock horror.

She rolled her eyes, and suddenly jogged a few paces ahead. She turned around and said, "Race you!"

I scoffed. "Okay?"

She looked hesitant for a half second. And then the cheeky wolf attacked me.

Her hand dashed out, and her staff appeared in it. She hooked it behind my leg and shoved me in the chest. Predictably, I crashed to the ground.

"Cheater!" I shouted as I regained my footing back, but she was already running.

*She is fast.*

"Sucker!" she yelled over her shoulder with a laugh.

I sped and wove through the traffic after her, never losing sight of her silver hair. I wanted to test this newfound strength and see what I could do.

I urged myself faster still and was finally gaining on her. We cut through throngs of angry people who threw their hands up at us in outrage. But I knew I wasn't giving it my all. My muscles still felt relaxed, and I was hardly breaking a sweat.

We were approaching the end of the block, and Delia was making a turn left.

I kicked myself into high gear.

I'd never run so quickly in my life, and my adrenaline spiked at the thrill of it. I didn't even care to notice the angry people or hear their shouts as we passed.

This was power.

Finally, the streamers, stalls, and endless tables of an open-air market came into view. Even at a distance, I could see it was a bustling bazaar, the kind I used to love getting lost in.

Delia stood hunched over, hands on her knees. She was smiling at me.

"Pretty fast for a wolf," I admitted.

She laughed, her humor blending with pants. "Yeah, and for a dragon, you're not so bad yourself."

We locked eyes, and for a moment, I wanted nothing more than to jump her silver-shod bones.

I glanced around. A few people were staring at us, still angry for having nearly knocked them off their feet. Then I spotted the perfect place.

In one single motion, I looped my arm around Delia's waist and yanked her to the side. She shrieked and tried to kick me off, but I pulled us into the back of a silk merchant's stall. An arrangement of tables spread out before, but behind it all, was a silk-draped cove where the man must have stored his goods.

It was secluded, and once inside, we were alone.

"What are you doing? The market is just ahead," she asked, hands against my chest.

The silk sheets shielded us from the street, but I could still spot the merchant through a screen of gauzy silk, bartering with a customer. Thankfully, it didn't seem like he noticed us.

"I just thought it would be nice to be alone with you," I explained. "Plus, I think I might have knocked some dude down. He sounded

pissed.”

She chuckled. “You weren’t the best at weaving.”

A loud shout made us shift back further behind the sheets of bright fabric. The merchant had set up his tent against an old stone building. We leaned against the wall, grinning.

Then, Delia cupped the back of my neck and pulled my lips to hers. Against my lips she said, “I wanted to do this all morning.”

“Really?”

“Mmmm,” was her only reply. Her tongue traced the edge of my lip, and her body ground against mine. “I really want you to touch me, Garret.”

I lifted her up, and she wrapped her legs around my waist, kissing me like she was ravenous. It was all hands and moans and gasps.

She was a goddamn drug.

The trail I made down her neck with my lips and tongue was met with more pleading noises.

Her movements changed and she pushed me away gently.

I let her go, but Delia didn’t search for her shirt or give me any biting remarks.

No. Instead, the wolf maneuvered me so *my* back was against the wall.

She sank to her knees.

It was cautious but deliberate, almost like she expected to be scolded.

I watched as a trickle of uncertainty and embarrassment appeared in her eyes, but when she tried to hide her face, I ordered, “Don’t you dare, Delia. You’ve nothing to feel ashamed about.”

She froze, eyes wide but more confident. Delia licked her lips and unbuckled my belt. When she pulled me free and gripped me in her hand, we both groaned in pleasure.

Still holding my gaze, Delia leaned forward and took me in her mouth.

*Oh my god. Is this woman a literal gift from heaven? Because I’ve never felt a tongue so eager or lips this soft.*

She pleased me as she unbuttoned her own jeans. Then her hand disappeared below the waistline as she touched herself, whimpering softly with her mouth full.



“Yes,” I rasped. “Yes, keep going.”

I was a blur of desire and pleasure, lost in this woman.

I’m not sure how long we were there, but my hands were in her hair, urging her on as I approached the finish line.

Even still, it only took me a second to sober up when I noticed we’d gained an audience.



## CHAPTER 17



**A** woman was standing between the sheets of waving silk. Watching us.

Petite. Wearing a red silk bikini top. Her nipples were puckered and her caramel hair was tied back in a braid. A wicked little smile played on her lips.

These were the only real observations I could have while Delia was sucking on my cock like I was candy.

The old Garret would have definitely stopped Delia and apologized to the newcomer. From the way her silk top matched the sheets hanging around us, it was clear this was her space.

But the new Garret?

I let my eyes travel over the newcomer's body. Down her bare stomach, the barely-there pleated leather skirt and her dancer's legs. It made me wonder if she had anything else under that skirt, and that only got me closer to my climax in Delia's mouth.

My gaze flicked back up to her hard nipples and the way her tits tried to spill out of every side of her top.

When I met her stare again, she was watching with thinly veiled heat.

I didn't look away as I pumped my dick into Delia's mouth and came. I groaned, my exhale hissing through my teeth. After ten heavenly seconds of pure bliss, I slid myself out of Delia's mouth.

She was looking up at me with a kind of raw vulnerability I never expected from her. I stroked her perfect jaw and held out a hand to

help her up.

The newcomer broke the silence with a mocking applause. “Very good!” she said sweetly.

Delia sprang to her feet and glared at her accusingly. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I *thought* it had been a mocking applause, but the stranger looked every ounce delighted.

Her green eyes went wide and her smile fell. “Oh! How rude of me not to introduce myself!” She twirled in a perfect ballerina’s pirouette that ended in a lavish performer’s bow. “I’m Jojo Thorne. Pleased to meet your acquaintance.”

I cleared my throat. The girl *had* been wearing underwear. If you can call that tiny strip of silk she’d just flashed us an undergarment. “Nice to meet you, Jojo. I’m Garret, and this is —”

“Delia Wayland, Second Ward Officer to the Governor,” my half-naked companion finished for me. She hadn’t put her shirt back on, and was staring at the new woman with an odd, tight expression.

I had a feeling it had nothing to do with voyeurism.

Jojo’s mouth fell open. “Ooooh, I didn’t know we were doing titles! Let me add mine!” She cleared her throat like she was about to make a great announcement, then flung her hands out to either side and gave us a sunshine smile. “I’m Jojo Thorne, Gold Level Three-Time Grand Champion of the Great Arena Battle!”

Interesting.

Delia’s expression remained the same. As if she’d been expecting that answer all along...

Delia *knew* this girl.

That’s when I noticed what seemed off about Jojo Thorne. She didn’t have any creature characteristics. No tails or fur or feathers. If she was as high level as I suspected, she should be showing off her animal features like Delia did.

I took a closer look, and then I saw it.

Something rippled in the air behind her. It was like an invisible wall that just barely shimmered at the edges. There was a slight pattern on it, too.

Oh, she had her creature characteristics. We just couldn’t see them. Whether it was by natural design or if she was hiding it on

purpose, it certainly gave her an edge. Someone might mistake her for a weak, easy target.

I picked up Delia's shirt and bra and handed them to her. "Apologies for raiding your territory. But we have things to do, so —"

"You're new here, aren't you?" Jojo swooped forward, stopping only a few inches away.

I blinked. She moved fast. "Sure am," I answered amiably. Delia was putting her bra on, and I took a second to mourn.

Up close, Jojo's eyes were as vibrant as spring grass, bright and unassuming. Her button nose matched the petite pucker of her lips, all set within a pink-cheeked face.

Now that she was before me, I noticed the strength of her small body. Her arms were pure muscle, though lean. Her stomach had a jaw-dropping waist and subtle ridges of abs. She was also covered in scars. Some faded and almost unnoticeable, and some puckered and purple.

"Hm... oh! You must be that dragon!" She giggled and palmed her forehead like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Now this makes sense. Anyway, carry on! Nice meeting you two! Bye Delia Wayland! Farewell, Garret Stone!"

She was the type of girl that always spoke in exclamation. She hadn't raised her voice, but the punctuation was nonetheless there.

"Wait!" I called. I wanted to ask her a few questions about the arena. I reached my hand out to Jojo's retreating form as the silk curtains closed around her.

Delia grabbed my wrist. "Stop, Garret! Are you kidding?"

"What's the matter?"

"We just met the city's worst serial killer. Come on. *Now.*"

I followed her out into the street again. "Serial killer?" I echoed. "That can't be right. She's —"

"Adorable? Charming? A little piece of candy in a bow? Yeah, Garret. That's what makes her so good."

"She's not a serial killer," I stated. It was too obvious. "She's a fighter, and people die in fights." But for some reason, Delia had a grudge against her.

The crowd was getting thicker and more excited. I walked half a step in front of Delia to clear a small path, while still moving with her

direction. I caught a scent of food on the breeze, and my stomach growled.

Delia snorted. “Just wait until you see her in the arena. Then you’ll understand.”

“Does she always kill people in her fights?” I didn’t know much of the arena, but I had a good grasp on the implications. People fight for progression percentage and money too, most likely.

“Not always. But so far, she’s undefeated. Well, not counting her first three fights. After those epic ass kickings, she was undefeated.” A pause, and then, “She and I entered this new world within two weeks of each other, and she’s already at Evolution Level 7.”

I raised my eyebrows and shouldered through a tight crowd of beefy dudes half-covered in what looked like leathery green frog skin. “Damn. So, what’s her creature? It has to be...” My words died as we turned the last corner.

A huge square spread out before us. At first, I was about to equate it to a carnival with the colorful banners and spinning contraptions and the mouthwatering scent of food. *Real* food, not just dried and cured.

Delia nudged me playfully. “Welcome to the center of the city. Oh, stop drooling.”

The square was packed with people and rows of booths. Signs boasting the best warding spells, every style of clothing, weapons, armor, bags and saddles, accessories and more.

“This is a flea market on crack and witchcraft,” I said, taking in the overwhelming spread.

She gave me an odd look. “What’s a flea market? Are your Earth’s fleas considered... valuable?”

“Oh, no. Not the little bugs. I mean a market where — never mind. What’s up there?” I pointed up. The market had its floor-level square. But the perimeter featured a baseball stadium style with two more levels packed with booths. Stairs led up to each one.

“The second tier is for food, and the third is for services. Non-product related. You sign contracts and hire people, or you can trade your goods in for cash.”

“Wow,” I sighed. A group of three women with dark skin walked by wearing tight leotards with cutout designs and thigh-high boots.

Each girl had a pair of perky bunny ears and a fluffy, round tail.

Delia patted me on the shoulder. "Is this considered fun, dragon boy?"

I nodded, still in a daze. She took my arm and led me into the fray.

I flinched as that irritating ringing noise went off in my head. It was the one that told me I had a new quest notification. I cursed inwardly. It's as if the more quests I ignored, the more showed up.

As we walked into the market, I covertly opened my ID.

\*\*\*

QUEST: Build Your Street!

DELIA IS YOUR CLOSEST COMPANION. If you hope to succeed in fortifying Easy Street, you'll need her trust.

\*\*\*

I SCROLLED DOWN. This time, there weren't any instructions.

I didn't get the sense that some nefarious compatriot was sending me quests to subvert the system. It was just uncanny, in this realm of limited gaming, that I'd be getting so many. But was there really any harm in accepting? It's not like I was being invited to commit mass murder.

I accepted the quest. There was no point in letting those potential resources go to waste.

With the coin we had left, Delia and I bought new clothing, three ward potions, and a dagger.

The woman selling weapons laughed when she saw my dented knife. She examined Delia's staff appreciatively and informed me to take notes from my companion.

I traded the gem from the liquan I found for a stunning dagger the length of my forearm. It had three red jewels in the pommel. Good for holding spells and wards, Delia informed me.

My feet also felt fantastic in the new leather boots I had on. There was a range of shiny, metallic and bejeweled choices that were astronomically high priced. And apparently, everyone wanted a pair. Men and women alike.

I went to the back of the curtained tent room and found the sturdiest pair of lace-ups I'd ever seen. They'd fetch a high price back home, I knew. Thick soles made of something more than rubber. Not quite metal. Not quite synthetic.

The leather was supple and smooth, but thick and padded for comfort. They'd last years.

The owner, a woman with slitted pupils and billowing red robes, looked surprised when I dropped the boots on the counter. In the room filled with glitter and shine, the plain footwear stood out.

But then, her huge eyes rolled to the high heavens as she drawled in a thick accent, "Dragons! All the same. 17 credits."

I bartered her down to 14, and she caved.

Delia whistled low when I strode out. "You look like a medieval construction worker."

I examined my feet. "I'll take that as a compliment. Better than silk slippers."

"True. You're not quite so refined," she agreed while walking away.

She bought a strengthening spell for her staff, which she refused to explain to me, and then we went for the food.

I've never missed real meat as badly as I did now. We stocked up on venison and cured poultry, with a few pounds from a beast who's name I couldn't even pronounce.

Fish and fruit, along with dried goods came next.

After shopping for more essential supplies, we decided to call it a day. As we prepared to leave, Delia stiffened.



Without considering, I slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close. "What's wrong."

"The Governor," she said tightly. "He's summoned us."



## CHAPTER 18



“**Y**ou look well!” The Governor’s voice boomed in my ears. We were invited to the arena’s VIP lounge. It reminded me of the private sections celebrities purchased at NBA games, but for a king.

The decor was lush and rich in a cringe y way. Crystal chandeliers, velvet couches, and rich dark wood. Everything gleamed and oozed money. There was an open bar, a private kitchen, and a hot tub.

Classy in the way that made you feel nauseous.

My eyes strayed to the left where the entire wall was made of glass, and I could see the entire expanse of the arena below. It was just sand, and hundreds of feet worth of seats rising above. Each of them filled .

We weren’t at the bottom. I’d guess our room was about fifty feet up. I could just barely hear the roar of the crowd, which meant this glass was nearly soundproof.

I shook the Governor’s hand and eyed the six guards that flanked him. They all seemed to give me a nasty glare.

Delia was quiet and polite. Now that I knew her more, I could see just how out of character it was. Ridiculous, too. If she wanted to impress the Governor, she should probably just be herself.

“What are you doing?” I asked her lightly.

Her calm expression hardened just a fraction as she cut her gaze to me. “What?”

I smirked like it was no big deal. “Normally, you’d have about twenty things to say. Right now, you seem a little nervous.” I added with a fake whisper.

She gave me one of those significant looks that said *shut the fuck up or I’ll eat you alive*, which I kindly responded with a grin that said, *you can start right here and right now, baby. I’ll enjoy every second of it.*

Delia’s ears were twitching. Her tail whipped around in an irritated fashion. “Can I speak to you in private, *Garret?*” Delia transformed back into the in-charge wolf I knew.

Much better.

The brilliant, genuine smile I gave her in return caught her off guard. I was just pleased the fire returned to her. “I can’t wait to hear what you have to say, but I’d hate to take up any more of the Governor’s time.” I turned back to said Governor, but brushed my knuckles covertly against Delia’s.

He was watching us with amusement. But his next words stopped me cold. “I see you’ve purchased Easy Street. Now tell me, Garret Stone. How did a newly arrived Evolution Level 2 citizen manage to do such a thing?”

I swallowed hard. I needed to keep my cool. The Governor would definitely sense my nerves, so I used them to my advantage. “Oh shit — *sir!* Excuse my language. Did I do something wrong?”

“You didn’t answer my question, Mr. Stone.”

Damn. I held up my hands and sighed. “Sir, I can’t tell you how it’s possible. But when I woke up to an offer to purchase all of Easy Street, I took it. Knowing how difficult it would be to manually rebuild the area, I understood it was necessary to purchase it and fortify the area with upgrades. I figured it was you who sent it to me. Aren’t you in charge of things like this?”

His eyes narrowed just a little, and I knew I hit a nerve. I just threatened his control over the city, and now he’d be on the defensive.

“Are people from your Earth always so insulting, Mr. Stone?”

I sighed like I was out of answers. “Maybe. If I offend, I hope you’ll forgive me. It was unknowingly done, and I’m still learning the customs of this new world.”

He flashed his white teeth at me. "You have a quick tongue, boy. I'll give you that. You say you received an offer? Describe it to me."

"It popped up on my ID like any other notification." I wanted to say *quest* notification, but he can't find out about my knowledge of those just yet.

"And was the sender made known?"

"No, sir."

"So you simply assumed it was me."

"Correct."

"Don't feel the need to hold back, Mr. Stone." A warning.

"It contained a brief description of the property values, the danger levels, and the price," I summarized. "It was about two pages' worth of information, but I have to admit that I didn't read it all. I already knew the place was trash."

He lifted a brow. "Careful about how you speak of my city."

I tapped my chin. "Technically, it's not part of your city. You didn't even own Easy Street. It was completely and totally abandoned, so it's no reflection on you! Anyway, lucky that I did get that offer, because otherwise it would be nearly impossible for Delia and I to come close to succeeding in this task. What with all the demon attacks and complete lack of safety and resources." I ended that with a dry laugh that I hope sounded real.

"Yes, I did hear of that... unfortunate attack. For this, I apologize. The demons have become bolder, and this month, they are especially brazen. The Northern Gate was nearly breached this morning. Something has made the nests restless, and now they are breaking their habits. Were you hurt?" This last question, he pointed to Delia.

"Yes, Governor," she said, meeting his eye boldly.

I'm so glad I thought of irritating her. Righteous anger brought the wolf back to herself quicker than anything.

"And it's a good thing she's such a kickass healer," I added.

"Garret!" she protested.

"You are. No need to be shy about it," I said with a nonchalant, easy tone.

The fire in her eyes promised she'd try to strangle me after this. She strode over to the arena window and watched as two

competitors.

“Governor,” I began. “If I shouldn’t have been able to gain access to the street’s purchase like that, why did it happen? Who sent it to me?”

He gazed worriedly at Delia as he replied, “I assure you, Mr. Stone, that this is a mystery that will not go unsolved.”

“Is that Jojo?” I asked just as the girl from the alley strode onto the now blood-splattered arena sand. She was wearing her same exact outfit, and was facing what looked like a ten-foot ogre.

“Ah! I see you’ve already become familiar with the city’s pride. The Great Arena. Jojo Thorne is the best fighter in her division, and more. She obliterates the people in her level too easily, so she requested more difficult opponents.”

I watched in horror as the huge beast gripped his axe and charged. Jojo bounced on her feet and waved at the crowd. Perky, unworried, and three seconds from dead. “She better have an epic creature form,” I commented.

“Oh, she does,” Delia drawled.

I caught the shimmer behind Jojo’s back a second before the ogre was on her. She rolled beneath him and sprung to her feet with a smile on her face.

*What the hell?*

The crowd roared, and something unraveled from Jojo’s arm. I thought it was a coil bracelet of some sort, but now it looked like a thin silver whip.

I considered it for a moment. But no, I didn’t think this girl was a snake. It had to be something else.

The chain glinted and seemed to undulate on its own, listening to every command Jojo gave it. The ogre roared as the metal sliced his skin, leaving thin red ribbons on his legs and torso.

But Jojo didn’t even appear to be trying. She leapt out of range, even once using the ogre’s thick, outstretched forearm as a launching pad to somersault over his head.

She was like an acrobat performing to a routine she alone could anticipate. She was marvelous.

“She’s toying with him,” Delia said in disgust. “At least she’s staying true to character.”

The ogre roared in pain. So far, he's only been able to sweep Jojo off her feet. But nothing to actually injure her. She danced around him. His axe whooshed over her head as she ducked just in time, and I wondered if even that was calculated. Like she knew the stakes had to *appear* high, even though they weren't.

Not for her, at least.

"You really don't like her," I said to Delia.

"That's an understatement."

"Such blatant disrespect for our Grand Champion," the Governor mocked. And then, to me, "Did you know that I saved little Delia from a similar fate to that ogre?" He pointed to the creature, now lying on his side, bleeding.

Before my eyes, the creature morphed into a naked man, and a medical team swarmed the arena, swept him up, and removed him. Jojo twirled around, bowing to the audience in the stands as they cheered for her.

The Governor smiled in approval. "You see, in the beginning, Jojo wasn't so refined. She had to fight hard for each win, and things were rarely pretty. The crowds, though," he sighed and shook his head in awe. "The crowds loved her all the more for it. Such gore. Such rage. It was something to worship."

Delia stepped back. Not toward me or away from the Governor, but back from both of us. "Governor, I hope you don't mind me interrupting, but this is my story."

He looked surprised, but didn't stop her as she met my eyes and said, "You see, in the orientation, we're given the option to join the Great Arena and battle for our Evolution Rank. We keep our place in line for our quests, but the arena allows us the ability to grow our strength in addition. I joined. My first battle was with Jojo."





## CHAPTER 19



**M**y heart stuttered.

She saw my devastation and gave me a humorless smile. “I nearly died on the sand. Jojo was relentless and brutal. She killed many people in that first year, and if it wasn’t for the Governor, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He saw my potential on the sand. Not for fighting, by the moon, no. I was new. Young. And my defensive magic is valuable. He stationed his personal medical team in my room until I recovered, then offered me a city job. I don’t even have the scars anymore, and I didn’t have to go back to the sand.”

I imagined Delia’s body broken and bleeding, and felt the ripple of the dragon shift run across my skin. It took me several moments of harsh concentration to keep from shifting in my fury right then and there.

The Governor’s mood had changed too. It was softer, like he was remembering that time as well. But before he could reply, an explosion caught our attention.

Not of fire. But of demons.

The arena was swarmed with black flying bodies. I saw Jojo’s face turn from triumphant to grave.

The Governor motioned to his guards, and then the glass wall slid open. Screams, shrieks, and roars assaulted us now that the barrier was gone, and the Governor stepped out onto a balcony.

With nothing but a furrowed brow and a snarl on his lips, he punched his fist into the air.

A shockwave boomed outward. A dome shimmered blue and white over the arena. The demons all froze in the air, floating like they were drowning in an invisible sea.

The Governor opened his fist, stretched his fingers out, and jerked his elbow back. The legion of demons contorted in the air, and the sound of breaking bones and ripping flesh came next.

Black blood rained down as the creatures dropped to the ground. Just empty husks and carnage.

The Governor's hand was crackling with power and his eyes glowed the same blinding color as the dome. He looked like a vengeful god sent to destroy us all.

A section of the corpses shifted. One pale hand thrust out from the bodies, and Jojo Thorne pushed herself out.

The Governor didn't seem surprised or pleased that his best fighter got out alive. I didn't think he felt anything when he was so drunk with this much energy.

Jojo screamed, though I couldn't hear it over the roar of the arena. She looked like she was in pain.

"We have to help her!" I shouted.

Delia screamed, "Garret, no!"

But I was already gone. My clothes disappeared the second I changed into a dragon. I was bigger. Stronger. Faster. Before Jojo could open her eyes again, I covered her with my huge body and roared.

I looked up and saw what was coming: a fresh wave of demons hurtling down like a cloud of death. I scooped Jojo up in my claws and launched into the air.

Delia was waiting at the balcony. Her hair flew around her with the buffeting wind from my wings, and she took Jojo into her arms.

I met the Governor's soulless stare. I could see the anger there. The accusation. His eyes raked over my form, understanding what I was trying to hide this whole time.

I'd leveled up. Again. And now he knew.

We both turned our attention to the onslaught of demons. The dome was gone, and the Governor's guards filled the arena. Many

turned into some kind of creature. Huge bats, falcons, a Phoenix, leathery scaled things I didn't recognize, and more.

The Governor created another dome, but this one was different. A demon tried to pass through it and attack the escaping audience members, but smashed into the barrier instead.

As I closed my teeth around a squirming devil and snapped it in two, I understood his plan. Kill the majority while the coast was clear, and then send the soldiers out into a closed battleground, where no demon could escape.

I appreciated the plan, but he had sacrificed Jojo for it. He obviously hadn't expected her to make it out alive. But with all that power, shouldn't he have been able to extract her?

It felt like I was in that arena for hours. I had teeth marks where I really didn't want them, and blood coating me from head to tail. I'm not sure how many dozens I killed, but once the last creature was exterminated, I was lost in bloodlust.

I was terror. I was death.

I snarled and unleashed a stream of fire into the air. The beasts around me lurched away, unsure. I could feel the bloodlust, the hunt, trying to take over.

But I was the master of my dragon. I would ride the hunt, not the other way around.

I opened my maw, and then a hand appeared over my nose.

Gentle. Cool. Familiar.

I inhaled.

*My wolf.*

"Come back to me," Delia begged, her voice a broken whisper. "Please, Garret, come back."

My bones shifted. My body transformed. And then I was just a naked dude covered in blood and god knows what else. "I wasn't planning on going anywhere," I told her.

Delia smashed me with a hug. Sobs shook her body. "You fucking idiot," she wheezed.

"Delia, I'm disgusting," I complained, trying to push her away. I'm pretty sure something's intestines exploded on me.

She punched me in the ribs, but her heart wasn't in it.

I gave up and hugged her until I noticed the Governor approaching, and I summoned my clothing back.

A notification rung in my ears. It was the quest I'd accepted. I opened my ID as quickly as I could and accepted the rewards without looking at them, and then closed the screen.

Delia was waiting for the Governor to speak. She was practically glued to my side, and her tail kept smacking against my ass. I smirked.

The Governor tilted his head. "Quite the stockpile of humor you have, Mr. Stone. For a man who nearly went feral."

He was referring to that urge to kill, I knew. But I'd kept mine perfectly in check. "Not at all, Governor. I'm sorry for scaring your warriors, but I just had some energy to express."

"Do be sure to keep yourself in check. Understood?"

"Effortlessly," I confirmed. "By the way, that was quite the display of control, Governor."

He looked around, worry etching his expression. "I do what I can, but I can't do everything." His soldiers were among the dead, too.

I wondered what the Governor's creature was, and more importantly, why he didn't join his people in the battle? I hoped he was something pathetic. Like a mosquito. Or a sucker fish.

But I knew he wasn't. Two things were certain: he was powerful, and he wanted to hide his creature type.

The Governor loosened his tie and removed his expensive suit jacket. "While I'd love to stand around and chat all day, Mr. Stone, there are more pressing things to attend to." He motioned for a guard to approach and said, "Hartford, you're assigned to Easy Street with Wayland and Stone. Alert me if any demons attack you there, and you'll have reinforcements. Oh, and Stone? We will have another conversation. Do count on it."

He turned his back on us and strode to the fallen, rolling up his shirtsleeves. His soldiers followed suit, and they began the slow, painful task of accounting for their dead.

I moved to help.

Without looking up, the Governor snapped, "Leave, Mr. Stone. These are not your people."

Delia guided me through a tunnel I assumed led out of the arena. “You’re hurt. Let me —”

“I’m in no danger of dying,” I told her. “Save your strength. You’ll need it.”

Her brow furrowed. “For who? Oh, Garret you can’t mean... not *her*.” She groaned as I found the stairs leading to the stands and began my ascent. “That woman is a psychopath! Just leave her for the Governor to take care of.”

“I’m bringing her back with us, actually.”

“I won’t do it. I won’t heal her.”

We continued to climb. “Delia, I feel connected to you. You know that, right?”

A pause, and then, “Yes. Though I don’t understand it.”

I chuckled. “You and I both . But we are connected somehow, and I feel that same pull toward Jojo. I’m certain it’s important. I think she’s going to help us rebuild Easy Street. She’s an opportunity, and a high-level one at that. We can’t let it pass us by.” I let this settle as we climbed, heading to the VIP lounge.

Delia was silent. Her anger hung in the air like ozone before a storm. “You’re making a mistake.”

“I didn’t say I trust her.”

“Well then what’s the damn point?” she demanded.

“To not let her die. To see this assignment through and succeed.”

“She won’t stay with us. She’ll leave the second she’s physically able.”

“I think she’ll want to invest in our venture,” I argued.

“Fine! I’ll bite. But what makes you think we can take care of her on *Easy Street*? The abandoned shitshow that just got trampled by demons? She’s going to be out of commission for a long time, even with consistent healings.”

I didn’t have a good answer besides, “We’re going to make that street into something big. We can protect each other.”

Silence descended over us as we reached the balcony of the lounge. I lifted Delia up until she could hoist herself over the lip. I followed her, pulling myself up with ease.

Delia was looking at the crumpled form of Jojo on the velvet sofa. She was bleeding all over it. The wolf said coldly, “Take a good look

at her now, because this is the most helpless she'll ever be. She'll recover. And then she'll betray us."

I wanted to ask so many things. Betray us to whom? The Governor? The demons? Or did Delia know something I didn't?

"You don't know that," I replied instead.

"I *do*."

I sighed. "Then I give you my solemn permission to kick my ass if I'm wrong."

She pursed her lips, considering. "Agreed."

Delia used one of her new healing spells on Jojo to stop the dangerous bleeding. The entire time, I had a sinking knowledge that this was the right path. The Governor might care about his soldiers, but he certainly didn't show the same concern for the Great Arena's star.

I cradled her body in my arms. She was light as a feather. We left the arena and walked silently through the city all the way back to the bunker house. It was easy enough. The city had shut down because of the invasion. It was a ghost town compared to the lively crowds that pushed through the boulevards only an hour ago.

When we arrived home, I set Jojo on the bed. She had a steady heartbeat and her wounds had closed up, but her eyes were shut.

Delia whirled out of the room. I heard her walking around upstairs, and decided to give her space. She was pissed at me, and I guess I don't blame her. I wouldn't like it if she invited some dude who nearly killed me into our home.

I examined my progression levels after gorging myself on food. Being a dragon made a man fucking ravenous.

I also learned I'd progressed to 16% in my journey toward Evolution Level 4 and received 20 credits in my reward. Funny how I'd gained Delia's trust and completed the quest, but now it seemed like I lost a whole lot of ground with the wolf.

But my intuition was still pleased, my dragon content. Delia was here, safe. Jojo was below, recovering.

Hartford arrived at the bunker house about an hour later. He was a tall, slender man who posted himself on our porch and attempted to look impressive.

He didn't accept any food, but he did appreciate the chair I brought him. Apparently, the stoic dude was going to stand watch all day on our porch.

It would be irritating having a spy around us all day. I'll admit it. But it was better knowing exactly how the Governor was keeping an eye on us rather than forcing him to rely on another smarter, less controllable kind.

Besides, Hartford might come in handy. There had to be some perks in a guy with a direct line to the Governor.

I was searching for an easy way to get some damn furniture in the house when another fucking quest notification made me pull up my ID. Only this time, the information was different.

\*\*\*

NEW QUEST

Assignee: Delia Wayland

\*\*\*

A BLINKING button below it read: Send.





## CHAPTER 20



I pressed the button. Somewhere in the house, I heard a large bang and a strangled sort of shriek that resembled the sound a cat makes when it's stuck in a fence.

Delia flew wildly down the stairs. "What is this?" she demanded, pointing into thin air where her ID must be displayed.

"I didn't kill anyone," I replied calmly.

She blinked. "What?"

"You're acting like you just found a buried body," I explained. "It's just a quest."

The fire returned to her silver eyes. "No! It's not just a quest! It's a..." she fought with herself for a few seconds before finishing, "a goddamn *quest*."

"Emphasis does not alter meaning," I reminded her.

She whacked my shoulder. "Explain yourself!"

I scoffed. "Very well, Your Majesty. I received a quest notification. It was for you. So, I sent it."

"I don't care about building a partnership with you, Garret. The level of presumption that it takes to send me a quest like that is utterly, completely, despicably —"

I stopped her and replied lightly, "Delia, I couldn't see any of the quest info. I have no idea what it was about." But she'd just shown me those cards, hadn't she? Apparently, the system wanted her to 'build a partnership' with me.

A slow, satisfied smile spread over my lips.

In return, a flush bloomed across her cheeks and panic widened her eyes. "You're lying."

"Not even a little. And if you took just a second to remember that I'm not your enemy, I'd love to explain."

Her teeth clicked together as she snapped her mouth closed.

"I clearly have the power to assign quests."

She waited. When it was clear I was finished, she asked, "And?"

I shrugged.

She tried to hit my shoulder again, but I caught her wrist, yanked her against me, and threaded my fingers in her hair.

Her tense body relaxed. Her eyes glazed over, and she arched into me.

"And what?" I retorted, voice husky.

She whimpered and softened against me. "Not... fair," she moaned. "But really, how is this happening?"

"I might have not been entirely truthful with you before."

"Hm?" Her eyes fluttered closed as she drank in my touch.

"It has to be the demon core, Delia. It's the only thing that makes me different from anyone else."

"Why would power be centered in a demon core?"

"I don't know. But why was I able to consume it when it kills everyone else?"

She chewed on her lip thoughtfully while her fingers played with my waistband. "Maybe dragons are like the goats of the sky."

I choked. "Goats?"

"Goats," she repeated. "In the sense that they can eat anything."

I mulled it over. "I'm not sure I agree with that analogy."

"You'll come around," she replied, standing on her tiptoes and locking her lips onto mine. "I need you," she whispered. "Please."

I supposed Easy Street could wait another hour or two.

She ground into me and tilted her head back. Now, it seemed all of her skin was flushed and radiating heat and need.

I unhooked her bra and slipped all her straps down. Her shirt was pooled at her hips an instant later, and my tongue found her nipples.

"Oh my god," she gasped. Her fingers clutched at my hair while I teased her with my teeth, my lips, my tongue.

I lowered myself to my knees and rested on my heels so I could stare up at her. She had a flat, tight stomach perfectly offset by gorgeous, full tits. Her warrior's shoulders were elegant and strong all at once.

Her breath caught as she realized what I intended to do. "Garret, you don't have to do that."

I curled my fingers into her waistband and pulled her pants down. "Do you want it?"

She bit on her swollen lip and nodded.

"So do I." I propped one of her legs over my shoulder, spreading her center open for me. And then I ran my tongue up her wet slit. She tasted exactly like I expected her to, and when I rolled my tongue over her clit, Delia cried out.

"Oh fuck, oh yes Garret, yes!"

She was about to come. That was quick. Too quick.

I leaned back and slid two fingers into her. She was soaked. Dripping. Her come was already sliding down my hand, and I'd hardly begun to work her.

"Please," she begged.

I looked up at her with a scowl that had nothing to do with anger. "Please what?"

"Please let me comce ."

On another day, I might have made her suffer. But I couldn't deny her right now. I caught her clit between my teeth, and within an instant, her pleasure peaked and split open.

I held her as she undulated with her orgasm.

Delia eagerly returned the favor to me afterward, and when we slumped to the floor, I bundled my shirt into a makeshift pillow for her head, and then laid beside her on the bare wood.

"We need some damn furniture like a gun needs a fucking bullet," I sighed.

She giggled.

There was a silent truce hanging in the air between us like perfume. "I want to show you something," I said to Delia , and sent her an invite to view my ID.

She walked to my side and took in the screen on display. "What is this?"

In my Assets tab, where all the information on Easy Street lived, were three names. Mine, Delia's, and Jojo's. There was the same list of animals behind it, including the likely huge rat, but that's not what mattered now.

Delia's eyes flicked through the information until they landed on that particular line. "What are our names doing here?" she mused. And then, "Oh. That's interesting. We're listed as residents."

I nodded and said, "I have something else to tell you. The quests keep coming. If I accept one, the notifications die down. If I ignore them, they bury me with notifications."

Delia was solemn as she listened. This reminded me yet again how rare and valuable quests were. This was beyond what was considered normal.

She had every right to be pissed at the unfairness of it all. But if I was right about this, then she wouldn't have any trouble catching up at all.

"Before today, I was my own man. I had only what was in my Inventory and on my body," I said carefully. "But I just bought the street."

Delia gasped and turned to my ID again. "The names... Garret... if this is what's showing in your assets, and if this is the first day a quest has shown up for another person, then you must be able to give quests to the *residents* of your property!"

"My thoughts exactly," I confirmed. "Way to take away my punchline."

"Well, this is quite interesting!" a new voice piped in.

Delia and I froze with our eyes locked together. Hers seemed to say, *I told you, idiot. This is the start of the mess you've invited into our house.*

I tried to make mine say, *Calm down. It might not be as bad as it seems.* Because right now, it appeared to be pretty fucking bad.

We simultaneously turned to face Jojo Thorne, who'd just overheard us break down our deadliest secret.



## CHAPTER 21



**D**elia was airborne before I could say *suck my dick*. She slammed into Jojo, who'd just been standing there in her blood-dried clothing, looking a little tired beneath her sunshine grin.

Jojo's head cracked against the wall. Fur was sprouting from Delia's skin and a feral growl tore from her throat.

Something that looked like light rippled over Jojo's skin. When it touched Delia, she yelped but kept her grip on the girl.

I seized Delia's wrists and hauled her back. She thrashed against me, completely out of control. What was it about this smiling, deadly arena fighter that made Delia go insane?

I did the only thing I could think of. I crushed my mouth to hers. Her teeth were sharper than normal, and I tasted blood as she bit down on my lip.

I ran my tongue across hers and finally, her lips softened and moved against mine.

"Wow! Three shows in one day. I think I'm the luckiest girl in the world," Jojo singsonged.

Another rumble built in Delia's chest and I came up for air to snap, "If you want to be helpful, shut the fuck up."

I devoured Delia's mouth for a few seconds more. She was satisfied by my remark to Jojo. I might recognize a connection to the fighter, but between the two, my loyalty was to Delia, and I didn't mind getting sharp.

“Are you okay?” I murmured.

“I’m not exactly sure what came over me,” she admitted. “But I think I’ll survive. Thanks for the rescue.”

If Jojo had the voyeur problem I think she had, we’d be in some trouble.

We straightened and faced the arena champion. She was examining the bare walls and floor with mild interest and sparkling eyes.

“You look better,” I commented.

“Thanks to you! Oh, well I guess I should say thanks to Delia,” she amended, giving the wolf a wink.

Delia’s ears were still flat against her head, and I prayed to whatever gods existed here that they didn’t kill each other by nightfall.

“I have a question, however,” Jojo continued, bouncing into our circle and startling us both. “Is my name with the residents as well?” Before I could answer, she barreled on. “Because I’ve rented before, and the occupants have to agree to stay in the home before they appear on the legal stuff. And for your information, I *have* agreed to stay here! Submitted my acceptance only a few minutes ago!” She ended her announcement by throwing her arms in the air and grinning.

Delia and I blinked at her, partially shocked and partially astonished that she was so ecstatic.

“Jojo, are you on drugs?” I asked seriously.

She covered her mouth and giggled. “You are so funny! Drugs! Goodness, no. I drank coffee last year and almost had a heart attack, but I’m certain it’s worn off by now.”

I cleared my throat and answered, “Yes. You are on the residents list.” No use trying to hide it from her if she’s just overheard everything. And it was a good sign that she’d accepted to stay here. She could have ran off and told the Governor, or whomever Delia thought Jojo would betray us to.

“Amazing! And are you asking for rent?” she inquired next. “Because there’s usually suggested rent for these kinds of things!” she informed us both.

I opened my ID. "I'll check." Eventually, I saw a row that was labeled 'Suggested Rent.' It was 2 credits a month. "I'll make a decision by tonight," I informed her.

Jojo nodded seriously.

Delia was still dumbfounded by the entire situation.

"Jojo," I began, trying to ignore her enthusiastic nodding as she listened, "Is there anything else you can tell us about the real estate side?"

She clapped her hands. "Yes!"

I flinched at the sudden reply, but she didn't notice.

"This is how it works in the arena barracks. You sign up for the arena battles, and if you win, they offer you a room in the barracks. An assistant reviews all the legal mish-mash and gives you your tax rate, rent, and the rules for your living quarters!"

"Taxes?" I asked. "You get taxed for your fights?" Another way for the city to profit off of the arena, I guessed. It made sense in this predatory world.

"Oh of course. Taxes, taxes, taxes. Makes the world go round!"

I held my hands up, making both girls pause. "Jojo, I appreciate your enthusiasm and information, but don't you want to know why we brought you here?"

She shrugged. "I assumed you needed me to fight for you. Protection, and all. Everyone knows about your horrible assignment here. But I'm afraid I can't help you. My wings are broken, and this is the kind of injury that takes weeks to heal, even with some potion support."

I stared at the translucent forms behind her. Invisible, except for the barely-there ripple in the air. Even if she was telling the truth, I had no way to verify.

But, I suspected Jojo wanted something from us, too. "The demons are getting bolder. You'll have to fight —"

"Thank you for bringing me here! It was the right thing to do," she interjected, her bright green eyes shining with understanding. She flung one arm around my waist and the other around Delia's shoulder. "We're connected. I feel it too."

Delia hissed and flung Jojo off her. "Don't *touch* me, Thorne. I'm warning you for the last time."



Jojo blinked in shock at the wolf. “Delia, I didn’t know you still cared.”

Delia smacked herself on the forehead and groaned in frustration. “Garret, please for the love of all things holy, tell me you have a plan.”

“I do,” I replied.

She didn’t look convinced.

I addressed the arena champion. “Jojo, you said you felt a connection? Is that why you agreed to stay?”

She chuckled like I’d just asked the most ridiculous question ever. “Duh! And because I would be murdered in the barracks, silly! All those tough fighters who hate my *guts* would love the chance to slit my throat in the night,” she explained blithely. “My wings do give me a bit of an upper hand, so I’d struggle to stay alive with them in such bad shape. My chances are much better here. Plus, it looks like you have access to the most valuable resource of all.”

No one needed to ask what she meant by that. She knew about my quest ability, and she wanted in. Maybe she’s too injured to live in the barracks. Maybe. But she’s most interested in a less-deadly, more efficient way to level up.

Then there was that mention about our ‘connection.’ I wondered what it meant, and if it reached beyond this Easy Street assignment.

Delia excused herself and stormed outside. I gave Jojo a grand tour of the house, and she sent me a surprising lump of credits and ordered me to purchase furniture.

I didn’t know what it was about her, but her high-energy rubbed off on me. She was quirky and weird and utterly unapologetic. When I bought a fainting couch made with bubblegum-pink velvet, she kissed me right on the lips and fell face-first onto the cushions.

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. Delia wasn’t here to glower at me for enjoying Jojo’s company, so I allowed myself to. I’d still be careful about her, of course, but I had a feeling she’d fit in just fine.

Soon, Jojo began to look ragged. She asked after the bath, and I left her to it. When I came back an hour later, she was passed out. Her cheek rested on the stone ledge. All the bubbles in the bath were gone.

I wrapped her in a sheet and placed her on the pink couch, covering her with a blanket. Her eyes were more sunken in. Her skin was pale and drawn.

Delia examined her, and admitted she'd need another healing. "I'm not sure what kind of injury this is," the wolf told me as she laid her glowing hands on Jojo. "Exhaustion is normal, but the damage in her body is still extensive. I wonder how she was even upright for so long."

The next several days passed with no real incident. It was remarkable. Jojo was awake sporadically, but she spent most of the time hugging the pink velvet and drooling.

Even Delia was warming up to her. Well, she was a little less murderous, but I didn't focus on semantics.

With the spare wood, we were able to upgrade the two houses on either side of the bunker. Delia infused them both with her warding spells while I managed upgrades. When our credits and resources began to drain, we admitted we'd have to find a way to gain more resources.

I'd gotten a new quest, which instructed me to inspire growth within Easy Street. This quest was open-ended, and the instructions were to create a sustainable income source.

It was like the system was locked into what I needed.

When I peppered Delia with questions about potions and learned there were dozens of them we could use to attack the demons with, the system sent me a quest for Delia. She'd opened it and revealed it was sending her to the edge of the forest to collect ingredients for the exact attack potions she was able to create.

This was definitely something worth taking advantage of.

A full week since the day we brought Jojo into the bunker house, she began to improve.

"Morning!" she trilled, swatting my ass as she skipped by.

I was used to this by now. I saluted her. "Morning, Jo. Wait, what is that?"

"Frosting!" she announced, dipping her tongue into a hot-pink swirl.

"At 8 a.m.?" I asked dryly.

She gave me her best offended look. “When else are you supposed to eat it?” She scooped some out with her finger and held it up to my lips.

I shook my head and gestured to my cup of coffee on the table. I was sitting on our new couch — the normal couch, not her velvet abomination, and enjoying the morning before the work began.

Jojo thrust her finger closer, now climbing onto my lap.

“Woah!” I exclaimed. Being the opportunistic opponent she was, Jojo took advantage of my open mouth and shoved her finger in.

I gave her a flat stare. She was grinning triumphantly.

With zero reluctance to spare, I sucked the frosting from her finger.

To my surprise, Jojo watched my lips with complete fascination. She licked her lips and adjusted her legs. Her knees were parted to either side of me, but she didn’t close the gap that would make this household a thousand times more complicated.

“Is that good?” she asked, the most subdued I’d ever heard her.

I gently pulled her finger out of my mouth and said, “It tastes like premature heart failure. How in fuck’s name do you eat that shit?”

She threw her head back and laughed, inadvertently thrusting her tits closer to my face. She was wearing another version of her silk wrap top, which never did anything to hide her hard nipples or the bottom curve of her breasts.

Her entire stomach was bare, and she had on the tiniest pair of shorts I’d ever seen in my life. These ones were white spandex and showed every dip and curve of her ass and pussy.

This, I was used to as well. Jo had a very particular taste in fashion.

She also wasn’t the seductress type. She rose to her feet, graceful and light as always, and bounded away. “I’m going to make Delia try it next!” she called out to me over her shoulder.

“Fuck that!” I grunted and took off after her. If she tried the same shit with Delia, she might end up with a severed head on the side of the street. Delia had found a balance with her hatred of Jojo, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t a danger to her.

Delia was usually on the front porch warming up her body with stretching at this time. I bursted out of the front doors to find the

aforementioned woman flat on her back.

Jojo was straddling her hips, one finger shoved into the wolf's mouth.

Delia's eyes were wide with frozen shock as Jo squirmed on top of her, full of excitement. "So, how do you like it?" she asked.

Delia's blank surprise slowly blackened with rage.

"Uh oh," Jojo teased. "Did someone not have their coffee yet?"

It happened in less than a second. First, Delia lunged. Jo shoved her finger further into the wolf's mouth, making her rear back to avoid choking.

Using the space to her advantage, Jo jumped to her feet, leapt onto the porch rail, and launched herself upward. She caught onto a lip on the second story siding.

She didn't even use her wings. I saw the red and white of her knuckles as she climbed to the nearest window.

Delia had already tried to catch a dangling foot, but on her failure, she dashed to the stairs to try and catch Jo in time.

The next fifteen minutes were filled with screams of rage, Jojo's ridiculous laughter, and the sounds of blunt force trauma.

I finished my coffee with a sigh, closed my eyes, and grinned.



## CHAPTER 22



“**W**e need training, resources, and training!” Jojo announced without a preamble .

We were in the middle of mapping out the street’s weakest areas, and contemplating where to focus our efforts of rebuilding next. Delia’s ward spells could only do so much, and we were completely out of materials. The wood was gone and our credits were nearly at zero.

Delia scowled. “Technically, this isn’t your assignment to complete, Thorne. Your assistance isn’t required, and there is no ‘we’ beyond Garret and I.”

Jojo waved Delia off. “Yes, well I do have a bit of a stake in this now, don’t I? With my living here, and my completely normal desire to stay alive and *not* get eaten by a flock of demons.”

Delia tried a different approach. “Well then put some clothes on.”

Jo performed another spin, her leg high up in the air, and trilled, “I am wearing clothes! You’re very strange sometimes, Delia.”

I wasn’t sure I’d call Jo’s outfit ‘clothes’ either. Her shirt was a decorative version of chain mail, with jewelry-thin gold metal that shifted with every movement and draped over her breasts, showing off every curve and bulge.

No, she didn’t have anything under. Yes, her nipples constantly peeked out. Today was going to be a hard day in more ways than one.

I shifted my dick in my pants and tried to focus on Delia's notes as Jojo stretched one leg up over her head, balancing on one foot. At least she had a pair of black spandex shorts on, though the dark color didn't completely hide everything I was secretly dying to unwrap.

"As I was saying, we have to train!" she repeated. "Garret, what kind of background do you have in fighting?"

I told her about my kickboxing and basic knowledge of boxing and self defense. She was pleased by this.

I wondered how much of this was driven by Jojo's new quest. I woke up yesterday with one to send to her, but she didn't reveal what it was really about. She just leapt onto my back, smacked a kiss on my cheek, and squeaked about needing to 'get to work.'

I haven't seen a new quest for myself since the day at the market. It was irritating, since I was the person who had access to this part of the system. Shouldn't I have some semblance of control over it?

Jojo was chattering at a million miles an hour, and finally Delia barked, "Fine! Take him! Just please shut the fuck up!"

Jojo fist-pumped the air. "Come on, Garret! You're mine for the day!"

I could have sworn Delia smirked at the look of betrayal I gave her as the arena champion carted me off toward the forest. She led me through the field and stopped when we were in the middle of a nice clearing.

I had no idea what she was planning, but I definitely didn't expect her to spend the next three hours kicking my ass.

She was a master. There was no doubt. This tiny, forever-giggling woman hardly worked up a sweat as she handed me my ass and snatched away my dignity.

As I laid on the dry earth, she stared down at me. "Well that was worse than I expected. But you're holding up pretty well! Most people I train are either crying or begging by this point."

"Electricity," I said. I was parched and tired, and my voice was raspy.

She lifted a delicate brow. "Pardon?"

“You create electricity. But I haven’t seen you use it since you shocked Delia that first day.”

She settled down cross-legged next to me, making her hips widen and her ass flex on both sides.

Fuck. I was exhausted and my dick was still ready to bang.

“You’re observant,” she complimented me.

“You use your metal whip in the arena to conduct the energy too,” I continued. “I’m sure everyone knows this, but I hardly know anything about you, and Delia doesn’t want to touch that conversation with a ten-foot pole.”

“Hmm,” she agreed. “Yes, you’re right about both things, though. The whip and Delia.”

I propped myself up on one elbow. “What really happened between you two?” I inquired. “You nearly killed her in the arena, but this feels extremely personal.”

She looked incredulous. “What’s more personal about a life? About dying?”

“You tell me.”

She flipped her hair. “You’re quite the over-thinker, aren’t you, dragon boy?”

Not quite. Jojo was trying to pretend, but she wouldn’t meet my eye. She was hiding something. And so was Delia, apparently.

I switched the subject. I’d find out what really happened between them sooner or later, and I didn’t want them to see it coming. “Does everyone else know what your creature type is?” I asked. “Delia wouldn’t spill.”

“Yup!” she affirmed. “Though I don’t show it very often. Why waste the energy?”

“I guess the demons took you by surprise in the arena.”

She pouted. “It was mostly the Governor’s fancy spell. It locks your shift down and cuts you off from your power. I didn’t even have the chance.”

Because he’d sacrificed her. A part of me understood. Why save one girl when you might save hundreds of lives instead? Still, the Governor would pay for that choice. I’d make sure of it.

“Well, I’m assuming you’re very rare. Unless there are other thunderbirds in this realm.”



Jojo took a beat to gape at me. "How did you guess?"

I shrugged from the ground. "Not very many creatures have both wings and electric control."

She poked me with a finger and a small shock zapped my arm. "Would you like a reward for being so smart?"

"What?"

I didn't have time to react. In a second, Jojo straddled me and pressed her barely-covered pussy against my cock. "I *love* rewarding smart men," she admitted as she rolled her hips up and down.

Suddenly, I wasn't feeling so tired. I flipped Jo onto her back and pressed my groin into hers. Her eyes rolled back. She clutched my shoulders and moaned with a smile.

I grabbed a fistful of her hair. Not hard enough to make her cry out, but she did freeze.

"I am not finished with you," I said in low tones. I bucked my hips hard into her once. Just enough to make her gasp. "But you'll have to wait." I couldn't do this with her. Not yet, at least.

Through the haze of lust, she said, "The pretty wolf is so hard to resist, isn't she?"

That she was. I released Jo and pushed to my feet. I looked up just in time to see Delia stalking back toward the bunker house with clenched fists.

I ran my fingers through my hair. "Fuck."



## CHAPTER 23



**T**hat night, I received two quests. One for Delia, and one for me. The next morning, Delia woke me up and dragged me outside before I even had the chance to piss.

She grumbled under her breath when I relieved myself in the open field, which was funny. To me, at least.

“So!” I began. “Is this where you kill me?”

Her stare was flat and unamused. “We’re training for mental defenses.”

“Mental defenses,” I repeated.

“Are you deaf?”

*Are you jealous?* I wanted to ask, but basic common sense won over. “Is this what your quest is about?”

Her jaw ticked. “Are you going to be compliant, or do I have to force you?”

I rubbed my eyes to get the last of my glorious sleep out. “How do we start?”

She looked into my gaze like she was searching for answers there. I hated to disappoint her. “I have an ability,” she admitted. “I didn’t tell you about it because... well, because people tend to lose trust in me when I do.”

I waited while she tried not to appear uncomfortable.

“I can push into people’s minds and read thoughts and memories,” she said in a rush, then frowned at me as if daring me to be angry.

I yawned. "That's fucking terrifying and ten shades of sick."

"I don't need you to lecture —" she cut herself off, surprised. "You're not angry."

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not — hell, Delia. I don't expect you to bare your soul to me and reveal all your secrets, alright? I get why you'd want to hide that, and for the record, it doesn't scare me."

"I haven't used it on you," she offered.

I let out a sigh of relief. Thank god. "Glad to hear it. So how does it work?"

She set her shoulders and focused, getting back to business. "Your brain runs on a certain frequency. With some concentration, I can tap into that and explore your head."

The shit of nightmares. I swallowed my nerves. "Cool. How do I stop you?"

"Know what a firewall is? Good. Put one up."

I scoffed. "Just like that? I just have to throw one up?"

She rolled her eyes. "Use your third eye to imagine a barrier between yourself and the world. Your mind is full of electric currents and blood and energy. Your spirit inhabits every cell. You can block out someone's voice when you need to concentrate. Tap into that same focus to keep me out of your head."

Third eye. Focus. Spirit. Yeah, I can totally create a metaphysical firewall with the guidance of the abstract. Easy-peasy.

"Ready?"

Delia didn't wait for me to answer. The next second, I was flat on my back, staring up at the pale blue morning sky.

"That was horrible," she informed me.

"The fuck just happened?" That blackout was more instant than a party girl on coke and vodka.

"You passed out. It happens in the beginning. Stand up. I'm going to try again."

I gritted my teeth, ignored my sore muscles from yesterday, and stood. I was more ready for the next attack. This time, I felt three seconds of excruciating pain in my temples before waking up on the ground, this time flat on my face.

“You aren’t very good at this,” Delia told me.

“I have a shit teacher,” I replied. I was going to regret that comment, wasn’t I?

True to my expectations, I didn’t even get a chance to stand up before Delia’s intrusion sent me to the void again.

“You need to chill,” I told her as I got to my feet. The headache was already killer.

She cocked her hip at me. “Oh do I? Maybe I’m just tired, Garret. Maybe I just want to survive this next month and actually work for my freedom.”

“As opposed to what I’m doing?” I trailed, knowing there was something she needed to say about me.

She flung her hand out to the house. “I’m not sure what you’re doing, but maybe you should focus on something *other* than your penis!”

So, this was about yesterday and what she saw with Jo.

I was tired and not entirely awake yet, so I couldn’t stop the next words out of my mouth. “You mean the penis that you’ve licked like a lollipop two dozen times? That one?”

She was so mad her face turned purple.

I regretted it instantly, and then again when another spell of searing pain hit my temples. I clutched my head and roared as Delia’s power sank into my mind.

The first thing I saw was the Thai landscape. The temple where I’d stumbled through that portal. It was so clear, I almost wondered if I was there again.

The pain and memory vanished. I was shaking, sweating.

But Delia wasn’t done. “*Focus,*” she hissed. “You have five seconds to form your firewall.”

I scrambled. I wasn’t really in touch with my third eye and all, but I tried to imagine a wall around me packed with stone and cement and strength.

This time, I felt Delia’s power hit that wall first. She shattered it a moment later, but even as memories of women filtered through my brain, I was proud of myself.

When she let go, Delia was panting with the effort. “You’ve had quite an existence, haven’t you, Alex?”

Great. We were back to 'Alex.' "Delia, it's not like that. I'm not — *motherfucker.*" I hadn't erected my barrier in time, and she tore through my head as easily as a chainsaw rips through ice cream.

A face appeared in my head.

*No. Not this, I thought. Anything but this.*

A flash of my mother holding me as a child. Then I was a teenager, and she was waving goodbye as a nurse escorted her into a hospital room. Her worn, sunken face as she wiped away my tears and told me everything was going to be okay.

And then she was gone. It's weird how people don't look like themselves when they're dead. I knew my mom's face as well as I knew mine, but the waxy creature laying in her bed was nothing like her.

I battered against Delia's magic. But it was no use. She saw everything. How I pushed my family away and never returned home how I traveled and lost myself in hopes of finding something resembling home. My shit family didn't care, either, so it was easy to stay away.

I felt my body shift with rage . The dragon bursted from me until my roar was amplified, until it shook the trees and the ground.

But the pain was gone.

I tilted my head down to regard the small human woman who watched me with tears in her eyes. She was reaching out her hand .

Fire burned in my chest, and I ached to set it free. To destroy everything with my anger and loss.

"Garret, come back!" she said.

My wings buffeted the air around her. She looked caught in a windstorm. I wanted to hurt her. Tear her with my claws. Taste her blood on my tongue. I was the king of this world, and she needed to know her place.

Besides, she was already mine.

"Please," she begged, reaching.

I opened my maw and captured her in my teeth. The wolf girl screamed and kicked at me, but where would she go? I carried her into the forest and landed in the protection of the trees.

She was gasping and pushing at my mouth but I held her tightly. *You are mine, I wanted to say. Mine to punish and consume.*

“Garret, let me go!”

I didn't budge.

“Fucking dragon!”

A growl vibrated through my chest and throat, and she fell silent. Much better.

I dropped the girl to the ground, but before she could scramble away, I trapped her with my talons. Her eyes were wild and fearful and... excited.

I shut my eyes and let the human man return.

“Garret,” she breathed.

I was now trapping her with my naked body. We were both panting

I crushed my lips onto hers. Delia clearly had the same idea, since her legs and arms wrapped around me. Nothing mattered except how much of her I would take.

My cock throbbed against her, and I worked at her pants to pull them off. “You are mine,” I said, punctuating the statement by biting her shoulder.

She jerked and moaned as my fingers found her pussy. “Yours,” she agreed.

By the time she came, we were slick with sweat and her wetness. “I need you to fuck me,” she moaned with swollen lips.

I wrapped my hand around her throat. My grip was gentle but firm. “Beg.”

Her mouth fell open in ecstasy as I pressed my tip against her tight opening. “Oh god, yes. Please fuck me, Garret. Please, I want you, I need you. You feel so good — oh!”

She was still pulsing with her orgasm when I slid into her.

It took three rounds to completely exhaust us both. We laid on the forest floor, high on the most mind-blowing experience I'd ever had.

“Is sex always that good for you?” I asked, sounding drunk.

She moaned in contentment and pushed her bare ass against me. “I'm not sure I've ever felt something that good,” she admitted.

My eyebrows rose. Delia on endorphins was quite a different creature. “Careful,” I warned. “That almost sounded like a compliment.”

She snickered. "You're right. I'll keep quiet. Wouldn't want you to get a big head."

I rolled over and pressed my jutting erection into her ass cheek. "Too late."

Her eyes widened as she peeked at me. "How are you ready to go *again*? What species are you?"

I tasted fire on my tongue and exhaled through my nose, letting out streams of smoke that curled around her face. "Dragon."

She rolled her eyes but smirked. "Show off."

"If it makes you more likely to fuck me like that again, it's worth it."

We walked back to the bunker house in contented silence. Jojo greeted us at the door with a tray of coffee.

I gave the rows of a dozen cups a questioning once-over. "Jo? What's this?"

Jojo was wearing the most I'd ever seen on her before. Just a white t-shirt that went down to her thighs. It gave her a comfortable vibe and just-woke-up look that I could get used to.

She grinned at us both. "You didn't drink your coffee this morning! I wanted to make you both some, but have noooo idea how you like it, so here are options! Come on inside!" She turned around and I nearly dropped dead.

Jo's shirt may be all covered on the front, but the back was held together by nothing but thin silver chains. She wasn't wearing any underwear, and her tight ass bounced as she walked to the living room.

I think I drooled a little when she bent over and reaffirmed her complete lack of underwear.

I cursed inwardly and gave Delia an apologetic glance, but the wolf wasn't even paying attention to me. She was lost in thought somewhere in the clouds.

She even said a polite, "Thanks, Jo," that made me wonder if she'd been casually possessed by some kind-hearted Easy Street ghost.

But she just sat down next to me and picked up a cup. Serene, she took her first sip and immediately choked and spewed it out.



Jojo squinted at the cup and smacked her forehead with a sheepish smile. “Oh that was the Just-In-Case brew!”

“Just in case what?” I asked, taking a sniff at the coffee and wincing.

She giggled. “Just in case the suggested amount was too small. So I put in double!”

Delia made a noise of disgust, but I handed her a new cup with coffee that didn’t resemble tar sludge. “Try this.”

A knock interrupted us. I downed my cup and strode to the door.

I opened it, expecting to see Hartford. But instead, a small, scrawny boy looked up at me with ghostly huge eyes.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“My name’s Rat. And I’m here to offer my help, and ask about any quests, Mr. Stone, Sir.”



## CHAPTER 24



I invited the kid in and sat him on the couch. The girls crossed their arms at the same time, and gave me matching stares of confusion.

I introduced everyone and asked Rat why he came.

His voice was thin and quiet. “I live in one of the houses down the street and was sent a notice that I had to register my resi — sorry — my residents with you.”

Residence, he meant.

“Well I am thrilled,” I announced.

“You are?” Delia asked.

“This whole time, I thought there was a dog-sized rat hiding on this street. But the whole time, it was a kid. I’m so relieved.”

The boy didn’t smile.

“You need water and food, don’t you?” Jojo said. It wasn’t really a question. “I do hope you like frosting.”

A small teacup dropped in her hand, summoned from her Inventory. It was swirled with blue frosting, and she thrust it into the boy’s hands.

He held it stiffly.

“Okay Rat,” I began. “I purchased Easy Street, which is why the system sent you to me. But how did you know about the quests?”

He replied, “I’d been ignoring the notifications for a few days now. Figured I’d been staying alive in that house long enough. Why should I talk to some newcomer rich man about my home?”

He swiped tentatively at the frosting and brought it to his lips. A spark of interest lit his eyes, and he continued. "But this morning, the message was new. Said if I complied, I'd be eligible for quests. Figured it was bullshit. Never seen a quest in all my life. But thought it might be worth the try." He scooped more frosting out and shoveled it into his mouth.

"Accept your residency, then," I told the kid. I opened my ID and started searching.

"What's in it for me?"

"You already know that, otherwise you wouldn't be here," I replied.

He gestured to the empty frosting cup. "Any more of this?"

Jojo crossed her arms. "Maybe. If you do what he says."

"Tough bargain," Rat replied, nodding in respect. "I don't have money for rent, Mr. Stone Sir. So if you're looking for credits, look elsewhere."

"What else, then?" I asked, still looking through the information on the screen. There had to be a way I could create quests myself. Otherwise, what was the point of having this power?

"Don't have anything," he confessed.

"Don't lie to me, kid."

He threw his hands up. "Search me, then!"

I chuckled and shook my head. "I don't mean *items*, Rat. I mean, what can you do for me?"

Delia was glaring daggers at me, and I could practically hear her saying, *Really, Garret? Child labor?*

"Easy Street is our freedom, our lives, and our future success," I told Rat. "And if you want, you can be a part of that. So I hope for your sake that you have something to offer."

I knew I was being a dick. But that was because this kid unleashed my carnivorous side. Delia and Jo were both creatures of incredible power. My dragon saw them as worthy companions, even if they could still be my prey.

This kid wasn't that. But he was a survivor. He had been living on this street with zero protection for a while, I'd guess. It was worth giving him a chance and seeing what he brought to the table.

Rat thought for nearly a full minute. We waited in silence until he said, "I'm real good at stealing stuff."

“Perfect!” I exclaimed at the same time Delia snapped, “That’s enough.”

My thoughts grew cold and clear. I was becoming the CSO again. “Do you trust me?” I asked her.

She chewed on her lip for a second and then nodded.

I turned back to my ID. I filled out the necessary information and sent it to Rat. “Accept your residency, then.”

When he opened my message, he snickered. “What’s an ‘Acquisitions Specialist,’ Mr. Stone, Sir?”

Jo snorted, and then choked on her saliva.

I grinned at Rat. “If you can do what you claim, this is your payment to me. Support our team, and you’ll get your level up.”

Rat nodded.

I clicked send on the second item for Rat.

He gasped. “Mr. Stone, S-sir? What’s this?”

The quest appeared on my screen the moment Rat had accepted his residency. I figured it was a good-faith moment. If the kid wanted more, he knew what he had to do.

“What does it say?” I asked.

He swallowed, looking terrified. “It says, ‘Gain Garret Stone’s trust. What does that mean, sir? What should I do?’”

“No instructions?”

He shook his head.

I checked outside to make sure Hartford hadn’t come closer to the door.

“I want you to follow Hartford. The guard that’s usually stationed outside our door. You’ve seen him? Excellent. He’s the Governor’s spy, and I want to know where he goes in the afternoons. Take notes in your ID, and bring me a report.”

Rat stood up and bowed. “Thank you, Mr. Stone, Sir.” Without another second to spare, he raced from the room.

“Why didn’t you have him steal?” Jo asked. “He said he’s a thief, not a spy.”

“Thieves are sneaks, and resources come and go. Information, on the other hand, is priceless. The kid can put his skills to better use. We’ll just have to see if he’s up to the task.”

“Sounds good to me!” Jojo declared. “Now, if you two lovebirds are finished with your little mind games, I have an appointment to beat Garret’s ass.”

“I have a better idea,” I said. “I’m going to the forest to gather moon flowers. You can put me on my back tomorrow.”

“Promise?” Jo purred, her entire body turning sultry.

Delia threw a pillow at her, which caused Jo to leap onto the wolf and start the hottest wrestling match I’d ever seen.

I shook my head, laughing. “I’ll leave you to it!”

I’d been putting off starting my own quest for too long, and I was eager for a change in scenery. Plus, the new quest meant a new opportunity. The system was in tune with what I needed, and what Easy Street needed.

But I still had three questions. What was the system’s end goal, why did the demon core give me admin access, and why were the quests so stagnant in the rest of the city?

Maybe the system didn’t trust the Governor, and so the stream of quests was halted. Or, maybe the Governor was keeping all the quests to himself.

Still, this option didn’t quite make sense. If he was a smart leader, he’d invest in making his citizens powerful enough to fend off the demons for good.

Another idea trickled through. I’ve been assuming it was the demon core that gave me this power. But there could also be a rival trying to overthrow the Governor. What if someone was feeding me access this whole time in hopes of decentralizing the Governor’s power, shattering the city’s quest economy and thus opening up a new leadership position?

I transferred my clothing to my Inventory and shifted into my dragon form, taking to the air. There were too many possibilities. Too much I didn’t know. I’d have to trust my gut and stay on guard.

My moon flower quest appeared simple. My instructions were to find the Western Foothills, about fifteen miles from here, and gather flowers from the highest point.

Simple enough.

According to the quest, moon flowers were a vital ingredient to several foundational potions. Wards, cleansing, protections, and

several others. It'd be easy to sell them at the market and pocket the credits.

At first, my plan for Easy Street was to make a half-assed protective barrier to try and keep the demons out.

But that was before I'd actually used my brain. Now, I knew there was more to Easy Street's potential.

People in this city had one problem, and it wasn't just threadbare quests. They didn't have a purpose, except for waiting.

They had to climb their way to strength through arena battles, trade and labor, and maybe the occasional monster hunting. It wasn't just about quests. These people were stuck in a flatlined economy that might be artificially stuck.

I was going to change that. Little by little, I was going to bring more people to Easy Street before the next demon attack came. Unless they surprised us again, we still had a few weeks until the next attack.

Rat was just the beginning. Jojo was only the start. How many desperate people lived in this city, dying of hunger for something they could control?

I was going to find out.

If we could build our own economy, I wouldn't have to worry about fortifying every shitty house on the street. I'd rent the houses and old business fronts with the promise of quests. Then the residents would be responsible for compensating me for the upgrades, utilities, and protection.

Yeah, I was definitely taking advantage of desperation. But I wasn't doing it to become rich. I was doing it to keep Delia safe from her punishments. I wouldn't doubt that once the Governor found out she'd leveled up, he would give her the worst kind of sentence. He'd either put her in prison or strip her of an Evolution Level.

She told me it was excruciating. I wasn't going to let her experience that pain.

And then there was my punishment for the stupid mistake I made on day one. Looking back, I knew now it was my dragon making those decisions for me, the bastard.

I flew until the foothills came into view and spotted the highest mound. The trees were thinner at the top, making it easy to land.

The second I touched the ground, I knew I was in trouble. A breeze picked up, and I smelled the telltale rotten stench of demons.

I scanned the area, wondering where they would spill out from. The hill was covered waist-high with purple and red Blush-flowers. The smell of the flowers mixed with the demon's stench.

I turned around, perceiving the sickening stink from everywhere at once. I called my dagger, its weight gave me a much needed assurance.

Demons were easy to take down as long as my dagger found their core. I had somehow found a way to locate them. It was more like sensing it, the dark mana swelling in their cores.

I couldn't sense this one though. I could only smell its stench, the foul smell that clung to them like maggots held to the long dead. The hilt of my dagger felt cold and ready. My dragon side snorted, eager and ready.

*Come out already!*

Waiting was the hardest part. But I didn't have to wait long. I descended down the hill and when I reached flat ground, the stench came hard at me. Then I heard a snort that didn't come from me.

The grass here was wild and tall, almost near my chest. It covered every path. But then they parted, withering as the bull walked through.

I saw the horns first, and then the rest of its face or what remained of it. There was more skull than there was flesh around it. Where the bones jutted out, it was completely black, as if the bones were removed and what remained was artificially put there.

*You are one ugly bastard, aren't you?"*

It snorted again. The horns were longer than usual, fitting its huge size, and they were as black as every other bone I could see. When its mouth split open, there was nothing in its mouth—no teeth or tongue. Its cry or roar was soundless.

And like its mouth, the bare part of its face had no eye while the other side had a weeping eye. The eyeless side carried deeper darkness.

It stretched its mouth in a soundless scream and then stomped a hoof on the ground. I expected the ground to shatter, but the plants around it withered too.



I realized my dagger wouldn't do much against it.

Stomp!

I sent my clothes away, urging my dragon half to come forth.

Stomp!

Then it placed its head down, leveling it in place and then it kicked the ground, upturning the dirt . I saw it move and then its horns rammed into me, pushing me back in my dragon form.

I tried to claw through it, but my claws met bones or whatever was in place of its skeleton. The bull snorted and I felt weak, as if I was losing breath.

My claws flailed and it tossed me with its horns. I hit the ground, bending grass and causing a huge clearing in the field of grass.

I scrambled up when I felt the ground tremble as the bull raced towards me. I flapped my wings, buffeting me forward to meet it.

I caught its horns and yet, it pushed me back, not once breaking its stride. It was strong. It had raw strength that I hadn't seen since I fell into Sinter.

*Of course, Garret! It is a fuckin bull built and corrupted with dark mana! Focus!*

I gritted my teeth, trying to stop it. I had to stop it somehow and maybe then I could tear it apart. *And what?* I wondered what good that would do.

The demon bull looked like it would shrug off my claws. I flapped my wings , hoping that would work. It didn't. My arms were beginning to ache.

I freed one hand and dug my claw into the one good eye. It bled and the bull's mouth split open again. It shook its head frantically. I lost my balance and its horn dug into my hide. My scales stopped it, but I felt the pain shoot through me.

I roared, and with rage, I swatted it with my tail. The impact threw the bull and it rolled several paces away before regaining its balance.

*You hurt, and bleed. You can die, then.*

That was all I needed to know. It snorted. I could feel the pain still, my scales were hard, but not invincible. If I gave it time, it would stab its horns into me. I had to finish it soon.

It shook its head one more time. I realized we now stood in a roughly shaped cleared field. Its aura and the fight had killed most of the flowers and grasses in the area.

Then it leaped. I saw it this time. Was it slower? I pushed the question away and tried to think.

*Frozen Roar!*

The spell was supposed to slow it down and it did. For two fucking seconds! It was like a subtle pause, a misstep. It didn't stop coming.

I had no choice. I prepared myself for the assault while the heat in my chest increased. The fire bubbled in there, waiting to be released. I held it back. Not yet.

It rammed into me and this time, I let it. I caught the horns and its force made my hands hurt, but I held on. I had to.

Flames and smoke puffed out of my nose. I folded my wings and with its horns, I pulled its face up. My shoulders rippled with the effort. It seemed to roar or growl, I couldn't tell.

Its eyeless face looked up and I let the fire pour down on it. It tried to shake free, but I didn't let go. The fire burned it continuously until my arms couldn't take its shaking anymore and I let go.

The demon bull hit the floor with a heavy thud and then it tried to stand up, but its face was in flames. It was in agony and it couldn't cry out.

My dragon side burned away every shred of pity I felt for it. Demons were despicable. And this one was the worst one yet.

I dug my claws into the ground, my chest heating up again, and this time I let the fire coddle up until I was sure it would burn through those black mana bones and then I poured it on the writhing bull.

Its dance became frantic. It rolled on the ground and yet, even the ground was burning. It danced and writhed and then suddenly it stopped.

Fire still crackled about it, but it stayed there, standing and dead. Then I heard a hiss, it stretched for so long until I thought it wasn't going to end and then a force exploded out of the bull.

The force put out the fire and tossed ash in the air.

When everything settled, the bull stood still, but different now. Its hide was like any other bull I had seen and where its bone showed, it

was bloody like it had been slashed many times.

It was dead, that didn't change. I sighed and slowly transformed.



## CHAPTER 25



**H**uman again, I examined the demon critically. It had huge teeth, thick hooves, and a leathery black hide.

I could probably sell the teeth.

I summoned my dagger and fought with the thing's stinking mouth for another twenty minutes until I had a dozen of the longest teeth lined up in a row. Had to be good enough for something.

The demon had been eating the moon flowers, but not all of them. The plants were huge, the thick white petals each the size of my entire hand. I had to use my blade to saw through the stalk, and bagged 62 of them. The remaining ones were small buds, and knew it would be smart to let them grow into fresh blooms before I plucked them.

I shifted into my dragon form and nearly left, but then I remembered the dead demon. What if I ate another core? What would happen to me?

I dug through its hide until my claws clinked against the shiny black core hidden in the corpse. It pulsed a dull bluish-black.

I consumed it. I waited.

But nothing happened.

Disappointed and ready to get home to my girls, I took off into the sky and flew toward home. I guessed whatever power the core could give me was already there. Assuming that my suspicion was correct, of course.

In the distance, the city line waited for me. But then, I noticed something that made my blood boil.

A plume of smoke rose from the very edge of the city. Easy Street.

I doubled down on my speed and raced time itself to get to the bunker house. When I landed, it looked like a quarter of the street was in complete flames.

The bunker house was in the center of the blaze, but it and the two structures beside it were untouched. The Firefly Cedarwood and wards did more than enough to protect the homes.

I tore down the street, looking for anyone, anything —

There was a glint of silver. Yes, in that window. For some reason, Delia was in one of the abandoned structures we hadn't begun working on yet.

She was carrying out Rat, who was unconscious and bleeding.

I shoved my snout against the window. Delia turned to me, panicked, and let out a breath of relief. "Not a moment too soon," she said, climbing on.

I lowered them to the ground. I wanted to flap my wings to clear the black smoke, but wouldn't. That would only stoke the flames.

"Jo was scouting!" Delia screamed up at me. "I couldn't find her anywhere."

Somewhere in the distance was a scream. A female scream from one thunderbird voice I could pick out of a crowd.

Delia whirled in a circle. "Garret! Where is she?"

In this mess, it was all roaring fire and Jo's voice. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

I shifted to my human form and summoned my clothes.

Delia clasped my hand in hers. "What do we do? We have to find her!"

She screamed again. This time, it sounded like pain and not fear. This was a problem a dragon couldn't take away. I could create flames, but I couldn't put them out. Useless fucking creature.

I had to act. I sensed every tongue of heat. The blaze called to me, and energy was building in my chest.

"Delia," I said through gritted teeth. "I need you to get away from me. *Now!*"

She didn't need me to tell her twice. She picked up Rat and sprinted down the street, toward safety.

With Jojo's screams echoing in my ears, rattling my sanity, I shut my eyes and let my dragon take over. But not by shifting.

While I remained a human, the ancient creature inside of me reached out and called to the flames.

I dropped to one knee under the weight of the power coursing through me. It was painful. Overwhelming. Infinite.

I was a magnet, and the flames were like the purest metal. The fire moved and sucked inward, drawn to my energy, and rushed into my body.

I absorbed the waves of flame into my body. But I was only human. I couldn't contain it.

I roared into the sky. Fire ripped from my mouth and exploded outward.

And then there was only smoke.

I stumbled, dizzy and disoriented. A figure emerged to greet me.

It was Jojo, in what was left of her clothing. The ends of her hair had been singed off. There was a nasty burn on her hip with angry, glistening skin.

She crashed into my arms and squeezed. "How did you do it?" she sobbed. "I can't believe I'm still alive. Garret, you're the fucking best!"

I snorted as she cried. The entire thing was surreal as fuck.

Jojo pulled back to look up at me, her characteristic brightness returned. "Does this mean we can celebrate?"

I brushed her hair back. "Honestly, I'll do just about anything."

Jojo gasped, punched her fist into the air, and squealed, "Threesome!"

I opened my mouth to suggest that maybe it wasn't the best idea when Delia barreled into us, wrapping her arms around both our bodies.

Jo and I exchanged a glance of surprise. Then Jo leaned her head on Delia's shoulder.

When we broke apart, I asked, "What in the fuck happened?"

Delia explained, "Rat returned, but you weren't here. He lost Hartford in the city. Said the guy disappeared in some random sweet

shop, and then the city guard chased Rat away for loitering. He came back here, only to spot someone in one of the windows. Rat came to the bunker house to find me, but by then, five explosions had gone off.”

Delia rubbed her red eyes. “He panicked and took off to *his* house to get his belongings. I tried to catch him, but he went straight into the burning building. You know the rest.”

Jojo raised her hand. “I was busy snooping through the houses — as is my birthright — and that sneak, whoever they were, locked me in a *disgusting* old bathroom and set off their cute little bomb in the neighboring room. And you know the rest,” she ended with a wink at Delia.

I led the girls back to the bunker house. Delia used a moon flower to brew a quick healing potion, and used it and most of her spell energy to heal Jo’s burn and Rat’s wounds. His head was in bad shape, since he got smashed by a fallen beam.

“Someone tried to sabotage us,” I said.

“Don’t say it,” Delia warned me.

My laugh held no humor. “You’ll just defend him to the death, won’t you?”

She glared at me. “And *you’re* determined to find a fault in him! He’s not perfect, trust me, I know. He’s an authoritative, controlling asshole. But he cares about people, okay?”

And she needed to believe that he cared about her. It was too much to imagine that her Governor, her savior, was ready for murder.

“Okay. Then who else?” I asked calmly.

The room was silent. Neither of them had any suggestions.

“We’ll figure it out,” Delia promised. “Whoever did this will pay.” In that moment, she was made of conviction.

There was no use fighting. We’d certainly discover the truth eventually, even if it hurt her.

Delia used three of the moon flowers to brew her own ward spell to fortify around three acres of the street. That’s when I realized I hadn’t checked on my quest rewards.

My progression bar was now 62% filled. I got an extra percentage for killing that bull from hell, and fifty credits on top of that.

Not too bad for a day’s work.



Delia and I had been sleeping beside each other on the bed below, while Jo usually curled up on her velvet fainting couch.

Tonight, as we laid in the dark, Jo crawled in the middle of us and tucked herself beneath the covers.

Delia scooted over to give the arena champion more room. I'd never slept better in my entire life.

When morning came around and we sunk into the living room couch, I got right to business.

Delia's ears perked up at the same time Jo's eyes widened. They each opened their IDs with open mouths.

"Garret, why did you just give me a house?" Delia asked.

"Fuck, yes, I have a house!" Jo squealed, leaping to her feet and dancing on the cushions.

Delia scowled at Jo's ass cheeks, which were flexing only two feet from her face.

I grinned. "Well, they're right next to this house," I began. "They're already well-protected, and the ground floor can be easily adjusted for business," I explained.

"What do you mean?" Jo said in confusion.

"How many moon flowers have you used in the last year," I asked Delia.

She shrugged. "One, besides the flowers you gave me. They're rare and expensive."

"Why is that?"

She thought. "Well, they usually come from official channels. Frankly, no one wants to venture into the forest. There are too many demons. Second, it's not clear how or where to find them. And since they're so useful, the demand is always high. Hence the price."

"I have 61 moon flowers," I revealed.

"You can't possibly..."

"I do," I confirmed. "How many people do you think would appreciate a lower market price and high inventory?" I asked, waiting for the information to click.

"Oh my god. That's genius," she said, awestruck. The puzzles fell together for her. "You can actually survive the forest and fight the demons. *And* you now know where the flowers grow. Plus, who knows what other resources the quests will open up to us? We can

run a premium storefront.” She paused for a second, then asked, “But why not just sell them at the market?”

I shook my head. People liked to feel superior, and I was counting on that. “Do you have a few contacts who would be interested in buying from us?” I asked.

“I think so.”

“Tell them, and only them. We can find more buyers quicker at the market, but that won’t benefit Easy Street. We want to draw people here, and treat our business like a premium secret.”

Jojo was nodding with me. “People will eat that up! Especially since we’ll be able to deliver.”

“Delia, can you make a few rare potions with these flowers?” I asked.

She scrunched her nose. “I know two basic brews and one sort-of advanced one. But my knowledge is pretty limited, since I haven’t trained much in it.”

“Could you sell them?”

“Like hotcakes.”

“Good. Make a dozen or so of the fancy potion. We’ll save the flowers for sales.”

She was fiddling with her ID. “The flowers will last about three weeks before wilting. I think we should make five potions and test how well they sell compared to the plants. If we have any flowers left over when the expiration nears, I’ll use them for potions.”

I respected her expertise in this area, and trusted she knew the smartest move. “How soon can you get this moving?”

She tapped her finger on her ID and smirked. “I just sent out seven messages to the dealer contacts I’m familiar with. We’ll see if there are any bites. I’m going to get my business front looking business-like .” She marched out of the room, full of purpose.

Delia now had full control of her house upgrades. She could make it however she wanted. I’d only give her and Jo that privilege. If things go my way and more people want to live here, they’d be renters and under my control.



## CHAPTER 26



It was just Jo and I. I asked her a question that's been on my mind for a while now. "Why aren't you healed?"

She looked down. "I'm fine."

"You're not. Delia still has to heal you twice a day. What's broken?"

"I said I'm *fine*, Garret? Jeeze, calm down!"

But I wasn't in the mood to. I leaned forward and gave her my hardest stare. "We don't have room for secrets, Jo. If something is up, and I don't know what it is, I can't protect you."

She scoffed. "You? Protect me? Dragon boy, who do you think I am? I've gone head-to-head with hundreds of the city's worst in the arena, and I've come out on top. I don't need your protection."

"Yes you do," I replied simply.

She was actually angry, now. The first hint I'd ever seen from her. "Oh? And how is that?"

"My very existence protects you from a life of arena fighting," I said. "I protect you from living in the barracks. I protect you from getting killed by the other fighters, as you reminded us. And in case you've already forgotten, I saved your cute ass from being burned alive. I'm pretty fucking great at protecting, Jo, and I think you know it."

Her lips thinned, but the anger melted away. "Fine. You win. But there's nothing interesting about my injury."

"So, explain."

She reached behind her to brush a hand along an invisible form. "My physical body is fine. Well, almost. My wings were kind of shattered, and that kind of injury takes a while to completely heal. But I think I can start flying again this week. It's my electrical wiring that's a bit messy!"

"Your wiring?" I tried to make out the shape of her wings. Even when I hugged her, I never actually felt them, despite my arms resting on her back. It was like her wings were twin ghosts. Tricks of the light.

She dropped her hand. "I have two main powers. Electricity, as you know, and thunder. Imagine my body contains veins of electric power, as tiny and numerous as nerves. That power connects to my wings and allows my thunder ability. But right now, the connections are all broken. Even creating a little spark takes tons of effort."

"Was it the demons?" I asked.

She smiled sadly. "I'm afraid it's our esteemed Governor who's to blame. But it'll heal. Stop with the sad face, Garret. It's okay." Jo climbed onto my lap and hugged my neck like I was the one who needed comforting.

I squeezed her back, but she flew off me excitedly. "So, what should my business be?"

Rat stumbled into the room, looking disoriented and lost.

"Morning!" Jo sang and thrust a cup of coffee into the kid's hands.

He looked down at it like someone just handed him a petrified pile of dog shit.

"How are you feeling, small boy?" Jo asked, patting Rat on his matted hair.

"Like I just got squeezed out of a hippo's ass," he grumbled.

"So poetic," she sighed.

He set down the cup and dropped on the sofa. "Know where Miss Delia is?"

"She's busy," I said. "But she'll be next door most of the day. What's on your mind."

"I suck."

"Suck what?"

The kid glared. “I can’t fight for shit. I got scared yesterday when I saw the creeper in the window, and had to run and get an adult to handle it. I should have been able to get him myself.”

“Or her,” Jo interjected with a knowing, wise look on her face. “I’ve heard some women can be *very* deadly.”

As if Jo isn’t the deadliest woman in the entire city. I hid a smirk behind my hand and asked, “What do you want to do about it, Rat?”

He put his head down. “I don’t know.”

I sent Jo a significant look.

She looked around the room, confused.

I jerked my chin toward Rat.

She glanced at him and shrugged.

Defeated, I asked, “Jojo Thorne, what are your skills?”

She counted off on her fingers. “Brewing coffee, making Delia mad, tumbling, tailoring my clothes, fighting baddies —”

“There!” I said. “That one. Fighting. You need a business type. Rat needs to learn how to fight. You are the deadliest person in the arena. Isn’t that a perfect match?”

Jo’s eyes went wide. She looked from me, to Rat. “You’d want to learn from me?”

He was still sullen, but he said yes.

Jo twirled in place and ran out the door. “Follow me!”

Two notifications appeared on my ID. Quests for Delia and Jo.

I sent them both, feeling satisfied like I never knew I could. I probably can’t create quests from scratch. But the system will provide them based upon my actions and decisions.

Yeah. I could fuck with that.

The next day, I went to the market with Delia, and she revealed the quest I sent her yesterday prompted her to get an employee.

“Do you need one?” I asked.

We maneuvered around a group of angry old dudes who looked too drunk for 9 a.m. And then, before our eyes, a middle-aged woman flipped over a table.

Glass shattered on the ground. The wooden table groaned. An old, angry looking man was screaming at her.

“You good-for-nothing wench! I’ll make sure you never work in this city again!”

She wielded her finger like a threat. "Eat a dick, Ulrich! Heaven knows I'll never touch yours, you swine! I'm finished here."

Ulrich's face pinched and turned an ugly shade of purple that reminded me of an eggplant. He shook his fist at her. "Begone! And for your sake, never show your face near my stand again!"

She threw up her middle finger and stormed away while Ulrich cleaned up. That's when I realized Delia was gone.

I whirled to find her pursuing the woman at breakneck speed. When she stopped her, the woman almost battered Delia away with her fists, but stopped when the wolf spoke.

The woman's face softened.

When I reached them, both were beaming.

"Garret," Delia said. "Meet Fern, my new employee. Fern, this is Garret Stone, the landlord."

"Pleased to meet you," I said with my most charming smile.

The woman scoffed. "Oh, you're trouble, aren't you? Watch where you put those teeth boy, you hear?"

"Inexplicably," I replied solemnly.

Delia went home while I purchased the food for our growing households. When I returned to Easy Street, all I could hear was screaming.

I ran to Delia's house to find her and Fern in an epic argument.

Fern, a squat woman about half Delia's height, was railing the wolf with shrieks. "*You didn't tell me you lived in a death trap! Easy Street? Are you mad, girl?*"

Delia remained calm. "Like I said, it's no *longer* a death trap. I wouldn't suggest you invite your grandchildren here, but you seem like a capable person!"

Delia was a strong woman. So, it would seem, was Fern. The two squared off like they were about to enter an arena deathmatch .

"It's okay, Delia. Let her go."

Delia's eyes narrowed. "This is my q-job. It's my job."

Fern's attention sharpened. "What were you going to say, girl? What word did you conceal from me?"

"It's okay, Fern," I told her. "Clearly, we've wasted your time. Delia, we'll find someone else. After this week, there will be plenty of people lining up to work with us. You know that. This feels like a

square peg in a round hole,” I said lightly, gesturing to the older woman.

Fern bristled. “What did you just call me, boy?”

I continued to talk to Delia as if Fern wasn't there. “And clearly, she's going downhill. Mentally, I mean. She keeps calling us ‘boy’ and ‘girl.’ We definitely told her our names, and she obviously can't remember that simple detail.” I smiled politely at Fern. “We're sorry you had to come all this way. Goodbye now.”

Fern was slack-jawed. And clearly, curious. You should never have to beg someone to stay with you, because they're always the ones that will leave anyway. You're just preventing the inevitable.

Trust me. I knew.

I leaned in to begin discussing plans with Delia when Fern spoke up. She was rooted to the spot. “Describe to me what you are offering here. Please.”

That was a change. Delia looked at me for permission, and I nodded. She turned to the woman and said coldly, “I've already explained that, Fern. Were you ignoring me, or are you just not mentally capable, like Garret suggested?”

Fern took a deep breath, probably trying to slow her anger. “I suppose I did get off on the wrong foot with you. The working conditions in the city are getting worse and worse, and my last employer was especially nasty,” she said with a sneer. “I am of the mind to think the worst of everyone, so please accept my apologies.”

She continued. “You said you would deal in advanced potions and valuable ingredients. Would you please tell me more?”

Delia lifted her chin, waiting.

Fern sighed and added, “Miss Wayland.”

Delia gestured to me.

“And Mr. Stone.”

I was trying so hard not to laugh. Delia knew how to make a person work for their place. I liked that biting, hard edge to her. I'd put that edge of hers to work tonight, that's for sure.

Appeased, Delia replied, “You are correct. The market is too flooded with cheap materials and basic items. The rich people in the city have all the access to the best resources, and we're changing that today.”



Fern's business side took over. She was drinking this in. "I'm listening. How are you sourcing your materials? How are you making your potions?"

I raised my hands. "I am sourcing them as of right now. Miss Wayland is managing the brewing."

Delia asked, "What's your brewing experience like?"

Fern straightened. "Quite advanced."

"What can you do with a moon flower?"

"What can't I do with the moon flower?" she replied with a scoff.

Delia grinned.

Fern gaped. "You can't possibly..."

"Oh, yes I can."

With only a few more critical questions, Fern signed a contract to work for Delia. She would receive a base pay, and would earn commission for every sale she made. Each moon flower would go for 115 credits, and a cut of that would go to both Fern and Delia.

The catch? Fern had to live upstairs and pay rent. She fought us on that one, but admitted she wasn't living in the best side of town, anyway.

The living requirement was the best part, and the most vital. That's because she wasn't taking money out of Easy Street. She was making money here, and funneling it back to us through rent, taxes, and upgrades she requested from Delia.

It was a step. The next would be to convince her to purchase a house here, especially once she understood the valuable upgrades she could enjoy.

Besides, the price would be unbeatable.

Fern was already strategizing on which potions would offer the best profit. She was also reaching out to growers she knew for basic ingredients.

Delia pulled me aside. "Why didn't you tell her about the quests?" she whispered. "You'll probably have some for her, right?"

"Very likely."

"So?"

"We need to be careful about how we lure people here."

Her brows rose. "You make it sound like we're serial killers who harvest organs on the black market."

I ran a finger down her chest and traced the swell of her breast. Delia's tail stilled. Her breath quickened.

"We want smart people who can understand basic risk and reward," I explained, though my voice was all seduction.

Her eyes fluttered as my finger dipped into her shirt and brushed her puckered nipple. "Yes," she gasped, pushing her chest toward me. "Definitely."

Good girl. "We want the smart people here. If we lead with the quests, we'll attract the desperate people, too. We need to lay our foundation with competence."

"Uh huh," she agreed. Her hand slid down to my rock-hard cock and squeezed it through my pants.

"It turns me on to see you in charge," I murmured. "Just as long as you remember who's in charge of you."

My dragon simmered like glowing coals beneath my skin, and I knew she could see the feral need in my eyes.

She swallowed and nodded.

"Say it."

"Yes. You're in charge, Garret. I'll always remember."

"Good. Because I intend to remind you as often as possible." I kissed her, and her body melted against mine.

I turned my head and barked, "Fern!"

Fern made a noise of surprise when she saw us. "Oh! Ah, yes, Mr. Stone?"

"I'm sure you'd love to take a walk. Explore your new community," I said, a note of danger in my words.

"Yes sir," she huffed and obediently strode out the door.

I tore Delia's shirt in two the second the latch clicked shut.



## CHAPTER 27



**A**fter two hours of mind-bending sex, I visited Jo. I nodded to Hartford as I passed, and wondered how much he was understanding about this place. We didn't talk openly about quests when he was around, and so far, all business talk was happening indoors.

I already asked Delia and Jo about any ways he might be listening to us, but they both confirmed the wards should keep any nefarious skills or spells useless.

Hartford nodded to me as I passed, and then I reached Jo's house.

She was a fighter. She had plenty of credits to spare from all her victories. So, she kind of went crazy on the decor.

The house no longer resembled a residence. Instead, it was a huge jungle-gym training space from kung-fu space. Moving platforms hung from the ceiling on chains. Random shit stuck out from the walls and the floor. I couldn't tell what the fuck kind of purpose they had, but Jo was the expert. Finally, a cache of weapons, apparently *all* Jojo's, hung on the wall in the corner.

The windows were covered and the walls painted black. To remove the impulse we all have to rely only on sight, Jo claimed.

I was still in the foyer. Where a traditional home might have a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, in balance with the second story bannister, there were instead a dozen ropes that draped all the way down to the floor.

She'd really gone all out.

"Jo?" I called into the quiet.

I heard a whisper of a rustle to my right, but since the place was so damn dark, I couldn't see anything.

Something rustled from above. And then something dropped onto my shoulders.

Or, *someone*.

Jo was sitting on my shoulders like she was about to play chicken. Her thighs squeezed my neck threateningly, and the cold tip of a knife pricked my jugular. "Gotcha!" she announced.

I summoned my own blade and pressed the edge to her inner thigh where her artery pulsed.

"Aw, that's not fair !" she pouted climbing off of me. Her hands smoothed over my abs and my lower back. "Like what I did with the place?"

"It's... um..."

"An insurance nightmare?" she asked hopefully.

"That's one way to put it."

"Nailed it!" she said happily, admiring her work. Her hands had slipped beneath my shirt and were running over my bare skin.

I'd just come from Delia, but I welcomed the intimate contact. In the dark, I was extra aware of her touch. Her hands were soft and gentle as they ran over my chest and navel. She was pressed against me, her legs spread just a little to let her pussy rub my thigh.

Shit. Since coming to this world, my stamina went through the roof. I knew I could go again. I also wanted to.

"It's not fair," she said. Her hand traveled closer to my zipper. "You give Delia all the attention."

I brushed my knuckles over her cheek, and she leaned into it. "And what kind of attention do you want, Jo?" I rumbled.

She whimpered and moved against me like a cat, begging for touch.

She was all smooth skin and tight curves. I fisted the front of her tiny shirt and yanked, locking her body on mine. My other hand slid down her bare back and curved to her front.

She had on her tight shorts. I teased the waistband as she tried to keep still. But she didn't expect me to jerk her shorts up.

She gasped as the front seam stretched and tightened over her clit. “Garret...” she moaned. “What are you doing?”

I tugged a little harder. “For the most part, I keep my hands to myself and my control in check. But if you give me permission to touch you when you wear clothes like this, I’ll let myself fulfill every fantasy.”

She was gasping and writhing now. I hadn’t even touched her — not really — and I could sense she was seconds away from coming.

I slipped my hand beneath her shirt and palmed her breast. She clutched my shirt and wrapped one leg around my hip, spreading herself for me.

I slid my finger down. Her shorts were fucking soaked, and I felt the perfect shape of her through them. “Do you want it?” I asked.

“Oh my god, yes,” she replied obediently.

“Good girl,” I purred into her ear. I rewarded her by slipping my hand into her shorts, finding her swollen clit and rubbing it.

It took her five seconds to come apart in my hands. I had to hold her up as she pulsed and rode the tide of pleasure. She gasped and buried her face into me, her hips bucking and pushing against my hand.

She was dripping down her thighs, and I wanted nothing more than to plunge myself into her tight hole and make her beg for another hour.

But there was a knock at the door.

Jojo groaned with happiness and the euphoric aftermath. She stroked my dick and said, “We’ll pick this up later, dragon boy. That’s for you.” She pointed to the door, then sashayed away into the dark.

I adjusted myself and opened the door. No one was there.

I muttered, “Fuck,” and then went to the bunker to wash and relieve the aching tension in my body.

A few hours later, Rat finds me. “Mr. Stone, Sir, I tried to signal you to my house, but you didn’t see me.”

I squinted at the kid. “What?”

He looked from side to side, as if there were spies in my own space. “The knock before. On Jo’s door.”

“Dude,” I said, “You are taking this spy shit real serious.”

Rat nodded emphatically. "I am. And I have important information to share."

"Okay. What is it? And Rat, you don't have to whisper. Just keep your voice down. Hartford, and all."

Rat's huge eyes got bigger as they widened in emphasis. "Yes. That's what this is about. I found out where he's going."

"Well don't take all day," I urged. "What did you find?"

"The shop that he disappears into? I snuck in. Don't ask how. Most embarrassing thing I've ever done. So much frosting involved. Anyway, there's a secret portal to the Governor and what looks like a radio system thing. It's probably how Hartford has been doing his reporting stuff, and all."

Interesting. If there was a secret portal and a comms system, we could use that in the future. I wasn't planning on taking the Governor down, per say. But the intel was perfect.

"Is there any —"

"I also have pictures, Mr. Stone, Sir!"

I opened my ID with a picture stream from Rat. Apparently, he'd stolen a fancy kind of camera from a lost rich dude who'd been wandering around some alley, drunk.

I'd been about to ask Rat if he could verify the intel, but the pictures and videos he shot were plenty. The kid rose a few notches in my book.

"Mr... Stone, Sir?"

"Yup?" The comms system looked to be locked, of course. I examined each one until I was certain I had all the details. I'd comb through them again later.

"Thank you."

I glanced over to see his eyes nearly bugging out of his tiny, malnourished head. Jo really needed to feed him something more than frosting. "Thanks for what?"

He lifted his chin proudly. "For trusting me. I just completed my first ever quest."

I grinned. "Did you level up?"

"Yes," he said reverently. But then he froze. "Sir, have you watched the last video?"

"No."

“Hurry,” he said, and then scurried from the room faster than the speed of light, probably wanting privacy while he soaked in his new Evolution Rank, credits, spells, and traits.

Curious, I clicked on the video and listened. It was Hartford muttering into a small black microphone, and the Governor replying through a larger speaker. It was just loud enough for me to hear.

*Hartford: I haven't verified they're going on quests yet, sir.*

*Governor: You know the stakes. We can't let it happen.*

*Hartford: Of course.*

*Governor: If this got out... well, I'm not sure we'd survive the backlash.*

*Hartford: No one will know, sir. You have my word.*

*Governor: And if you find they are breaking our system?*

*Hartford: Inform you immediately, and remove myself from Easy Street.*

*Governor: Precisely. Our power relies on the public belief that there aren't any more quests than what we're given. That would disappear if they knew we were deceiving them. Keep me posted, Hartford.*

The video ends with Hartford hanging up and closing down the system. The screen goes black.

“Motherfucker.”

The Governor was artificially suppressing quests. Was he keeping them to himself? Doling them out to only his most loyal followers? The Governor himself must have a ridiculously high Evolution Rank, considering what he must have access to.

If he experienced the same kind of quest stream that I had, he had to be receiving millions every day. And he was just... ignoring them.

But one thing was certain. I'd do everything in my power to find out why.





## CHAPTER 28



**T**he truth hit the girls like a bomb. They seemed to go through all the stages of grief in the three days that followed.

At first, Delia wanted to deny the entire thing. She picked apart the video, the words, everything to try and devise another meaning from the stolen conversation.

Jo went straight to anger, and spent the entire night in her custom gym, beating the shit out of her equipment.

The next day, the girls were like puddles of mud. Everything about them drooped and wilted. Their entire fight for an existence here was founded on a greedy lie. Delia idolized a man who was comfortable lying and keeping her small. Jo played into a system that idolized *her* for injuring and killing other people.

Suffice it to say they were experiencing the biggest identity crisis there was. Their entire world shifted.

On the third day, Delia left Fern in charge of the storefront to train with Jo, whose wings were working again. She still wouldn't show me what her wings looked like, but last night I glimpsed a sliver of white in the sky, and I wondered if it was her.

Delia and Fern had also customized the house to look like an apothecary, and there was currently a line of seven people. Cash was flowing in, and I'd have to go hunt for more moon flowers by the end of this week.

More amazing was the amount of quests that were populating for any citizens living on Easy Street. These once-forlorn people were

suddenly thriving, gaining levels and resources that created a boom in the tiny economy.

It wasn't all about making money, of course. We still had the rest of the street to fortify before the end of the month, which was approaching fast. But Delia and Fern were working on the necessary potions.

Jo also said she has some tricks up her sleeve, and only giggled and kissed me when I asked her to reveal them. "Time will reveal all!" she'd crooned and traipsed away.

When I was out of view of the street, I sent my clothing to Inventory and shifted into my dragon. I was getting fucking huge, and needed to get used to avoiding any and all structures. It just wasn't worth the risk of knocking shit down.

I flew thirteen miles East and landed beside a small river. I returned to my human form and opened my ID to review the information once more. Quest: Bye-bye Bugbears.

Fayland needs your help! The Gnomes of Fayland are being raided by Bugbears. Their numbers are dwindling and the Gnomes are being pushed from the homes.

Instructions: Kill 20 Bugbears. Help the Gnomes reclaim Fayland.

Reward: Flash progression to Evolution 4, +300 credits.

I looked around, wondering what way would take me to Fayland. I pulled up the quest marker and sighed when I saw FAYLAND marked on the map. It pointed over on the other side of the river, not very far from where I stood.

I grinned, loving the idea of exercising with some bugbears. Those things were feral and strong, almost like bulls. I crossed the shallow river and when I walked about two miles forward, I realized I was walking beneath tall trees.

The trees were stretched far, with fat trunks that seemed almost bald except for the carvings on some of them to indicate the unmarked trees had smooth bland looking barks.

The carvings looked like messages, but I could understand zilch from what I was looking at.

*Well, I don't need messages to kill a bunch of bugbears, do I? I hope not.*

The trees were far apart and yet, it seemed crowded. The space between them would allow my dragon form, realized with more than a little measure of happiness.

The slow wind in the forest was cold, probably from the river I had left behind. I wondered how long it would take me to get to Fayland and how would I know when I got there.

As if the woods heard my thoughts, the air seemed to vibrate around me. The ground felt soft and groomed, as if the forest had been taking care of itself in an unnatural manner.

*Gnomes*, I thought. The vibration stopped and at the end of that came a terrible scream and a roar. I do n't know when I ran, but the cry pulled me like a magnet would call to metal. I weaved through trees, searching for the voice.

I wondered if I should shift into my dragon form and pushed the thought away. It would be troublesome if a gang of bugbears swarmed me. They were resilient, like pests. It would be difficult clawing through them quickly.

I summoned my dagger. The hilt felt at home in my hand. Its balanced weight made it seem like I had an extension of my hand. The screaming came again and this time I stopped to find where it was coming from.

There was something wrong with the forest. The sounds came from every angle, as if they were bouncing or the trees were echoing the fear. I stopped and stood for a second.

*Where are you?*

I knew I could feel things— light and sound— sharper in my dragon form. I let my dragon sense rise, isolating every other noise in the forest.

I filtered through the soft rustle of leaves and the gentle hissing of wind through hollows in the barks of some of the trees. A small animal scuttled away a small distance to my left.

I opened my eyes when I sensed the sound again, this time a small whimper and gratingly satisfied growl. *I will be late!*

I ran. Again, the thought of flying filled my head. I grunted, pushing the dragon back down. I needed it, but not the whole of it.

I needed the keen senses and speed. I might need to transform later, but not now.

My feet seemed to blur against the forest floor. My speed amazed even me . I could tell I was running at the fastest I had ever ran. *And soon I will be faster!*

When I came out from behind another tall, red tree that looked like it would touch the sky if I looked up, I saw them.

Six Gnomes, the oldest— carrying a wiry staff pointed at the bugbear in front of him— was trying to protect the others. They were surrounded.

Behind the circle of bugbears, I could see one dead bugbear with smoke rising from its charred body. I frowned, then turned to the old, shaking gnome.

His small face was clouded by a thick white beard, except his bald head. I could see his legs visibly shaking. I wondered why he was scared if he had killed the bugbear, then I saw the jewel studded into the staff, near the curve at the head.

It was dull. Was the old gnome out of juice?

The six gnomes looked like mice cornered by hungry cats. I had to act fast. The bugbears were bigger than I thought. I was tall and they were taller, with a hairy man-looking face except the bear nose and claws. One looked back at the dead bugbear behind it and growled.

I had only a second to wonder if my dagger would do any good against the partial armors and then I tossed the worry away and leapt into a run.

The first bugbear was shocked, but then the shock was quickly replaced by anger. It snarled, stench choking me as I cut through its snarl. It doubled back, but I wasn't going to let it go. Two more stabs, my dagger passing through the chain mail like a butcher's knife through apples.

It fell with a thud, soundless in death.

My blade was covered in dark-reddish blood. I swung it and blood made a light splat on the forest floor. Another bugbear growled at me. This one had only shoulder armor with spikes.

*Yeah, you are next.*

They were all turned to me now. I saw the old gnome lead the others to a tree and then something opened and as they rushed into the tree, a bugbear attacked.

I grunted under the weight of its attack . I pushed the rough tree branch it swung and slashed its belly open. It cried, a pathetic sound that made me grin.

The rest of the bugbears came for me then . About four of them, some with claws extended to cut through me and others carrying rough weapons. I jumped back, sidestepping a slash from a claw.

I weaved behind another bugbear and plunged my dagger down into its back and pulled it out before another beast smashed my head with a spiky club. The sharp spikes whizzed past my face and I quickly slashed its hand.

They were slow, but they were strong. Yet, I was stronger. They didn't seem to give off any dark energy like the demons did. All they had was a deep bloodlust that I didn't have a problem weaving around.

When I stopped to take a breath, they were all dead from one deep gash or the other. My hand was slick with blood and I was half covered in it too. I sighed, my chest heaving.

The forest was quiet again, except the stench of the dead bugbears. *Who knew they smelled worse when they died?* I wiped my blade on one of the corpses and walked towards the tree I had seen the gnome vanish into.

I was glad Delia hadn't come with me. I didn't have to worry. I could go all out. I stretched my arm, the muscle rippling and cracking. I felt fine, as if I hadn't just killed six bugbears.

The tree looked like a normal tree, but I was sure I saw them enter it. Something like a door or maybe a portal. I was not sure. I knocked softly with the hilt of my dagger.

There was silence. And as if to mock me, wind whistled past , and some leaves rustled to add to the mockery. I was at the edge of giving up when I heard a creak and then a small opening showed on the bark and a small face peered out.

"It's alright," I whispered. The young gnome looked behind me and then at me. He withdrew his face and then another showed up.

The old gnome's eyes bulged when he saw the dead bugbears.

"Are you the leader?" I asked, staring at his beard. It looked as white as new snow. He shook his head and pointed left. He muttered

something I couldn't understand and then he sighed when he saw how pointless talking would be.

At that moment the ground trembled and he ran back into the tree-house. *For fucks sake*s, I muttered as I turned, knowing what I would find.

They were all there now—claws ready and maw-like mouths with huge teeth snarling. There were about twenty of them, all clad in chain mail or leather.

The group split and from within it, a huge bugbear came forward. It was different. Its face was closer to a bear than the others—with furry ears and slightly protruding snout that snarled.

But its arms were ripped with muscles and though its chest was hairy, the rest of it shone with toned muscles and fading scars.

It glared with beastly pale red eyes and when it stopped in front of the other, it planted its great axe on the ground and the ground split.

I knew I would be calling on the dragon soon.





## CHAPTER 29



**A**t the roar, the smaller bugbears attacked. Their stampede shook the whole forest. I took one step back and prepared. I could feel the dragon rearing to come out. The heat of its anger prickled my skin and made my breath stifling hot. It was excited and its craze was slipping into me.

I ran forward, my legs feeling like pistons. They shot me forward and the first bugbear I slashed through had an open torso and a missing arm. I felt a small swell of approval within.

I grinned. Drunk on that first draw of blood.

The whoosh past my head as I dipped out of reach and a bugbear smashed another bugbear behind me instead. I heard a ring in my ears and for a second my attention was split.

I pushed the notification away and focused on the fight in front of me. Twenty bugbears. Twenty ferocious looking beasts with ugly faces and snouts ready to tear me apart and pick their teeth with my bones.

The thought made my blood boil— and it was not just me that got angry. The dragon growled, the sound escaping my throat like a small rumble. The bugbears shifted with fear and my dagger opened another neck in those passing seconds.

More came and as they came, I cut them down. I switched my dagger to my left hand and made a fist with my right. My fingers were becoming stiff from squeezing the dagger too hard.

I was filthy with bugbear blood. It painted my hair and face black. I watched out for the leader, waiting to see when it would attack. It didn't.

It watched like some overlord watching its horde fight to their last. He was the one I needed to worry about, I thought. I could see a dark grey energy, much like a wave of heat.

It oozed out of him as he paced behind his axe, watching his ranks reduced bit by bit.

*Why is it not joining the fight?*

The dragon's snort told me the answer. Pride. I chuckled then, plunging my dagger into the throat of a bugbear as it raised its weapon to strike. The huge wooden monstrosity of a weapon fell and the bugbear fell back with me on top of it.

I spat, tasting a bitter liquid in my mouth as I looked around me and saw I was left with four bugbears and the leader who had his hands folded over its barrel-like chest.

My pants were torn and my shirt was filthy. I hissed at the waste of good clothes. They would pay for it with their hides.

The leader roared again, snarling at the retreating bugbears. They turned to it, its red eyes fixed on them and in that glare, I knew he promised them certain death.

They turned to me, all four, growling like wounded lions. I didn't mind, I raced towards them and rolled under a claw slash and dug my dagger into a meaty thigh.

Then I rolled away, and stood just close enough to push the dagger into the chest of another bugbear.

It died mid roar. There was a pathetic whimper and then a whine.

Then a thud.

I was left facing two bugbears and one with a torn thigh. I grinned, thinking maybe I should end this with style. I was the dragon. They were measly bears. They should kneel.

My inner self agreed .

The two bugbears decided to attack together. The futility of it amused me. I threw my dagger at the closest one and it stopped in its tracks with the dagger planted firmly in its head. *Fool*, I thought.

The last one came at me with its claws. They were longer than I thought. It went for my face and chest, and I dodged all its swipe.

It was like a baby trying to catch arrows. I could see all its attacks. I decided to thank Jo when I got back home. She would love to know how I toyed with bugbears with what I learned from her.

I got bored and caught one of its arms with both my hands and then pulled back hard. It groaned in pain. I didn't stop until I pulled it off its feet and smashed its face on the ground and then I stumped on its head.

I stomped on it while staring at the leader. It watched, teeth bared.

Then I lifted my hand towards where my dagger was sticking out of the face of the other bugbear. The dagger vanished and then appeared in my hand.

I bent down and pulled the bugbear's head up by its chin, and while staring at the leader, I pushed my dagger in from under its face. It shook a little and stopped.

I let the body fall.

Again, silence swept through the forest. Until I realized the wounded bugbear was still whimpering, holding its thigh.

The leader picked up its axe—the pure black of it shone as if it was oiled. As it passed the wounded bugbear, he swung the axe and the bugbear's head fell down and rolled away from the body. The leader snarled.

*Good time to change to the dragon, Garret.*

It looked down at me, its eyes peeling me bare. Then it swung that axe again. The single blade was about the width of its chest. My transformation was fast, almost in a flash.

I caught the blade and my legs dug into the ground. The trees shed leaves and for a moment there was gust. Then it all ebbed, and I snarled into the face of the monster. I could smell the rage oozing from the bugbear.

It tried to push the blade down, but I pushed it back instead. It staggered a few paces back and grounded the axe down again.

*You really want to die with pride, don't you?*

It roared and this time I saw the energy oozing off it spread to the axe. Whatever that was, I wasn't going to risk holding the blade again.

Its steel chest plate shone and the air vibrated again, almost as if I had stepped in a rippling current.

I shrugged the discomfort off. Against my scales, it was mostly just noise.

It lifted the axe and was about to swing again. I felt the heat rise in me and when I opened my mouth, fire roared out. The bugbear quickly placed the axe in front of its body and expended the energy it had built up in defense.

*Frozen Roar!* I screamed the spell and I saw the bugbear freeze. I was not sure what level it was, but I knew it wouldn't slow down much. I beat my wings, boosting forward, just before it fought out of the hold of my spell.

*Seconds, it got out in seconds.*

It was too late though. I clamped my teeth over a chunk of its neck and tugged. Flesh came away in my jaws, and blood fountained from the wound. It rammed its shoulder into me as it flailed.

*Futile. You are as dead as the ones you watched die.*

It tried to raise the axe with one hand while another held its bleeding neck. It was slower now, lifting the axe with strain. I whipped my tail against its chest and it staggered back and then fell to one knee, blood spilling out of its mouth and neck.

*Yes. That is where you should be. On your knees before me.*

I could sense it was gone now. The energy that wrapped around it before. I walked to it, my feet clawing up the forest soil.

It tried to lift the axe again, one last time. That pride pushing it to the last breath. I bit around its neck and face. It was big when I was human. Now it wasn't so big.

I crunched down on its head and a sickening bitterness filled my mouth. The hand on the axe flexed and then dropped.

My mouth felt hot as the ringing in my head intensified. I hated the noise. I wanted to wash my throat and tongue, scrubbing until I forgot the taste.

The huge bugbear hit the ground, raising dirt.

I sighed, staring at the bodies of bugbears. *That was tiring.*



QUEST: Bye-bye Bugbear.

Status: Completed!

Reward: Flash progression to Level 4; +300 credit.



I WATCHED as the XP bar filled up and then restarted again. I could see just a hint of green showing I got a tiny progress to level five.

I went back to the front page and smiled at the new level.



NAME: Garret Stone

Form: Dragon

Creature type: Reptilian Endothermic

Metabolism: Carnivore

Evolution Level: 4



I STARED at it for a while and then got another prompt.



## **EVOLVED TRAIT/SPELLS**

ALL TRAITS and spells have evolved with the new Evolution Level. This means all previous spells are upgraded to stay balanced with your current level.



I LET THAT SINK IN, still grinning. Delia would have a fit when I told her about it. I laughed at that, her face filling my mind. I wondered what she was doing. I decided to pick my new Spell and trait quickly and leave. The new traits I got were interesting.



#### **LEVEL 4: Evolution Traits**

Choose One

**Dragon Harvest:** This skill allows you to gather multiple resources at once, without doing more than a command. This skill helps you save time and energy, and it can be used in human form.

**PRISTINE SCALES:** This skill allows you to clean your scales after battle.



MY CHOICE WAS OBVIOUS. I shook my head at that second option wondering who would be so vain to pick that option.

After that I went on to pick my spell. There, my choice was easy too. I chose Ember-storm.

It was a spell that could generate a massive plume of burning fire and embers that would not only burn a target for immediate damage, but it reduces their strength because it would choke them with fumes.

It was perfect for me.

I let my ID fade away and stretched. I needed a bath. When I turned around, I realized the bodies were lying about. It would be a waste if I left them there.

“Dragon Harvest,” I said with my hands out and white light enveloped the corpses. I watched as all the bodies disintegrated and then vanished.

I heard a ringing and when I opened it, I saw that the Dragon Harvest separated them into meat, organs, and bones. Delia would be happy with the bones. She and Fern could use the bones for potions and for the wards.

I stretched and sighed. It was time to go home. But first I would have to wash off in that river. I smiled and took to the sky.

*I'm coming home, little wolf.*





## CHAPTER 30



I could get used to flying. I loved how liberating it was. The sky was all mine. Well, mine and the birds', but I was bigger. I dominated it.

My wings flapped and a gust of wind pushed against the trees and raised dirt as I took to the sky. I should take Delia on a cruise sometimes.

It would be interesting to see how big her eyes get when we soar higher and higher until we are touching the clouds.

The other times I had flown with her, we were distracted by the dangers behind or in front of us. This would be different.

I let the cool wind wash over my face, it was like bathing without getting wet. It felt magical. My heart swelled, no, it was the dragon's pride. I chuckled at that and beat my wings again, increasing my speed.

I had missed them, all of them. Even Rat. They had become some kind of family to me— better than the ones I left back on my earth. They were reliable and that was what mattered

The faster I moved, the easier it got. Soon, Fayland was like a memory behind me. I smiled, looking down. I would be able to see the roofs soon. The roofs that would tell me I was soon to soar over Easy Street.

Then I would find 319. The new home I had carved out for myself. My mind dug up my uncle's and brother's face. I wondered if I still hated them. The thought had not registered in my mind.

I pushed it all away, sweeping these thoughts to the recess of my mind and smiling. I couldn't wait to put my hands around Delia's waist.

I wondered what Jo was doing.

The last of the trees parted and I finally saw Easy Street. From above, the ruins yet to be fixed swallowed my attention. And then I saw something else that stopped me cold.

Smoke billowed from further down the street, exactly where 319 was. My home.

*What in all the nine rings of hell is happening?*

I pushed myself, flapping harder than I had ever done before. The ground came at me and I landed with an unplanned force, cracking the ground and my wings taking off the porch rails of a house we hadn't fixed.

I could see them now, a small swarm of demons. Their aura made the air hot and so many of them at the same time made my skin prickle slightly.

They turned to me, about six of them, screeching and clawing their way over. I felt the heat in my chest build up like a dam rumbling. The heat grew until it was unbearable.

I would have to be careful not to burn down the houses, it would do us no good if most of the properties were scorched.

I waited for them to get closer, close enough that I could control the path of the flame enough not to burn anything else.

They rushed like mad things. My eyes stung the closer they got. These ones were different from the ones before. I hadn't noticed the others having passive attacks.

*Good enough*, I muttered and roared. The sound pushed them back a little and then fire burnt through their hide. When I cut the flame off, there was nothing left but ash floating in the wind.

I changed to my human form and summoned my dagger. I summoned clothes appropriate for the fight I was about to get into. The boots felt light and springy, as if it read my mind when I moved.

I heard something like a scream and realized what was happening. Most of the demons were in Delia's shop. I hoped and prayed they were alright as I ran. Some demons were on the road, probably the excess. The ones who couldn't get into the apothecary.

They came at me, claws ready to dig into me. I could smell their hunger turn into fear and then dread when the dagger lodged in them. One after the other I tore through them like they were made of cloth.

I caught one by the neck, its claws scratching my arm, but I felt nothing. I pulled my dagger from the head of another and pushed through the screeching demon's mouth.

I was pissed. The anger in me was not just my human side's own. My dragon side was red-hot with anger. *Why would they enter my domain? Hurt my family? Why?!*

I let the thoughts blind it with anger, making my head hum with mana and rage. I ran, finding stray demons on the road and tearing through them until I reached 319. I could see it clearly now.

Demons scrambling to get in the building and demons screeching to death. I heard Delia's howl, it was rife with anger too. I smiled. My wolf was deadly too. I walked towards the entry to the apothecary.

I heard a whine and when I turned, I saw Rat giving fast stabs to a demon with a short knife. He didn't look at me, he jumped on another.

Jo had done a splendid job in so little time. Of course. That was the witch of the arena after all. I pulled a demon back and slit its head open and dragged the dagger down until I heard its core burst and then it died.

Open eyes turned to me. I grinned, my teeth bared and my eyes glazed crazy with the dragon's rage. I looked like a mad man holding a dagger to the mass in front of me.

The shop was covered completely with buzzing and groaning demons. Demons jumped on top one another to get at the women inside. Fern. I didn't know how capable she was but I hoped she could hold her own.

"Come taste my blade, demons," I said through gritted teeth. They all screeched like strangled pets. I toss my dagger from hand to hand, stepping back into the tarred road of the street.

I needed space. I didn't need to change form, not yet. I needed space for speed. They came like a storm. All of them had claws stretched out for my head.

In danger, dragons roar. That's what I did. I roared and for a moment, they seemed scared. I rushed at them. My dagger and I were a blur. We weaved through the demons like wind whistling through the holes in the trees.

My dagger found their cores and my instinct saved me from the sharp, dark claws. It was a beautiful dance.

At one point, my hand was slick with demon blood. I hardened my grip on the dagger hilt. *I am my weapon and my weapon is me.*

I let that ring in my head. That and my dragon side's glee in the battle. The demons were not different. I might have overthought it before. I couldn't smell the sting in the air. And their cores shattered like porcelain.

In the end, I was left breathing with corpses lying about like decaying cars in a post-apocalyptic movie.

I turned quickly, dagger in hand and body still in tune with the battle and then I stopped when I saw Delia's eyes.

She was breathing hard. Her shirt was torn, her hair was scattered. I could see much of her left breast where the neckline had torn down. She saw me looking and shook her head.

I smiled, still breathing like I had run around the world.

"What happened here?" I asked and then hissed when I noticed the gash in my arm. Fern came out behind Delia and behind her, Jo dragged out a squirming demon.

"Don't play with that," Fern told Jo, face wound up in a frown. Jo smiled. She had scratches too, but aside from that there was nothing serious.

"Come," Delia said, leading to a bench that had managed to survive the onslaught. She checked the rest of my body and sighed when she found nothing else.

"They came out of nowhere," Fern said. Her voice was tight, I didn't know if it was anger or fear. I wondered if she would be rethinking her decision to stay.

"They are beginning to behave weirdly," Delia said as she healed me. Her hand alight like before. I felt it slowly. The relief and then it was all gone. Then she went to heal the others.

I nodded.

“They pushed through the ward?” I asked and Delia sighed and nodded. “I have something that will make the wards stronger. And meat too.”

“I think there is some—” The ground trembled as if someone had tried to split Easy Street with lightning. I stood up immediately and ran to the road. What I saw made my heart race and my eyes water.

This was it. This was what made the air sting and vibrate.

*What the fuck is that?*



## CHAPTER 31



“Oh no!” Jo said beside me. I hadn’t noticed her joining me. I watched the demon walk towards us, every step it took shook the street and maybe beyond it. I turned to Jo. Her eyes were large saucers.

Fear? I hadn’t seen her scared before, but the demon coming was something else. It was tall, as tall as a house and huge. It was covered in darkness that seemed to shimmer.

Behind the demon, two wings were spread and raised. They were the whitest things I had seen in all my life. So white, and yet so dull. It was mind bending. It marched forward slowly, as if every step was deliberate.

“What is that?” I asked.

“A Demon Lord,” Jo said, breathlessly. I couldn’t tell if what I saw on its shoulder was his head or a helmet. From it, two twisting horns grew close to each other on his forehead. And at the top of the horns was a golden halo.

“That’s a full Demon Lord, Garret,” Jo said. *Was she scared? Why?* I could see the power oozing from the demon. I knew it was strong; way stronger than anything I had fought so far, even the bull. I knew that.

And yet, my dragon side was eager to fight it. I wanted to tear it apart and squeeze its core until I heard it splinter and the demon cry in pain as it died.

“What should we do, dragon boy?” Jo asked. Delia was there already. I couldn’t find Rat, but I didn’t expect him to be out there.

Fern was on her knees, staring at the Demon Lord like it was a star dropping from the sky. It was amazing to look at. It towered above us and its darkness was as brilliant as a night’s sky full of stars.

It stopped and looked down on us. Its red eyes were like beads and now I could see that its armor was covered in scales. There was an ash-grey hilt strapped to its side. A sword? I hadn’t seen any of the demons carry a sword like that.

It growled and then pointed a finger towards us. I felt it then, the air sizzling like every molecule in the air was being heated. I turned to the others, they were choking.

“Delia, the bunker, take everyone,” I said. The Demon Lord’s finger was shining. I realized what it was trying to do. *Sorry, I can’t let you destroy what I have suffered to build.*

“What about you?” Jo asked as Delia pulled her towards the house. Fern was even harder to pull. I turned to the woman and growled. She yelped and scuttled away with Delia. Delia stared back one last time before I lost them.

“Alright, it’s just you and me now,” I said and then commanded my clothes to vanish and then I transformed. The ball of energy in its finger had turned into a spinning orb of mana. *That looks bad.* I groaned.

It flicked the finger and the orb flew at me. I put my hand out and caught it, but the force pushed me far back. Then it exploded.

I was waiting for that. I opened my pores and absorbed the flames before it could spread and when I opened my eyes, I saw the surprise in its face.

*Shocked already?*

I beat my wings and shot off from the ground, using speed and strength, I caught it and picked it up. I flew quickly, before it could think and when I saw the first trees that led into the forest, I let the demon go.

Before it hit the trees, it flapped its wings, gained wind and then sailed softly before settling in the air in front of me.



It pulled the hilt then and instead of a sword, what came out was a flexible chain of linked blades . It flicked it and the blades made curves and it sounded like a whip.

The blades oozed mana, dripping it down to the ground. *I need to be quick.* The demon's halo flared and changed from gold to a bright red, like its eyes.

Then it whipped the chain at me. The blades curved like a snake. I flew up and the blades followed. I had to do something fast or the blades would get to me.

I switched direction and flew straight at the demon. I saw its black lips curve with a slight smile. *Bloody damned piece of shit.*

*Frozen Roar!*

The demon's eyes bulged, but it was only a second. It was fast, I would have missed it if I wasn't close to it.

It froze, falling, for just that second and I dug my claws into its armor of scales and then closed my teeth around its neck and down.

We slammed down through trees and hit the forest floor, causing a huge crater.

Blood pooled into my mouth and I heard a soft groan, like what I did was a minor discomfort. Then it grabbed my neck with one hand, pulling me off its throat and held me in place for the chain that had resumed its chase.

I swung my tail, slamming it in the chest. Its hold loosened , but I was too late. The chain grazed me, tearing off scales where it made contact.

I turned in anger, my chest filled with fire and roared. I bathed the Demon in flames, not stopping until it staggered back and whipped the sword at me again.

The bright light was snuffed and I pulled my head just before the chain hit me. *That chain is sharp enough to cut through scales.* I didn't know why, but I had a feeling it had to do with the mana leaking off it.

The Demon stood up and flicked the chain . It retracted and snapped into a dark segmented sword. The demon looked at the hand it had used to block the flame. It was burnt, but slightly.

I roared at it again, my rage climbing.

Some trees were crackling with fire around us. Most of it would go out soon. I had controlled the flames, focused it on the demon. The halo's red brightened and the demon grinned, showing rows of white teeth.

It blinked and then it was coming at me. The speed was crazy. I roared flames at it, this time uncontrolled.

I heard a whirr and then I saw the sword curve out of the flames and rush at me. I dodged and the demon used the moment of distraction and slammed a punch down my head.

My eyes glazed over and when I blinked the pain away, another dark fist was coming, so was the sword. I groaned. I had to do something fast.

I flicked my tail, slamming the demon in the chest, pushing him back a bit, just enough time for me to duck and let the sword whiz past my head.

I raised my head up and saw that the demon was already on me. It dragged its claw through my wings and I screamed in pain. It grabbed the wing, and dragged until I heard a crack and pain lanced through me.

The pain seared every thought I had, every hold I had on reality. I saw the demon and all I could think was pain and rage. Flame bloomed out of my snout and when it raised a hand to block, I snapped my mouth on it.

The demon growled, I was biting on where I burnt before. I relished its pain, reveled it in. It tried to flick the sword again and I laughed. *Wrong move!*

*Ember Storm!*

The spell blossomed like it had been eargerly waiting for this moment. I dug my claws into the demon's chest and the scales stopped the attack, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

Flames burst out of the ground like crawlers and wrapped around it. The more it struggled, the harder the flames burned. It was beautiful to watch.

The Demon Lord growled, screaming as the flames burned through the scales. It kept burning until the forest was rife with the smell of burning flesh.

Its sword laid on the ground where it had flung it in the struggle against my spell.

Then it groaned, unable to move its hand. There was a sharp croak, as if it wanted to cry— *or summon more creepy demons!*

I dove at it and tore through its neck. The fire ebbed slowly and it tried to push my head away, but it had lost every bit of strength and mana.

My teeth pulled flesh, tearing through its throat, and then its chest, and finally, when I found its core , I pulled it out and snapped my teeth on it.

The Demon Lord groaned, stretching for me. The halo was gone and the eyes, like hot coals losing their heat, darkened.

I staggered back, my chest hot and flaming. *What the hell is happening?* Then I felt it, like a spasm, I stretched and my wounds ached at once.

When the pain settled into an ebb, I felt the power flowing through me. My body glistened gold, like the Demon King's Halo.

I stretched my neck up, and then I vented out fire into the sky. The flame was different. It felt stronger and I knew so many people would see or feel it.

Yeah, let them.

Let everyone know that Easy Street was mine and that I would cut through whoever brought danger to the people there.

Let them know.



## CHAPTER 32



-After the dust settled-

“**W**hat are you thinking about?” Delia asked. She laid on the couch staring at me. There was a lot to think about. From where I stood by the window, I saw bits of Easy Street bathed in noon light.

There was a wholesome feeling in just looking at it.

Again and again, I had to tell myself that we were safe. The city was safe and so was Easy Street. No thanks to the governor, of course.

I turned to the beautiful half wolf on the couch and smiled before shaking my head. Everything was good, but I wasn't stupid to think it would stay like that forever.

There was a lot I wanted to know. I knew one thing now though, and I wasn't even sure of it yet.

There was a possibility the governor had stifled the quests because he was trying to protect them from something like that Demon Lord.

Still, I had to talk to him. We had to make some kind of plan on stopping the demons once and for all. It made no sense to wait for them to attack.

I decided I would pay the governor a visit soon. Maybe later. But for now, I walked over to Delia. She was beautiful, and in the dress she wore, she was all shades of temptation.

She shifted, giving me space to join her on the couch. I could see the swell of her breasts through the dress and I could see she wore nothing under. She had been in all day, letting Fern do much of the work at the Apothecary.

Her lips drew me and by the time I pressed mine to hers, she was already pulling my head. My hand traveled from her side to her back, and then to her ass.

The dress was so light I could be touching her skin.

Her lips pulled me in, and I let a soft, wanton growl escape and she giggled. I pulled up the gown slightly, touching her bare thighs. She moaned, urging me on. I took my time, drawing out her hunger.

“Garret...” my lips sealed away anymore words she had to say. My finger trailed up slowly, and then she arched her neck and I kissed her shoulder, her neck, and then I made my way to one puckering nipple.

Delia moaned when my tongue flicked over her nipple. When I took the other one in my mouth, I let my finger brush her sex. She caught my hand before I could move it. She gently placed it over her wetness, and nodded eagerly.

I chuckled and slipped a finger in. Her claws grazed my back and I tensed. I wondered if she could feel my hardness. She answered that a moment later. She rubbed against it, moaning as I slowly moved my finger in her.

“Garret, please,” She muttered. It was slow and breathless. I was close to the edge myself, I wanted to pick her up and make her straddle me. At the same time, I liked how fast she was moving her hips against my fingers.

I was lost in the sounds she made, wanting more and more—as if her climax was mine.

Her hips moved to a rhythm that was completely hers. And when she pulled my face up for a kiss, she was breathing hard. I moved my fingers and she gasped.

This time her movement was slow and deliberate. She ground down on my fingers. Her mouth was slightly open, but no sound

came out. It was mesmerizing to watch.

Before, back on earth, I had wanted women for my own pleasure. Sex had been about me reaching my climax, and being satisfied.

This time I wanted her to feel everything. She pulled me down on her, her claws dug into my arm. The pain mixed with the pleasure. She squeezed my hardness softly, working the length while arching her back.

“Garret, I wan...” the words died in her throat, flooded out by the deep moan that rolled off her chest. She chuckled, her eyes closed tight.

*Fuck!*

I wanted her now, and I was sure she could tell. The whole of me was stretched and hard and sensitive. Every stroke of her hand on me was sending me over the edge of desire.

I wanted Delia like a drunk begged for wine. I pulled out my fingers and she groaned, frustration obvious in the deep sound.

I didn't waste much time, I needed a taste and more. But for now, I decided to drag it on, make her want it as much as I wanted it.

I kissed her stomach, the smoothness of her skin on my lips was amazing. I kissed her all the way down until my lips hovered over her wet sex.

I hovered there and when I dipped my head, I heard her gasp in anticipation. Every reaction she gave was a push I needed badly.

My lips met her thighs. They were soft, easy to nibble on. I nibbled softly, moving ever close to the point I wanted .

“Garret!”

I ignored her urging. This was as much for me as it was for her. She needed to feel the hunger, that way we could ravage each other.

I nibbled until there was no space to put my mouth but the soft spot begging for attention. I slowly lowered my head, my tongue stretching eagerly for a taste.

She moaned deeply when I made contact, her hand guiding my head. She pushed my head down roughly, lost in the need for more of what my tongue was doing.

I flicked my tongue over her clit, getting a sigh from her. I tasted and tasted until I could not hold on anymore.

She was swollen and soft, and wherever my tongue touched, I wanted to explore.

“Garret, I want you. I want you, dragon boy,” She said, the words coming out as moans. She pushed my head away and pushed me back on the couch.

I would have loved to explore some more with my tongue, but her eyes were firm. She wanted me in her, and that was all. There was no bargaining with that.

I willed my clothes away, startling her. She grinned when she saw how hard I was. Then she straddled me, pulling down the straps of the dress.

The fabric fell off her shoulders and then uncovered her breasts. I stared at her, the whole of her. As much as I could see.

When she held me and guided me into her, I couldn't stop the shudder that ran through me. She stared at me as she moved. Our bodies moving together and giving each other pleasure.

I wanted to say a lot, tell her a lot, but all I could think about was how beautiful she was moving like that.

Her eyes were shut and her mouth was open again. She made small whimpering sounds. They were cute and funny, but my mind was locked in what she was doing to me.

“Oh my...”

“Oh Gar...” Words faded when I fondled one breast and then she arched her back and I had to hold her from falling. The rhythm was gone now and all that existed was pleasure.

Every movement of her hips pulled me closer to the peak and from the way she moved, she was close too. I slowed down, giving her control.

My climax rushed at me. Immediately I felt myself stiffen and unable to control my motion, she dug her claw into my back. The pain pushed me all the way off the edge and I growled.

Her climax knocked mine further. The way her body shook and the staccato rhythm of moaning seemed to heighten my orgasm. I stretched, wanting the whole of me to stay within her.

The pleasure was overwhelming me and I didn't want it to end.

Delia held my head to her breasts, her heartbeat hammering in my ear as we tried to catch our breath.



“You guys could have invited me to the party,” Jo said. I froze turning to her. I expected Delia to frown and throw her out, but that didn’t happen.

Jo was wearing a short skirt that showed more than it covered. That and a bikini that sent a rush up my head. She grinned as she took off her boots as she walked closer.

When the bikini fell to the ground, Delia pulled my head up and leaned down for a kiss. I smiled against her mouth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hey there! My name is Victor Briggs. I am an avid LitRPG, Gamelit, Cultivation, and Harem Lit reader. Since I've had so much fun reading other books in these genres, I decided to give writing a shot myself.

I hope I did not disappoint.

Feel free to drop by my Facebook page. It is very new and very bleak. Any advice or criticism is welcome.

Thank you all for trying out Dragon Shift! Took me a year to finish, mostly because I stopped and started so many times.

My next one will come out much faster, I promise.