SJ SANDERS

BLOODED LABYRINTH

A DANGEROUS MONSTERS ROMANCE

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Author's Note
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PROLOGUE

Asterion was cursed by the gods. He didn't need to be told to know this. His entire existence was unending carnage. Those who were lost in his labyrinth were sacrificed to his monstrous appetite. An appetite that ever hungered and could not be appeased. Nothing slaked the need that burned continuously within him. Nothing save for the love of a mother who flaunted the gods themselves to see him fed rather than wasting away in Minos's prison, and a sister who comforted him whenever she came to spend a few hours in his company.

But his mother had joined the shades long ago and Ariadne, too, was no more, her lovely long limbs and sweet face nothing more than dust.

Although he knew his mother's love for her monstrous son, he knew that his existence was traded for her complete obedience to Minos. His boyhood memories of her had long since faded. But not so of Ariadne. She was the only one who descended into his shadowy realm between worlds to pass time in his company. She had been the only light in his dark life. In her company, he could find rest.

Love was cruel to have taken her from him.

It was love that persuaded her to save the Athenian sentenced to feed Asterion. It was that love that betrayed him and nearly destroyed him if the gods had not been so cruel as to preserve his life. Locked away in solitude. The terrible cruelty that had been birthed with his enslavement to the labyrinth had not ended with the Kingdom of Minos. The heart of the labyrinth was beyond the boundaries of the mortal world, and so there he remained. Starving, raving, lost in madness until even that became

background noise that he learned to ignore so that he could, for a time, find some small measure of peace.

In the gloom of his labyrinth, the shrines erected within the corridors that had once been painted with the blood of his victims were festooned with flowers that grew in the boundaries of his world, offered up with his prayers for relief from his cursed existence.

The end he begged for never came.

But then something changed.

The worlds shifted, and once again prey was finding its way into the dark stone corridors as the labyrinth found new routes to the world of the living. Humans once again stumbled into his world, one at a time or in pairs. He tried to resist the hunger every time, but it never ended.

He couldn’t stop the hunger.

Blood once again was running through the labyrinth, drawing ravenous spirits back to his abode to feast on the entrails of his kills and drink from the rivers of blood.

He was cursed by the gods.

CHAPTER 1

Vicky was lost. Oh, fuck, was she ever. Her heart plummeted as she skimmed her dim surroundings. Nothing looked familiar. Worse, the deep shadows of the forest seemed to take on an alien life of their own. She stifled a startled yelp as something moved, a darker form slinking among those that surrounded her before disappearing once again.

Nearby, an animal let out a shriek that made the fine hair on her arms stand on end, the flesh pebbling with a chill of terror. She swallowed back the bile that rose up into her throat as she waited, listening intently. Her heartbeat thumped loudly in her ears, but otherwise an unnatural silence had settled once more around her, broken only by the soft whisper of leaves in the wind.

She hoped it was just the wind, at least.

Keeping her footsteps as light as possible, Vicky blazed a path through the brush, intent on getting as far away from the site where some poor creature had met its end. With every step, she cringed at the sound of the brush rustling around her and the faint snap beneath her feet. She was sure it was sending out some of sort of beacon to every predator in the area, alerting them to the easy meal walking through their territory.

Fuck. She never should have set foot inside the forest.

It wasn't like there weren't plenty of warnings to keep fools from doing just that. Although she was newer to the area, tales of the strange forests popping up everywhere had reached her long before she had arrived. She had even seen them from a distance as she wandered, vast forests appearing out of nowhere overnight where there had once been cleared farmland or brush. The sight of them had inspired a trickle of unease that had only

worsened when she heard stories among the haphazard settlements that she passed through. Tales of the tricks that the forests played on unsuspecting people who wandered too far into their depths had been enough to make her avoid the creeping woods wherever possible.

Until it was not.

Vicky shivered, pulling her coat tighter, pretending that it was only due to the chill of the spring air. She stared into the deep hues of brush and leaves, illuminated only by the meager light that managed to get through the canopy.

She should have stayed at the last settlement. Although practically a ghost town, the small group of families would have at the very least offered some safety. If she could have dealt with the suspicious way that they eyed her, she could have taken residence in one of the houses on the fringe of the settlement. Centered around the square of what had once probably been a quaint little southern town, there had been plenty of abandoned homes in good enough condition to make into a home. If she had been able to ignore the stony way the residents watched, all conversation falling silent, their mouths pressed in flat lines of displeasure at her mere presence. Those who had not glowered at her watched her with an open interest that made her skin crawl.

Suspicion was the norm now following the Ravening, but the unwelcoming atmosphere had been so oppressive that she had moved on again after just a scant few days of rest.

Even the trade had been miserable.

Post-Ravening, wandering through the barrens—the stretches of wild, inhospitable land between the settlements—and scavenging had become a way of life for Vicky. Typically, a few weeks of work could buy her a couple months with a comfortable bed to sleep in and a full stomach. But this time, she left the settlement with a pack of food that she doubted would last longer than a month, and a new set of clothes and boots to replace her worn items.

She had been angry, fueled by bitterness, when she had struck out in the early hours the day before. Perhaps if she had not been, she would have noticed that she had entered too far into the forest as she traveled along its edge, taking shelter beneath the trees. If she had, she would not have awoken in the depths of the ever-moving woods.

It had been a mistake. She wanted to scream that into the uncaring forest, and only just managed to stop herself by biting her tongue. Although she had not intended to enter the forest itself, she knew that even the innocent act of going near the wooded area, even its outskirts, looking for edible greens and flowers to supplement the fare traded to her, had been her downfall. Worse, she had chosen to take shelter beneath a little cluster of trees to escape an evening rain shower.

Every decision had paved her way to that moment. There was no escaping that fact, even though it seemed unfair that her misstep had landed her in a place of her nightmares.

Her fingers twisted the ribbon knotted around her neck, the small charm sliding between her fingers. The coin pendant had been a gift from her father when he returned from a business trip to Greece. Supposedly a replica of a coin from the famed city of Knossos in Crete, pressed on one side with the face of Hera and the labyrinth on the reverse, it had been the perfect gift for a ten-year-old obsessed with mythology. Back then, she spent hours dreaming up stories about where it had come from, who might have once touched it. That life, and that little girl, had disappeared with the Ravening. Her mother and siblings died in the aftermath, leaving her and her father alone in the world until he, too, was taken from her. Now, it was a comforting piece of her past and all that she had left from that life before.

If only the charm could do its magic now!

Vicky squinted against the gloom, looking for any semblance of a game trail that could possibly lead her back out. It was unlikely that she would end up anywhere near where she had started, but animals frequently carved distinct paths through their territory to its outer edges. If she could just find one, there was a chance of getting out. There was also a chance of going even deeper into the forest, but she quieted that fear. Seeing how she had no other resources to aid her, she had to take the chance.

The dark foliage around her didn't make it easy. It seemed to converge and blend in a daunting mass that reached out for her with gnarled fingers. Shuddering at the thought—since, apparently, she was determined to spook herself—she continued to scan her surroundings until her breath whooshed out in relief. *There!* Among the bushes, she could see the faint passage cutting through the trees and undergrowth.

Quickening her pace in excitement, she stumbled over an uplifted edge of rock. Thrown off balance, she instinctively stretched out a hand and was

surprised when it smacked against a rough, unyielding surface. Brushing her fingers over the numerous tendrils of vines and leaves, she could feel the rough scrape of stone in the gaps between them. Curious, she peered closer, pulling out an old Zippo from her pocket. She rarely used it outside of starting campfires to preserve her scavenged fuel, but times like this made her grateful to have it. Its flame flickered as she drew it closer to the surface, and her eyebrows rose at the sight of an overgrown stone wall.

"What in the world?" she whispered.

Despite being covered in enough vines to suggest that it had been in that condition for a while, the sight of the wall, though surprising, gave her some hope that it was perhaps an outer perimeter wall of someone's property and a stone walkway. With the darkness settling even thicker through the forest, she hoped it led to an abandoned house with four walls to protect her from whatever strange wildlife that was living in the forest.

"Please, please let there be a house." The faint sound of her voice breaking through the silence was startling to her ears, but some prayers needed to be said aloud. She flicked her Zippo shut and gave the stone surface a grim smile. "I guess there's only one way I'm going to find out."

Keeping one hand on the wall, Vicky walked along its side, relieved when it didn't immediately terminate into broken rubble. That allayed one concern. She only hoped that it would lead her to something fast. The last remnants of sunlight were fading fast, far faster than her plodding progress.

She wasn't the least bit surprised when, minutes later, she was totally encapsulated within inky darkness. She let out a frustrated sigh. She could flick on her Zippo again, but without some kind of rudimentary torch, she didn't relish the idea of burning through all her fuel for so little light. She curled her fingers slightly, feeling the tips scrape against the stone reassuringly. As long as she could feel the wall, she should be okay.

Taking a fortifying breath, she continued forward, the sound of her steps on stone, interrupted and muffled in places by the overgrowth, providing disconcerting fuel for her imagination. Her fingers trailed along the rock, lifting every so often when she was forced to skirt a cluster of large rocks or heavy growth of tangled plants. Those moments left her feeling suspended in darkness—walled in by nothingness—until her hand flattened against the wall once more.

Every scuff of her boots dredged up memories of watching ghoulish *Night of the Living Dead*-type creatures rising out of ruins until she forcibly

quieted them by focusing on the sound of her breathing. She was alive. She was just lost. She wasn't some wandering dead thing or spirit caught in the dark underworld. It was just the dark, unnatural silence in the forest playing with her imagination.

Unbidden, she recalled hearing that the underworld had a section that was a vast forest full of wailing spirits. She shivered and drew in a huge, gulping breath.

She was alive. She breathed, in and out. Nice and steady.

Every breath was calming, reminding her that she was alive, keeping her focused as she walked rather than feeling like some wraith gliding through nothingness. No wraith would make such gusty sounds. Was she breathing too loudly? It sounded loud. She felt certain that something was listening, tracking every breath. She gulped in a breath and held it as she came to a stop, her ears straining for any trace of sound trailing after her.

Nothing.

A weak giggle escaped her and bounced back at her at a startling volume. Vicky froze, her eyes roving helplessly in the dark.

An echo? That couldn't be right.

Stretching out her opposite hand. She slowly side-stepped until her hand flattened on another wall at her other side. Her blood chilled. Digging out her Zippo once more, Vicky ignited the flame and slowly raised her hand, her head tipping back.

Her eyes widened. Above, she could see the perfectly wedged-together blocks of stone. Lichen clung in some parts with clumps of moss, no doubt receiving meager light from some of the larger cracks between the rocks. She would even wager that some of the gaps were cut slits to allow in air and sunlight. They were so frequent and evenly spaced that she imagined that it would be lit well enough to see by if the sun hadn't already set.

None of the gaps, however, were large enough to allow anything of any substantial size in or out. That meant that they were designed to keep dangerous creatures out… or something dangerous within.

Licking her lips, she stepped back a pace. And then another.

"I think… I think I'd better go back."

She winced. Speaking to herself was a bad habit she'd developed after her father passed, driven by some need to be reassured by the sound of her voice, but it was one that was bound to get her killed wherever she was now.

With her small light held in front of her, she spun around and raced forward several steps, only to come to a skidding stop. Frustrated tears sprung to her eyes as she stared at three different branches of the corridor, each one barely visible in her weak light but enough so that her heart dropped. She had no idea which one it was. She had been forced to release her hand from the wall so many times that it could be any of them.

Tears blurred her vision as she looked from one to the other, contemplating each path until a skittering sound made her draw up short. Turning her head back toward the direction she had been heading, she turned the light that way too, her heart hammering louder in her ears as she listened. Rocks fell somewhere in the distance from the direction she had been heading, and her stomach pitched.

Lifting her light to the right, the passage closest to the wall, she bolted down the corridor, the shimmer of her lighter's flame bouncing off the nearest stones, its fuel spending recklessly in her terror. Her stomach continued to roll with nausea as she plunged forward into the darkness, the vines seemingly lifting up from the walls, slowing her progress—taunting her.

From a distance, she could hear a skittering scrape of something in pursuit. The sound was an ominous combination of clicking, like something striking the stones repeatedly, layered with excited chittering and deep growling.

It didn't sound like anything she wanted to encounter in the dark tunnel. Especially as the long corridor seemed to be stretching out, continuing without end ahead of her. Her chest burned as she sprinted, dodging unfamiliar fallen stone that she hadn't recalled being in the path. Her brow furrowed at the sight of them, many coming so close to her that she would have been aware of their presence before.

Her lips parted in horror as understanding sank in.

Oh, fuck! She had gone the wrong way! This wasn't the way she came! Vicky veered right, hoping that it would empty out onto a familiar path in addition to aiding in her escape from whatever creature was pursuing her. Or creatures. There was no way of knowing what was hunting her, much less how many of its number.

As she raced down the hall, she noted the change in the vines and plant life as it became tighter, and the walls narrowed. She swallowed a panicked

cry. This wasn't right, either. The only blessing was that the surrounding silence was only broken by the sound of her rapid footfall.

She drew in a ragged breath. Had she lost it—them?

Hope loosening the cold grip on her chest, she slowed her pace to a walk, her hand resting on the painful stitch in her side as she dragged in large gulps of breath. Listening.

There was a faint click and then another, sending a prickle of horror over her skin. To her dismay, the terrible sound resumed at a fiercer pace, the growls louder and far more numerous, nearly drowning out the chittering. Ducking to the left, she flew, stumbling, down another path, and then dove again down another. One twist led to another, and she sprinted for all that she was worth, praying for an end to come into view, praying that the wild sounds pursuing ever closer would quiet.

It was maddening, and, somehow, as one unfamiliar hall became another, she was certain that she was now lost in some sort of labyrinth of halls.

Jagged rocks scraped against her skin and thorned vines ripped at flesh and cloth as she battled her way past every obstacle.

A scream tore from her throat as she ripped through a thick clump of vines hanging in her path, her fear-clouded mind unable to determine if they had moved or were naturally suspended there. She didn't care; she couldn't focus with any clarity. All she knew and breathed was the instinctual need to escape. Her light flickered and died with the last bit of fuel expended, plunging her into darkness. The chittering and growling rose up behind her, getting progressively louder, drowning out her cries until it too was interrupted by a deep, ferocious bellow that rattled the hall.

Vicky stared sightlessly ahead, her flight down the corridor coming to a stumbling halt as the clicking silenced. The chitter-growls continued in faint, hesitant bursts, but it was as if she were not the only one pausing warily. She heard a click and another, but it didn't sound as if it were getting any closer. Instead, if she wasn't mistaken, it sounded like a slow, reluctant retreat of a predator facing a superior one.

She swallowed thickly, bile trying to choke her once again.

Gods, she was fucked. At least without fuel in her lighter, she wasn't going to be forced to witness her end. She certainly wasn't going to be able to outrun it, not with the heavy thumps that approached at a ground eating pace. Whatever it was, its stride had to be huge.

Squeezing her eyes shut may have been foolish considering how dark it was, but she did so anyway. She could feel the hot billow of its breath caress her skin, and her chest tightened as her breath seized in wait for the killing strike. She raised her hand to her charm and gripped the coin tight.

“Daddy,” she whispered, hoping that he would be waiting for her on the other side.

CHAPTER 2

Asterion paused, staring down at the female curiously, the haze of blood lust clinging just barely to his mind. The flush of her blood roaring in her veins incited his terrible hunger, but it was dulled by another warm, seductive scent mingled with it and the startling sight of her submission, her head bowed to him.

Unlike other prey that had tried to evade him or attack him, her eyes were squeezed so tightly shut that her nose wrinkled up from the effort. Where she had desperately fled from the flesh-eating satyrs who had infested his labyrinth in recent centuries, there was a sense of surrender in her submission that gave him pause.

More than that, her single word startled him as she whispered a soft plea.

Daddy? He was oddly intrigued and… charmed by the complete submission held within that one word, yielding everything up to his whim and control. It was perplexing too that it should strike a chord within him. It made him want to dominate and consume in an entirely different fashion than his cursed nature.

He huffed and snorted, blasting back wisps of her hair from her face. He had the advantage over her that he could see her as clearly as if it were day. She couldn't hide anything, not even the tiny grimace of her full lips pressing together in the dark. Asterion cautiously stepped back a pace, his nostrils flaring as he drew her scent deep into his olfactory glands. Sweet feminine flesh, ripe with health. Her scent was arousing, flooding his cock with blood so that it stiffened uncomfortably beneath the swath of material around his hips.

Curious.

One of his broad ears flicked in consideration.

Was this a trick or some trap designed by men to capture him? Surely the sweetness that enticed him was nothing more than a clever potion rubbed into her flesh to bait him.

A blasting gust of air left him. That had to be what it was.

His ears pricked toward the corridor ahead of him, listening for any other signs of human life as he scented the air. Outside of his unnatural hunger, he did not especially enjoy killing humans, but he would have no compunction over killing one invading his labyrinth to seek his death. He had dealt with would-be Theseus-enamored "heroes" often enough over the ages. The isolation of his labyrinth had relieved him of that particular burden, for a time. If they had returned as well, he would deal with them with ruthless efficiency. There was a time where he had once enjoyed the challenge of facing a warrior, their taste being all the more succulent for the effort, but that time had long since passed even before the labyrinth pulled away from the mortal world. Now, he was merely tired.

His eyes fell again on the female in front of him. He should cease hesitating and kill her. He could promise her a quick death at the very least before he dealt with her accomplices. Still, he had to admire the courage it took for a female to go along with such plans. He hadn't recalled a single one willingly coming into his labyrinth since the days of Ariadne's presence there.

Grunting, his gaze fell upon her hand fisted tightly around an item strung on a ribbon around her neck. *A token from the gods of some kind, no doubt.* Not that it would save her. Such things never saved anyone who entered and stirred his hunger. Yet never before had his hunger for blood and flesh warred so strongly with the carnal hunger that currently pulsed within his shaft.

He dragged his wide, flat tongue over his fangs, and silently stepped back several paces before falling into a watchful silence as he observed her, uncertain of what he wished to taste first. He knew from experience that the blood of women could be intoxicatingly sweet, and yet there seemed to be a sweeter elixir promised from the scent drifting up from her body.

One of the female's eyes pried open as she glanced sightlessly in his direction.

“Uh… are you there?” she whispered, her voice broken and trembling with obvious fear.

His stomach soured with the knowledge that his presence alone put that there. While he couldn’t ignore that it was a natural part of his relationship with his human prey, he disliked the scent of her fear overwhelming the sweeter, more delicious flavors in her natural perfume.

He grunted, his ears turning toward her. “Are you so eager for death?” he rumbled out in a low, quiet voice.

His voice rasped with barely contained violence and bloodlust, and she visibly shivered at its sound. Her skin pebbling, she shook her head frantically, a pale, crystalline tear escaping from beneath her lashes.

“N… no. I… I’m sorry.”

His eyes narrowed. “For what? For your part in the plan to destroy me?”

It had been so long since Asterion had conversed with anyone outside of the troublesome creatures that shared his home that his voice was raw and his throat ached, but he required answers.

Her mouth gaped, her eyes snapping open and widening in a shocked expression that was almost convincing.

“*What?* No!” She rubbed her arms as she sightlessly sought him out, her brow furrowed, the entreaty in her eyes stirring something within him best left alone. “I’m lost. I don’t even know where I am, much less how to get out of here.” She ran a trembling hand through her hair, her words so soft and unsteady he only heard due to the grace of his superior hearing. “I certainly wouldn’t have been running blindly through this place. That’s pretty damned unprepared for someone striking out to murder anyone, I would say.”

Asterion snorted, pushing back his unexpected amusement at her words and the strange protective need rising beneath the desire riding beneath his flesh. The female was good. He had to give her that. No doubt, had she been born a male, she would have been a lauded and accomplished actor in the greatest plays at Knossos. He would not be deceived so easily.

He swept a critical eye over her, noting the simple braid that framed one side of her face that bound the front part of her hair, as well as the coarse clothes, woolen coat, and thick boots she wore. The pack strapped around her shoulders appeared particularly well-worn and beaten. Aside from her clean, pleasing scent, there was nothing about her appearance that

suggested that she was being employed to act as any kind of seductress, and yet she was enchanting as if she were Circe herself.

"We will see about that," he rumbled, dropping his large horned head so that he was eye-level with her. He bared his fangs in a silent warning as instinct demanded, despite her inability to witness it. "Do not tempt the monster by fighting or fleeing. Understand, little female?"

Mouth snapping shut, she paled and eyed him warily before nodding repeatedly in a gratifying affirmation. This one was intelligent, at least.

Leaning forward, his large hands nearly engulfed her small frame as he lifted her up off her feet. The moment her boots left the ground, her breath rushed out of her in a tiny, terrified squeak. Despite her reaction betraying her fear, she thankfully did not unduly struggle in his grip. In fact, her body molded against him when he pulled her up against his chest, her softness stirring his hungers higher, though he struggled to differentiate them. His claws dug against her clothing as he warred with himself to win back his control.

Although he still suspected a trap, some small part of him was aware and dismayed by the knowledge that she would not lean into him in such a manner if she were able to see him. No female would willingly surrender her care to a beast. In the past, when he had attempted to control his monstrous appetite, the females he had attempted to spare had ignored his warnings and pleas. Every one of them fled, willingly choosing death when they caught a glimpse of him.

His grip tightened on the female in his arms. Although it had no less bothered him to consume the males, murdering and consuming the flesh of the females he tried to save had broken his spirit, so that he had quit trying after several years

Why again now?

Why risk reopening old wounds for a female whose intoxicating scent worked to ensnare him?

There was no logic to his decision.

Grunting unhappily, Asterion strode through the winding corridors of the labyrinth, listening to the murmur of the intelligence that inhabited the structure. The voice that comforted him in his lonely youth and encouraged him to take out his rage on the race of men who imprisoned him was always present. It watched as he passed vine-covered statues of the gods who stared

at him with condemning eyes, as his hooves clopped across the stone floors that led deeper to the center.

He would get the answers he sought once they arrived at the labyrinth's center.. Once they arrived, there would be no means of escape for her. The doors of the inner chamber into the labyrinth were concealed and sealed by his blood. Not even the satyrs, who now shared the halls at the labyrinth's welcome, could find their way in.

His body hardened and ached, his hunger twisting his belly with need as he thought of having the small warm female in his den. All to himself without risking danger of another trying to take to his prey.

That was all she was in the end—prey. He would do well to remember that.

CHAPTER 3

Vicky leaned into the body of the creature carrying her. She had no idea what he could even be or where she was for that matter, but he was undeniably strong…and very warm. Fur brushed her nose when she snuggled her cold face into the warmth as she tried to ignore the metallic musky odor of blood clinging to him. Beneath the blood, there was something else that drew her and had her burrowing closer in an attempt to breathe in that scent only. Smoke and juniper. It reminded her of winter fires roaring in the hearth with just a hint of citrus and spice.

The warmth emanating from the large, muscular body pressed up against her and the scent of his flesh worked a surprising magic, seeping deep into her bones, muscles, and tissue. She began to relax by degrees, a lassitude falling over her that alarmed her even as she melted against her captor's fur.

The adrenaline that had saved her through her mad dash through the labyrinth was crashing fast. Even though she still trembled with residual fear, she was just too comfortable and too tired to put up any further fight at the moment.

Vicky let out a raspy sigh. It was difficult to put up a fight when, for the first time in a great many weeks, she felt warm. She couldn't fight her way out of a sack much less fend off the monstrously huge creature carrying her. Through the fog of exhaustion filling her mind, she considered that if something was going to eat her in this awful place, at least he had the mercy to provide some comfort to her first. Perhaps he would even wait until she was eased into sleep to deal the killing stroke to save her from the worst of the terror and pain.

She had no wish to die. Far from it. She was just so damned tired. And so very warm. The furred arms holding her tightened, his thick muscles pressing against her in a firm band as the creature picked his way quickly through the corridors, taking turn after turn at a pace several times that of what she would have been able to walk. She could feel the cold air stinging the side of her cheek and stirring her hair from his ground-eating pace.

Other than the heavy stomp of his feet, the silence that surrounded them had an ominous weight to it that was both frightening and reassuring. The unnatural quality of the silence naturally terrified her. Devoid of even the slightest scurry or hum of rodents and insects, it was as if everything was still, watching the creature passing through the corridors. That it was also reassuring was a more complicated matter, one that veered a little too close to danger for her comfort, and that was the knowledge that everything else there, even whatever had pursued her, was afraid of the beast who had her now.

And he was a beast. From the billowing huffs of his breath to the inhumanely wide expanse of fur-covered muscle, every inch of him was of monstrous proportions. Even his rage-filled roars were not sounds that any human could make. That he could converse like a man, however, gave her a small amount of hope that she may just be able to reason with him.

Not that mankind was particularly reasonable or moved to kindness or charity in recent years. If humanity was the stick against which everything else was to be measured, then she was in a lot of trouble. With the Ravening, humankind had devolved into madness. In her years of roaming, she had seen enough human depravation to know that they didn't need any help reaching new lows of cruelty.

The steady beat of her captor's heart against her ear, however, lulled her into a small measure of comfort. He was not acting on excitement or aggression. Other than the grueling pace he set; she wouldn't have known that he was in any hurry at all. It certainly didn't tax him to move at the rate that he was, and that made her wonder how fast he could race through the halls in pursuit of prey.

She shivered as her imagination picked up on that thought. She would never be able to outrun him should he decide to pursue. She could picture the walls skipping by; her feet turning down one corridor then another, as his hot breath fanned on her from behind as he mercilessly gained on her, his arms coming around her and… she shook her head, her teeth sinking

into her bottom lip as a chill raced through her body that was equal measures of fear and arousal from a peculiar desire that she could not explain away.

Shoving that thought back into the shadowy recesses from which it sprang.

Drawing in another deep scent-laden breath, she turned her head just enough to notice that torches were lit, their golden-red illumination bounced on the walls, pushing back the darkness, illuminating small patches of worn gray stone lined with vines and foliage from the darkest black to pale silver. There was little actual green to be seen. What little there was possessed a grayish tint and seemed to grow exclusively closer to the vents cut into the stone above.

Frowning, she turned her attention to the black fur that brushed her nose. Although the fur on the chest was like velvet over the skin, she noted it was longer and thicker around the powerful shoulders and neck. A long thin braid swayed across one pectoral just inches from her face. Bound with red thread that contained a single blue bead, it was an element that was almost human in contrast to the dark fur that boasted even darker, splattered patches that she suspected were the source of the bitter blood perfuming the immediate air around her face.

Swallowing back another surge of bile, Vicky braced her hand against the thick muscle of his chest and attempted to push back to get a look at exactly what sort of creature held her. His reaction was lightning quick, his clawed hand burrowing into her hair as he crushed her more firmly against his chest and held her in place.

“Not yet,” he rasped.

She shivered at the dark rumble of his voice and subtly twisted in his grasp. The heart beneath her ear and palm began to thump faster. Unsure of the reason for his quickening pulse, she froze, her breaths coming out in tiny little nervous pants.

The hand in her hair gently stroked, the claws lightly scraping her scalp in what could only be interpreted as a soothing gesture.

“Be at ease, little female. No harm will come to you as long as you obey the rules.”

She shook her head, the fur buffing her cheek as tears of fear sprung to her eyes. “I don’t understand. What rules? Why can’t you just let me go? Please”

“I cannot,” he grumbled unhappily. “I have been held within here long enough to know now that the labyrinth never again releases its prey.” He huffed and at the edge of her vision, just above her, the corded muscle of his thick neck shifted and became taut beneath the dense fur as he seemed to turn his head one way and then the other.

A labyrinth? Vicky drew her hand across his chest and tucked it in between them to finger the coin around her neck.

“B… but a labyrinth is just a stone prison,” she whispered.

Again, she became aware of the movement of his head above her, though this time, she had the impression that he was shaking it by the quick movement of his neck muscles.

“Perhaps that is how it began, but it has not been that for as long as I’ve known it. It was old even when I was dropped within, with a reputation of its own.”

The clomp of his feet on the stone lent a more ominous backdrop to his words. She cringed into him, uncertain if she wanted to know and have her hopes of escape burst, but he continued to speak, the rasp of his deep voice amplified by the walls surrounding them.

“It was said to be a path to the underworld. It is possible that there are corridors that extend into the lower world, but I refuse to search them out. I’ve made my refuge and survived here when I was disposed of here to die. The Labyrinth nurtured me, but it never released me. Nor has it ever released anyone but one, and he had assistance from my sister. Her powerful magic that allowed her to travel the labyrinth unharmed, influenced it to release him. If only she would have done me that kindness in his stead.”

The last was said with such bitter quietness that Vicky might have missed it if she weren’t pressed against his chest, the rumble of his words distinct against her ear.

Moved by the pain buried beneath those quiet words, her lips parted with the intent of asking him why his sister had not released him, but he drew in a ragged breath and began to speak again.

“The rules are simple. Never run. I will hunt that which runs, and there are other things that dwell here now that will do the same. Never struggle. That which struggles to escape is prey. I am bringing you to a place of safety. None of the creatures of the labyrinth can enter my abode. Never leave the safety of the abode. No matter what you hear or see, to leave it is

to court death within the labyrinth. The labyrinth yearns for blood… but it will not have yours."

She shivered against him, the tremor running through her with more strength than previously as she embraced the true horror of the situation. She was trapped inside like a hapless bug lured by the sweet sap of a carnivorous plant only to be caught within and consumed.

Helplessly caught, Vicky went limp against him, her body trembling every so often with shock, reminding her that she was still alive. The creature hugged her tighter, a rumble echoing up from his chest as he continued to lightly scrape her scalp with his claws, as if he were attempting to soothe her. She was too emotionally numb to be comforted. All she could do was stare blankly at the rush of light from the torches on the wall and the light stirring of the thicker fur on his arms as he walked.

It was only at length that she noticed he began to slow. His body hunched slightly over her as he ducked through a series of narrow entrances, his body shifting awkwardly to slide through the barriers that felt as if he were moving through an invisible membranous substance that was more felt beneath the skin than physically present. There was a sensation of wetness and an electric tingle than ran through her that made her skin prickle, her fingers scratched at his chest at the disconcerting feeling that made her stomach twist with nausea.

Then it was over.

She was immediately bathed in a comfortable warmth as a soft gurgle of water sounded somewhere in the near distance. The source of the warmth from what she could see was a long basin that ran along one wall filled with fire. She stared at the fire, watching the shadows shifting around it as it danced, when suddenly she was lifted away and set on her feet.

Caught off guard, Vicky stumbled a step, her head whipping around as she took in her surroundings. An enormous type of platform bed dominated one part of the room covered with thick furs, and a sort of archaic-looking stone stove was set up in one corner next to a cooking spit, glowing with the hot coals that were visible within it. There were a couple of small tunnels that led off from another wall, one of which she suspected was the source of the water that she heard. Although heavily shadowed and primitive, it had a reassuring peacefulness to it, as if it were undisturbed by whatever things hunted outside those walls.

That didn't necessarily mean she was safe. There was still the elephant in the room… or rather, her captor monster.

She slowly turned toward him just as he took a heavy step back from her.

"Do not be afraid," he whispered.

Swallowing back her nerves, she allowed her eyes to travel his length as he slowly came into view.

Eyes widening, her breath stuttered in a sharp wheeze as her heart leapt in terror. A clammy chill fell over her as her eyes roved over him in horror.

The massive chest that had cradled her almost appeared carved from stone, as were the hard abs that descended down toward a tapered vee disappearing beneath a swath of fabric belted securely around his hips, leaving the side of one powerfully muscled thigh and calf bare. From there, though, the leg twisted back into a thick hock that descended into a noticeably bovine leg that ended in a hoof.

What the hell?

It wasn't like she had never seen some of the monsters that had migrated into her world following the ravening, but usually from a distance, and nothing quite like this. Every inch of powerful, lethal muscle was twisted into a monstrous form, more beast than man.

A thickly tufted tail flick, and her eyes rested on it for a moment, putting her briefly at level with the intimidating bulge between his thighs.

Moving on!

She jerked her gaze upward, back up past his chest again, the fur thickening into a long mane of dark hair that spilled around his shoulders. She caught sight of more than one braid peeking out from within the thick mass. A long black ear flicked, and the firelight bounced off the powerful ebony horns sprouting from the broad brow of a face that was bull-like and yet not in its shape.

It was more like a demonic bull creature than anything as natural looking as a bull, an illusion that was reinforced by the wicked fangs she caught a glimpse of as his mouth parted.

His warning forgotten, Vicky stumbled back, her heart leaping to her throat. She half turned as if to flee when his powerful hand snapped out, capturing her arm in his grip so that he could swing her back around with an incredible force that offered no room for denial or escape. He towered over her, his expression stark and terrible. His eyes glanced down at her arm and

with a grimace, he released her, allowing her to sink to the floor with a pitiful moan.

She was trapped in a labyrinth with the monster of all ancient monsters… the terrible beast of Minos, the Minotaur!

He crouched, lowering himself toward the floor so that he didn't tower over her, his tail swishing around his legs. He was like a demon, waiting, biding his time to kill her if she made even one wrong move. Panting nervously, she turned her head away, watching him only from the side of her eye so that she knew his location. From her peripheral vision, she watched him stand again and stride over to a wall to hang a giant double headed ax he was carrying on it, the hiss of metal on stone loud as his arms stretched out from his side, palms up, his claw-tipped fingers splayed in a universal gesture of being unarmed.

Except he was armed. Those claws alone and massive hands could easily kill her in one strike.

A weak sound of hysterical laughter escaped as she gripped her pendant tight. This eater of men and women promised to keep her safe? What was coming to keep her safe from his appetite?

CHAPTER 4

Asterion eyed the female in front of him with concern. Tears of terror were stark in her eyes and her entire body trembled where she sprawled on the floor. All things considered, she was handling the sight of him better than most, and that gave him hope.

"Do not be afraid, little female," he reiterated, projecting what he hoped was some small amount of gentleness into his tone.

Not that he knew anything of gentleness. The only small amount he had ever experienced was what little he received from Ariadne, and that was so long ago that it was nothing more than a dim memory swathed in the pain of her betrayal. Gnashing his teeth with the anger that the memory of his sister brought, he shoved that thought firmly back. He winced when the female in front of him scurried back away from him as if he had just threatened violence upon her.

He lifted his hand to reassure her, and she ducked, drawing out a frustrated growl from him.

"Be still. I have no interest in harming you. You are safe here as long as the rules are heeded."

When she made no move to acknowledge him, he blew out an angry sigh and backed away from her. Clearly, this was getting him nowhere. Perhaps with some space, she would become more comfortable with his presence. If only she did not run.

He prayed to the merciless gods who warded his prison that she did not run.

Turning away, he strode toward the spit, pulling his recent kill from the sack tied at his belt. Three rabbits dangled by the ears from his fist. Fat

burrowing creatures such as these were at least plentiful in the labyrinth. Not that he had many qualms over what he ate anymore. Even the satyrs made a meal when he had the occasion to kill one. The creatures were quick and smart, and he had no interest in feeding on them unless they were foolish enough to attack him or attract his predatory instinct.

When they had first made an appearance, he had hoped that they might be companions against his loneliness and even had slaked his lust with some of their number until he realized a terrible thing about those who found their way into the dark depths of his prison. The satyrs did not distinguish between their hungers. Sex and food were one and the same, and they were quick to attempt to consume those that ignited their passionate hungers.

Asterion growled, tearing the hide from the rabbits' flesh. It was why he had been drawn to investigate when he heard their frenzied gleeful hunt. There were few things that could excite them so. Being slain by him would have been far more merciful than a death at their hands.

He tipped his head in consideration and rubbed at the base of one horn.

Why had he not attempted to consume the female? She was running and acting in a way that all prey behaves, inciting his hungers… and yet, when he reached for her, he hadn't been able to bear the thought of removing the light of life from her eyes.

Not that his hunger had abated any.

His cock twitched beneath the double belted chiton falling from his waist. He still hungered for her. He wanted to taste her flesh and blood, he wanted to indulge his every carnal lust. But he did not want her to die. He hungered for a companion as much as he did to indulge his bestial appetites.

Though those appetites were nothing, if not considerable. Just holding her in his arms had been a test of his will. Every shift of her body against his made him want to devour her.

He slanted a covert gaze in her direction, noting that she still had not moved from where she had dropped. She watched him, though. Her eyes tracked every movement of his claws, hands, and arms. He bit back a frustrated snarl. She was staring at him as if she expected him to suddenly turn them on her in violence.

Had he not proven enough that he would not harm her? He carried her through the dangerous corridors of the labyrinth, sheltering her with his

own body. He opened the heart of the maze to her so that she could enter his abode.

Grunting, he spitted the rabbits and rubbed fresh herbs into their flesh with a practiced hand. His sister had brought in the small plants when he was still young and planted them in the smaller antechamber where they received a bit more light from the carved grating. That small gift and the chitons she offered to him, bespelled to never decay and refresh themselves over night for as long as they remained in his possession were the only trappings that he possessed that reminded him that he not just a beast but a man as well.

In a matter of speaking.

Laying them over the bed of hot coals, Asterion turned his attention to stirring up the fire once more until it leapt and kissed the meat hanging over it. It didn't take long for the sizzle of hot grease hitting the coals and the scent of cooking meat to fill the room. It was only then that he heard a shuffle of movement.

Tipping his ear in the direction of the sound, he turned the rabbits, rumbling to himself. Hunger, as he knew well, was a good incentive for curiosity. Not wanting to startle her, he kept his back to her as he continued to work over their meal. Only when it was done did he straighten, pick up a large clay bowl from his crude stone table and walk over into the light-filled antechamber. His guest may not eat if he was present and watching, but he would occupy himself for a while in his little sanctuary to give her time to eat her fill in peace.

Perhaps later, when she was feeling more confident, he would share his special place with her. He smiled at the thought as he stepped inside the antechamber and breathed deep the combined fragrances of all the plant life within. Drawing in a pleasing breath, he looked around, trying to see how she might perceive it.

He could not imagine how she would not find it beautiful.

Light filled every inch of the space, coming through numerous small floral-like carved vents in a natural stone-worked grating. For all his life, he had tried to figure out the source of the warm sunlight and had failed. Even the seemingly delicate stone working was stronger than it appeared when he had thought, in one of his youthful rebellions, to attempt to break through it. He never saw the sky except glimpsed through the carved vents in the upper

parts of the labyrinth, and he did not care to leave himself exposed in the hunting grounds of the other creatures for any longer than he had to.

This room, thus, had become his sanctuary. Filled with light and possessing a natural spring, it was the only source of beauty he had ever really known. And there, in the middle, a pair of peach trees grew, their limbs brushing the top of the roof above. Some of the branches disappeared entirely into the grating and vents, but the labyrinth seemed to adjust around their presence.

The walls continuously reformed themselves, so it was very much as alive as he had said aloud. Its sentience was not human, or like any other being caught inside, but something colder, even as it took care to nurture the things that benefited it. His existence there fed it and benefited it and so it saw that he, too, was fed and cared for. The small berry bushes, the peach trees, and the herbs kept alive in a timeless fashion was a testament to that.

Reaching up, Asterion plucked several round globes of fruit from the branches, taking care not to tangle his large horns and he filled his bowl at a leisurely pace. He did not hear any activity coming from the main chamber, but that did not mean anything. His human was small and quite probably light on her feet, especially if she wanted to move thinking he would be unaware.

Finally, he heard it, the softest brush of small human feet on the stone floors. He grinned triumphantly and turned toward the spring to refill one of the small jugs shelved on a carved-out nook in the wall off to the side of it with fresh water.

With his simple offerings in hand, he returned to the main chamber, his gaze falling on the spit where one of the rabbits was missing. He refrained from seeking out the location of his female. Instead, he walked by the spit as if nothing was amiss, carrying the fruit and water jug to the table, his fur prickling with the sense of eyes watching him.

Ignoring his companion's presence to the best of his ability—a difficult task with the delicious flavor of her natural perfume thickening the air of his abode—he attended to his meal, consuming two of the rabbits and leaving the remaining ones to keep warm over the coals for later.

Eating his fill of meat and fruit, he eventually retreated to the antechamber to bathe in the spring to remove the grease and fruit juice from his fur as well as the blood that had dried in uncomfortable, stiff patches all over him. Most of the blood was not his own, but there were at least a few

scabs that peeled and opened a bit under his ministrations, stinging at the touch of the cool water. They bled for only the briefest moment before washing clean.

His quick healing was one of the few blessings of his cursed existence. The other was his general good health. While he still questioned whether or not his immortality was a good thing, that it wasn't plagued by any manner of illness was at the very least in his favor. The gods could have been far crueler in devising his fate.

It was for that reason he did not curse them. Though at many times he felt justified in doing so. And some of that was out of respect for his sister that he still continued to visit the ancient shrines scattered through the labyrinth to pay his respects. He did not believe as she did that the gods did not hate him. Why else would he exist in the state that he did? Ariadne had attempted to assure him otherwise many times. His birth that was a punishment to their parents had nothing to do with their decision to violate the nature of the labyrinth and seal him within it. She had been certain that unholy act had changed the labyrinth and made its thoughts toward humanity deadly.

Pouring a large jug of water over his head, thoroughly dousing his mane and horns, Asterion considered her argument for the first time in a great many years, pushing aside his pain to recall her observations. He remembered the way she had sat on the rocky ledge as he was now, bathing her feet in the water, a small smile at the simple pleasure on her face as she spoke.

"The labyrinth was not made this way, Asterion. It has always been a mystic portal between worlds, allowing us to seek and learn the greater mysteries. At least that is what it was in the time of our forefathers, and theirs before them. Long before Father claimed it as his, the labyrinth drew many to experience its mysteries and to pledge themselves to the gods of the hidden road."

If she was correct and the labyrinth hated humanity as much as it seemed to love him, then he was definitely going to need to keep a careful watch on his little human. Sooner or later, it would become impatient for her blood.

With that uncomfortable thought lingering in his mind, and the silence from the main chamber adding to his disconcertment, Asterion rose and shook the water from his fur as much as he could before hurrying back to

the main chamber. He had to assure himself that she was still safely there within his abode. Although aware that the thunder of his hooves hitting the rock so quickly could frighten her, he could not force himself to slow. Instead, he flew into the room, panic swelling within him as his eyes turned sharply around the room only to fall at last on the small feminine form slumped at the table.

Lips twitching, he walked to her side and chuckled at the grease and fruit juice smeared across her lips and cheeks, her mouth parted in a soft snore. Grabbing a rag from near his stove, he dampened it with water and gently slid it over the delicate skin of her face and hands, washing away traces of dirt, grime, and the remaining evidence of her meal.

Once she was clean, he carefully lifted her into his arms so as not to wake her, enjoying the warm stir of her breath against his chest. He indulged himself in the pleasure of holding her for several minutes as he gave his bed a long, considering glance.

There was only one place for them to sleep. As much as he did not wish to give up his only comfort, he also did not wish to see such a small delicate female sleeping draped over the table or on the floor. At the same time, he did not wish for her to awaken terrorized by the sight of him lying beside her. As delectable as all her scents were—even the fear scent that intrigued the predator within him—he did not wish for her to look on him in a way that was plagued by that emotion for much longer.

He shook his head in annoyance at the direction of his thoughts. Why was he even debating the matter? She would become accustomed to his presence sooner or later. Besides, there was no reason for either of them to be uncomfortable. His sleeping platform was more than big enough for them both. He would just have to take care to keep to one side. He did not wish to scare her too much or accidentally crush her beneath his weight in his sleep.

Laying her on his bed, he braced his weight on it with one knee as he covered her with the thick furs before he too climbed in and wearily allowed himself to drift into slumber.

CHAPTER 5

Vicky smiled sleepily, burrowing into the warmth surrounding her. It was strange that the sun wasn't in her face, but she wasn't about to quibble over small mercies. She wasn't of the mind to move any time soon, anyway. She was so incredibly warm. And whatever she was pressed up against smelled good too. Did she spill something on her blanket? No… more like on the fur sleeping pad she used. She rubbed her cheek against the soft fur, breathing in the scent. What was that smell?

She couldn't recall having anything that smelled like that. The bit of cologne that she had found in salvage was sparingly used, even though she enjoyed the pleasant tones of amber and musk. But this didn't smell anything like that, and she had run out of the cologne a short while back.

Mumbling to herself, Vicky stretched with a quiet moan of pleasure. Her pillow shuddered on her cheek and a warm gust tousled her hair. She frowned in her sleep. That wind was unseasonably warm. Extreme changes in the weather were never a good sign from what she recalled. Best to just enjoy the simple comfort while she could, then.

Tangling her hand into thick fur, she snuggled in closer, rubbing languidly against it. She scowled again. There was an uncomfortably hard lump pressed against her belly. *Fucking rocks.* She shifted against it, but when that didn't dislodge it, she sleepily began to lift her knee to shove it aside when a low, very deep moan vibrated against her. Instinctively, she froze, a cold chill suddenly running through her when something beneath her furs shifted and a distinctive hand gripped her bottom, pressing that lump even more firmly into her.

Shying away, Vicky squeaked and attempted to wriggle free as she was enclosed even tighter against the fur, a rumbling growl filling her ears.

"You seek to escape, little female?" a voice rasped above her head as a surprisingly warm, velvety soft surface brushed against her forehead and back into her hair.

Those words, and the deep growl of the masculine voice cut through sleepy fog over her mind and Vicky bolted upright. Or would have if the arms around her didn't tighten further, pinning her helplessly in place while her heart hammered like a snared rabbit. The long, thick shaft pressed against her leapt with an excitement that made her tremble.

The Minotaur!

"Please," she choked out, her words halting when she felt the slight prick of his claws.

His displeased growl shot through her, and she nearly wept at the horrific train of thoughts running through her head. There was no telling what the beast would do to her. Eat her? Rape her? Both? She had nearly worked herself into a good panic when, after a stretch of silence, it was followed by a billowing, grunted sigh. She toppled over with another indignant squeak when he surged up, pushing to his feet.

Blinking up at her captor in the soft lighting, Vicky watched as he rubbed one horn with his large hand before dragging his fingers through his mane in a distinctly human expression of frustration. His eyes narrowed on her unhappily, but he shook his head, his massive dark horns cutting through the air, and spun away, his long legs carrying him away from her quickly. Her eyes widened fearfully as he headed toward a deeply grooved wall with the realization that he intended to leave.

He was going to leave her there… alone!

Vicky scrambled to her feet in a rush, half stumbling as she chased after him. "Wait! Don't leave me! Please!"

He tossed her a disgruntled and impatient look over his shoulder without so much as slowing his pace.

"I go to hunt," he snapped. "Stay here."

In the next moment, he ducked his head, angling his body to the side. There was a shift around him that blurred his edges enough that Vicky rubbed her eyes, thinking that there was something wrong with her vision, and then he was gone.

Vicky stared intently at the space for a long moment, bewildered. He had just disappeared. How was that even possible? More importantly, how did he get out? This was her best opportunity to make a run for it and try to find her way out of the labyrinth. There had to be a way back out into the forest. The minotaur could stick his “rules” up his ass.

Though she couldn’t seem to successfully ignore that whole, don’t leave the abode because the labyrinth was death bit. It could just be a tactic to try and frighten her, or he could be completely serious and leaving might be a death sentence.

Approaching slowly, she continued to eye the space as she nibbled at her bottom lip anxiously. There was a definite groove there, but she couldn’t see any kind of doorway. Uncertain, she moved closer, waving her hand over the space in front of her until she finally flattened her hand against the stone. Nothing.

“What the hell?” she whispered.

Frantically, Vicky ran her hands over the wall, her fingernails digging into any crack or crevice in search of a mechanism or handhold that might reveal a doorway. She dipped her fingers into one particularly deep crack, only to jerk her hand back with a small shriek at the sensation of something firmly gripping her fingers and a tickling sensation brushing across the back of her hand. Reacting on pure instinct, she ripped her hand free and yelped in pain and then again in horror at the large black and red centipede scurrying up her wrist. With a shrieked curse, she shook it free before proceeding to stomp it beneath her boots into the ground.

“Shit! Fuck!” she continued to gasp as she rubbed the back of her hand numbly after finally stepping away from it to stare down at its pulverized remains.

She rapidly became aware of a stinging sensation that shot through her hand beneath her fingertips, making her wince and draw her hand up to inspect it. Even in the low lighting of the room, she could see the trail of three deep scratches that vaguely resembled claw marks not unlike scratches she received from the neighbor’s cat she tried to pet as a child scored into her skin. It had felt like someone, or something, had grabbed her hand.

She winced and shook her hand in an attempt to relieve the sting. It had certainly hurt enough when she had pulled free. What the hell could have grabbed her? Whatever it was, she wouldn’t feel comfortable in the room

unless she was certain that nothing was going to unexpectedly make an appearance in there with her the moment that she let her guard down.

Hoping that she wasn't about to do something phenomenally stupid by investigating, though maintaining a safe distance, she crept closer to the small crevice, her brow scrunching as she peered at it. Her expression slowly morphed into a confused frown.

She couldn't see how even a whole hand would have been pushed through from the opposite of the wall. She had very small hands and had only just barely been able to slip hers inside. Whatever the case, there certainly wasn't any sign that she could see now of clawed hands reaching out for her.

Giving a weak laugh, Vicky backed away again and shivered as she skirted around the remains of the centipede.

"Probably just got my hand struck in a tight spot and scratched it on some sharp rocks in there. Them lining up in a way that looks like claw marks is just a freaky coincidence. Don't go losing your mind now, Vicky."

The pep talk didn't help.

There was something so not right about the whole situation that the idea of setting foot in the labyrinth made her want to throw up. Sure, it could be coincidence and her overactive imagination at work but in a place like this, the likelihood of it being something far worse was a chance that she didn't want to take.

"Yeah, I think I am just going to stay here where I'm at then," she muttered to herself with a shiver. "No playing hide and seek with whatever murderous things are in the walls for me."

Better the monster that had rescued her and that she could see than the invisible one that seemed eager to ensnare her and apparently had a taste for blood.

Spinning away, she raced back toward the bed and threw herself onto the platform. Pulling her legs in close, she burrowed under the furs. The monsters in the walls could have them. She wasn't planning on moving from the bed at all if she could help it.

Her bladder took that moment to remind her that it was uncomfortably full. Groaning, Vicky threw her feet back over the side of the platform and slid off the bed. Keeping on her toes as if not letting her heel touch the ground would do anything to evade a potential threat, Vicky hurried off in search of a place to relieve herself.

As she scrambled around the room, she thoroughly cursed the minotaur's furry hide. The very least he could have done was show her where to pee if he had planned to keep her trapped in there. Her curses rapidly became a lot more inventive and louder when her search turned up nothing useful. She certainly wasn't going to attempt exploring either of the two corridors leading off from the room. Not when the light from the fire basin did not seem to penetrate either of them. It was a pity that the light from the strange, undying fire did not extend further than the main room. She certainly wasn't going down into the two unknown, pitch-black tunnels after her last experience of sticking her hand in a dark hole where it didn't belong. With her damned luck, the water source would have something living in it ready to eat her. Who knew what kind of creatures her captor lived with if the centipede was anything to go by.

In a moment of sheer embarrassment, she reluctantly found a space near a wall that wasn't too dark to take care of her business. Her cheeks flamed with humiliation for every second that she squatted there and continued to do so long after she hurried back over to the bed.

CHAPTER 6

Asterion paused in the corridor, his fur standing on end as a sensation of being watched washed over him. His preternatural vision sharpened in the dim illumination as he turned his head, seeking the source of the sensation. Frustration unfurled in his gut at the delay. He had been gone far too long and was eager to return to his human, which made his mood all the fouler at being detained to deal with the creature stalking him.

"Come out now, and I may not break your neck at first opportunity," he growled, his threat amplified by the high-vaulted space of the labyrinth's torch-lit walls.

His ear twisted in response to a light scrape behind him and he slowly turned, preferring to neither show his back nor demonstrate any unease in the face of a potential threat. His nostrils flared, drawing in a familiar musky scent.

"Barbasa, what are you doing in this part of the labyrinth?" he grunted, his eyes narrowing on the satyr that emerged from the thickness of the shadows.

Far larger than most humans to his memory gave them credit for, the satyr was larger than a mortal man and thick with muscle that made the species quick at hunting down and pursuing their amorous hungers. Barbasa was large even among his kind but was still nothing compared to Asterion's size and brawn. The male slanted a bright green gaze at him, a secretive smile playing about his lips as he brushed a lock of reddish-brown hair from his eyes.

"Is that a way to greet an old friend, Asterion?"

“A ‘friend’ would not have tried to devour me at first opportunity,” he snapped in reply.

The satyr shrugged, his smile widening. “I admit that I got a little carried away. But that is all history, and besides, the labyrinth would have protected its favorite son.” He tipped his head. “Why the threats now? You certainly have not sought out my company, and I have not offered you any harm.”

“Why are you following me?” Asterion demanded bluntly.

A sly look crossed the male’s face, his eyes dancing with laughter as he leaned a shoulder against the wall. “I have come to investigate an interesting rumor that has sprung up among my flock. There is talk that there is a female here… a human.”

Asteron’s ears flicked impatiently. “And if there was?”

“Then I would have to ask why a minotaur that we have lived peacefully with for so long would attempt to steal our prey?” Barbasa replied with a feigned casualness, his friendly words belied by the iron in his tone.

Grunting, Asterion lowered his horns subtly, which the satyr acknowledged with a faint quirk of his brows.

“From what I recall, my territory is not part of your flock’s hunting grounds,” he bit out. “You have your own halls and lower reaches that I do not care to traverse. I expect the same respect to be given to what is mine.”

Barbasa sighed, his lips pinching. “It is not so easy as you say. Yes, prey enters into our own corridors, but in places where our territories converge and we pick up the scent of human flesh, it is impossible to reign in our hungers.” He cocked his head in consideration. “They also say that you did not spill her blood and the labyrinth groans angrily for it. I could not believe it when I heard, but I do not scent any trace of human blood on you. How did you resist the hunger, Asterion?”

“Who says that I resisted?” Asterion grumbled. “She is mine to feed *my* hungers, whatever they may be, not the labyrinth’s.”

The satyr’s eyes widened as he glanced around warily before giving Asterion a venomous glare. “Do not say such things,” he hissed. “We are granted immortal reprieve here that is sustained by the labyrinth. Because of it, we do not age, we do not become sick. All our basic needs for survival are cared for by its will. Even a favorite son cannot flaunt the will of the labyrinth.”

“Then it will have to be happy with the other blood I give it,” Asterion replied, holding up the small roe he had found wandering the upper corridors. The deer’s head hung limply, its glazed eyes staring out sightlessly. “The labyrinth shall receive more of its blood in addition to its fat and bones when I take it to my butchering room.”

“And the woman?”

“Mine,” Asterion reiterated. “All that the labyrinth may enjoy from her is our combined essences when she submits to me and the sounds of her pleasure. These will be offerings enough.”

Barbasa frowned doubtfully. “The labyrinth has its way of getting what it wants, one way or another. When the time comes, if you cannot do what needs to be done, then allow us that pleasure. We have the stomach to see to it that the labyrinth is fed—naturally, after we satiate ourselves. It has been long since we have enjoyed a woman amongst us, and we would be most grateful for the pleasure of carrying it out in your stead.”

Gritting his teeth as his anger boiled dangerously within his blood, Asterion stepped closer, his shadow falling over the satyr as the fingers of his free hand curled into a fist at his side.

“I will only say this once. You and yours will not touch her.”

The cocky smile slipped from the satyr’s face as a tremor ran through him with the pungent scent of fear released into the air. Asterion nearly smiled at the male. Despite his obvious fear, he straightened, however reluctantly, under the weight of Asterion’s glare and returned it.

“Then do not force us to make that choice. The labyrinth will not conceal your abode forever if you deny it.”

Nostrils flaring, Asterion took another step, forcing the smaller male to crane his head back to his meet his gaze. “Are you threatening me?”

Despite the musky, bitter fear-scent filling the air, the satyr’s lips curled smugly. “That would not be our intention. It would hardly serve our interest to make such an attempt. Not when it is the human you want, and, as you can see,” he nodded meaningfully at the deer, “you cannot stand guard over her perpetually.”

Bellowing out his anger, Asterion swiped at Barbasa, gripping the smaller male in his brutally crushing hand. Hauling the male up off his hooves, he brought the satyr nose to nose with him so that there was no possibility of Barbasa mishearing his words.

“This is your only warning—one that I am only giving to sustain the long-held peace between us, and because I do not wish an unnecessary conflict—if any of your flock come anywhere near my female, I will rend their limbs from their bodies and feed their corpses to the labyrinth’s hunger.”

Barbasa curled his fingers around Asterion’s hand, grinning wildly. “That would doubtlessly be quite interesting to witness. Just remember, Asterion, we all depend on the mercy of the labyrinth. Enjoy her while you can—I envy you that and would not deny you—but keep my words in mind. Sooner or later, the labyrinth will tire of your delaying tactics and demand the appropriate sacrifice. Under the madness of the labyrinth, even that carnal hunger you feel will not be able to overwhelm the bloodlust when the fog descends.”

Asterion curled his lip at the satyr, lowering him abruptly to his feet. Deep within, however, his gut clenched. He had always suspected that the labyrinth was as tainted as his sister had said but had not wanted to entirely believe that it drove its inhabitants into madness. He had thought that it was merely his imagination that his hungers had surged fiercer than ever when they came. Despite his carnal hunger for the female, that other hunger was like a terrible specter, one that in retrospect had grown disproportionately larger and more ravenous as the centuries passed. How had he missed that when he had noticed the way the satyrs had become more vicious in their blood frenzy over their long confinement? Hearing it from Barbasa, however, brought a sickening realization of just how much his small human was in danger.

Nodding his head in a sharp swing of his horns, he backed away from the male, watching quietly as the satyr straightened and brushed himself off. A deadly smirk crossed Barbasa’s handsome face, and he inclined his head as well in mutual understanding before spinning away to race back into the shadows from whence he had come.

As his gaze tracked after the male as he disappeared from sight, Asterion wondered if Barbasa truly understood how readily he would kill him despite their long span of association with each other. The wary challenge and acceptance, and an unnatural giddiness that had been in the satyr’s eyes suggested that he did and, in fact, looked forward to it in the manner of one eager to court death, to dance along the edge of danger, and

recklessly drown himself in feasts of blood regardless of the source. Possibly even that of other satyrs if the madness ran high enough.

Asterion grunted with unease. Were the satyrs truly that far gone, and if so, what did that say for him? He had been confined to the labyrinth considerably longer than Barbasa and his kin. The thought was not a comforting one. Once, he would have doubted that the satyr flock would cannibalize their own, but now he wondered, if any were slain, whether Barbasa and his kin would become drunk with their blood as equally as any other.

Ears twitching, Asterion stood in place, listening as he drew in deep breaths through his nostrils to scent the air, until he was finally satisfied that the satyr had departed. Only then did he move from his spot and resume along his path back to his abode—if not at a considerably quicker pace. He was suddenly very uneasy with the distance between himself and his female. Worse, that she was alone and without his protection

His sudden fear was unfounded. He knew that logically, even if his instincts currently drove him to desperation. Regardless of what the satyr believed, Asterion knew full well that Ariadne's magic could not be superseded by the labyrinth. It did not have that power within the protections of his rooms. Unlike the flock, his abode was not carved out and provided by the labyrinth but created by the magic of his ancestral house that had guarded over the labyrinth and laid the first stones. His sister, disturbed by what the labyrinth had become, had woven the magic around his abode to protect him from it even as she found a way to keep his fires continuously lit and to draw the sun into his garden chamber. While it was true that the labyrinth kept him fed and had tended to his needs, his sister had been wise not to trust or depend on that generosity. Because of that, even if the labyrinth should turn against him, the satyrs, and anything else captured within its halls, would not have access. Still, it chilled his blood to even imagine what they might do to his female should they get their hands on her. It was that thought which hurried his pace.

The torches flared with his passing as he neared his destination. This too was a product of his sister's magic, in echo of the comforting hospitality of the labyrinth that had once welcomed ancient wanderers into its depths. That was long before his time, but Ariadne had told him of it, of how they descended into the depths, far below the labyrinth's center, to experience the mysteries of the underworld. There was a time in his youth when he had

liked to imagine that, on some level, it still sought to comfort those inhabitants who walked its halls despite its violent, deceitful nature. That even without Ariadne's magic, its torches would flame in comforting welcome to him. But he was not so deluded. He had not been for a long time.

In the flare of a pair of purposefully marked torches, his eyes sought out the carvings on the stone wall that marked the entrance to his abode. He stopped in front of the rough-cut dancing figures that marked the spot; their presence visible by their gleam within the light. Seeing the carved image brought an old echo of pain and his mouth tightened in reaction. He hated that the pain of his memories still lingered within him to such a degree that they rose and tormented him merely at the sight of the carved girl and minotaur-child scratched into the stone. Ariadne had made those marks long ago when she had been just child, the images imprinted with the power of her budding magic. The girl on the stone was one who had danced the crane dance of the labyrinth's hidden mystery, just as she appeared to do in the carving. She had kept the secrets of the labyrinth and, when she had grown into her powers, she had forged his home, holding that secret place within her heart as well.

Tracing a claw over the complex path twined around the carved girl, Asterion watched as the wall of the labyrinth thinned and became no more substantial than membranous passage. When had his pain dulled so much? It was only a short time ago that he could not look on any image of his sister, much less the magic of Ariadne's portal, without feeling the sharp stab of betrayal to his soul. Did the lessening of his pain mean that he was losing the last pieces of his sister that he had jealousy preserved within his memory and heart?

The thought alarmed him even as he experienced a sense of relief that he refused to acknowledge. Instead, he focused on his loss, feeding his grief with his regrets and anger at being deprived of what little he had left of her. It was bad enough that she had abandoned him, but now he had to suffer *this*? He did not understand why it was happening, and his sorrow spiked in relation to his growing confusion as he passed through the barrier, feeling the light touch of his sister's magic still woven in after all these centuries into the stone.

What was different?

The female. *His* female.

A female that did not want him and would not love him, and yet whom he would keep anyway to stave away his loneliness. This was what was dimming his memory of Ariadne?

He growled, tugging at his mane with one hand in frustration, wishing he could severe himself from his weak need. The female was going to cost him everything: his memories and his heart. He snorted and coughed, the air thickening around him and in his lungs as he breathed it in.

Asterion's eyes rolled back, a black haze filling his mind as his lungs labored with each breath. Something insidious snaked up from where it was coiled deep within his belly, making saliva drip from his fangs. His awareness narrowed down to ravenous hunger and the helpless rage that filled him, springing fully formed from his sorrow.

A bellow built up in his chest as he passed through into his abode, his eyes rolling as he attempted to look everywhere at once for the culprit. *The satyrs were right. Destroy and feed upon the female and free yourself from her sorcery.*

The voice seemed to come from within and outside of himself all at once. It was a familiar voice and Asterion clung to it. At that moment, it seemed like the only thread of familiarity and sanity in the overwhelming strangeness of the new situation he had found himself in.

What do you know of caring for a female, anyway? Even Ariadne would not stay, choosing to be a foreigner outcast among her lover's people. She chose to die on distant shores rather than remain forever with you within the labyrinth. Your female will also seek to escape. She will not wish to be tied to you even as she steals the memory of your sister. Better to paint the corridors with her blood.

Blood. A red spring that you can drink deep from once again and keep her essence forever within you where she cannot escape. She will be a part of you forever, and a part of the labyrinth forever if you but drink and feed upon rich meat when you release her from her prison of flesh.

Shaking with the intensity of violence filling him, he strode heavily through the room, the hunger for sweet, life-giving blood filling him. He snorted and grunted, his hot breath expelling sharply through his nostrils as his bellow worked its way up… and then died in his throat when his gaze landed on the small figure curled up on his platform.

She slept.

With her brown hair splayed out around her as if she were a nereid floating in wait for her lover on a placid sea, she evoked such a sharp longing through him that he fell to his knees. The heavy thump of them hitting the floor echoed in his ears, but no less than the clatter of his labrys falling at his side. His arms were otherwise empty since the roe lay a short distance away where it had tumbled to the floor unnoticed and forgotten at his entrance.

Staring at her—needing her—his mind twisted on itself with confusion and denial even as another hunger roared through him, engulfing the mad bloodlust, and driving it from him. But it was not replaced with any sense of peace. Bile rose, burning through him as this new hunger consumed him, demanding to be fulfilled. It clouded his mind with visions, telling him to ease its ache and ease his own loneliness in turn.

The temptation crawled through him and made his fingers twitch with the desire to reach out to her. Curling them tightly into his palm, he stumbled back away from the sleeping platform.

What was he doing? His eyes rounding with horror, he dropped his head, angling it away to not be tempted to look upon her, his large body shaking with shock. What unforgivable madness was he suffering now? First, he had nearly been overwhelmed by the terrible blood hunger, but he had been spared its fury only for it to be replaced by an insidious temptation that he did not even recognize in himself. It was beyond tolerable!

To fall victim to the first was bad enough. It was at least familiar. He would have torn her apart with his fangs and claws and she would have stared at him sightlessly as so many others had, her hand laying limp at her side from where she had reached out to him in entreaty just as *they* had. But the second? He shuddered. Even if he avoided destroying her body completely, he would have killed her spirit, and when she looked upon him, her eyes would be as vacant as some of the satyrs' prey that he had seen. He would have harmed her without thought, stealing more away from her than merely her freedom, making him truly a monster, and in the process, he would have obliterated any hope at all for a companion.

His ears pricked as she sighed, stirring in her sleep, drawing his attention as his head lifted at once toward her. He was inescapably drawn to the small female. There was no escaping it any more than he could tear his eyes away from her now. Something about the sight of her there on his platform warmed some forgotten, hollow spot within him and with it

solidified his determination to keep her safe. Although she was still nameless, it mattered little to him. He would have her name eventually. She was his.

A soft grunt left him when she stretched and turned in her sleep, her clothing stretching tight across her breasts. His cock thickened beneath his chiton, his desire thrumming through his blood as a carnal hunger rose anew, sharp and swift through his senses, this time with clarity and pleasure rather than twisted by the labyrinth's power that had snuck by his defenses just outside his abode. With a rumble of interest, he breathed in deep, seeking to consume her natural perfume. A pungent scent filled his nostrils instead, wilting his desire.

Despite the smell, shame filled him.

He had neglected to show her where to relieve herself. He wondered how long she waited in complete discomfort before she gave in and found a spot to empty her bladder. Although he did not completely understand why she did not look down one of the antechambers since she would have found it quickly enough, it mattered little now. This failing was still his. From here on out, he would make sure that she knew all that she needed. First, however, he would see to it that the mess was taken care of and then he would make sure that she was clean and comfortable.

Hanging his labrys in its place on the wall in passing, Asterion walked back to the garden chamber to fill yet another jug with water. Fortunately, it would not be difficult to clean. Whether by Ariadne's design or by that of the labyrinth itself, the edges of the walls were formed with fine grooves that drained liquid where they met the floor. Because of that, there was nothing to sop up, and any water poured out to rinse the stones would likewise be carried off. While it made cleaning his home easier for him, he was especially grateful for how easy and quickly he would have it taken care of so she would have no reminder of her embarrassment when she awoke.

As he filled the jug, a peculiar sense of purpose found root within him. It was the smallest of starts but he was caring for his female and protecting her. Smiling to himself, he shouldered the jug and carried it back into the main room chamber. He knew that she was awake the moment he entered. Feeling her gaze on him, he glanced over at the sleeping platform to see her curled in the middle of it, far from any of the edges and mostly buried under the furs, watching him warily as he strode over to the wall. Moving slowly

to not startle her, he poured out the water over the spot, washing the traces of waste away as he watched her from the corner of his eye.

Slowly, she pulled the fur up to her chin, her cheeks blazing red as she openly watched him. As unnaturally red as she was, he was beginning to become concerned for her health when she surprised him by speaking.

“I’m really sorry.”

CHAPTER 7

Vicky cringed at her pitiful apology, shame crawling through her as she watched the minotaur wash away her mess.

How freaking embarrassing.

It didn't help that he appeared nonplussed toward her apology, the only reaction being the ear that flicked at her seconds before he turned his head fully to gaze at her curiously.

"Why do you apologize?" he asked. He gestured to the draining water. "This was the result of my neglect, so it is my duty to clean it." He cocked his head and appeared to hesitate, his expression growing thoughtful in the vague sense that she could distinguish in the slight purse of his wide lips and the upward movement of his brows. "I am curious, though, why you did not choose another room where you would not have to suffer with the smell… unless human senses are deplorably dead."

The right corner of her mouth quirked at his observation, and she gave a tiny chuckle that made both of his ears prick toward her. She shrank back slightly, her smile wavering at suddenly being the center of his undivided attention, but when he made no threatening move toward her, she felt her shy smile grow unexpectedly. He blinked, a look of surprise shifting rapidly across his face, and peered back at her with a thoughtful light in his eyes that hadn't been present before. His focus on her was so absolute that it sent a tingling tightness through her belly.

Nerves. It was just nerves.

Not that there was any real reason to be nervous. He wasn't scolding her, nor did he appear to be angry. He had merely asked a reasonable question and was patiently waiting for her answer. It had to be the situation.

It wasn't exactly a normal one for her, even post-Ravening. Otherworldly creatures roaming the earth aside, none of them had ever tried to approach her, much less hold her hostage in their lair in order to protect her.

It was fine.

Vicky jerked her chin towards the black stain that marked the ground where she had crushed the centipede. "Because of that," she admitted. "After being attacked by the centipede from hell, I was scared, and those corridors are dark. Frankly, I wouldn't have gotten off this bed at all following that experience, if it weren't for the fact that my body didn't give me a lot of options in the matter."

Dark horns slashed the air impressively as he turned his head to peer at the crushed remains. Frowning, he stalked towards it until he came to a stop hovering directly over the smear of guts. He scuffed at the edge of it with one hoof, the skin on his broad muzzle wrinkling.

"Where did this come from?"

At the dark bite in his voice, Vicky promptly swung her hand out in the direction of the presumed entrance.

"Over there in the wall where you disappeared. I put my hand in a crevice to see if I could find a way to open the door you used but found that thing in there."

His body suddenly stiffened in a way that sent a fission of alarm through her. The tension of his muscles and the way the longer fur around his neck and shoulder rose, it reminded her that he was a very dangerous predator.

"You tried to run away?" The words were spoken so gutturally that she froze and stared back at him.

"Of course not!" she denied, pushing aside the fact that the idea had crossed her mind for a moment or two. It didn't count. "Where the fuck would I go where I wouldn't immediately die in this place? I was nearly eaten by the thing living in that damn crevice as it was." She shuddered and surprisingly, he relaxed, his gaze turning concerned. She rubbed the back of her hand where the scratches still stung. "It was pretty horrible."

His eyes dropped and his brow lowered as he focused on her hand. She stilled, her heartbeat picking up as he eyed her hand. Quicker than she could follow, he moved forward with a deadly speed that made her jump when he suddenly seized her arm, dragging to him. A small scream choked her, but

she managed to smother it when she saw the concerned way he observed the wounds, his claws lightly tracing over them.

"What happened, exactly?" he growled quietly.

She shuddered, remembering the feeling of something grabbing ahold of her. Not wanting to sound like a lunatic, she gave what she considered the most plausible explanation. "I think I got my hand caught briefly in the crevice without realizing it. The rock must have scratched me when I panicked and yanked my hand free. Just a stupid accident due to sticking my hands in holes where bugs will live."

He gave her a confused look, his head angling as his ears tipped toward her. With his large brown eyes, there was something that could have been faintly sweet about it, if it weren't for the strange electric sensation passing between them, and if he wasn't a mountain of tense muscle waiting to pounce. Releasing her arm, he backed away from her, and Vicky felt some of her own tension ease in response to the sense of relief that barreled through her at the distance put between them.

She bit the inside of her cheek, somewhat ashamed of her own recoil toward a male who, as of yet, had not harmed her and was otherwise taking care of her needs. Some attitude that was for one's own rescuer. At least, if he noticed, his expression gave nothing away as he nodded toward her wound and turned away.

"We need to clean and bandage that. Come this way," he murmured.

Giving a quick furtive glance around—just in case—Vicky followed after him, pausing when he did to pick up a torch mounted on the wall between the tunnels. Walking the short distance to the fire basin, he lit the torch and carried it back to the tunnels, giving her a long, shuttered look in passing. He said nothing else as he stepped into the tunnel at the left, leaving her to follow after him. Within the first few feet, it hooked suddenly to the right before spilling out into a warmly lit room.

Pale, golden sunlight filled the entirety of the space, causing the spray from the spring to sparkle as it danced. Dark leaves unfurled around the spring. Some were fuzzy but many smooth, and scattered among them in places, she caught splashes of dark colors from flowers blooming among the stalks. The plants were crammed in nearly every spare space, vines entwined to climb their taller neighbors and branches dipped toward the ground. Foliage climbed and trailed everywhere she looked, all gleaming with a flush of health despite the fact that she could spy no source at all for

the sun and much of the garden was obscured by shadow. Lips parted in awe, she spun in place, staring in wonder at her surroundings.

"What is this place? It's beautiful."

Asterion paused, his ears tipped toward her as he watched her stoically. "The garden chamber." Despite how unaffected he attempted to appear, his voice held a note of restrained pride as he walked to a stone table almost entirely obscured by growth and picked up a stone bowl. He fell silent for a moment as if considering his words. "Like my abode, this was designed by my sister's magic. This is a safe place," he assured her. "Nothing that dwells within the labyrinth can get in here."

She shivered, rubbing her arms uncertainly. "That seems a bit impossible. The centipede got in," she reminded him.

He glanced over at her briefly as he headed toward a thick clump of plants. "More precisely, you pulled it in."

Vicky gaped at him, affronted at being blamed for bringing the centipede in. "I did not! It crawled onto my hand!"

Bending to carefully snip off a sprig with his claws, he snorted. "It could not pass the wall. My sister's magic prevented that. It was not until you put your hand in there that provided it a manner of access." He gave her a reproving look. "You are fortunate that the manifestation was a weak one. It is more curious about you right now, I imagine. It is not often that it loses prey. Had it managed to keep its hold on you, you would not have escaped from being bitten."

She shook her head, unable to wrap her head around what she was hearing. "Wait. Are you saying that it *did* grab me? That the labyrinth is somehow… alive?"

"It always has been," he explained quietly. Dropping another handful of sprigs into the bowl, he turned his head to give her a hard look. "It is why you must not leave my abode. You see now what dangers you may meet if you try to escape."

"Like I said, I wasn't trying to escape. I was afraid of being left alone in here and wanted to stay with you," she blurted out in annoyance.

He grunted as his right ear flicked with uncertainty. "You wished to… be with me?"

Vicky bit back an impatient huff, annoyed with herself for the half-truth. It wasn't a complete lie either, since that had been her first thought, but she didn't care for the way it made her feel. That he was questioning it made

her feel even more annoyed and guilty with herself. That just made her more furious.

Gah, why couldn't he just accept it and move on?

She looked up at him with an annoyed retort on her lips but when she looked at him, truly looked at him, she saw the flash of vulnerability in his eyes despite his otherwise stoic stare and the words died on her lips. Although towering over her at well over seven and a half feet tall, and every inch of him being packed with muscle, there was something so fragile about him in that moment, as if he couldn't believe that someone actually wanted to be in his company.

The fact that such an intimidating creature would show such vulnerability was absurd and somehow disturbingly endearing. Surely it couldn't be that easy for a monster to get by her defenses and sense of self-preservation.

She cleared her throat, uncomfortable with the direction of her thoughts and her sudden bout of self-disgust. "You were a bit of an ass with all this mine, mine and growly stuff but… I guess that I feel kind of safe with you. Safer than I do alone anyway," she amended quickly. All of that, at least, was true. "I mean, look at you, you're huge. And you not only saved me but didn't hurt me like you could have."

He glanced down at himself and nodded, his expression hardening with determination as he met her eyes. "I would not seek to hurt you. I wish to protect you."

Vicky peered at him cautiously. "And this 'mine' business?"

The beast shrugged. "You are still mine, and I will not hurt what is mine." Something passed over his expression that she couldn't quite decipher, as if he were disturbed by a thought. "No matter what, I will not," he reiterated. "But I will not apologize for my desire of you. It has been long since I have known a kind touch. Not since Ariadne."

His words drifted off into silence as he stared off into the garden, like he was watching the shadows of the past that only he could see come alive.

She frowned and brushed her fingers over her charm. "Ariadne? Not *the* Ariadne, the daughter of Minos?"

The minotaur broke free from his inward visions and glanced at her sharply. "You know of Ariadne?"

She started to shake her head but nodded with bewilderment. "I mean, kind of. It's an ancient myth how Minos built a labyrinth to cage his son

whom the gods cursed with the likeness of a bull due to the love queen Pasiphae consummated with a bull so that he might release his enemies within it to be destroyed."

His lips pulled back in a grimace, giving her a brief view of his fangs. "That is not quite accurate. He did not build the labyrinth, though what he did to it was tragedy. The labyrinth was built by his ancestors as a place of mysteries. He merely rebuilt the entrance into something grander and far more terrible that instead of acting as a passage between worlds, he was able to cage them in here eternally."

He gave a miserable shake of his head. "I do not know if the souls are trapped here as the living forever are. I hope not. I think that, if they were, then that would have been a far greater crime that I pray the gods saw to his punishment in Tartarus where the vilest do their penance." He huffed a sound that might have been laughter if it had contained even a drop of amusement within it. "As ill as he seems to have been remembered, my father's cruelty is understated. He took pleasure in my torment even as he saw to it that I was educated with the best tutors in my youth as a matter of pride when I was still small enough to be controlled by his guard." He bent, clipped off another couple of sprigs, and threw them into the bowl.

"I hate my father," he admitted in a stony voice, sending chills up her spine. "I hated his every punishing strike, his every condemning word that left his mouth. Even as much as I hated him, however, in some ways, my mother's transgressions against me were worse. She refused to look upon me or even speak to me, except once, which she did from behind a screen when I was small. I was denied all company except those they threw to me." His hand stilled, hovering of a yellow flower as he seemed to be caught in his memories once more. "The ancient magic of the labyrinth allowed me to know their words and understand them clearly as they begged to be set free." He shook his head violently, a shudder visibly rolling over her skin. "The words they screamed before I… killed them… haunt me."

Swallowing, Vicky stepped closer despite her common sense screaming at her to do just the opposite. Her hand shaking, she reached out sympathetically to lay her palm against his arm, cognizant of the fact that he was a killer and a monster in every way she understood the word. Yet she couldn't help but be moved by his pain even as unease settled through her when it came to the labyrinth. He glanced down at her hand, his body

stilling. She only just barely kept herself from ripping her hand away when another shudder ran through him, bleeding away his tension so that the tightened muscles gradually began to relax under her palm.

"You are really Asterion, aren't you?"

"I am." The confession was a soft rumble that pulled at her heart.

A monster that he was, he was just as alone as she was, but unlike her, he had been alone for centuries, caught in the madness of this place.

"How can that be? You've been here for centuries. And you're saying that it's the magic that makes us able to communicate?"

He nodded and clasped her hand under his, his head lowered as he looked at the difference between them. "It is necessary for the labyrinth. Even then, when I was trapped here in my youth, it was far larger than anyone knew, stretching to a number of access points that even now I cannot number and have only discovered a small portion. In the depths of its history, many foreigners passed through it, and even more when Minos threw his enemies within the confines of this place. As I said, it keeps us alive… those whom it sees profitable to sustain. Though in my youth, I did not understand it, and I was too young and blinded by my anger and pain to notice how much it began to change. At first, the labyrinth was the only kindness save for my sister that I knew, but Ariadne tried to warn me. Minos twisted the spirit of the labyrinth. It became more of a monster than what you believe me to be… more than I am, anyway."

Asterion met her eyes, and she was caught by the terrible pain in those dark depths. "I do not deceive myself, female. I am a monster. I have done many terrible things within these corridors." His hide quivered with what she took as revulsion. "I hate what I have become, and I am beginning to suspect that my sister was right about another thing… the influence the labyrinth has over our appetites. It makes me want to rend and consume. I have noted that the satyrs who were hunting you before are becoming increasingly mad and violent."

Vicky attempted to draw back, fear rising quickly in her with his confession, but he did not let her. His grip tightened as he drew her to the spring and forced her to take a seat on the rocks before releasing her. She might have sprung to her feet in an attempt to flee, except she recalled his words about not running from him and suspected that they were more of a warning. The silent plea in his eyes as he stepped away reinforced her hunch.

He gave her a grim smile, no doubt easily reading her like a book. He was ancient after all and likely had witnessed more human reactions toward him than she wanted to think about. She didn't want to think about it because it stirred pity and a sort of kindred sympathy within her. How many times since the Ravening had she been looked at fearfully as if she were potentially a cleverly disguised monster coming into the midst of a settlement? She was certain that Asterion would suffer all that and worse if he were roaming the world, but she couldn't imagine that it could possibly be more horrific than what he encountered within the labyrinth.

"You will not hurt me," she whispered, the affirmation more for her benefit than anything else.

"I will not hurt you," he rasped in agreement. "More, I cannot… when I see you, those hungers disappear. My hunger… changes."

Vicky gave him a sharp look, and heat quickly rose along her neck and into her cheeks with the realization of what he meant. Suddenly, she was uncomfortably far too aware of him. She wasn't a virgin. In the nightmarish landscape that her world had become, she believed in taking her pleasures where the opportunity presented itself. She had scratched that particular itch many times. Yet, to have this huge male admit such a desire was terrifying as much as it inflamed a kernel of taboo awareness that she had not been aware of banked within her center. It was impossible—unnatural even. He wasn't human. Worse, he was a killer—a man-eater. And it worried her even more that she would feel anything of the like for an ancient monster that belonged to myth.

The light touch of his hand as he slowly washed her wound with a flat leaf that left behind a slight astringent burn seemed to only exacerbate her awareness of him and, without intending to, she shivered under his touch as a bloom of heat spread through her belly. He paused, his nostrils flaring, drawing in her scent, and she wondered if he could scent her reaction. His eyes darkened and her breath stopped. Was he going to take that as an invitation? Would she stop him if he did?

An unwelcome tingle stirred between her legs. With it, rose a forbidden voice reminding her that it had been a while since she enjoyed intimate company. Would it be such a bad thing to allow him to ease their mutual loneliness? She recoiled from the suggestion. What was she thinking? She wasn't sure she could even trust him not to hurt her, much less have any

certainty that they were even compatible. It was lunacy to even play with the idea.

A gust of breath left him, interrupting her train of thought, and he turned away, bringing her inner turmoil to a screeching halt. Setting aside several long strips of leaves and some vine, he turned his attention to fully focusing on the task of making a poultice with the herbs that were left in the bowl.

Watching him work, her lips tipped in self-mockery. Here she was, recriminating herself, when he wasn't even attempting to make a pass at her. He wasn't showing any sign of interest at all, actually. If it weren't for the fact that he said otherwise, she would have believed him to be completely ambivalent to her proximity.

That he could control his reactions so well, despite his claims of how much she incited *that* hunger, brought a sense of relief. It wasn't until he shifted closer to her, his legs spreading to make room for her so that she could be drawn closer against him and rest her arm on his thick, muscular thigh as he worked, that she became aware of the rigid bulge of his cock of terrifying proportions tenting the fabric around his waist.

"What do I call you, little female?" he asked quietly as he smeared a paste, the burn banking whatever desire stupidly lingered.

He lifted his soft brown eyes, a brow quirking at her so that she smiled self-consciously. Great. He was trying to heal her, and she was ogling him like an inexperienced teenager and getting all worked up about nothing so that she had entirely missed the question.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

The corners of his mouth lifted in amusement. "Your name?"

"Oh, that." She huffed in embarrassment and shrugged. "Well, I was once Victoria Ann Marshall, but now I'm just Vicky."

"Vicky," he murmured to himself, his fingers deftly wrapping the long strips of leaves around her arm before binding it firmly with the length of vine. His eyes warmed as they met hers and he smiled as he gave her hand a gentle pat and he stood. "Welcome home, Vicky. Come then, let me show you our abode, and then I must prepare the meat for our meal."

Ignoring the unwelcome warmth curled in her chest, she warily rose and followed him, silently reminding herself not to get too comfortable and trusting. The Ravening had taught her that lesson well, and in the company of a man-eating monster, it was stupid to not heed it. She couldn't let herself be softened by an offer of a home, even if it had been a long time

since she had one. Still, she had no illusions of how dangerous her situation was, especially when the rest of the labyrinth apparently wanted to kill her.

She was certain that was what caused the warm feelings. His offer to share his home was as much a matter of captivity as it was a kindness. Perhaps it was her own isolation that bred a certain desperation within her so that it felt good to be included and wanted here, no matter how foolish the sentiment was.

"All right, let's see it. But perhaps we can start with your toilets."

He gave her a confused look. "Toilets?"

She groaned miserably. "Oh gods, no toilets. Not even an outhouse?" As he continued to look baffled at her words, she gestured onward and grimaced. "Perhaps you can share with me where I am to… uh… pee and stuff."

A look of comprehension crossed his face and he nodded. "The other tunnel is bisected. The nearer path leads to the lesser spring where you can relieve yourself and wash while the further one leads to the butchering chambers." He hesitated, giving her a doubtful look. "You might want to avoid the latter. It can be… unpleasant."

She grimaced. She just bet. "Thanks for the tip. I think I will do just that. Lead on."

Recoiling slightly from what she suspected was a warm smile, despite the somewhat bovine face and mouth full of sharp teeth, he led her back into the main chamber to begin their tour. Although the tour was short enough, she was entirely grateful when she could curl beneath the furs again, her bladder once again emptied as she dozed while Asterion attended to his butchering. The sound of metal against stone and the dull crunch of bones breaking that echoed up the hall into the main chamber was not exactly sleep conducive, but she tried to ignore it. Just as she tried not to think about how many people he might have butchered in the past. She hoped he never actually butchered anyone, anyway, though the alternative made her stomach flip queasily.

Now that was a thought that was going to give her a sleepless night or two. She only prayed that it was all truly in the past. He was certain that he wouldn't hurt her, so surely, he wouldn't… would he?

Vicky gnawed on her lip and prayed that he was able to stand up to the magic of the labyrinth as much as he claimed.

She shivered as a horrific sound echoed all around from some unknown place within the labyrinth, sending ice through her blood. She drew the furs around her. Any barrier would do. Anything to make her current reality go away.

Burrowed within the furs, she eventually heard Asterion moving about, but she shut him out with the rest of the world, refusing to allow curiosity to rouse her. What did it matter anyway?

CHAPTER 8

The daily barrage of barely muffled growls and snarls amid the disconcerting dying shrieks unnerved Vicky. She sat on the platform, unable to get accustomed to the sounds. They all seemed to blend into the background of the occasional torturous symphony from beyond the safety of the Minotaur's prison.

That was exactly what it was. Bespelled as it might have been to keep him safe and provided with staples and some small trappings of civilization, it was very much a prison. Hell, anyone could see that. She had noted it her third morning there when she managed to crawl out of terror and misery enough to begin actually exploring her new "home," outside of just the necessary trips to relieve herself.

The smooth stone walls were uninterrupted by any sort of beauty or flourish, just stark stone and the long fire basin to provide fire and light from which Asterion lit the fire pit to cook their meals. There was no access to any kind of area where one might fully feel the sunlight on their face or smell the fresh air free of the dust and unpleasant bloody remnants consumed by the labyrinth. Even though Asterion thoroughly swept the rooms with juniper branches and burned handfuls of sweet-smelling herbs, nothing could get rid of the foul odor.

She felt like she might go mad from it. The taunting smells and shifting, heavy shadows teased her mind mercilessly, playing tricks with her eyes. She had only been there for a matter of days, imprisoned with a broody monster who growled under his breath as he moved through the rooms, and she already felt unwell—as if she were trapped in a waking nightmare from which there was no escape.

What a horrible place. Who could possibly survive here?

But Asterion had. Somehow, he had survived, as had the creatures roaming the corridors, but she worried that none of them were whole once confined within the labyrinth. Yet, between them, the Minotaur seemed to have fared better. How was that?

Vicky thoughtfully stared at the flickering flames and shadows on the far wall. How had Asterion survived being held there for centuries without sun or clean air?

She jumped at a sudden sharp squeal of pain and Asterion's head lifted and turned toward her, his eyes reflecting the firelight like those of a predator. A creature whose history suggested that he would devour her without a second thought. She shivered at the reminder. *Gods what a thought.*

Despite his man-bull appearance, he was as much a man-eater as anything else in these halls. Perhaps worse, because at least those things out there did not pretend to be anything other than what they were. *How can I trust that this won't change?*

"Do not worry, they cannot get in here," he rumbled. "They won't dare to come near. They are too cunning to risk their lives where there is no advantage… when they know that I will kill them."

Swallowing, she nervously licked her lips. "Who?"

His horns tipped toward the invisible entrance meaningfully. "The satyrs."

She shivered again, wrapping her arms around herself, one hand coming up to pluck uneasily at her pendant. "That's what that sound is—those horrible creatures that chased me?"

His horns tipped again, this time toward her, as he inclined his head in agreement. "They hunt," he explained quietly, his eyes following the movement of her hand. His ears flicked toward her, and he watched so silently that Vicky's hand closed around her coin with all the apprehension of born prey. "What is that?" he asked gruffly, and her gaze dropped down to her hand in surprise.

Unwinding her fingers from around the small bit of metal, she came off the bed and cautiously approached him. Crouching beside him at the fire, she held the coin up to the light when she came near enough for him to see.

"It is a coin from Knossos. My father brought it back for me as a gift a very long time ago. It depicts the labyrinth," she explained quickly.

Dark eyes focused on the coin, and something moved through their depths that she could not identify before, but in the next moment, it was gone, and his eyes shifted back to the fire.

"A father would gift his daughter the likeness of a place of misery and pain?" he asked in a manner that could have almost been mistaken for conversational if not for the bite in his voice.

Startled, her gaze swung to his face. "What? No, of course not! I guess, looking back, it was more about the magic and unknown with the labyrinth and long-ago people. It was a popular memento from Crete. He brought it back so that I knew he was thinking of me." She grimaced as her gaze strayed to their surroundings. "It certainly seems a lot less magical and more horrific being caught inside it personally, though."

She wasn't about to admit that, as a girl, she had been obsessed with a movie her parents had introduced her to. Even if she could manage to successfully explain what a movie was, she didn't think he would understand the allure of magical creatures, battles of wit, and handsome goblin kings. Nor the fact that it was considered lighthearted entertainment when the real thing was far uglier.

Asterion grunted, his attention dropping back down to the fire as he leaned back and rested his broad shoulders against the wall behind him. When his eyes lifted, there was a hint of grim amusement within their depths.

"Is it how you imagined?"

"Not even close," she admitted, shivering again as another horrible scream crawled through the halls outside of their refuge. "Honestly, I could have gone the rest of my life without ever experiencing the reality of it."

His head dipped in acknowledgement, a deep rumble of laughter filling the space between them. "Yes. I suspect all the labyrinth's victims, whether those slain or imprisoned here, would share that sentiment."

Vicky peered at him from beneath her lashes. Despite his laughter, there was a pain in his voice that she hadn't heard since he had spoken of his father two days ago. Then again, they had not spoken much at all during that time, the Minotaur studiously kept his distance when not in the labyrinth hunting. Him lingering around the fire today was surprising as much as it brought her a sense of relief at not being trapped in here alone with a horror house going on just outside their cell. So much so that part of

her wanted to crawl up under his arm where she could feel his heat and strength protectively surrounding her.

She certainly didn't want him to leave, but she couldn't resist clearing her throat and asking, "No hunting today?"

A hint of a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth as he met her gaze and he shook his head, his long mane sifting around his shoulders with a clatter of beads and bone charms hanging from hidden and half-visible braids within the mass.

"No. I have filled the smoking boxes in the slaughter room to their capacity as well as the small connected cold storage cavern. It will keep the meat fresh for the next few days before I need to hunt, and we will have plenty of smoked meat for days if I am unsuccessful in the future." His smile fell. "You discover quickly enough that your food supply is often determined by the combination of luck and the whim of the labyrinth. It may choose not to open its tunnels for a time, or if it does, there is always the chance that little to eat will find its way inside. It is always a matter of preparing, but for now, we are good."

Vicky blanched at his words. It had never occurred to her that the labyrinth could just close off its entrances and practically starve those who inhabit it. And to be cursed with immortality on top of that? She shuddered, her stomach turning uncomfortably. And to think that not too long ago, she had actually believed she had half a chance at just walking out of there. Gods, she was stupid. Everything within the labyrinth was trapped there and at mercy of its whim.

"And what happens when food runs low?" she whispered, though somehow, she knew without him saying, and it made her blood run like ice in her veins.

His mouth tightened. "Then you hunt what you must in order to survive."

She swallowed, suddenly nauseous as her mind immediately went to the satyrs outside.

"Have you ever had to eat them?" she whispered.

She thankfully didn't have to elaborate. His eyes narrowed and hardened with understanding as he dipped his head in a short nod. "A time or two," he admitted, his gaze dropping back to the fire.

And he survived? It seemed almost impossible. They sounded numerous as they hunted through the nearby halls. Although the satyrs never ventured

quite near the center of the labyrinth, sound carried well enough to taunt her with their vicious hunt. Surely, with their numbers, they could potentially overwhelm Asterion … eventually, if not at first.

If that happened—then what?

Would she be trapped inside their little cell, slowly starving bit by bit once her food ran out, unable to leave without risking being caught by the creatures as they circled outside? Without Asterion's protection, nothing would keep them from closing in around her, even if they could not enter the labyrinth's center. Still, how long could she possibly last before she had no choice but to leave to find sustenance? When that happened, she had no doubt that she wouldn't be capable of worrying about anything anymore.

"I feel sick," she muttered faintly.

His eyes snapped up to her. "It is unnecessary to worry. I will see to it that it doesn't come to pass," he growled.

She blinked at him in confusion for a moment, wondering if he somehow had access to her inner thoughts. She didn't think she had spoken out loud.

He leveled a hard look at her. "You will not be required to sustain yourself in such a manner," he clarified." I will see to it, to the best of my ability, that it does not happen. And if it does, I will take care of you. On my oath to Styx."

"Oh." Warmth crawled up her neck. Of course, the satyrs. "Thank you."

A tremulous smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, touched in spite of the dread and fear curling in the pit of her stomach. Her instinctive mistrust of the monster attempted to rear up but fell quickly in the face of his promise. An oath to Styx was no casual thing among the ancient Hellenes, and she would insult him by taking it any less than in which he meant it.

With an amount of daring that surprised her as much as him, Vicky scooted closer, angling her head in the process so that she might continue to meet his eyes. His body straightened stiffly in reaction to her proximity, his eyes widening. She pinched back the shy smile that threatened to stretch across her face and instead looked over at him curiously.

"What if we just escaped?" she whispered. "Haven't you wanted to?"

His massive shoulders slumped as he lowered his head, his heavy sigh ruffling her hair. "There is no escape for me. I tried early on, but magic woven the day I was cast into the labyrinth holds me here. I am bound to it." Sadness flickered in his eyes. "There may be a chance for you,

however," he admitted in a strained voice barely above a whisper. "But only if I can find a way to distract the labyrinth's attention long enough to get you to an open tunnel without the satyrs noticing."

Vicky's lips pinched together, confusion knotting her insides. She should be ecstatic that he would seek to find a way to get her out of there, but she couldn't help but to imagine him stuck within the corridors all alone. And for how long? Centuries more? It all seemed terribly sad.

Setting a hand on his thick forearm, she marveled at the strength of the muscle tensing beneath her palm and looked up at him gratefully.

"Thank you," she whispered in return, her spirits plummeting as she realized just how long that could truly be.

How many years would pass before she had the opportunity, and would she still be entirely sane by the time she left? It was a terrifying question.

CHAPTER 9

From the corner of his eye, to not make her unreasonably wary, Asterion watched the human wandering around the room as he slowly worked the wet stone over the edge of the ax's blade. She was restless, but that was expected. He had difficulty becoming accustomed to the confines of his lair at first too. And he liked to watch her.

He liked her scent as well. It was warm and inviting; a feminine musk that made him want to bury himself within her in a way that he had never experienced before. It made him want to spill his seed into her hidden, ripened heat. He thought about it constantly until it nearly maddened him and still, he wanted more of it.

That made it a dangerous scent, one that invaded the room so thoroughly that there was no true escape from it. And how it tormented him! Her feminine musk teased his senses until it made it uncomfortable to be too close to her for long periods of time. Because of that, he was forced to sustain a certain amount of distance between them during the day when he could not escape into the labyrinth itself. As she did not seem inclined to close that distance, it made it easy on him, even as he found it discouraging.

At night, however, he suffered, his cock throbbing with exquisite pleasure and then, eventually, pain. It made sleep difficult and yet, as sensible as it would be to find another place to sleep and spare himself the discomfort, he enjoyed having his body curled around hers at night. He craved the close contact on a primal level beyond even his sexual urges that plagued him. Many a night he had lain there wishing that she would roll over and embrace him, allowing him to fit their bodies together so that he

could feel a sense of complete unity with someone. To not feel so endlessly alone. Just having her there in his arms was more than he could relinquish.

At least not until the day arrived and with it the reminder that she would not welcome his touch when it was unnecessary. So, he maintained his distance. But he never got tired of watching her. Even when her pheromones filled the room, hardening his cock to a vicious ache, his gaze followed her restless movements or discreetly watched her as she stared in fascination for long stretches of time into the basin's flames. Whatever fascination the flames held for her, Vicky's route often took her close to them, as it did now, her eyes staring into the fire.

"How does this stay lit?" she asked, pausing at the corner of the basin.

He lifted his head, turning his attention fully toward her as his ears tipped forward. "Magic," he replied truthfully. He gestured to the basin with the blade of his ax. "They are not real flames when they are contained there. Not in the way that I might make flames for the purpose of cooking or heating. The conjured fire is different. So long as they remain in the basin, it is relatively harmless. Same with the torches in the halls. It is how they light in response to someone walking along that part of the corridor. It is only when it is released that it will cause damage… which I take care not to do. I will light the torch from it when I require the extra light, but I do not transfer it to the cooking pit, and I always take care with the torch when I have it."

"Is that so?" she murmured, stretching a hand toward the flame. A look of amazement crossed her face, and she gave a husky laugh that shot straight to his groan. "It's not hot. I feel nothing more than a faint warmth here."

He nodded. "From the expenditure of magic. That is all you will feel when it is within its home. The basins are the seats of the conjured flames."

"Amazing." She dropped her hand and shook her head in amusement. "So how did you light the torch from it then?"

"I did not," he replied with a faint smile. He took care not to show his teeth, recalling the way she had stared uncomfortably at them before. "Not truly. It is bespelled like the other torches. The basins are located in various places and hold the true fire from which the torches can pull. Since the basin provides plenty of light, I prefer not to have my torch always illuminated or a constant potential fire hazard. Because of that, it was enchanted so that it requires contact with the basin to ignite it. Otherwise,

by remaining unlit, there is less potential risk of anything catching fire should it be upset."

"Ah, so the torch does not contain the flame in the same way that the basin does," she observed.

"Yes. Should a torch fall from its sconce, it could potentially be disastrous with enough kindling." He frowned at the basin. "Conjured fire is raw elemental power. It does not always obey the rules that it should and so requires a certain amount of respect."

"Has it ever gotten free?"

"Once," he admitted, his hide rippling uncomfortably with the memory of the heat and stench that had invaded his lair. "But it was long ago. It raged through the labyrinth, sucking out all the air until you could hardly breathe, with such incredible heat that you felt as if your skin and lungs were searing with every agonizing gasp for air. Even here, sheltered where we are, it was terrible, though I was safe enough from the flames with the magical reinforcements. Not everyone was so fortunate. There was a considerable loss of life."

He paused at her small gasp of horror before continuing grimly on. "No one has been foolish enough to toy with it since. Certainly not the spirit of the labyrinth. Where you might be caught unaware by the labyrinth and see walls shift and reach for you, it will never be those bearing torches. The safest place from it is always near the flame-bearing walls."

"Noted." Vicky gave the fire a thoughtful look and shuddered. "I admit it is a lot less attractive now."

His mouth curved, and a deep, rolling chuckle rumbled from his chest. "Like so many things in the labyrinth, nothing can be taken merely by its appearance. And everything changes." He tipped his head as he considered her. "I wonder what you will become."

Her brows winged up. "Are you saying that I could be potentially dangerous?"

"In this place, I would not be surprised if the most beautiful things were," he replied, his eyes dropping to the ax once more as he dragged the wet stone along the edge of its blade.

Despite his focus on his work, he was very much aware when she stepped closer and dropped down to settle onto the low bench near him. The motion of his hand paused for a heartbeat in surprise before resuming its

rhythmic glides. A thrill rushed up his spine with warm tingles at her closeness as she watched him, a deep ache tightening within his core.

He wanted to shift closer, to draw out and heighten his pleasure, even as caution demanded that he withdraw from her. But she did not get any nearer. He was content to linger in that liminal space between both pleasure and pain, torturing himself exquisitely. His eyes rolled back and immediately closed his eyelids, not wishing to frighten Vicky. His instincts were playing a delicious havoc with him that he kept within until he could not stand it any longer.

The echo of his ax falling at his side with a clatter was enough to jolt him back to awareness, his mouth twisting with the pain tightening his sack and prick. Huffing out a long breath, he turned as he stood and picked up his ax, his tail swishing out beyond him to encourage her to keep her distance as he stalked over to return the ax to its place on the wall. He did not turn back to face her but stared at the mounted weapon for several moments, his breath dragging in and out of his lungs in deep bellows.

From behind him, he could hear the soft rustle of movement as Vicky got to her feet.

"Asterion, is everything okay?" she asked, the note of concern in her voice burrowing deep into his chest.

Lowering his head, he grunted humorlessly. "Yes, of course. Forgive me, I need to see to some things in the butchering room."

"Oh." He could hear her fidget in place. "Do you need some help?"

He nearly moaned with the picture that sprung to his mind of being confined within that small space with her, her wrists bound and hung from one of the hooks for his pleasure. The scents of blood awash with the layer of her musk richened with thick arousal. He quickly shook his head, his horns slicing violently through the air.

"No," he rumbled, drawing away to move quickly around her. "It is better if I do this alone. There is little space in the butchering room, and as I said before, it is not a pleasant place that you would enjoy."

That it drove his own insatiable appetites was another matter that reminded him of just how different they were. For whatever reason, his desire to consume fed into his lust and the idea of taking her there against a bloodied wall appealed to his primal nature in a way that he understood would be unnatural for humans.

“Oh, okay. If you’re sure,” she replied slowly, a nervous edge to her voice that he hated. “Maybe I’ll go to the garden.”

Squeezing his eyes shut against his rising lust and the mental images still besieging him, he nodded blindly, his feet carrying him rapidly away from her. He barely paused to light one of the free torches before striding into the righthand corridor, the echo of his hooves following him, mocking his quick escape. It was a harsh reminder that no matter how quickly he ran, he was unable to truly escape her.

His lungs burned with the heaving breaths that had nothing to do with exertion. His rush down the corridor to the butchery room would not have normally so much as winded him, even if he made multiple trips back and forth to the main chamber. No, it was all due to the lust boiling within him, the hunger that gnawed at him so violently that he shook with it. His tail flicked with a needy impatience, every muscle in his body protesting the enforced distance between himself and his prey.

He clenched his teeth, bracing his hands on the wall at either side of the tied down leather flap that closed off the cool storage access, his horns pressing with brutal pressure against the stone. His desire to carnally consume her, to taste and drink in her arousal and feel her cunt wrapped tightly around his cock, did not make her any less prey. Although this hunger was different than those he had experienced in the past, it was still undeniably a hunger. There was no peace from it, nor was there any escape. Not for either of them.

With a low growl, he turned to grab a massive cleaver from the long table behind him and flung the untethered leather straps from their hooks. The cool air rushed over him, barely penetrating his thick fur as it rapidly seeped into the room. Ducking his head so that his horns did not hit the low ceiling, he stalked inside and reached for the nearest hanging slab of meat. With a few powerful strikes, he split it, catching the weight of the falling half of the meat with one hand. It would need to be chopped up into smaller portions. Part of it would return to the stone shelf along one wall where it would be wrapped in the leaves that would repel insects and rodents. The larger portion of it, however, he would spit for their evening meal.

Striding back into the butchering room, he slapped the cleaver on the table and dropped the meat on the table with a wet, heavy thump next to it. With a grunt, he walked across the room to the far wall and rinsed off his hands beneath a tiny fount of water that was provided from the same spring

that ran through the waste area. His hands clean once more, he returned to secure the leather flap over the cold storage room until it was taut over the entrance, allowing only minimal amounts of the cold air from below inside. It was only after that was done that he stepped back toward the table, his fingers curling into fists at his side until his knuckles cracked loudly as he circled it.

The scent of the bloody meat sent a tremor through him, its rich metallic scent stirring his hunger until it heightened his other hunger, mixing in a confused instinctual barrage against his mind. This was not helping. His breath panted out of him, his cock straining from its pouch, pushing against his leather chiton, dragging precum back and forth as he moved until he could feel a wet spot press against the head of his prick. A low guttural moan rumbled in his throat.

This was insanity.

There was no doubt in his mind that he was only delaying the inevitable, but he wanted to give her time. He wanted for her to accept him more than anything. As much as he wanted to pin her beneath him, her hips dragged up into the air as he rutted her, taking her as brutally as his instinct demanded would not win her heart. It would not make her wish to remain with him either. He had promised to help her escape—and he would—but he did not wish for her to be terrorized by his presence or seek to flee him. As much as he hungered, his body responding to the primal call of hers, he yearned to be embraced and surrounded with true kindness once more. It was perhaps juvenile and weak to wish to be held—as Barbasa's had often called it—but he would not deny, in the privacy of his own mind, his desires.

With a low growl, he picked up the cleaver and brought it down hard into the meat, hacking into it over and over as he separated joints and snapped through bones. The burn of his muscles did little to relieve the ache in his cock, but it was at least an outlet, one of very few he had.

He would give Vicky time and space from his attention, and hope that she would eventually see him as something more than just a monster protector. And hope that he would be able to get his own appetite, where it concerned her, under better control.

CHAPTER 10

Blinking blearily, Vicky sat up and yawned. There was a faint scratching sound that seemed to come from miles off, but the room was strangely quiet. Brushing back her hair from her face with both hands, she frowned and looked around. The main room was empty but that was not unusual. It was rare for him to linger about as he always seemed to have something to occupy his attention.

Tipping her head to listen, she frowned. That was strange. Usually, she could hear at least some echo of Asterion's activity from the one of the corridors but there was nothing but silence.

"Asterion?"

Slipping from the bed, she padded barefoot toward the open halls. A quick glance to the wall between them affirmed that the torch was still in place, but she leaned in and squinted into the gloom anyway. There was no shift of shadows nor was there any sounds at all, no matter how faint, other than the soft trickle of water.

But just to be sure…

"Asterion, are you down there?" she called, her voice sounding overly loud to her ears as the corridors amplified and carried it.

Nothing. No heavy thump of hooves on stone, no dull thwacks of a blade. No response at all.

With a shiver, she drew back, casting a speculative look toward the torch. With a slight shake of her hand, she pulled it free from the sconce and carried it over to the fire basin. The flame lit just as quickly as he had shown her, but she looked nervously up at it, recalling his warnings even as the torch trembled in her hand. Sucking her bottom lip in, she focused on

her breathing until the torch steadied and headed down the left-hand corridor to the garden, hoping that maybe he was engrossed in working the soil in the beds as she had seen him do the other day, his hooves muffled by the damp earth.

The tunnels were not terribly deep, but there was a chance that he had simply not heard her. The echo of her own footsteps rose around her, echoing as if someone or something was following her as she walked down the hall, the torchlight casting ghostly figures on the stone walls at either side of her. It was unnerving amid the heavy silence that permeated the air. A grateful sigh burst from her when she stepped into the garden, the faint light warmed the haunting atmosphere significantly with its gleam upon the water and on the leaves that tipped up toward it.

"Asterion?"

A leaf stirred slightly in the barest brush of a breeze, the soft fall of water from the spring providing a cadence of life and yet the space was otherwise empty and at a peaceful rest. A disappointed frown dipped the corners of her mouth, and she reluctantly withdrew back into the hall.

"Not here, I guess," she mumbled.

Hastening her steps so the echo didn't seem to draw out behind her, Vicky hurried back up the corridor and entered the other. She paused only briefly by the "bathroom," to call his name since she sure as hell wasn't going to waltz in there if he was relieving himself. When that yielded no results, however, she continued to the far room that she had never seen before. The butchering room. Even in their brief tour, Asterion had only gestured at its entrance before hurrying her along.

A shiver of trepidation ran down her spine the closer she got, her hand sweaty on the torch. She would just take a quick peak… just to be certain. With her heart pulsing wildly in her throat, the hall seemed to stretch more ominously, the haunting sounds that had plagued her before returning with full vengeance amid those of distant skittering sounds. She paused so that there was nothing but silence and tipped her head, listening. There was a long silence and then she heard it again. It wasn't quite skittering. She wasn't sure what it was exactly. But somehow… why did it sound closer?

A wry huff left her, and she shook her head. Of course, it wasn't closer. The labyrinth warped sounds in unique ways that fucked with her mind.

With a nervous, self-deprecating chuckle, she started forward again until she arrived at the furthest entrance. This was deeper than the garden and

there was a sense of being encased in darkness even with her torch in her hand. But it was the smell of blood, old and fresh, that hit her nose that made her skin crawl and her steps slow as she approached the gaping, dark entrance.

Swallowing, she crept toward the edge and peered into the room with her torch held up. There was no way he could be in there. If she were smart, she would just turn around and go back to the main room and leave this room alone like he wanted, but the need to be certain pricked at her until she took a step inside, the torch light faintly bathing the walls in dim light.

A large table dominated the center of the room with several hooks suspended just to the side of it. Beyond the table itself, she could make out a wall laden with several different large knives of styles that looked nothing like the kitchen utensils from her mother's kitchen, each of them larger and significantly more threatening in design as if pulled right from a horror-inspired video game of her youth.

She shivered as her gaze slid by a tied-down leather flat before coming to rest on a far corner that seemed darker than the rest of the room. Not because her light did not reach but because the stone had been stained so repeatedly that no amount of cleaning could completely remove the dark tint splashed over them. She half-expected Asterion to come rushing out of nowhere to chastise her but was met with nothing but a grim, silent emptiness.

Bile rising in the back of her throat, she backed out into the corridor, dragging grateful breaths of the cool, dank air. Though she could still smell the stale scents of blood from the butchery room, it was much more manageable outside the doorway. She gulped in a deep breath and gagged slightly before turning away to hurry back down the hall. He *definitely* wasn't in there.

Relief filled her when she exited from the hall back into the main chamber and immediately extinguished the torch in a large metal container that stood off to the side. Snuffed out, it smoked a bit, which lent an unpleasantly acrid smell to the air, but she was able to return it to its sconce without trouble, the brighter light from the fire basins illuminating this room comfortably at least.

She paced uneasily, her mind busy wondering where the minotaur was. Even that first day, he had not simply up and left her. Unless he believed that she was safe and fine there without him. Perhaps he thought she would

enjoy some time alone? She chewed her bottom lip nervously. She wasn't so sure she liked everything about it. Sure, she was still a bit frightened of him, but what reasonably sane person wouldn't be? But being alone and having nothing but a heavy wall of silence at all sides of her with nothing but her thoughts for company—thoughts that tended to drift in morbid directions—was not something she wished to face.

She paused in the center of the room, her eyes fixed on a distant spot, wondering if she should try again to find her way out to look for him in case he was hurt when she heard it. She froze, her blood chilling as a loud skittering sound slid along one wall, drawing nearer. It was either a larger creature with numerous hard appendages or was a great many creatures… possibly with cloven hooves. She paled, her fingers twisting together in front of her.

Something like satyrs.

A shiver ran through her as she became aware of a noise; a faint scratching sound that increasingly grew louder until it was clawing at the wall just outside. Clamping a hand over her mouth, she muffled the squeak of horror that escaped as she ran, her bare feet slapping against the stone floor, back to the sleeping platform. She didn't even hesitate to launch herself into it and draw the furs around her.

"They can't get me in here," she whispered, repeating the words that Asterion had told her. "They can't get me. I am safe in here."

Dragging the furs over her head, she pressed against her ears in a vain attempt to quiet the horrible sounds coming through the wall but, no matter what she did, she could not entirely shut it out. It was a constant, grating sound among whispers and cruel laughter that had her huddling beneath the pelts as she stared blankly at the hidden entrance. She could hear them muttering and growling at each other, and the thump of bodies colliding against each other as they milled just outside. Their panted breaths that allowed them to drag in big, sniffing gulps of air and hyena-like cackle made her hair stand on end. In her mind's eye, she could picture them pushing against each other, their noses tipped toward the stone wall as their claws scraped and pried, searching for a way in.

She shivered, a sick feeling falling over her. It was horrible. They were horrible. Their taunting calls, muffled by the thick wall of stone between them were lewd at best, and horrifying at their most sadistic.

"Come out, pet," a raspy voice crooned.

“Come out and let us taste you.”

“You will enjoy it. We can make you scream from pleasure.”

A dark chuckle followed. “And then you will keep screaming.”

Vicky crammed a fist in her mouth to keep from crying out, and to keep from screaming back at them in turn. The pressure of her teeth bit into her knuckles, tears leaking from her eyes as they continued to call out to her, their suggestive words both lewd and cruel. It took all that she had to remain silent and not respond. To not cry out in terror or scream back at them in defiance. Nothing to incite them further or verify her presence there.

“We can smell you,” another sing-songed with a cruel laugh. “We can smell your sweet musk. It makes us hunger.”

“Does it make the minotaur hunger? Has he yet been tempted to tear your flesh from your bone? He will. Better to come with us.”

“Better to know our ecstasy.”

“Better to know our hunger,” they purred as one.

Fuck you! She screamed silently in her mind, blood filling her mouth from where her teeth broke the skin. She continued to scream the words in her head over and over as they laughed until eventually it trailed away, their claws scraping along the stone walls with their passing. Still, she laid there and shivered. She didn’t move from the spot until a dark shadow stepped into the room, making her bolt from the bed in terror.

With a scream, she raced for where she knew the entrance had to be, determined to claw her way out if necessary to escape the danger that had found a way into the room with her. She screamed again; her voice so shrill that it tore at her throat as arms circled around her, yanking her off her feet, and didn’t stop screaming even when she was pressed firmly against a broad chest, a rumbling croon filling her ears.

Drawing in a deep, shaky breath to fill her lungs to scream again, she drew in the warm scent of her captor. The arms tightened viciously for a moment, a deep growl sounding just inches from her ear as the smell trickled down through the terror in her mind until something familiar niggled at her memory.

“Do not struggle!” he rasped, a note of alarm in his otherwise fierce voice, the big body behind her curling around her as if to share their heat.

Do not struggle? Awareness rushed through her, and she stilled, not wishing to trigger the already triggered instinct of the male holding her.

With the iron band of his muscled arms surrounding her and the prick of his claws as he breathed unevenly in gulping billows of air, she understood better than ever what purpose his rules served. At the moment, they walked a delicate edge together.

"Asterion?" she whispered; her voice already roughened from her panicked screams.

Her fingers dug into his fur, clinging tightly to him as she allowed his presence to sink further into her mind. They stood there, curled into one another rigidly until her muscles slowly unclenched as she blew out a long, steadying breath against his fur.

Relaxing her grip, she slowly ran her fingers up his forearms in a slow stroke in an attempt to reassure them both. Very slowly, she felt him relax beneath her hands as his breath gradually evened out. His grip relaxing, he pressed her comfortingly against his chest.

His deep voice rumbled in acknowledgement. "I am here. I have you. There is no danger here."

"The satyrs…"

"Gone," he assured her. "They would not remain out there once they scented me."

She nodded her head, leaning her cheek against his furred chest, her breaths still dragging in and out with effort, the rasp of her uneven breath filling the room around them.

"Please do not leave me here alone again," she whispered.

Her heart sank when she felt him still beneath her cheek and his own deep sigh fan over her hair.

"I cannot make any promises, but I will try to remain as close as I can." His warm knuckles skimmed down the back of her arm. "Even if I am not here, I will always come for you—no matter where I am in this cursed place. I will always come. You will be safe from the satyrs and the labyrinth, both."

Vicky's teeth sank into her lip as she mutely nodded. Truly, she did not see how he would be able to keep her safe from either forever.

CHAPTER 11

Asterion growled with self-loathing as, once again, he stalked through the labyrinth. He condemned himself for it the moment he felt Vicky's eyes watching him as he left. Though he had not spared her a glance, he imagined that they had held a look of accusation within them. She knew there was still plenty of meat and he did not have to go out in the twisting halls. He went because he chose to, because he needed the reprieve from her scent, and from his endless hunger.

The way she watched him when he left, her arms wrapped around herself and her head bowed, had torn at him. It was the same, every time he left, since his first excursion.

He certainly did not enjoy being out there. Oh, he had spent more time out in the corridors than not before Vicky had fallen into his life, but now that she was enclosed within his lair, there was nowhere else he wanted to be. Especially when he saw the evidence of what crept dangerously near when he was not standing guard over his female.

Pausing at the intersection of two paths, he paused to scrutinize the corridors to work out which one would return him home the quickest. He had been gone long enough and his hide was beginning to prickle anxiously.

It was because of what he found that he did not wish to be taken too far from his dwelling while Vicky remained there, and why he was eager to return to his lair now. Not only because he disliked being parted from her, despite how necessary it was, but because the satyr flock was becoming a little too brave. They foolishly hadn't hesitated to take advantage of his absence. He knew that they terrorized her. He saw the stark fear in her eyes when he stepped inside, and the instant relief at his presence, even though

she still feared him too. She had so little true respite, unable to entirely escape his presence without bringing greater terrors that it made him violently angry on her behalf.

He had wanted to turn around and hunt them down that first day. The taste of blood had filled his mouth as he imagined tracking and tearing them apart one by one until the entire flock was obliterated. Instead, it had taken all his strength to remain so that she would not feel so afraid. Not more afraid anyway. Though it lessened more and more as the days passed, her fear continued to remain between them.

His hide shuddered and his lips peeled back from his teeth. Every time he saw the scored claw marks outside his entrance, he saw red as fury rolled through him in a terrible haze. That they dared made his rage spike even now. If he so much as caught anything sniffing around his lair, he would not hesitate to kill them.

Every time he returned, he pledged that he would not leave her again, but deep down, he had known the truth. He would eventually leave… he had to. It was the madness that threatened his sanity, the all-consuming need that clawed within his mind that kept him running. He did not want to hurt her and yet something foul rose within him wanting to do exactly that.

He did not know if it was something evil within him as his father had always claimed, or if it was something insidious born of the labyrinth itself. Either way, he was not taking any chances when it came to the dark desires that rose within him.

As if taking advantage of his moment of distraction, something long and wet trailed around his lower leg, inching its way up and around. With a snort of anger, he kicked it away and dropped his ax low behind his leg. A sharp squeal echoed from the corridor behind as something heavy thumped onto the ground by his feet. He did not bother to look at it. He knew exactly what it was, and he was not amused.

Snarling, he glared darkly at the silent labyrinth walls around him. “Unless you wish me to set your corridors ablaze again, do not attempt that again,” he warned loudly.

Silence met his words, but he knew it heard him. It always heard him. Barbasa liked to claim that Asterion was the favorite son of the labyrinth, but the truth was far more terrible. Whatever favor he had was for being a good tool and servant. For being powerful. The spirit of the labyrinth liked those traits. It liked obedience, strength. But it hungered and to satisfy that

hunger, it would manifest in whichever way it considered most expedient. Its attack just now was not the first, nor was it unusual. When prey was minimal, the labyrinth could fully manifest in order to feed itself. And it had happily fed on him, his strength and virality, more than once. Though it left him weak and ill to where he had been barely able to crawl back to his abode, he had been able to sate its hunger without dying unlike the smaller, weaker satyrs, and unlike the humans. That was the only reason the labyrinth did not outright kill him as it sought to do with so many who entered its halls.

He did not know when it realized that he held such value. Was it when he was young? He did not recall it being so cruel then, though Ariadne appeared more cautious and frightened of it as they grew up together. But he was certain that at some point it had hungered for him and discovered how well he could feed it.

His pelt shuddered anew at the idea of being drained again now of all times. How would he protect and care for Vicky if he were half-dead? Though the experience was one that brought extreme pleasure that would have kept him from feeling more than a mild pain as it consumed him and could very well satiate the labyrinth enough to spare the female from its interest for a time, he could not abide the thought of giving up another part of himself to the appetite of the monstrous spirit.

"I will *not* feed you again," he growled, his head swinging with his announcement to make certain that his voice carried to wherever the spirit of the place lurked at that moment.

There would be no doubt between them on the matter.

A soft echoing sound like a furious howl, too airy to be from any living being, drifted up the corridor and something shifted and rippled back away from him, sending the dark vines that clung in spots along the walls rattling. Asterion grunted, unimpressed by the warning. The labyrinth knew him well enough to not test his warning. He had no doubt that it would attack at some point, but for now, it would watch and wait. The labyrinth was intelligent and would wait for the moment that would benefit the greatest before risking his fiery retribution.

He had, after all, done it before.

A grim smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. Though he had mentioned it to Vicky, he had not told her that particular story. He did not want to frighten her with ideas of history repeating and being caught within

this prison, barely able to breathe and survive until the spirit backed off and withdrew to tend to its wounds and rebuild its halls.

Nor did he wish to give her nightmares about the truth of this place and that the monstrosity born within it was far more terrible than even he was. He alluded to it, but he would not tell her what he had seen in its manifestations that could make one's blood run cold even as it could be terrifyingly beautiful. She did not need that haunting her when he intended to do everything in his power to protect her and get her out safely.

Taking the right hall, his hand curled tighter around his ax, his ears tipping toward every sound. He growled as he heard the light scuffled tap of satyr hooves, but whoever it was moved on, darting down another corridor with little seen of it other than a glowing flash of yellow eyes in the dark. Muscles immediately tightening with the instinctual urge to give chase, he drew back with monumental effort and shook his head in a manner that sent his horns swinging wildly. No. He needed to get back to Vicky. He gave an angry snort to expel the frustrated need but was pleased when the satyr's pace audibly increased in response. If he could not give chase, letting it think he was preparing to do so was at least a little satisfying.

Fortunately for the flock, Asterion did not encounter any additional members from among their numbers on his return along the winding paths. He would have been happy to leave some very visible warnings, but it seemed that the satyrs were wise enough to avoid him. Or, more likely, Barbasa was directing them out of his path. It was a shame that the male did not have similar control over the activity of the other males to keep them from potentially being murdered in the first place.

Asterion grunted humorlessly, his pace picking up as he picked out the recognizable signs that marked his lair. Satyrs did not live by anything more than a loose social organization, connected mostly by blood relations than any true order of society. As half-feral as Asterion was, he knew something of the civilized world. What his dim memories did not recall, his sister had devoted years to educating him with the hope that he would see outside of his prison someday. He let out a dry chuckle and shook his head, unable to imagine why Ariadne had believed that their father would ever give him an opportunity to prove himself to be more than a beast.

That was not what Minos had needed him for, and in the end, Ariadne had realized that as well. The moment she helped Theseus and fled Knossos had marked the conclusion of that chapter of his life. And for that, he had

destroyed nearly every scroll she had smuggled down to him. Even his stylus had been broken beneath his hooves. He had torn apart everything that marked him as a civilized man that she had attempted to fashion him into.

But destroying those things had not erased it where it mattered it most. Though his memory of her face was dim, barely a faint memory, he retained much of what she had taught him. Sometimes without even realizing it until he reflected on his actions later.

A beast of the labyrinth wouldn't have attempted to spare humans in the past. It would not have saved Vicky either.

He drew in a deep breath as he stood in front of his entrance. He was more than his hunger. He understood that. He was just terrified to test it. More, he was afraid to fail and see that he was truly nothing more than a monster as his father always judged him to be.

As much as he wished to court Vicky, gentle her to his touch until she was no longer afraid of him, and win her for his own, the fear of failure stalked his dreams. In his dreams, he acted out every single evil impulse, feasting upon her, her screams filling his ears. The possibility of failure, of being that monster, was his worst nightmare that drove him day and night, keeping him from her side. Leaving her alone with her fears.

And he hated himself more every day than he could possibly hate anything else. Even the labyrinth.

Stepping inside, he paused, his eyes sliding through the room until they fell upon the human sleeping soundly in his bed. For the first time that day, he smiled. The top of her dark hair was all that was visible above the furs, her arm hanging limply over the edge of the platform. Her fingers twitched slightly, perhaps reacting to some dream, and a very soft snore rose from the mound of furs covering her.

Slowly, so that the thump of his hooves would not disturb her, Asterion closed the distance between them, his hand reaching out to draw back the fur covering most of her head. A smile stretched across his face. He rarely took the opportunity to look upon her when she was sleeping. He did not look upon her at all when he woke, not needing the temptation when his body's demands were at their loudest.

It was clear that it had been a grievously missed opportunity. Vicky was soft and sweet in her sleep, her cheek rounded with a flush of warmth upon it from the comfortable heat of the furs piled around her. He longed to run

his finger down the side of her face to test whether it was as soft as it looked but pulled back his hand at the last minute, guilt stirring within him for even considering touching her when she was asleep and vulnerable, and unable to consent to his touch.

Self-disgust rolling in his belly, he pulled the fur back over her and backed away. He would let her nap for a while yet. Though it was still early, he had little doubt with the way the fur had been pulled over her head, that the satyrs drove her into the bedding where she hid, trying to drown out their sounds until an exhausted slumber finally overwhelmed her. He would not be the one to disturb her when she finally found some refuge from her terror.

He would let her sleep. There was no harm in it.

CHAPTER 12

Vicky toed a clod of soil, frowning down at it for a moment before raising her head to peer up at the grated stonework that let in the narrow streams of light. As meager as the sunlight was, it felt good, making it her favorite place in Asterion's prison. Not that there was space to do much else. When she was in the main chamber, there was little to do other than eat or crawl up onto the platform to sleep buried beneath the furs. She had done so much of that recently that Asterion had begun giving her worried looks, not that it kept him from randomly leaving to busy himself elsewhere.

It seemed he always had somewhere else to be, and yet, she had been touched every time he lingered. It was hard not to be moved by his concern and his carefully worried queries from a safe distance, telegraphing his every movement as if he were afraid that he might frighten her. She had taken to attempting to draw out a conversation with him just to get him to remain a bit longer every day. After all, he was gone so frequently, spending only scant hours with her throughout the day, that she felt like he was more a ghost than a true presence there. And yet, she was surprised when the day came that she actually was beginning to miss him and not just his protective presence.

She simply missed spending time with the minotaur. And was frankly sick to death of her own company with nothing to do but wander around the garden, taking in as much of the sun as she could, and bathing.

Vicky bit back a laugh. She hadn't bathed so much since she was a kid. She had even taken to watering the plants after obtaining basic instruction from Asterion so as not to risk overwatering and accidentally killing

anything. The only thing she refrained from doing was getting down in the dirt and weeding. She knew that it was necessary, but she hated getting dirt caught beneath her fingernails, which seemed to happen enough just with regular activity. The last thing she really wanted to do was get clumps wedged under her nails. Besides, it wasn't like she had gardening gloves like her mother had, nor did she have the thick skin and protective fur that the minotaur possessed to protect her hands.

She cocked her head, considering a large cluster of spiny nettles. Those would definitely leave an unpleasant sting. Perhaps she could persuade Asterion to make her a pair of gloves. It would be nice to have something active with which to occupy herself with, especially since he was doing all the hunting and butchering. That alone kept him busy enough. Taking care of the garden more thoroughly would be the least that she could do. Not that she knew shit about gardening outside of childhood memories of helping her mother pull weeds, the spare gardening gloves baggy and half slipping off her tiny hands. Surely it couldn't be that difficult. Not with a healthy garden. Even the soil had a dark richness to it that shamed any other garden she had ever seen before or after the Ravening.

She was certain that the asshole farmers in the villages she trekked through and left behind, especially the more recent one, didn't have soil like that. For that matter, none of the farms had plants that looked as nice either. A smirk briefly tipped her lips as she imagined how they would react if they knew that a minotaur's garden was far better than anything they could manage. They would not take it well. Many humans shunned the nonhuman beings with which they now shared their world, dismissing them as inferior and brutish. Except for elves, though they seemed potentially as cruel or crueler than any monster.

"Must have a lot of nutrients in it. I wonder what he fertilizes it with?" she queried aloud as she dug her booted toe deep in the soil just in front of her, overturning it to see just how deep it went.

Her toe came to an abrupt stop, jarring against something hard. What was that? She gave it an experimental tap and dug her toe around, pushing the soil out from around the object until the edge of her toe scraped a side. Catching along the object, she slowly worked it back and forth, wiggling it loose little by little. The dirt around her foot pushed and spilled away as something slowly pressed upward. A dull curled horn pushed up from the soil and she looked at it curiously.

“Huh… odd.”

She gave another push with her foot and the rest of the horn spilled out from the dirt before tipping over on its side, the horn faded into a smooth expanse of yellowed bone. With a yelp, she nearly lost her balance when it suddenly dislodged completely from the dirt to roll over on top of her half-buried foot. Two empty eye sockets with residual bits of flesh hanging from around them stared sightlessly back at her.

Shrieking, Vicky jerked her foot back and had the misfortune of catapulting the skull directly at herself in the process. A louder scream left her as it struck her between her breasts before rolling free and landing once more at her feet. With a curse, she scrubbed at her shirt with shaky fingers, trying to brush off the bits of hair and flesh that had come loose from the skull and clung to her. Swallowing back bile, she hazarded a glance down and backed away from the skull now in partial profile to her.

It was horrible. Clumps of flesh and hair clung to the scalp and along the raised humanoid cheekbones. The lips were gone however, leaving nothing but a grisly smile with two pairs of sharp teeth that might have grinned at her if it were not missing its entire jaw. A smashed broken side with a deeply cut imprint scored the side that her boot had apparently caught on.

“What the actual fuck?” she shouted, staring in horror as she registered the sound of the minotaur’s heavy steps rushing behind her.

“Vicky!” Asterion bellowed as he burst into the room, drawing her gaze away from the obvious remains of a satyr to the male coming to a stop just within the entrance behind her, the broad expanse of his chest heaving with exertion. He gave her a worried look and slowly proceeded forward. “What happened? Are you injured?”

“Nooo,” she dragged out, shuddering. She pointed down at the skull. “That flew at my head! You want to tell me why you have a satyr head rotting in your garden?” she asked, her voice gradually rising until she was shouting her question.

His head tipped as he drew up to her side, angling so that he was peering down in the direction she was pointing, a nonplus expression crossing his face. “Fertilizing the garden,” he replied.

“You are fertilizing your garden with pieces of satyrs?” she demanded, aghast.

Still staring down at it, his massive shoulders shrugged. “When they attack me near my home, it makes a better use for them than just leaving them to rot right outside where I have to smell the stink. I feed the foulest parts of them to the labyrinth from the butchery room and dismember them to then feed the rest to my plants.”

Though she could appreciate the logic behind it, and the sort of waste not-want not mentality, Vicky gagged.

“I sure as hell hope you were not gutting and dismembering them in the same place you prepare our meat,” she managed.

He gave her an affronted look. “Of course not.” His head tipped to the opposite angle as he considered the skull once again. “I butcher them where I gut my kills and likewise wash the area thoroughly after I am done. The table is for meat already prepared to be consumed.”

“Glad we got that sorted out,” she muttered, her hand pressed against her roiling stomach. She slapped a hand against his chest as she stepped by him, her head shaking in bemusement. “I hate to tell you this, but I am not touching that dirt again. Never.”

He turned his head, his ears pricking toward her. “I did not expect you to. Tending to the soil the garden requires is… a process.”

She pulled a face as she continued walking. She wasn’t going to stop and ask for clarification. “I just bet it is,” she said instead with a shudder.

It just figured that a monstrous labyrinth would grow gardens with particular “tastes.” She wasn’t stupid, she knew that decay fed plant life. Her mother had been an avid composter. She had worms in her composting bin and everything. Vicky could handle kitchen leavings and worms but feeding chopped up bodies to the Labyrinth was something straight out of a bad eighties horror movie.

Nope, her offer to weed the garden was now permanently off the table. If another skull or body part got lobbed at her, she would most definitely lose her shit. She would just stick to watering the plants and try not to think about what else was getting watered within the soil. She definitely wasn’t going to think about satyrs being pulled apart in the butchery room or their carcasses feeding the vegetables, herbs, and fruit producing plants they consumed with some of their meals.

Even now she felt like she might be sick if she thought about it too closely. Of course, the minotaur wouldn’t be bothered by it considering his diet over his lifetime. As far as he was likely concerned, meat was just

meat. Having satyr body parts around was probably no different to him than fertilizing with deer parts or something. She wrinkled her nose, hating that it could be that simple just as much as she hated to acknowledge that a big part of her wished that he was more… human.

"Then again, give me a few centuries locked in here and I might become a bit less discerning about what I eat too," she muttered to herself.

As if summoned by the errant thought, she could hear Asterion's even steps behind her. She wondered if he was going to follow her or return to wherever he had been hiding himself. Despite how confused she felt about the minotaur, she hoped that he would follow her back to the main room. His company helped keep the worst of her fears at bay, especially when the hunts started up again in the labyrinth at odd hours. No matter how wary she was of him, the things out there—especially the satyrs—frightened her far more.

Though she didn't glance back or slow, she held her breath, listening, as she crossed from the corridor back into the main room. Behind her, his steps slowed and then stopped as if he were hesitating. Vicky sank her upper teeth into her lip, waiting, and then released her breath in a long sigh when his steps retreated again, no doubt carrying him back down the other corridor.

So much for that.

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she tucked her hands beneath her arms as she walked back to the center of the room, her back bowing slightly as she heard the long howl of the hunting satyrs begin.

It was going to be a long fucking day.

CHAPTER 13

Vicky watched curiously as Asterion opened his large mitt of a hand, revealing four polished white pieces that vaguely resembled misshapen dice, each of them carved with delicate images.

"What's this?" she asked excitedly.

After a handful of days pent up in the labyrinth, she was about ready to go stir crazy from boredom, especially with how often Asterion had to leave her for hours at a time to hunt. While the green food, fruits and veggies, helped vary their diet, meat was almost a daily necessity for the Minotaur. Unaccustomed to staring at an enclosed space for any great length of time, anything new was a subject of excitement for her.

"These," he rumbled, "are astragaloi."

A soft feathery sensation brushed her mind, producing the word he intended.

"*Dice*?"

Her eyebrows flew up as her gaze shot to the minotaur's face to see if he was fucking with her. He stared back blandly, but then again, he had the best poker face she had ever seen and managed resting beast face in a way that women with resting bitch face would be envious of. Unless he was moved by a strong emotion, it was anyone's guess as to what he was thinking, not that she didn't entertain herself frequently by trying. A game that he had not slaughtered her for yet.

"No way!" she breathed. "They don't look like dice. They don't have enough sides, but they look similar, if a really lobsided with the four sides instead of six. What are these strange markings on them?"

“Dice,” he repeated back slowly, his accent thick, and he nodded. “We craft them from the knuckle bone of goats forming four sides, three of which we mark with symbols as you see here.” He lifted one up for her to inspect. “When we throw them, we count those that are face up without any symbols showing.”

“Fascinating! And you made these? They are beautifully carved. I imagine a goat was hard to come by down here.”

Both of his ears twitched with discomfort. “I enjoy carving. Though traditionally they are made from the knuckle bones of goats, I have found that satyrs provided suitable bones just as well.” He cleared his throat as she stared at him. “There have been many days where there was nothing to occupy my time. I taught myself to carve centuries ago. But if you like them so much, you may have them. A gift.”

Vicky drew in a sharp breath, uncertain of how she should feel about the gift as he gently cupped her hands in his large one and carefully tumbled the dice into her hand. She stared down at them, half-horrified and yet her chest constricted even as it filled with warmth at his generosity. They were clearly something he put a lot of work into… and he was giving them to her. She couldn’t remember the last time she was given a gift. Perhaps her last birthday before the Ravening.

“I really shouldn’t take them. You obviously worked hard on these,” she murmured, reluctantly, even though she wanted to clasp them selfishly to her chest.

She glanced at him from beneath her lashes and watched as he shrugged, his head dipping with an ambivalent grunt as his eyes examined the stone floor.

Was this great beast of a male embarrassed? He certainly looked far too intimidating for her to have ever imagined that he would have a softer side like this. As far as she had figured, his luxuriously soft, thick fur was the only thing soft about him, and even that encased deadly muscles and lethal bits.

She tipped her head to the side, considering him. She was starting to see that he was a lot more than what she had assumed that the minotaur of myth would be. For one, he was far less true to bull-man form. Aside from his face possessing some hints of humanity in addition to its peculiar angles that lent him a shapelier face and broader muzzle than a bull had, there were other features that did not quite match up with her assumptions.

With his long, thick mane that covered his shoulders and around his neck, he rather resembled a lion if she ignored his bull features. Come to think of it, with his retractable claws, teeth, the thick tuft of his tail, and his tantalizingly soft pelt, there was a lot of lion to him that was mingled with his prominent bull features. Physically, he was a true monster constructed to strike fear and be as a lion among men. Yet, at that moment, she saw beyond that to the stark vulnerability rising to the surface again, along with a shyness she would not have expected from a male shaped like a brute and who ordered her about like he did.

Noting his reaction she murmured, "I haven't owned anything so pretty since we had to leave everything behind during the Ravening. I fear you have found my weakness; I do like pretty things, and these are amazing!"

Turning the dice reverently over in her hands, she grinned down at them, totally enchanted with his thoughtfulness and her new revelations about her "beast."

His dark eyes lifted, a hint of a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. She stared at his mouth in surprise. She had never seen even the smallest hint of a smile from him before.

"It pleases me that you like them. I do not have much, but what I have is yours."

Her mouth gaped in surprise at his unexpected declaration. He seemed far too possessive of anything he considered his, to say such a thing.

"But… why?" she stammered.

His gaze shifted away. "I tire of being alone."

She nodded. Her fingers tightened around the dice as she considered the years of traveling alone and feeling no less alone in the settlements she visited as the people actively avoided her company. Sighing, she gave him a commiserating smile. "Yeah, I think I am too."

Taking advantage of the fact that he was kneeling on the ground, bringing the formidable male down to at least somewhat nearer to her height, Vicky stepped forward and, before she could change her mind, wrapped her arms around him. They promptly disappeared into the thick ruff of fur, startling a delighted giggle out of her the likes of which she hadn't made in years. Asterion froze against her, his muscles tightening to a degree that she couldn't help but be aware of it.

Vicky stiffened warily.

Perhaps she misread the situation?

Embarrassed, she started to pull away when she was suddenly seized by two powerful arms holding her close, squeezing against his massive chest with a carefulness that was endearing even if it startled a small jump out of her. Pressed against his chest, she could feel his heart thumping and felt a strange connection to him, as if something tied them together in that moment as his soft muzzle brushed the nape of her neck bared by the ponytail she chose to wear that day. The sensation sent a shiver jolting through her, tickling her, and she chuckled as she burrowed her cheek into the thick fur around his collar, soaking in the warmth of actual caring contact. Not human contact, but in her recent experiences, it was far sweeter and more freely given than anything she had received even from the few lovers that she had briefly enjoyed.

Impulsively, she reached up and grabbed ahold of his nearest horn and gently tugged the side of his face closer to quickly press a kiss into the fur there. It happened so quick and without thought on her part that it caught both of them by surprise. She felt him jerk slightly as if to pull away before cautiously leaning into the touch. She swallowed, unable to believe she had the nerve to kiss a monster like he was another human being, but she was strangely glad she did. It seemed that the terrible monster was as skittish as a beaten creature, wary of touch while being entirely touched starved. Without drawing away, she smiled against the fur of his jawbone. “Thank you, Asterion.”

He responded with a soft rumble that vibrated against her with such strength that it nearly shook her. Stifling a laugh, she leaned into it, ignoring the shocking lick of heat the ignited within her in response. Given that she knew quite well that her body responded in a very healthy fashion to stimulation, she didn’t put any significant weight on it and enjoyed the novelty of being hugged.

Perhaps she was more than a little touch-starved herself.

Suddenly, he pulled away and there was something new in his expression that she couldn’t quite identify. With a deep, chuffing sound that might have been something close to an uneasy chuckle, he lightly plucked the dice from her hand and held them up in front of her.

“Let me teach you how to play.”

Nodding eagerly, she took her place at the opposite side of the circle he had scraped into the stone with one claw. Glancing over at her, he surprised

her with a broad sharp-toothed smile that evoked a quiver within her that was surprisingly not due to fear.

Okay, that was a little harder to ignore, but the fact that she was just pressed intimately against him probably had some bearing on it. She didn't know what was happening between them, but there was a certain excitement to the unknown factor that came with the territory of having a companion. Strange bodily responses aside, she decided in that moment that she really did want a friend for once.

Sure, whatever existed between them wasn't quite yet friendship, but it was a start.

CHAPTER 14

Asterion's tail flicked as he tried to ignore the very naked female bathing just behind him as he worked in his garden. It wasn't like she was nude. She had her undercoverings and was using a small scrap of leather to wash herself. That she was cleansing her body just behind him should not feel as indecent as it did. He had just cleaned the blood and sweat from the hunt off himself a short time ago without any shame or compunction about her enjoying the garden a short distance away. Yet with her, his very presence there while she performed such an intimate task felt borderline obscene.

Days were indistinct deep within the labyrinth without any sun to track the passage of hours, so he could not rightly tell how many days had passed with her in his company. It had been at least a dozen risings now by his count. Days with his Vicky seemed to slip by with surprising speed. Somehow, despite the lingering awkwardness between them that was only made worse by Asterion's inability to control his nightly reactions to her nearness and her own natural responses that perfumed the air with a faint hint of arousal, they had fallen into an easy rhythm that filled his days with more pleasure than any other he could remember. It shamed him to admit that it even surpassed his youthful memories from when he dotingly followed Ariadne on adventures through his prison.

Although his sister had attempted to make his abode as much a home as possible, it had never felt like more than a sheltered place to be where he could let down his guard and escape the creatures occupying the corridors. It never felt like what he vaguely understood a home should feel like. Before, unless he required rest, he never felt a need or desire to stay within

the walls, preferring to hunt through his territory or pay respect to the shrines in the lower halls to pass his waking hours. Even when Ariadne had been there with him, they had spent much of their time exploring and playing games among the twists and turns. But that was in the early days of his prison, before his father began sending victims into the halls to die, when the labyrinth had been a comforting—if somewhat dark and mysterious—place to be. But still, it had not been home then, nor in the great many spans of years that followed.

Vicky had changed that.

More than once he caught himself lingering for a moment longer than wise to watch her when she slept, even as he looked forward to sharing fruit together for their morning meal before his restless need consumed him and sent him out into the labyrinth. But every evening on his return, there was no greater pleasure than eating together as they tossed the astragaloi. He still found it difficult to open up to her and was often gruffer than he ought to be, but even then, he could not keep himself from obsessively looking at her.

She was everything he was not. Soft, small, delicate. She didn't belong in the labyrinth with monsters like him and that made him not only relish the moments in her company, but he also acknowledged that it made him terribly paranoid. Even with the magics protecting his dwelling, he carefully assured himself that nothing managed to escape past him whenever he entered or exited. As unlikely as it was to happen, given the nature of Ariadne's spells, he could not help but worry when his female was alone without his protection. Every moment he was away from her, made him feel an unsettling dread build more as each day passed that something would find a way to snuff out the bright light of her soul and beautiful laughter.

His increasing obsession and hunger, however, was worrying, as was the vicious protectiveness that rose within him like a feral creature ready to strike. None of this was the behavior of a rational male, much less a prince.

"Asterion, you look about ready to panic. This is not exactly the first time you've been in here with me while I wash," she teased, calling out from behind him. "It's not like I'm naked and bathing. I never would have imagined you to be so prudish."

Unbidden, he could see her very clearly in his mind's eye as she might be while bathing, her naked body reclined on the rocks beside the spring as

she thoroughly washed her most intimate places. He swallowed back a groan, his cock stiffening painfully as it became fully erect with need, his hunger igniting in his belly. He was therefore startled when he heard a splash and a splatter of water suddenly doused the fur along his back, drawing an annoyed growl from him. Mostly because it did little to ease the ache between his thighs or cool the burning hunger that was rising through him like a flame upon tinder.

"Do not," he growled, closing his eyes against the haze of need burning through him.

Vicky fell silent for a moment, the gurgle of the spring the only sound in the room for several beats of his heart. He grimaced, certain that he had emotionally harmed her once again with his brutish words. He was surprised, however, that when she spoke, it was with no little amount of chagrin in her voice.

"I'm sorry, Asterion. I should respect your boundaries. Please, forget I said anything."

He wanted to assure her that she was not at fault and to speak whatever she desired, but he held his tongue. He did not want to further encourage such inciting behavior when it had such quick consequences for him. She had done nothing wrong, but he did not wish to scare her with the hunger he had managed to keep contained.

His breath felt hot as it dragged in and out of his lungs, though he strove to ignore it. Although a faint haze had descended over his vision, he battled through it to focus on the bush in front of him and the small pink medicinal blooms that he was gathering to dry. Vicky had asked about pain relievers, just evasively claiming that she needed them for "that time of the month." He had no clue what event occurred every lunar span that required pain suppressants, but that there was something both horrified him and made him faintly nauseated.

He had ripped flesh from bone more often than he could count, but he could not stomach the idea of his little female in pain. The irony of it all was not lost on him and he grunted dourly as he plucked another bloom, adding it to the pile in his basket. Unfortunately, forcing his attention to the flowers, the reason he needed them, and his task at hand did little to quell the hunger burning through him.

He briefly wondered if perhaps he had been cast to Tartarus after all for the blasphemy of his existence and his terrible deeds. Surely some daemon

was solely responsible for his current torture.

He huffed a long sigh as Vicky's soft humming reached his ears, mingling with the soft sounds of water splashing as she returned to her ministrations. If he were in Tartarus, he admittedly would happily remain there and be tortured indefinitely if he could keep her. That was also why he took care to not expose her to his hunger. If he yielded to her teasing and looked at her, he knew that the need would grow far beyond what he could hide. He fairly shook with it now. It was only by his will that he was remaining in place attending to his work rather than striding over to rip the small cloth coverings to free her breasts and sex to his pleasure.

No, he did not dare look at her. He could not risk losing even the smallest amount of control that would make her aware of the full extent of the hunger consuming him.

With another ragged sigh, he reached out and plucked another bloom, pretending not to notice that it was the same shade of her lips… and he wondered if she possessed petals of similar hue beneath the small scrap of cloth circling her hips.

CHAPTER 15

Vicky hated the hours that she was left alone. It was maddening and within the complete silence of her surroundings, she often thought she heard things scraping and clawing on the other side of the walls. She still had nightmares of being chased through the labyrinth, and those sounds were eerily like the ones that still haunted her in her dreams.

When Asterion was there, everything was different. There were no ungodly scratching sounds against their walls frantically trying to reach her. Although the hunts and various creatures inhabiting the labyrinth could be heard echoing from afar, she was pretty sure that nothing dared to come near when he was there. But when he was not, no manner of distraction could make her ignore them.

Shivering, she climbed up on the platform, wrapping herself tightly in a large bear fur. She didn't even want to know how a bear was caught in the labyrinth or what else might have ended up in there. Instead, she burrowed beneath the warmth, the fur pulled up over her head, trying to block out the terrible noise assaulting her ears.

A crash echoed through the room from somewhere in the labyrinth and she cringed at the shrill shriek that followed after it. What made the hair on her arms raise in terror, however, was the blood curdling snarl that seemed to echo all around. It was promptly joined by a booming roar that sent small pebbles clattering across the floor.

"It's okay," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. "Nothing can get in here. It can't get you."

Claws screeched against stone as shrieks and roars blended into a cacophony of violence that ended with one last deep rolling growl before all

was silent again. She barely dared to breathe as she strained to listen, her heart thundering in her ears. Tears leaked out from beneath her lashes, and she startled at the sensation of the rapidly cooling hot moisture as it slipped down her cheeks.

When several minutes of silence passed, Vicky drew in a shaky breath and slowly released it. Whatever it was, it was gone, likely carrying away the grisly remains of the challenger away for its meal. She desperately wanted to throw up.

Burrowing her face into the furs beneath her cheek, she continued to take slow, measured breaths. She hated the labyrinth, and she had a distinct feeling that it hated her too.

No. That wasn't right. The feeling she got when she was alone, listening to the labyrinth alive outside of the safety of their secret chambers, was too cold to be hatred. It simply wanted her dead. In the depths of her nightly nightmares, when she was lost running through the halls, she sometimes saw the stones ahead of her morph into a terribly inhuman face filled with razor sharp teeth in a maw that unnaturally gaped open just ahead. She never seemed to slow to keep herself from sliding into its terrible mouth, its black tongue eagerly lapping up her blood, its teeth tearing at her flesh until she woke screaming in Asterion's arms.

Every night he demanded to know what tormented her and every night she brushed it off as nothing more than dreams conjured by an overactive imagination. But she wasn't so sure that it was. She wasn't that imaginative, and she certainly had never been a horror fan like some of her friends before the Ravening. Asterion was convinced that it was the labyrinth itself… or rather, how it chose to show itself to her when her mind was vulnerable and open to its influence, and she was starting to agree with him.

It was like she was caught in Rob Zombie's demented playhouse, but instead of horror icons like Freddy and Michael, it was occupied by unspeakable terrors beyond human imagination.

A fresh round of tears stung her eyes and she sniffled into the fur.

"I want to go home," she whispered miserably to her prison and any deity who deigned to listen, her fingers clutching her charm. She licked her lips and gave a weak laugh. "Asterion speaks of this as my home. He thinks he can keep me alive by sheer brute will alone, but gods help me, he doesn't understand." She joked on another humorless laugh. "I am not going to

make it here. This place is determined to kill me if it doesn't drive me straight into the depths of madness."

At least for now there was blessed silence. She sank heavily into the furs, her body beyond weary. Her eyes drifted shut and the scratching immediately resumed. Throwing back her head, Vicky screamed until her throat grew raw, and she collapsed back into a fit of coughing.

"Damn this fucking place," she rasped into the fur.

She might have sunk gratefully into oblivion if not for the fact that her eyes snapped open, and she bolted upright at the sudden burst of cool air that was chased by a heavy thump of hooves hitting stone.

"Vicky?"

Her eyes swung toward the sound, and she nearly collapsed with relief when she saw Asterion enter with concern evident on his face. As he approached the platform, she reached for him, a sob of relief shuddering through her as he gathered her up in his arms in an uncharacteristic comforting embrace. Held her there against his chest, crooning softly to her, the rumble of his deep voice soothing against her ear. When her tremors finally ceased, he continued to stroke her hair, but it was his deep voice that finally broke the invisible wall between them.

"Do you wish to speak of it?"

She shook her head against his chest. She didn't want to say and make him feel guilty about leaving her to be tormented by the labyrinth's sinister hunger. He couldn't stay with her even if he wanted to.

He had said before how difficult it could be to find prey since the entrances often changed and where animals could appear within the corridors was often unpredictable. Not only that, but she was aware that he believed that slaughtering the animals he found in the labyrinth would buy her safety from its appetite. He had confided as much to her, but she had been doubtful then, even before her nightmares had grown worse.

She blinked back her tears. "Just a nightmare."

His large, furred hand stroked down her back, and she could feel the weight of his concern radiating through her. "Another?"

"Yeah," she croaked. "They seem worse when I'm alone." She sniffled miserably and clung to him. "Are you sure I could not just go out with you?"

His sigh was deep, but he hugged her to him, reassuring her with the small gesture of physical affection in the way only he could. "You would

not be safe out there."

Twisting in his embrace until he loosened his grip, she leaned back so that she could meet his eyes. "I'm going to be really honest right now. Mentally, I'm not okay here, alone. I think I would feel safer with you than I do now."

He shook his head, baffled. "The magic of these walls can protect you far better than I could."

She shrugged. Perhaps there was something to that, but it didn't matter. "I *feel* safer with you, though," she clarified.

His ears flicked and she could see in the shift of his eyes that he was deeply uncomfortable with her request.

"I must think on it," he hedged, and she was certain right then that his decision was already made. He would not be taking her out there. "I have brought down one of the deep-dwellers. Despite their appearance, they are very good eating. We will feast well tonight."

Giving him a grateful smile, she slipped from his embrace and crawled off the bed, not wanting to remind him about how much meat they had stored away. If he was excited about feeding her then she would let him be. At the same time, she tried not to watch too closely as he stepped out of their sanctuary to retrieve his prey. One look at it and, as expected, she wanted to hurl. Of course, anything that he called a "deep-dweller" would be some kind of monster!

It was a pale, leathery creature whose head heavily armored with plating so that only a tri-serrated beak was visible. She couldn't see any eyes. Instead, it had four horns, one of which was broken, rising up from its brow and the general place that the eyes might have been. Just above the second set of horns, a long bony crest spiked outward before flattening just above its neck and extending down in overlapping armor partially down its swollen body. From those plates, large, thick, gray spines jutted outward making it vaguely resemble a sea anemone if not for the dozens of long legs and the two whip-like tails dragging behind it as Asterion hauled it through the main chamber into the tunnel that led to slaughter room.

As much as she wanted to be plastered to his side, she wrinkled her nose and sat back down on the edge of the bed. It didn't bother her to see game butchered, but there was no way she was going to be able to stomach witnessing *that* and still be able to eat. As it was, she would be lucky with however much she managed to force down if she didn't think too closely

about where it came from. Even from where she sat, however, Vicky could hear the sickening crunch of its natural armor being broken free.

Once, when she was a child, her uncle had visited and treated the entire family to a lobster dinner. Daddy had said that he was just splashing money around, but she had been eager to try something so adult and new. Lobsters were what fancy ladies ate—the ones on the tv who dated successful boyfriends. She had been utterly beside herself with excitement as she personally picked out her lobster from the tank before taking her place at the table in the fancy restaurant. That was until the lobsters were brought to the table and it had stretched across her platter looking quite like it had in the tank except very dead. She had swallowed, praying that she wouldn't throw up. She failed the moment her uncle had picked the big metal cracker and began to work at breaking the shell. She had thrown up all over the table, ruining everyone's dinner.

That was how she felt now as she listened to the shell cracking and popping in the distant tunnel.

Pressing a fur to her mouth, she gagged and squeezed her eyes shut. "Please, please do not let cave lobsters become a regular item on the menu."

To her relief, when it came time to eat, she managed to hold down her meal without too much effort. In fact, she ate it until her stomach was comfortably full under Asterion's approving eye. Unlike the lobsters of her childhood, the meat resembled grilled chicken and, true to the bizarre nature of human tastebuds, tasted like it as far as she could tell.

She couldn't believe that she actually ate it. In retrospect, it made her skin crawl but thankfully, her stomach did not rebel despite the fact. She would have hated to have thrown up all over him when he was beaming with pleasure at her appetite. It wasn't that she was a picky eater, and she still ate her fill of everything that he set before her, but it was hard to be enthusiastic about most of the meat he had offered before, especially when she knew there were far tastier bunnies that scurried through the corridors. But this was pleasantly different.

She hated to admit it, but it seemed like this variety of deep-dweller had even rabbits beat. She wondered if he could find any more of it instead whenever he felt the need to supplement their rabbit-heavy diet to give the population a chance to recover. Vicky chuckled quietly to herself. He certainly could pack away roast rabbit

“Would you like more?” Asterion inquired, his eyes gleaming with warmth as he lifted another piece of meat to her.

Patting her belly contently, Vicky closed her eyes, waved away the meat, and sighed. “Nope. I’m so full, I don’t think I can move. You might have to roll me over to bed.”

A deep chuckle greeted her words that had her prying one eye open to grin over him. It was a positive sign that he was becoming more comfortable with her whereas just a couple of days ago, she could barely get a dry chuff and faint smile from him. It was definitely progress, and in that moment, she felt closer to him than she had to anyone else since striking out on her own.

“I would be pleased to carry you,” he rumbled. “You need not ask.” With that, he rose, then scooped her carefully into his arms so that she didn’t violently pitch, which was a good thing given how full her belly was.

She was half asleep when he set her on the bed, the stuffed mattress dipping under his weight as he crawled in beside her, his bulk instantly warming her. There, she dozed listening to Asterion’s voice as he spoke of a festival for the queen of the heavens that he once saw in his youth where so many bulls had been sacrificed that the altar had been piled high with bones, hide, and fat and the air thick with the fragrant perfume of cooking meat.

Hiding her smile in the furs, she noted that most of his best memories were food related. She filed that little bit of information away and listened contently as he spun a picture for her of how life was thousands of years ago.

If it weren’t for the sheer hell of the majority of the day, she could use more that were spent exactly like this.

CHAPTER 16

She whispered his name in her sleep, a note of longing in her voice. It effortlessly invaded his dreams where he touched her body freely without worry, awakening her need and stirring her desire to rival his own. How he needed his mate. His female and she welcomed him, her thighs parting eagerly for him. He moaned as he watched his cock slide deep into her sheath, his every thrust jiggling her breasts.

"Asterion," her voice panted.

Curled around his female, Asterion stirred sleepily in response, still half caught in his dream, his cock swollen and his testicles aching as he thrust forward, his cloth-covered phallus rubbing enticingly against warm feminine heat as her bottom canted back toward him, lining his cock up more perfectly with her cunt that was barred from him by both his chiton and the small scrap of fabric she wore. Vicky let out a soft breathy sound as she writhed against him and he growled deep in his chest in response, needing to feel that silky heat around his sex more than anything.

His cock jerked against her and a damp pearling of cum at the head of his cock made him moan as his body quivered against hers, his hips rutted against her bottom as his claws dug into the furs around her belly. His female wriggled as soft panting moans filled the air around them, mingling with his own deep moans and grunts. One hand gripped her hip, dragging an excited squeak from her as he increased his speed, his mind drifting in a warm haze of lust. He wanted nothing more than to yank her up on to her knees so that he could shove in hard, fast, and deep.

With that last fantasy, he erupted, ropes of cum jettisoning against his chiton as she quivered and moaned, the scrap of material covering her sex

drenching as she cried out. His body shook against her as he held her in place, the haze of his dream fading as reality rudely intruded with the pulse of his spent cock against her.

His entire body stiffened as a new hunger roared through him and his cock threatened to rise again at the deep scent of her arousal curling around them. It was more potent than it had ever been, stirring to life something far more dangerous within him than he had realized. What had he done?

At his side, Vicky's body shuddered against him as she came down from her own release, her breath panting softly from her in quick, tiny gasps. She lay still beside him, surrounded by his much larger body curling around hers, as if in shock.

"What did we… I can't believe we just did that," Vicky finally whispered hoarsely, her voice a bit patchy from all her sweet cries that had filled the air just moments before. "I thought I was dreaming again and then…" her voice trailed off in an embarrassed silence.

"We were both dreaming," he grunted, shifting away, releasing her. "It meant nothing."

As much as it pained him to say that when the experience and the fading memory of the dream had scored claws deep into his heart, he didn't want her to be afraid that he would ravage her while she slept. He wanted her to continue to trust him sleeping at her side, even as he now began to wonder how wise that was.

To his dismay, she twisted around to give him a baleful look.

"That's not funny, Asterion. This is really awkward. I mean, there is a difference waking up with a bit of a… reaction, but what we did…"

Seated at the edge of the bed, he tipped his head to look down at her. "What we did was natural for two healthy adult beings who lay in bed together night after night," he interrupted. "There is no reason to be embarrassed, unless it disgusts you that much."

His stomach turned, sickened. It was entirely possible that she regretted her responses if being intimate with him disgusted her that much.

Vicky glared back up at him, her dark brows drawn low over her expressive human face. Though her cheeks were still a deep pink from her blush, her brown eyes were filled with annoyance.

"Why would that be the first thing to come to your mind? That's not it at all."

He snorted doubtfully. “Is it not?” He swept a hand toward his body. “Is this a form that would stir desire in humans?”

Her eyes drifted over his chest and abs; her bottom lip captured between her teeth. “I guess that would depend on who you ask. In my world, there are all manner of strange beings now that we live amongst, and while many settlements are very isolationist and keep to their own, pairings between humans and non-humans are not unheard of. I have even seen a few cross-species couples in passing and they seemed quite happy despite likely being whispered about everywhere they go.”

“People see it as unnatural,” he remarked, cutting directly to the heart of the matter.

Her wince was telling, but she sighed. “I don’t think it’s necessarily even that. I think people are afraid of change and what the mingling of species means for our world. It is no longer *our* world, you know? And that terrifies people because in the back of our minds, we all know that humanity can disappear as quickly as our world did, and no one would miss us. We would just be a mark of history on the world that would continue to be filled with other beings, existing only through hybrid bloodlines.”

“I would miss you,” he said honestly, opening himself up just a little emotionally to reassure her even as he readied himself to be rebuked.

To his surprise, her gaze softened, the corners of her lips lifted. “Despite how we met, I believe I would miss you too,” she replied.

Hiding his delight at her small admission, he yawned widely and reached over to scratch an itch on his chest. That delight slowly withered at the pensive look that suddenly tightened her features. Whatever she was thinking, he was certain that it was not about tender feelings toward him now.

She blew out a breath. “You are right. We shouldn’t get too excited about what just happened. Like you said, it is natural, and who knows, some of it may be due to… what’s it called…stockham…no…fuck, I remember hearing about it before… Stockholm Syndrome.”

Asterion scowled. That did not sound like anything good. “What is that, then?”

“It’s a fancy term some psychiatrist came up with a long time ago to explain why people get attached for their captor.”

He immediately bristled and pushed up into a seated position. “You still see me as your captor?”

She waved a frustrated hand. “Of course not, but that could also be part of the syndrome. I mean you’re a captive too. You have been for centuries! Maybe we’re both experiencing it. I’m honestly not sure if that is how it works, but it could begin encouraging feelings within us that make us want to draw closer. Trauma bonding, I think it’s called.” At his frustrated glower, she sighed then scooted onto the edge of the sleeping platform beside him. “I don’t know, Asterion.”

Growling, Asterion slipped off the bed and peered down at her, his need tightening within him with even darker purpose.

“As I said, it was nothing,” he snapped and stalked away.

He needed distance, immediately. And to cool his blood. He also needed to change his damned chiton. It clung to his groin and thighs; the fabric dampened with his seed.

Stalking into the garden chamber, he threw off his chiton and immersed himself in the warm pool fed by the spring and another hotter spring that trickled in from the side wall. He promptly dropped his head back against the stone, uncaring that it thumped uncomfortably. He had a hard skull that was difficult to break, as more than one creature of the labyrinth had discovered to their own folly.

Laying there in the pool, he sighed and allowed his mind to drift dejectedly until it cleared enough for him to focus on the important part of her words that he had initially overlooked. He paused midmotion, the scrap of leathering stilling on his flesh.

She was feeling something too, something more than the ache of desire in her body, he was certain of it.

Hope sprung as a live hot flame kindling in his heart. His little female—his one-day mate, he acknowledged—was as cautious as he was, but this was a start.

CHAPTER 17

Vicky moaned, her hips arching as some slick slid over her clit to drag between her folds. The touch was hesitant, experimental even, and it made her smile as it continued to slide up and down along her sex. Every now and then it paused at her clit to lap at it, tapping at it with a rapid rhythm that had her twisting, her breath panting out of her.

"Asterion," she whispered in a husky voice, his name ending on a gasp when the tongue stroked in a firm, languid movement from the bottom of her slit to the top of her clit.

A cry left her as it writhed against her pussy as if blindly seeking entrance, but she jumped as she felt an additional wet flick against her nub, and a moan tumbled from her. What had he done there? Fuck it felt incredible. It was like she was being stimulating by two tongues. A large one rubbing deliciously against her and a smaller one attentively slurping at her clit, drawing a hot flood of arousal from her depths.

Gods it was so good. She didn't want to open her eyes in fear that if she did then reality would intrude too quickly, and it would bring the incredible pleasure to an end. A moan tumbled from her lips as the wet heat writhed within and around her sex.

How the fuck was he doing that?

Her head thrashed from side to side, her breath panting. He was consuming her with every lash of his tongue, drawing more from her sex as if he were ravenous for her taste, and she was being savored. It was exquisite torment that slowly began to border on pain as his tongue thrust voraciously, and with increasingly more determination, into the deepest part

of her channel. Her brow wrinkled with discomfort, and she tried to shift away to silently signal for him to withdraw a little.

Instead of heeding, his tongue struck with another strong lash, making her muscles quiver and hips jump as his secondary tongue tugged at her clit. A screech left her, her eyes snapping open only to flood with horror as she screamed again at the sight of two long, gray appendages extended from a small crack in the wall.

The walls around her gave an echoing groan of satisfaction like someone enjoying a particular satisfying meal as the smaller coil slipped down, heading toward her ass.

"*What the actual fuck?"*

With a shrill shriek of denial, she dropped her hand around it and flung it away, turning her attention immediately to dealing with the other two between her legs. With a guttural sound of pure disgusted horror, her hands clawed the slippery tentacle-like tongues until they fell back enough that she was able to kick them away completely.

Eyeing them as they momentarily coiled back toward the wall, Vicky shuddered with revulsion. What the fuck were they? Possessing a strange flattish side, they had stroked and flicked along her pussy searchingly in a way that was definitely not erotic now that she had a good eyeful of them. Whatever they were, they certainly did not belong to her minotaur!

She jumped as something darted toward her face and she immediately snapped a hand up to bat it away, watching in shock as the flat coil was flung backwards a short distance to twist among the others before they recovered enough to snake through the air back toward her. They were literally trying to enter her body through any orifice.

Strangling on a cry, she clawed and slapped them away, kicking the larger one away whenever it attempted to dip between her legs again. The more she fought, the more frenzied they became, however, and she found herself quickly fighting with greater desperation, tears of angry frustration streaming down her face. Behind her, she heard Asterion's heavy stride coming up the hall and a sense of relief filled her, battling with the insane amount of panic flooding her bloodstream.

"Vicky, another nightmare? Perhaps we need to…" his words came to a startled stop before immediately pitching into a furious roar.

The loud clang of metal echoed through the room and hooves struck stone in a furious rush, but it was the ax arching down, severing the

“tongue” that drove in a beeline between her legs again. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. The gush of cold, unnatural fluid on her thighs and the gushing stump jerking back with a piercing shrill sound that stabbed through her head. The smaller appendages whipped back out of the room with it through the crack in the wall as Asterion followed after it with a deadly snarl.

“Oh man,” she whispered hoarsely as she stared down at the limp cord of flesh still laying limply on the bedding between her legs. The cold, black fluid that had gushed from it was only trickling and made her stomach turn just looking at it. Pushing it away, her nose wrinkled.

“Fuck, this is disgusting” she muttered, casting a brief glance at the minotaur’s back as he crouched to examine the cracks in the wall. “What the fuck were those and how did they get in here?”

“Manifestations of the labyrinth,” he growled angrily.

“Are you saying that the labyrinth grew tongues to lick me with?” she screeched while trying to line up her experiences and what she saw with what he was saying. “I know you said it wanted a taste of me but that is ridiculous!”

He shook his head, the tip of one claw running along the exposed crack in front of him. “Not tongues. They may have a sense of taste, but they are designed to slowly burrow into a creature and suck all its vital fluids and innards out before dragging away the carcass that is left. It is an efficient way to kill.” He frowned. “Usually, they kill far quicker. For whatever reason, it was prolonging its feeding. But then again, it has been a long time since the labyrinth has had a human to feast upon.”

She paled. “Fuck, that’s sadistic. It’s worse than tongues and parasites combined.”

With a shudder of revulsion, she immediately tossed the hacked appendage as far from the bed as she could. She sure as hell wasn’t having an evil labyrinth’s human-eating straw anywhere near her, and especially not any orifice. She happened to glance up briefly, however, when he straightened, snapping to his full height, every muscle in his body tense.

Fuck, he was pissed. She shivered, uncertain if she was feeling fear or lust at the fury racing through him. Or maybe it was both and she was truly on her way to being fucked up now.

A grimace twisted her lips as she hunted out a bit of cloth to clean herself up with. Between the sexual fluids from her arousal coating her legs

and the nasty stuff the severed limb spewed, she just wanted to get the most immediate evidence of what had happened cleaned off her. Wrinkling her nose, she spread her legs wide and dabbed at her pussy, grimacing at a sort of viscous slime that coated her folds where those things had grazed trying to access her body to feed on her.

Gross.

She startled slightly when Asterion gave a low grunt, his breath huffing from him in a loud blast from his lungs as something carnal and wild shifted in his eyes. Mortified, she felt her cheeks with what had to be a progression of shades of red as she dropped the leather rag and snapped her legs closed. He had turned just in time to get a huge eyeful of her slimed up intimate area.

She knew how it had to look, puffy from her wet dream and darkened with arousal as her own slick coated it. And probably a few drops of whatever passed for blood for an entity like the labyrinth that she hadn't yet gotten completely wiped away. She choked helplessly as she fought against a hot current of arousal that rose swiftly through her. It shouldn't have been able to happen so soon after nearly being a snack, but maybe Asterion was right.

There was still a possibility that they were both just clinging to each other as victims of some sick need of the labyrinth, but she couldn't ignore the fact that there was a rightness to it. This horrible situation may have brought them together, but why did that have to stop them from grasping what happiness they could with both hands and fighting for each other?

Gods knew that with everything apparently out to eat her in this damned place, she just didn't care anymore. She was more than ready to embrace any and every bit of good she could find.

She shivered with lust as she saw the way that he, too, was affected in the temporary vanquishment of their temporary enemy. His broad nostrils flared, and a deep rumbling growl rose up his throat. The sound fueled her need, making it burn hotter.

Kicking the soiled fur from the bed, her lips stretched in a welcoming smile, Vicky scooted back on the bed, making room for him. Considering how pleasant her dream was before it was rudely interrupted by the labyrinth's horror show, she was eager to get the real thing on her and see what it could do. Sure, her lower thighs were splattered with the mess, but the rest of her was clean and very willing, and he hardly seemed disturbed

or put off by it. The massive bulge of his sex tenting his clothes showed his interest as much as it made her pussy clench eagerly with a desire to finally be filled.

With heat simmering in his eyes, he stepped closer, his thick muscles flexing as he allowed his ax to drop to the floor. Every inch of him screamed superior predator and she was both terrified and inexplicably excited by it. She no longer had any interest in making this make sense, however. She wanted him… needed him. And despite everything, he was good and caring toward her no matter how dangerous his nature was. The heavy clop of his hoof felt as if it vibrated through her, and a tiny gasp escaped from between her parted lips as he stepped beside the bed. All he had to do was crawl forward and he would be welcomed between her legs. Leaning down, he placed his hands heavily on the thick mat and paused, his eyes drifting down to the dark marks inking her skin.

Suddenly, he halted, a thoughtful expression crossing his face seconds before he straightened and took a firm step back away from her. He slowly shook his head, withdrawing.

Bewildered, Vicky watched as the minotaur strode away, grabbing the torch from the sconce where he had left it burning when he rushed to her aid. Removing it from its place on the wall, he headed down the left tunnel, leaving her alone on the bed. Mystified, she stared after him before realization hit that those things could come through the wall again. Her eyes snapped back to the broken point on the wall, and she stared, her breath stuttering in a soft fan against her lips as her pulse hammered in her throat. She stared at it so intently that she didn't hear Asterion return until he was practically upon her, a bowl of water in one hand with a rag draped over its rim, and a bucket in the other carrying the musk of wet, fertile soil.

Setting the bowl at her side, he strode away to crouch in front of the cracks once more. She had noted before that he had filled the crack near the entrance at some point and so it seemed he applied himself to the same task again, sealing away the labyrinth from entering through holes in Ariadne's magic.

Scooping rich mud from the bucket, Asterion proceeded to pack it tightly into the cracks, working with a methodical rhythm that she found distracting as she attempted to dab at herself with the wet rag. She was so absorbed in watching the flex of his muscles and the gentle sway of his tail along the ground as he worked that she had barely even washed a smudge

off by the time he stopped, stood, as his eyes found her when he turned toward her.

A flush of heat seared her in that moment at the renewed heat in his eyes as his gaze lingered on the path of the rag. With a low growl, he settled the weight of one knee on the bed and reached for the rag, plucking it easily from her fingers to dip it into the bowl.

"Allow me the pleasure of tending to you," he murmured.

Her tongue sticking firmly to the roof of her mouth, she nodded silently, her eyes rounding as she watched him swipe the rag down her breasts. There wasn't so much as a speck of the filth on them to warrant it and yet he made an approving sound as her nipple beaded up beneath his gaze.

His eyes lifted, pinning her in place as they met hers, the corners of his inhuman mouth lifting. Longing, desire, and an ever-thirsting need stared back at her from them and she slowly nodded, spreading her legs wider for his ministrations. His sudden grin at her submission was feral and she moaned as the wet cloth lightly slapped across her sex. She shivered, her breath panting from her heaving chest, but it was her nipples that tightened and her clit that throbbed for more when his shadow extended over her, his primal growl claiming her before he had truly even begun.

And then with a ripple of muscle and a deep moan, he was gone.

Vicky snapped upright in bewilderment; her eyes wide with confusion as they tracked Asterion. He backed away, his chest heaving. The lust and hunger filled his eyes and etched into his features and the hard bulge of his muscles, his impressive erection bulging rising eagerly for her excited her and made her want him even more. But he stepped back, his breath billowing out in gusty breaths with every step of his retreat until he was a distance where he felt able to turn away from her and leave.

"What the fuck just happened?" she wondered aloud, her confusion shifting to annoyance when she heard a distant, faint laughter in response.

CHAPTER 18

Vicky paced restlessly. Okay, the confines were really starting to get to her. What day was it now, anyway? She had lost track. She had attempted to keep note of it but the passage of days was difficult to observe. Other than the light that worked its way through the grating in the garden, there was very little with which to mark the nights and days.

Sure, she had considered marking the passage of time with grooves cut into the walls but had discarded it, uncertain if she could face a depressing future with countless marks marring the walls. Imagining just how scored the walls would be if Asterion had taken to that had made her stomach flip so she had discarded the idea almost immediately. With her miserable sense of time, it took about a week for her to lose count, if not a little more.

Turning abruptly away from the bed, she shook her head. There was another problem, too, that she had been trying to ignore. As much as she hated to admit it, sleeping night after night surrounded by the heat of the minotaur's muscular frame and warm scent was starting to get to her. And it was not only not getting any better, but it was also getting a lot harder to ignore and pretend that it wasn't happening.

On top of that, Asterion was beginning to act strange.

Well… stranger.

From almost the start, he was quick to rise and put distance between them as if he couldn't tolerate being beside her for any longer than necessary. She did not begrudge him that since she was not altogether comfortable with their sleeping situation herself. But then he suddenly started retreating at random moments to the butchery room where he knew that she would not follow, if not into the labyrinth itself. The time he spent

with her seemed to be timed in short bursts, part of which were spent eating or playing dice together. And it was only getting worse. As of late, he had begun going directly into the gardens for long stretches of time upon rising. At first, she had been too absorbed in her own head to think anything of it. It was only gradually that she began to realize what the daily echo of vigorously splashing water coming up the hall meant.

She glanced toward the left corridor and frowned thoughtfully at the sound rising from it. For fuck's sake, what exactly did he have to clean off himself that required that much vigorous splashing? Quite thoroughly, in fact, if the loud, hurried splashing of water was anything to go by. What, was it her? Did she really smell that bad that he couldn't stand any trace of her scent clinging to him?

Giving herself a discreet sniff, she frowned and shrugged. She didn't notice anything particularly off-putting. In fact, she smelled better than she had in some time now that she had regular access to fresh water to bathe herself with.

Unless it was something else. A specific scent that he was being covered with during the night as they slept that he could not tolerate and sought to scrub from his fur. There was only one recent development and that was… she floundered as her mind zeroed in on the culprit.

Fuck.

Her arousal. He had started acting this way ever since they had gotten carried away while dreaming.

Dropping her face into her hands, cradling it between her cool palms, her face heated further, humiliation burning through her. Was it really that potent of a taint to him? It wasn't like she could stop her body's natural reaction to him while she was sleeping. She certainly wasn't intentionally inflicting it upon him for fuck's sake.

Nor was it like she was the only one physically reacting to the close press of their bodies at night and yet it seemed that she was the only one not making a big deal of it. Not that his monstrously portioned size wasn't enough to make any sensible woman worry at least a little. And yet, though she had seen the large, solid bulge of his cock pressing up through his clothes often enough, and even woke once to it lodged tightly against her, she tried not to react to it or draw attention to her awareness of it. She didn't even shrink back from its presence as she had the first nights sharing the bed, accepting it as merely a part of his bodily function.

I certainly haven't been rushing off to wash off any memory of it from my body the moment I got up, she thought sourly.

No, her conscience whispered back with a touch of glee, *you enjoyed it too much. Where he wants to remove the evidence of arousal, you want to luxuriate in the way it makes you feel. Desired and aflame with your own needs.*

Her lips pressed together. Was that what was really bothering her? That on some level, she enjoyed it and wanted another forbidden taste of that desire whereas he sought to escape it. She knew that the arousal wasn't one-sided, but that did not mean he wanted to feel it any more than she logically did, even if her body was of another opinion on the matter.

Did she really want him to crave the contact as much as she was? The selfish part of her said yes, she wanted to know that she was not the only one who was both disturbed and suffering from the confusion of her mixed feelings. She wanted him to battle against his unnatural urges as much as she was beginning to—and that alone was crazy.

It was all so messed up. Groaning, she swiped the heels of her hands over her face.

For fuck's sake, get yourself together. He is not even human.

She scoffed silently to herself. That was an understatement. There was nothing human at all about his massive proportions. There was certainly no way she was mistaking him for anything human when she was sleeping pressed up close to him. That part of him didn't feel particularly human either. Her belly heated and she pressed her hand to it as if to put the desire back down within herself.

He was not human, and it was important for her to remember that. He wasn't even close to human sized or possessing common features as some of the human-nonhuman pairings she heard whispers of. Worse, it was dangerous to be tempted to ignore it.

Whether he styled himself as her protector or not, there was no getting around the fact that he was a violent predator. She needed to remember that and keep perspective regardless of the instinctive hoe that seemed to commandeer her body while she was asleep and cleave to the strong male lying beside her every night.

"Gah!" Vicky threw up her hands in frustration as the sound of frustration exploded out of her. "I've been alone too fucking long," she muttered, rubbing at her eyes.

Her fingers stilled at a deep, resonating sound suddenly rumbling through the hall. Tipping her head, she listened, her lips curling downward in concentration. Was that… singing?

Curious, she followed the sound down the left corridor, stopping just at the entrance of the garden. Though she could not see Asterion, it was definitely his voice. Perhaps he was done with his bath then. Without the hall contorting the sound, the rumble smoothed out into a deep bass, rising and lowering in pitch to a melody of an unknown song. Sung full voiced, the room barely seemed able to contain it any more than it could contain the booming resonance of unleashed thunder. With the flowing fountain, his voice could have been a tamed storm, or the voice of some rain-bringing god.

It was… beautiful.

Vicky's feet moved as if on their own accord, and she quietly stepped into the garden. And then nearly stopped breathing in shock.

Though his back was to her, Asterion stood thigh-deep in the fountain-fed pool. The water barely coming up behind his mid-thigh treated her to an unobstructed view of his ass. Rounded and with small dips at the side, it was firm and slick with water as if he had just stood up from reclining in the pool. A muscle flexed as he adjusted his stance, and the dark rope of his long, tufted tail hooked as it lifted from the water just as he bent over, revealing the plump sack between his spread thighs. With a blast of air billowed from his lungs, his body snapped upright, his wet mane flying back to slap against his back among a shower of water droplets flicked back from his horns. The muscles of his arms bulged as he appeared to be scrubbing his hands over his face.

He was definitely *not* done with his bath.

Oh gods, I'm here peeking on him while he's bathing!

A furious blush climbing her cheeks, Vicky let out an embarrassed squeak as she slapped her hand over her eyes and spun back around to the entrance, her hand outstretched and grappling for the wall. Water sloshed behind her as if he turned abruptly.

"Vicky?"

The question was spoken with so much heat that it curled through her belly like an ignited flame, warming her thoroughly. Her sex clenched immediately in reaction to the dark rumble of his voice, her arousal spreading through her and pooling low in her core. Unable to stop herself,

her hand fell away and she peeked around the edge of the wall, her heart hammering in her chest, her eyes widening at his thick cock clasped firmly in his fist.

He stilled at her soft, lustful gasp, his nostrils flaring as he doubtlessly caught the scent of her arousal surrounding him as a heavy perfume in the air. Under her gaze, his hand tightened around his shaft, his claws slightly biting into the soft tissue, drawing forth what she imagined to be an erotic burn by the way he moaned as droplets of blood mixed with the precum seeping down the side of his cock from its flat, blunt head. Then he stroked again as if he couldn't help himself. Every pump made his muscles quiver and still he did not reach for her. Not yet anyway.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. I heard you singing and thought you were done," she replied in a rush.

Another slosh. Did he just take a step toward her? Her breath hiked into a soft pant in time with the flutter of her pulse. It felt like there was an invisible string between them being pulled together at the moment and the fire ignited within her was quickly devouring it, and with it all doubts she had repeated silently to herself just minutes ago.

A deep growl rolled out from behind her, the room amplifying it into a dangerous thunder that threatened to draw down its lightning and pierce her. Fuck, she wanted that. Her thighs quivered with the need that rushed through her blood. She was sick to react that way to such a deadly sound. She should be terrified. She should want to run as fast as she could from him.

Scratch that… she wanted to run. But for an entirely different reason. This was not some horrible monster. This was Asterion, a male she had come to trust, admire, and care for, whose carnal hungers sent thrills through her. For him, she wanted to run so that he would pursue and catch her. She wanted to see what happened when his instinct overruled his reason, and he gave into that hunger he kept such a tight leash on. For weeks, she had been grateful for his control, but now she wanted to see it broken and she wanted to find out just how exquisitely he would break her.

Water splashed as if in agitation.

"Leave," he rasped. "Just walk away slow…"

Her heart jumping eagerly within her chest, she did not give him a chance to finish that thought. She dropped her hand and, throwing a wicked grin over her shoulder, leapt forward into the blinding darkness of the hall.

“No!” he bellowed.

It was too late. The words were immediately lost into a monstrous bellow amid a sudden spray of water as he charged from the pool that did nothing to cool her excitement. Quite the opposite. It inflamed it. They had spent so many days dancing around their undeniable hunger for each other, all of which had been leading up to this moment. She realized that now.

Vicky raced down the hall, her legs pumping with the excited rush of blood coursing through her. A giddy pant escaped her. The heavy thump of his hooves just made her increase her speed, wishing to extend to the thrill of the chase. Never had it felt so, so good to break a rule.

A surprised squeal left her when a pair of arms violently curled around her, wrenching her completely off her feet. The pace barely seemed to break as she was carried the remaining distance through the hall into the warm light of the main room. She barely had a second to drag in a breath before it was forced from her lungs as she was spun against the wall, the arms releasing her to pin a thick hand over her throat. The pressure from it was just hard enough for her to feel it without truly impeding her breathing, and it sent an erotic thrill through her as she lifted her eyes and met the burning gaze of the minotaur hovering over her.

His eyes almost glowed with a reddish cast as he stared down at her, his lethally sharp fangs exposed. She felt the slightest brush of his tail against the side of her leg but that was the only thing soft about him at the moment. Every inch of him was drawn tight as a bow to hunch menacingly over her. A smile stretched across her face, desire twisting tighter within her. Despite the danger pouring off him, there was something in the way he was holding her that conveyed an impossible passion-driven strength as he bent over her. He wanted her. She could see that burning within in his eyes, reflecting back her own need.

“This is not what I wanted,” he growled down at her and her eyebrows arched in disbelief.

Pressing her neck against his straining hand, her smile turned into a sharp grin. “This is exactly what you want. Do not deny it.”

His eyes briefly closed as a shiver ran through him. “Not like this,” he denied. “Not like a monster,” he rasped. “The hunger of a monster is something no woman wants.”

Vicky’s heart broke a little for him in that moment. “I believe you should let me be the judge of that,” she challenged, and his eyes snapped

open in surprise. She smirked up at him, her fingers curling around his thick wrist. “You are not a monster, Asterion, nor are you a man. You are something else, something better,” she added when his eyes clouded with dismay.

His eyes widened, his ears turning toward her. Those same dark eyes dropped and heated as they followed the bath of her tongue as it traced over her lips, wetting them.

“I’m not afraid,” she whispered.

“You should be,” he replied with a low growl. “You do not know what I could do to you. You tempt something forbidden within me.”

“By whose judgment? Your father’s?” she scoffed. “I am telling you right now that I know you wouldn’t hurt me any more than I would enjoy. I trust you to unleash your need for me. I want it.”

He shook his head, but she could see a glimmer of intrigue in his eyes. And perhaps a little hope as he waged an internal war.

“You do not know what you are asking.”

She nearly laughed at that. Even when she was terrified of him, she knew exactly what a force he was. It both drew her even as it scared her, and that had frightened her more than a simple monster ever could.

“I could hurt you,” he added, his voice dropping lower as his nose dipped toward her, his nostrils flaring as he drew in her scent.

She peered up at him. “Then hurt me so good. I would rather all of you, all your hunger, than just the small parts of you that you feel safe to give me.”

She drew in a sharp breath as his thumb brushed across her throat, her skin prickling with the fresh flare of arousal. His breath fanned her hair, the tension in the air between them increasing to the point that it felt a thread away from snapping. He groaned then, the sound deeper than ever.

“I warned you. Unfortunately for you, I do not have the strength to resist,” he rumbled, his head leaning in closer.

“Good,” she whispered, narrowing her eyes at him in silent challenge.

His big body trembled as he closed the distance between them further. “You never should have run, Vicky.”

She bared her teeth in a fierce smile. “Neither should you have. Stop running from me, Asterion. I want this. I want you.”

His eyes flared brighter, and he snarled as his large body surrounded her until her entire world narrowed to only him. “Then you shall have me.”

CHAPTER 19

The hunger within him raged, but Asterion could no longer find the strength to care. Vicky's lust had sunk its claws into him, demanding his surrender, bleeding away every bit of strength from his will. He had wanted to be a better male for her. But now—there was no longer a choice for either of them.

With a growl, he gripped the material covering her but paused. As much as he wanted to rip it from her, sense intruded just enough to remind him that his female had nothing else to serve for clothes. Nor did he have any decent leather to make her anything suitable to replace it. Giving a frustrated grunt, he dropped his hand from around her neck and pulled the hem of her strange, short tunic over her head. The band she wore around her breasts mystified him for a moment, but Vicky giggled and had sympathy on him. Her hands snaked up to the clasp between her breasts, allowing the material to fall away before she moved on to open the fastener on her pants.

Unable to wait any longer, his hands gripped them and pulled the length of thick material, peeling it from her legs. She barely had a chance to step free of them and kick the material to the side before he had her pressed firmly against the wall again. With one hand, he released his chiton, and put his free hand once more at her throat, holding her in place. Crowding in close, his cock brushed just below her breasts, the hot silk of her skin kissing the head of his prick. Her eyes dropped but he growled so that her gaze instantly snapped back up to him, a darker flush of desire stained her cheeks as it ran down to the tops of her beautiful breasts.

He marveled at them for a moment. He had never seen an aroused, naked woman, with the warm perfume of her skin surrounding him as potently as the soft texture of it caressed him back with every touch. With his free hand, he plucked gently at her nipples and then pulled more firmly when they puckered; the tips engorging and stiffening with her blatant desire. If he hadn't been able to scent the potent heat of it, he knew that all the signs of her desire were being displayed beautifully for him from her wide-blown pupils to her slightly curled toes braced against the stones beneath her feet.

Her small hand gripped his forearm, her fingers tightening in a hold that came nowhere close to encompassing even his wrist. She was so delicate… so sweet.

Rumbling with pleasure, he dipped his head lower, drawing in another deep breath as his hand slid up between her legs exploratively. The flesh jumped at the drag of his claws, enticing him so that he scratched a bit harder. Vicky gasped at the scrape, the scent of her arousal thickened around them, making another growl rumble through his chest. He teased her with his claws until she was panting softly, her legs widening for him. When his fingers finally came to the junction between her supple thighs, he retracted his claws—something he never did—to tease the silky heat there.

It was so delicate. Though he yearned to see the treasures beneath his fingers, he could not seem to stop his gentle exploration. He dragged his first and second finger up along the puffy petals at either side of her slit, delighting in the way she quivered in reaction, her breath panting out with soft sighs. It was whenever his finger brushed a stiff bead of flesh at the top that he paused at Vicky's sharp gasp as her hips jerked erotically against his hand. He couldn't decide which reaction he liked more. All of it fascinated him.

Savoring her reaction, he continued to stroke as he breathed in the scent of her from her neck. His tongue stroked simultaneously over her pulse as he lightly squeezed her neck and flicked his knuckle against the pearl. The throaty sound of Vicky's moan shot straight down to his cock, making him grin wickedly.

"Assuredly Aphrodite has blessed you," he rasped.

Her eyelashes fluttered open to reveal the deep warmth of her eyes as the corners of her lips curled. "Are you planning on worshiping me then?"

He smirked, pinching the pearl between his knuckles, enjoying the way her face lit up with desire as her body shook in reaction. He felt like a god and yet knew he was nothing more than a willing servant to his beautiful human goddess. Her pain and desire were all his for him to unleash his hunger upon.

He was still afraid of it, but he was beyond the point of concern now. Distantly, he marveled at how easily he could damage the slick, puffy skin beneath his hand. So sweet. He imagined that it would taste that way as well. His mouth salivating, he dropped his hand, cupped it under her bottom and lifted her up high against the wall. Hands shot around his horns, clenching hard as a startled gasp left his female. A gasp that quickly turned into a rapturous moan as his head dropped between her thighs, his long tongue stretching out to swipe ravenously at her sex. It gushed on contact, and she sang out a tiny, ecstatic cry that made his cock jump eagerly.

But the flavor! A moan rumbled from him. Not even the wine that Ariadne smuggled to him in their youth, or any of the treasured honey from the palace, was as sweet on his tongue as Vicky's hot essence. And such a pretty vessel to sip it from. Her cunt was just as soft in the firelight, gleaming with the arousal that coated it. The petals of her cunt had a slight furl to their edge, and he stroked along one and then the other, tasting them and sucking them each into his mouth and nipping on them just hard enough to make her gasp. Every whimpering pant was the sweetest of songs, but her loud cry when he latched onto the little pearl, catching it lightly between his teeth before sucking on it hard, was the music of the gods themselves.

Releasing his prize, he dragged his tongue along her sex, firmer and pressing deeper than before. He savored each stroke, feasting upon her, his teeth delivering small stings that made her cry out and gush, providing an ever increasing well from him to drink from. Between the sweetest of juices that he had discovered between her thighs, the richness of her scents, soft feminine flesh, and the beauty of her cries, she was a feast for all his senses. It drove him to seek more and more. He fed on her, his hunger insatiable with every lash of his tongue, a tongue so wide that it covered the entire width of her small sex. Her every cry of completion and sweet flood giving him more of what he hungered for.

He did not relent, not even at the sharp sting of Vicky's teeth on his sensitive ear. He growled but she only moaned and nipped at it again,

making his cock twitch and ache. They continued their mutual devouring until the pleasurable tightness of his cock turned into a tight, aching pain that finally drew his mouth away. He glanced down at himself, the pale pink flesh of his prick was stained an angry color at its tip, and copious amounts of precum soaked his length as it dribbled freely down. He felt Vicky's head brush his as she too looked down, his ears turning toward her as she drew in a sharp breath.

"Holy fuck," she whispered.

Grunting, he gently untangled her fingers from his horns and lowered her slowly down the wall, noting that her muscles tensed the closer her sex drew the blunt head of his prick. There was a slight hint of fear in her excited scent that made his cock leap, spewing a tiny spurt of precum from its tip in reaction. She moaned at the sight and licked her lips hungrily.

At the first touch of his cock, Vicky quivered so strongly that Asterion stopped with interest and peered at her. Fascinated, he began to coax the broad, blunt head back and forth against her slippery folds, watching her desire once again coil tighter within her. He desired to feast upon that, too, as if he could suck it out from her body and into his, so he fed upon it the only way he could. Growling, he slapped his cock against her cunt, once, twice, delighting in her small shouts of pleasure. She squirmed about the head, curling her hips down in an attempt to impale herself upon the length, but he grinned hungrily and did not let her. Not yet. He needed more. He waited for the perfect invitation for the ultimate feast.

And it came in the form of her pitched whine and the flood of wet heat down his length. With her thighs quivering, he pulled her down onto his length, his cock pushing through the tight grip of her rippling channel. She cried out louder at his invasion, her nails digging into his fur as he burrowed in bit by bit, stretching her soft, hot cunt around him. It resisted every bit of his length, but he pressed up ruthlessly, dragging her hips down with the same even pressure.

"Don't stop," Vicky chanted raggedly in his ear. "Don't you fucking dare stop."

He grinned though she did not see it. He had no intention of doing so. Not now or ever again, it truly was too late for both of them. They were both damned to this terrible hunger.

Grunting and growling, he worked himself deeper, his cock jerking and spurting copious amounts of precum with every bit of space it gained. She

whimpered, her throat working under his hand, and wriggled, trying to force him deeper until he snarled with impatience. Firming his hold on her hip, he dragged her down sharply as he pumped up, boring the remaining expanse of his dick deep into her. A bellow left him as the sensation of her tight channel rippled and squeezed around him. It was the most exquisite agony and pleasure all at once. The perfection of the highest abode of the gods and the sweet pain of the darkest, forbidden depths of Tartaros. Her scream as her body milked him amid the intensity of her orgasm was the most exquisite of sounds.

His claws sprung free, digging against her hip as he began to pump, his own hunger racing forward, needing more, demanding more. Her hips twitched and writhed in attempt to move in tandem with his violent pace. As much as he relished it, he still needed more. Pushing her firmer against the wall, he pinned her completely and grinned when she stared back at him wide-eyed, a feverish lust hazing her gaze. With her unable to move, he picked up his rhythm, his hips rolling, stroking deeper and faster, his hand squeezing just enough that her eyes rolled back as her lips parted on a silent scream. That, too, he feasted upon when he loosened his grip and her orgasm rushed over her again, her cunt gripping him harder as it suctioned the length of his cock deeper with the force of her release.

Unable to hold back any longer, his cock swelled and jerked hard even as his testicles drew up tight in preparation to deliver their seed. The roar that ripped from him was unholy, something that no natural animal made as his cock twitched repeatedly, spurting his hot seed within her as her cunt clasped tight around him, her scream joining with his in their shared torment.

It was hell. It was bliss. And for once, his hunger was sated. His hunger rested in his belly like a content creature as he held Vicky against him. It would rouse again soon enough, however. Bending an affectionate smile upon his mate sagging against his chest, he adjusted his grip, curling both arms around her and turned toward the platform. An excitement stirred in his chest. He could not wait to lay there with his mate and know that sweet peace. That would be the only peace they would ever truly have for she was never escaping him now.

As much as he was hers, she was now irrefutably his.

CHAPTER 20

Asterion smiled in his sleep as he instinctively reached for the female curled up beside him, needing that contact, and dragged her up against his body. Although she had clung tightly to him in the aftermath of the nightmares that terrorized her nightly, at some point, she had rolled away until he sought her out again in his sleep. Curling his large frame around hers, he sighed contently as her sweet feminine heat and scent encompassed him. In the deepest night and early morning hours, when his world was narrowed to only her wrapped in his arms, he could allow the moment of vulnerability to admit to himself that he loved her.

In his dreams he whispered the words, telling her every feeling trapped within his heart over and over. In his dreams, he did not have to fear that she too would reject him and want to leave him. In the end, everyone turned away from him. His parents had at his birth. Ariadne had betrayed him and left him alone in his prison for the male she loved. The love he felt for Vicky had caught him off guard, kindling within him so slowly that he had barely noticed until the fire had ignited and burned away everything else but his love and deep, continuous hunger for her. In his dreams, it was safe to allow himself to enjoy it. Sleepily, he nuzzled her, caught up in the stories of her world drifting through his dreams.

As of late, he had begun to dream that he could leave the labyrinth with her, and for the first time in centuries, feel the warmth of the sun on his fur and fresh air filling his lungs. Even with the devastation of the Ravening that she told him about, he would treasure every day out in that world with her. That was a world that held a possible future rather than endless years of bleak imprisonment. Soon, their shared stories of their respective worlds

would dry up. As it was, his stories were few enough already. He did not recall much of the kingdom of Minos since he was still quite young when he had been thrown into the labyrinth, and even before then, he had not been permitted out into the city. All he had to offer her were views he recalled from his window and the feast day parades of gods through the streets to holy sites and back to their temples.

For that reason, it was not the shadows of the distantly remembered past, or the echoes of his sister's laughter that he dreamed of anymore. Instead, it was Vicky's world that haunted his dreams, and along with it the hope of experiencing it with his female at his side if she should have him and be agreeable. He would no longer feel the oppressive darkness of the labyrinth surrounding him at all hours. To hunt knowing that prey hadn't been lured in to feed the labyrinth's own monstrous appetite.

In the end, he was still a monster that people would fear. But what they thought did not matter to him. All that mattered to him was his Vicky. They would fulfill each other's lives and he would be her protector out there just as much as he was here.

Asterion smiled in his sleep as he dreamed of the home they might make, one with plenty of open land around them, far from anything that would feel confining. Mountains rose in the distance in his dream, the scent of the harvest on the air, and he did not miss the walls that had been his only companion for centuries. He would make a good life for his Vicky, and in his dream, she loved him as much as his own love was growing for her.

CHAPTER 21

Asterion knelt on the ground, taking great care despite the considerable bulk of his body. A flower teased his nose, and he found himself smiling in spite of himself as he admired it, recalling the last time he admired it. It not only held the same color as Vicky's sex when flushed with arousal, but even the frilled petals closely resembled those that framed her wet slit. It was a shame that it did not smell as sweet, but few things could be as perfect. In any case, perhaps that was a good thing. Their appetite for each other had been uncontrollable for the last couple of days, and his mate needed her rest. Even his own prick required a little recovery time than what he had been allowing it.

He chuckled, releasing the bloom from between his fingers so that he did not risk crushing it in his grip. He would prefer to leave it be so that he could continue to admire it later. Perhaps he would show it to Vicky just so that he could watch her face redden with pleased embarrassment when he told her how something as simple as a flower threatened to arouse his desire anew for how perfectly it resembled her cunt in all its beauty.

She likely would not realize even then just how important she had become to him over their many weeks together. Her presence had quickly become as necessary as air to him, and now that she accepted him, it only made him love her more. He shook his head in amusement. He had been able to ignore his hunger by controlling his exposure, but nothing had saved him from slowly falling in love with her, even if she was not quite there yet herself. Vicky filled a hole within his heart that he had long ignored. With Vicky, there was now something truly worth smiling about for the first time in his long, miserable life since he was abandoned here.

And why would he not smile? She was truly a remarkable female who possessed wit, humor, and an unbreakable quality that he admired. She would need all those things to survive the labyrinth, but with him there, he had little doubt that she would succeed. She would do what none since Theseus had done... she would escape the labyrinth. And if gods willing, he hoped that he would find a way to leave with her. Especially after the way she looked at him, watched him bathing and the immeasurable pleasures that it had led to for both of them.

Never would he have believed that she would accept his hungers and would bend them to her own pleasure. Though part of him still worried and held back a small degree, uncertain of when the influence of the labyrinth might fracture his mind more than it already was, he was grateful for what they could freely share.

Even now he hungered for her. Although it was temporarily banked, he felt it there within the core of himself, ready to spark to life at any moment. He never tired of feasting on her, and she was even matched to him in that since she never tired of sharing in the ravenous hunger. She was his perfect mate in every way.

The corners of his mouth curled. For the first time, he had both the hope and the desire for escape. Something he had not felt in eons.

It occupied his mind a lot as of late, though he knew that he was fooling himself. Still, it lightened his heart to have that hope and pretend that happy endings existed for creatures such as himself. And that maybe Vicky could come to care for him beyond the passions they shared. She was certainly strong enough; she proved that to him every day that she entered the garden since her discovery.

Though Vicky had been horrified at what was hidden within the soil to help it flourish, she still faced her fear and the garden bravely every day as she continued to carefully water the plants growing within it. He still had no idea what it was that she had planned to assist with before that discovery, but he had not been untruthful when he said that caring for the needs of the garden within the labyrinth was a process, though he may have misled her a bit on what was required.

Not so much regarding the satyrs, for they were kills that he had made in defense of his territory, as he had said, but he had taken advantage of those kills to satisfy the needs of the garden. Ariadne had warned him that once a year, at minimum, but best if it were twice or three times, he would

have to feed the garden a sacrifice of blood, flesh, and bone so that it would continue to produce. Though what it came from was left open to interpretation, it had not escaped his attention that the soil was at its richest and the plants grew most abundant when fertilized with the remains of the satyrs.

At one time, there had been remains of humans lost long ago to the labyrinth, and to his own hunger, but it was so long ago that he did not know if the bones even remained in the fertile soil. In any case, he was glad it was not human remains that she had discovered buried there. She might not have recovered quite so easily from that shock. Even if she did, he doubted they would be where they were now with the reminder of his brutality toward her own species that could have so easily been turned on her if not for the twist of fate that rewrote a different path for them.

His mouth quirked in amusement at the strangeness of fate that provided the perfect mate for him where others before had fallen. But then, the fates were a peculiar bunch of goddesses, anyway.

Still, he wanted to do something to show Vicky how much he appreciated her and how blessed his life had become since she stumbled into his path. He was just at a loss as to how. He had gifted her the astragaloi, which she seemed to love, but that seemed to be a poor reflection of the depths of his feelings. Not when things have grown between them and have become something so beautiful. There was so little that he had to offer her that he resented his captivity more than he had in centuries. Everything had changed with a mate to care for. He wanted better for her than all of… this.

Perhaps he would fare better by finding her something within the labyrinth.

Though he loathed to leave her side, he knew from experience that all manner of things could be found from those who became lost among the many halls. He was certain that he could locate some little treasure that might make his mate smile.

Vicky glanced up at him as he entered the main room, her lips curving as if pleased with his return. She shifted, pushing herself up from her sprawled position, the furs slipping from her bare shoulders since she had not yet bothered dressing again since their rutting earlier that morning. She looked so warm and inviting. His cock twitched. It would take only a few steps to carry him to her side. The gods knew he was tempted by that bare

expanse of flesh. Desire curled through him, tightening every place it hooked into him. As easy as it was to give into it, Asterion knew that if he did, he would not be capable of leaving until they were both exhausted once again.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, he strode by, aware of her eyebrows winging up as she watched him pass.

"Are you going somewhere?" she called after him.

"Just out into the labyrinth. I will not be gone long. I want to patrol the nearby corridors and make certain that the satyrs are not becoming stupid enough to try and claim any of my hunting territory."

It was certainly true enough. He had not patrolled in a while and keeping his scent fresh in his territory was part of what kept it from going challenged. It was also a convenient reason for him to go out and search for her gift.

A distressed look crossed her face, but she nodded. "Yeah, if that is part of what is keeping them from coming nearby while you are here, then I suppose you should. It has been a few days since you've been out."

And she didn't want him to go. He could see that clearly on her face but also saw her resigned acknowledgement that it was necessary. There were certain things about life in the labyrinth that could never change, no matter how much one wished them to, in order to live in something akin to peace and safety. Laughable as that was in the labyrinth, what he had now was better than a constant bloody conflict with the flock.

He grimaced as he holstered his ax. "That is part of the reason. Our distinct territory lines are determined by certain halls within the labyrinth. There are neutral territory corridors that adjoin them, of course, but maintaining fresh scent trails is essential."

Her lips quirked. "And here I thought that before, you were just trying to run away from me."

"Run away from myself," he corrected, leveling a heated gaze on his mate. "Never from you. It is bad enough being aware that a male like me is unworthy to touch you, but being consumed by my hunger not only tormented me but made me afraid for you."

A smile slowly bloomed on her face despite her obvious anxiety. "Tormented you, huh? Do I still torment you?" she asked, giving him a playful look.

He growled but did not take the bait. Instead of approaching the platform, he gave her a promising smile. “You make me burn for you in the most deliciously painful of ways,” he vowed before slipping into the corridor, her pleased laughter following after him.

His good mood evaporated, however, the moment he stepped into the gloomy stretches of the labyrinth corridors. How was it that after only a few days, he had forgotten just how cold and miserable they were? Without any thermal springs present to warm the air as there were in his lair, the damp chilliness not unlike a cave pervaded the entirety of his surroundings.

Without a backward glance, he set out an even pace, stopping occasionally to scrape his horns against a wall, delivering fresh marks and refreshing his scent at each spot. All the while, he scanned his surroundings in search of any hint of metal or shiny surface that might reveal a discarded item. To his frustration, he was coming up with very little despite how far the route through his territory carried him. There was simply nothing that he could see sufficiently presentable enough to gift to his mate. The broken bits of metal discarded in random deposits along the labyrinth floor did not amount to anything of interest.

At the furthest reaches of his territory, however, he slowed, his ears pricking cautiously as something stirred nearby. Straightening, he turned and found himself staring into the glowing eyes of a shadowy form. Not fully manifested—not yet—the shadow bore the distinct features of the spirit’s preferred guise. Long, shapely feminine legs lead up to a rounded bottom, the illusion of breasts swaying slightly with the spirit’s movement as it tipped its head inquiringly.

“Asterion,” it whispered.

He ignored it and turned away, his eyes scanning his surroundings, hoping that he might find something soon so that he could return home. He hoped that the labyrinth would get bored of whatever its current game was and go away, as well. Unfortunately, it seemed that he was not going to get his wish when an angry snarl tore up the corridor, drawing his attention back to it as he turned around with a scowl. His hand clenched at his side, eager for the weight of his ax, but knew it would do little good against the spirit’s shadow form. He did not answer, but simply crossed his thick arms across his chest and waited for it to continue with an air of impatience.

He had a mate to get back to, after all.

“Asterion,” it shrieked, its voice projecting far louder with a shrill edge like a violent wind blow along reeds. “Why have you betrayed me?”

“Leave me, spirit. I have betrayed no one,” he replied dismissively.

“Lies!” Its hiss was so full of promised violence that he stilled, his eyes turning toward the shadows as he bristled with tension.

“Do not call me a liar. I have not visited any harm on you, nor have I done anything more than protect my mate,” he argued. “It seems that you are more eager to harm and betray me than I am toward you.”

The glowing eyes narrowed. “That,” it hissed, “is not acceptable. Until now I have been patient enough with your foolishness. Even when you maimed me, I let it go as another one of our games. But the time for defiance is at an end. You cannot have a mate! You are my bull. *Mine!”*

Eyes widening with surprise, disgust churned within him at the spirit’s jealous claim. Though it had fed on him before and the exchange had felt erotic to him, he did not imagine that the spirit was capable of feeling such emotions.

“I am not yours,” he returned with such a violent growl that the shadow straightened and visibly darkened as if drawing all the darkest shadows within it. “I have never been yours in any way that mattered,” he continued. “I have only been your prisoner. Nothing more.”

A dark gaping mouth formed within the shadows, its eyes enlarging as they burned. “You were given to me! Bred by Minos to be mine so that he might have control of the full power of my sacred halls.”

“Halls of death,” Asterion interrupted with a snort of disgust.

“The greatest of mysteries!” the spirit argued angrily. “You were to be my guard, my prince sacrificed to dwell forever with me. I fed your desires even as I saw to it that you were nurtured and cared for. Desires that were mine to claim. The humans and beings who entered here were never anything more than meat to you and so they should have remained. You can have no other mate than me.”

His laughter was probably not wise, especially not in its brutality, but he could not trap it within his mouth. It came rushing out with all the pain of the centuries carried in it.

“You cannot be my mate, labyrinth. My hunger may be terrible and may consume me, but you do nothing but consume. There is nothing within you that can be my mate, nor do you have my agreement. I may be your captive, but I am *her* mate, and *nothing* will change that!”

The shadow swelled, the shrill shriek of wind filling his ears as the torches flickered around him. He stared, unmoved, at the furious manifestation, unwilling to show even a hint of fear in the face of the labyrinth's wrath.

"I could destroy you," it snarled, the shadow manifestation bending toward him, but he snorted.

"That will not get you what you want, and you are aware of this. But I do have to wonder if you will succeed before I destroy you first," he growled. "We have played this game before, you and I."

The shadow shrank back, its eyes narrowed on him thoughtfully. "You will see that I shall not lose this time. But because I do not wish to destroy my bull, I will give you a warning. You have five turnings of the day to give her up to me, or I shall bring a suffering to all that has never been known before. I will have my mate, one way or another, and the female dead," it hissed, disappearing in an expansion of shadows.

He stared at the place that it had inhabited, a coldness settling into his heart.

"You see," a male voice intruded from behind him, making him stiffen with pent-up hostility. Asterion turned to eye the satyr as Barbasa stepped from around the corner and glared at him furiously. "You see what your willfulness will do? You will destroy all of us, Asterion! Give the human up before she is the death of every living being in the labyrinth."

Turning around fully, Asterion stormed toward the smaller satyr, his chest heaving with his fury. Lashing out, he caught Barbasa around the throat, smashing him hard against the wall at eye level as he leaned in and growled threateningly.

"I swear by the river Styx, if any harm comes to my mate, I will see to that this entire labyrinth and all within in it burn to the ground. She is my heart and the keeper of all that is good within me. It dies when she dies. So just keep that in mind," he rasped, dropping the wide-eyed satyr in a limp pile at his feet.

Stepping over the male, he took two steps forward before Barbasa's voice halted him

"Wait!" the male coughed in a strained voice as he scrambled to his feet. "Wait. Why are you this far at the edges of your territory, Asterion? What would bring you here so far from your human's cage?"

"It is not a cage," he replied gruffly. "It is her only sanctuary."

Barbasa laughed. “Only one who is reared in one would see nothing amiss with it. But you did not answer me.”

Asterion’s tail flicked impatiently, his hands curling at his side.

“A gift,” he growled. “I wished to present my mate with a gift. Something special to celebrate our joining.”

His ear turned as silence fell behind him.

“Ah,” Barbasa murmured softly. “The love of a mate.” He sighed. “It is true then. You were not simply baiting the spirit. You have mated the human.”

“I have,” Asterion affirmed.

“Well, then, you might as well take this. I am sure your mate will make better use of it than I have.”

Curious, Asterion faced the satyr, his brow rising at the gold pectoral pendant set with a brilliant ruby with intricately carved flowers framing it. His ears turned toward the male.

“What is the price?”

“No price can be given to this,” Barbasa replied woodenly. “It belonged to my own mate. She died scant months before the flock was trapped in here. I should have sent it with her into the otherworld instead of selfishly keeping it with me. I have felt unworthy of carrying it all this time ever since. It would be best if it remained with another female as a gift of love, whether that be in life or death.”

Asterion met the male’s eyes, his heart moved in sympathy at the pain that he saw there. Inclining his head in thanks, he accepted the necklace, his fingers curling around it. They stood in silence for several minutes before the satyr finally slipped away, leaving Asterion to return along the twisting paths back to his lair and his mate who waited there.

CHAPTER 22

With her leather project pooled in her lap, Vicky stretched her arms above her head, enjoying the tension-releasing pop of her shoulders. She was a shit-poor seamstress, but the supple, newly cured leather she was attempting to sew was at least starting to look like a sort of dress.

Kind of.

The best that she could get with next to no skills and using one of Asterion's blades and the needle he fashioned for her from bone. He had plenty of sinew from various projects of his own over the years, so she wasn't in any shortage for supplies. Just skill and talent came up woefully short. Perhaps she should have let him sew it for her like he offered but given that his own skills seemed to be consigned to bags, pouches, and simple chitons to wrap around his waist, she had decided to give it a go.

It wasn't *bad*. But it wasn't particularly attractive, either.

Truthfully, the dress had a sad, shapeless look and was sleeveless because she didn't have the first clue how to successfully make a sleeve. She was also certain that she remembered patterns having many more parts pieced together to make it fitted but had quickly abandoned that idea when it became clear that she really had no idea how that worked. When it came right down to it, it wasn't going to win any kind of prize. It was crooked and pretty damn ugly, actually.

Staring down at the pile of leather in her lap, she shrugged. Her already worn clothing was wearing incredibly thin in spots. It wasn't going to last too much longer. In any case, the leather was supple and would at least be comfortable to wear. And the seams appeared to be holding together well

enough after a few practice sessions with some scrap leather under Asterion's tutelage, so she at least knew it wouldn't fall apart on her. That had to be good enough when she couldn't exactly trek over to the nearest town and barter for clothes or raid a crumbling department store in one of the dead cities.

Fuck. She never thought she would see the day where she actually missed digging through deteriorating, abandoned buildings looking for supplies. If she ever got out of the labyrinth, she swore she would never again complain about another scavenging plunge or the many days she had to walk between towns.

Absently, her gaze drifted around the room as she leaned back against the wall at the head of the bed. At least she had Asterion for company. It could have been so much worse. Although there wasn't much to keep her occupied, just having him there brought her an incredible sense of happiness. Heaving another sigh, Vicky's eyes shifted over to the entrance's barrier wall and a smile broke over her face when suddenly Asterion's bulk passed through the magic barrier into their home.

She hopped off the bed enthusiastically, discarding the leather dress on the bedding, and hurried over to him. "You're back!"

Enormous, thick arms promptly gathered her up, pressing her to his toasty warm chest. In the labyrinth, she never seemed to be able to get warm enough unless she was being held by her minotaur.

"I am," he rumbled. "And I am glad of it. I was gone far longer than I like."

"Longer than I like, too," she gently chided. "I missed you."

His warm muzzle lovingly brushed against her cheek. "And I you. Trust me when I say that the thought of you inspired my eagerness to return swiftly."

"I just bet," she chuckled as she rubbed her cheek against his, her nose burrowing into his thick mane that came in long just behind his jaw. "Were you able to get far?"

She felt his head nod. "I managed to cover the entirety of my territory."

"Mmm." She ran her fingers teasingly through the long mane falling around his shoulders. "Does that mean I have you all to myself now?"

Interest lit within his gaze, heating it. "Entirely. We should have a respite for some days before I need to go again. Not until I need to hunt."

“I know what you can hunt right now, if you are interested,” she breathed.

His ear flicked toward her and the rumble in his chest grew louder, echoing thunderously. She wasn’t even given the opportunity to run, but just the threat was enough to spur him into action. Without hesitating, he strode toward their bed with Vicky clasped firmly within his grasp. The air expelled from her lungs in a burst of surprise as he dropped over the side, ass up, and quickly stripped off her jeans with a few tugs, leaving her bared skin exposed to the cool air. Strong hands yanked her hips up higher so that she was clearly presenting to him moments before the hot length of his tongue dragged through her folds.

Her hips jerked, a soft moan expelling from her on a long breath. Fuck, that felt so good. Her toes curled with every lap of his broad tongue, the tip tapping at her clit at the end of every stroke. A fine sheen of sweat popped out over her skin, and she wiggled back against his mouth in an impatient demand for more, her hips shooting forward with a louder moan at the sharp impact of his hand against her bottom. Heat and arousal bloomed even higher through her as her minotaur growled before his hands closed around her hips once more to drag her pussy back to his mouth.

She squealed when he very lightly nipped at her clit, sending a sharp sensation barreling through her, her chest automatically flattening submissively against the bedding, her cheek turned against one particularly plush fur, the soft, incredibly fine hairs stirring and bending back with her every pant. His tongue pressed harder now, slapping at her clit as he licked her, grazing and then pressing against her back entrance. Her belly clenched and her sex flooded with fresh arousal in response, which just incited the fury of his licking as he growled against the sensitive flesh, the vibration sending sparks of pleasure shooting through her.

His hands tightened on her as her thighs quivered, threatening to give out, but then his mouth was gone and she gave a frantic cry of protest, her body writhing against his hold.

“Easy,” he growled, his grip pinning her more firmly in place.

Vicky growled back at him in frustration, but it died in her throat as the silken, flat head that crowned the hard heat of his cock brushed the wet mess of her folds and pressed forward. Her sex opened in welcome, stretching around his girth with an incredible fullness bordering on the sweetest pain. He growled as his cock speared her with a thrust so firm that

her breasts slid against the fur, teasing her nipples. Her cry was muffled in the fur, her fingers clenching against it. Bracing her arms, she tried to push up to give relief to her sensitive nipples, but Asterion's snarl filled her ears and a hand shifted away from her hips to press firmly against her back, pinning her down in place as his hips picked up their pace and snapped against her ass with a fierce, rapid tempo.

His grunts and growling bellows rode above her as his cock rutted into her, his heavy balls slapping against her clit with every thrust. Every drive of his hips sent her sliding forward slightly before his grip snapped her back in place, her nipples rubbing in time with his rhythm as her pussy wept and clenched around him in small unending pulses of pleasure and need as the mingled sensations sparked through her in crackling bursts, drawing to her center. Her legs trembled with the power of it, her belly tightening as the feeling coiled deep, stretching her thin. She cried out, her channel fluttering and then squeezing down on his shuttling cock so tightly that stars burst behind her eyes and Asterion snarled, his cock swelling inside of her.

With a wail, she came, her channel spasming around the enormous dick rutting into her as her orgasm blasted out from deep within her. Her toes and fingers curled with the intensity, and her head was drawn back, arching her back as she was suddenly drawn up from the bed, the cock inside her pounding up furiously into her as she was dragged back against Asterion's chest. He rocked and ground deep with every thrust, sending another orgasm ripping through her, his opposite hand cupping her breast as his fingers tweaked her nipple hard. Her cries became a litany of whimpering curses and she shuddered, clenching down on him hard when his hand dropped from her breast to rub her clit between his slippery fingers. They stroked over it in a fast rhythm before pinching the bud sharply, bringing about her detonation.

The world unraveled around her with the force of the orgasm, her head dropping back against Asterion's shoulder with the power of it as she ground back against his pounding cock. Suddenly, it jerked against the mouth of her womb as he bellowed out a terrible roar, jettisons of hot cum spraying deep within her with its every pulse.

He kept her pinned to him as his cock flexed, his seed pumping into her as he ground his hips into her ass to keep himself lodged deep within her as he emptied himself. Vicky allowed herself to hang limply in his embrace,

pleasure engulfing her even in the aftermath of her orgasms, tiny licks of pleasure lighting her up with every load released into her.

After several minutes, his muzzle brushed her cheek and Vicky was slowly lowered to the bed, his cock pulling free with a slight tugging sensation as it slid out of her. She moaned, her pussy rippling one final time as it hit every wonderful spot on its way out and she sighed as she lay there limply against the bed. She felt it shift with Asterion's weight and then warm arms pulled her in, tucking her against his broad chest. Entwined, they lay there, basking in the aftermath of their pleasure, his hands gently stroking over her breasts, belly, and hip in soothing motions. She didn't want it to end and was disappointed when he finally shifted away with a grunt.

She turned to grab ahold of him and frowned when he reached over and stilled her hand. "Rest here. I will cleanse myself and return to attend to you," he murmured. "And then, I am yours."

"I can help." Vicky wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, drawing a deep rumble of laughter from her minotaur as he gently set her hand on the bed beside her.

"You are pure temptation, but no, or else we will never get out of this bed, and I have other things in mind before I give you a proper rutting next time."

Her eyebrows raised with interest. "Oh? Is that so?"

"Yes," he said firmly. So, wait here and I will return. Afterward, we can prepare your favorite tubers and vegetables along with some of the choicest cuts of meat from the cold storage for our meal."

She heaved a melodramatic sigh but gave him a quizzical look, her interest in a completely different appetite suddenly roused. "Really? What's the occasion?"

"Just you. That is the only thing I require to celebrate," he replied so earnestly that it was panty-dropping worthy if she were still wearing any.

"Oh, all right then," she grumbled, her lips twitching as she shifted so that she was splayed on the bed. "I will wait right here then."

He leaned down and his tongue rasped over one breast, bathing her nipple so that it furled once more into a tight bud, dragging a soft moan from her. "Good. I wish to see you here just like this when I return. Do not move from this spot."

“Fuck, I wouldn’t even dream of it,” she replied with a happy sigh, her eyes following the minotaur’s muscular form as he rose from the bed and walked to the hall.

She was definitely eager to see what all he had planned.

CHAPTER 23

Asterion cupped Vicky's gift in his hand and looked down at it. The pectoral piece was even more beautiful in the light of the garden than it had been within the gloom of the corridor. Setting it carefully down on a smooth rock beside the spring, he stepped into the warm water with a rumbled sigh from the new sense of happiness filling him. Eager to return, he scrubbed his body quickly before stepping from the water and rubbing his damp fur with a handful of crushed mint leaves for their pleasing scent. He wanted every moment of this to be perfect. He was on a new hunt now, one with the goal of claiming his mate. Not only was he going to give Vicky her gift, but he was also going to pledge himself to her and hope that she would accept him in turn as her mate.

Pulling on his best chiton, he tucked the necklace into the small pouch on his belt and strapped that on as well. Lifting a small container of grease he painstakingly collected, he rubbed his horns with the sweetly perfumed fat until they gleamed and buffed his claws. He even gave his teeth an extra cleaning, determined that he was as appealing as possible. He still did not entirely understand what Vicky found desirable in him, but he wanted to appear his best for her and so took particular pride in grooming himself for his mate's pleasure.

Filling a large krater vase with water from the spring, he grabbed a clean leather rag and soap, and carefully carried it from the room, eager to return to his mate. He smiled as he stepped inside the main chamber, his eyes falling on her lithe form still laying spread out over the platform where he left her. She met his eyes and grinned, a welcoming warmth filling her gaze. With a pleased rumble, he made his way over to her and carefully set

the krater down beside the bed before kneeling beside it. Dipping the cloth in the vase and taking care to wring the water out, he slid the rag over her belly.

Vicky's sigh of pleasure went straight to his cock, but he gripped it with his opposite hand in a stranglehold in an attempt to control it. He would not rut her again just yet. This moment was all for her pleasure. Giving his cock one final hard squeeze that made it spew a small amount of cum onto the floor, he tucked it between his thighs, so it remained pointed downward so not to soil his chiton and released it to devote his entire attention to cleansing his mate's beautiful limbs. Her legs and arms were thoroughly washed, same with her feet and hands before he moved onto more sensitive areas, drawing soft gasps as he slid the material over her nipples and then down between her thighs to wash the mingled fluids clinging there.

"Damn, this is a nice surprise," she whispered throatily as her hips arched responsively and oh so beautifully to his touch as he made sure every inch of her was thoroughly cleaned.

When he set the rag aside and swiped his fingers through her folds, he was greeted with a moan that sent another splatter of his cum to the floor. Retracting his claws so that there wasn't a chance of damaging the vulnerable flesh there, he dragged his fingers in circles along the sides of her clit and grinned as Vicky began to pump her hips, grinding against his hand cupping her sex. It was primal and glorious watching her thrash, her hair sliding over the furs as she tossed her head from side to side in her mounting ecstasy.

"Please. I need more. Please," she whimpered.

Ah, she begged beautifully too. And he was not one to deny his mate. Sliding two fingers inside of her, he pressed against the soft tissue in her channel and rubbed it as his other hand continued to toy with her clit. A wheeze left her as she trembled at the double onslaught and she bucked against his hands, her thighs quivering. She rode it higher, her channel tightening gradually as it clung to his thrusting fingers until finally it clamped down hard and pulsed around him with the same vicious suction that he had felt around his cock moments before as she cried out. He groaned and his balls tightened with another release spewing from the head of his cock but worked her through her orgasm until she collapsed weakly back against the furs.

The wet sound of his fingers sliding out from her sex made him hum happily, and his mate's eyes turned to him, watching him as he sucked her flavor from his fingers before enjoying the relief of allowing his claws to slide back out. He grinned down at her and picked up the rag, dipping it into the cooling water to swipe it over her sex again, this time in light sweeps merely to clean her release from her cunt and thighs. Dropping the rag back into the krater, he picked it up and stood again. Without saying a word, he gave her a heated glance full of love and carried the vase back toward the garden to empty the water.

Quickly retrieving the meat that he had already prepped for their meal; he re-entered the main room. Vicky gave him a sated smile as she stretched and rose from the bed, and he grinned in return as he headed toward the stone slab where he could set down his bounty and start up the cooking fire. The light patter of her feet made his smile widen as he set down the plate. Straightening, Asterion turned to embrace her when suddenly everything around them pitched violently, the flames rolling up high before extinguishing under its full force as the clatter of falling objects filled the air around them. And with the terrible cacophony, he heard his mate's terrified scream.

Bellowing in a mixture of rage and fear, Asterion lunged to his feet and turned to race to Vicky, determined to protect her from the force of the labyrinth attacking them. Barbasa had been right. The labyrinth would not be stopped. It was destroying his abode from the outside. He could hear it in the creak and fracture of the stones around them as rubble fell, destroying the only testimony to the centuries of his life there.

He snarled. It could throw its fury at him all it wanted. The labyrinth would *not* have his mate!

No longer protected by his sister's magic, there was only one thing he could do now to save Vicky. He would have to go to the deepest levels below the labyrinth to the court of the gods. The temple was the only refuge available to them now, and one he had not stepped foot in since Ariadne abandoned him. Worse, although it was beyond the reach of the labyrinth, it was not entirely sealed from those who also dwelt in the labyrinth who knew the way. He didn't have to worry about the beasts that hunted the labyrinth, but there were others that he did have to be concerned over. Such as Barbasa.

A growl rattled through Asterion as he battled his way through the falling rubble.

If Barbasa even dared… well, that would be yet another satyr that he would gladly kill.

CHAPTER 24

Turning blindly to the sound of the familiar bellowing roar, Vicky rushed forward to the shadow of the male running toward her and sobbed with relief. She had seen the wall drop right behind him as the world seemed to tilt, and everything burst all at once and began collapsing all around them, fueling her mind with images of the minotaur being caught and crushed beneath the stones. Tossing his head to bat away small falling stones with his horns, Asterion was suddenly there right before her, his familiar furred arms sweeping around her to pull her safely against his chest.

She clung to him, her fingers burrowing into his fur and mane. She didn't know how she escaped being struck by the falling rocks. It had to be a miracle—or perhaps was somehow due to Ariadne's magic, who could say? But now that he had held her, his enormous body sheltered her as his horns tossed violently and his shoulder hunched to take the worst of the blows against his thick frame and hide as everything continued to pitch violently.

Her face burrowed against his chest, she was hyperaware of his every hoof-fall as he quickly picked his way through the room, his sure steps making her extremely grateful for his superior vision. As relieved as she was to be in his arms, she couldn't stop her tears as she heard the broken groan of their home falling apart behind them.

Their home. As much as she had feared the labyrinth and hated it, they had been safe and found each other in the small, sealed space at its center. It was their history together and the memory of every touch as they learned each other, and now it was being destroyed with every occasional shift of

the ground. The fall of stones burying the life they had begun to make together.

She wheezed fearfully against the muscle beneath her cheek, panic closing off her throat with the realization that they would now be at the mercy of the creatures that shared the labyrinth with them. She quaked helplessly with fear beneath the big hand that worked to calm her as it methodically stroked her back.

"Asterion," she cried out.

"All will be well. Nothing can harm you while I am here and have you in my arms," he rasped, his muzzle dipping to brush the top of her head.

She could have cried at that brief contact. In fact, she was pretty sure that she was already crying but couldn't feel it because the dust in the air was absorbing her tears, leaving cakey streaks of grime on her cheeks. But she nodded her head mutely, letting him know that she was putting her faith in him.

"It will be just another moment and then we will pass through the entrance," he rumbled, his voice vibrating through his chest continuously in reassurance. "You remember. It is a little unsettling. but we will be through it quick, and you will be able to breathe clean air again."

"In the labyrinth," she moaned, shivering. "No, not there, Asterion, it wants to *eat* me."

"Would not any intelligent being desire to do so?" he teased in a strained voice.

Vicky smiled weakly into his fur, knowing exactly what he was trying to do. "It's not the same, and you know it."

She pressed her face closer into his chest. Her breath was coming in shallow gasps now, and she could feel the tension coiling tighter within his frame as if he were aware that she walked the line of thoroughly losing her shit. It was an inescapable soundtrack fit for a nightmare. Horrible wails and shrieks filled the halls just outside their crumbling home from creatures likewise fleeing the destruction, the sound rising above the crash of falling stone. Something screamed somewhere nearby in agony, the sound so shrill and horrific that Vicky jerked in Asterion's hold, her pulse pounding a staccato rhythm in her ears.

"Fuck, we are going to die. I just know it," she mumbled, and her minotaur's arms tightened in response.

“I will not let that happen. I swear it,” he growled. “I promised that I will keep you safe and I will. Have faith in me for a little longer.”

She murmured her assent but every cry in the dark and violent shake of the corridor sent terror burrowing deeper into her. Not wanting to distract him as he dodged obstacles and falling stones, she brought up a hand to bite down on her knuckles to resist the urge to scream. She gurgled around it, hardly able to breathe as the unnatural sounds closed around her in the pitch-black darkness surrounding them. Asterion shifted her in his arms and one of his hands came up and closed around hers to drag it back down so that she gasped painfully and wheezed between her sobs.

“The walls are caving in, but the entrance is clear. Breathe deep,” he ordered, and she instinctively complied, submitting to him as her body operated in complete trust to his will.

Parting her lips, she drew in a large gulp of air before everything shifted dizzily around her and she felt the strange membrane glide around them once again. This time, however, it felt splintered, wide cracks that threatened to cut into her and bleed her dry. Vicky moaned against him. She needed to breathe, but there was no air in that in between place. As she slowly choked, every muscle tightened with anticipation of the worst.

There was something wrong with the portal. They were going to die before they got through.

Unable to tolerate the burn of her lungs any longer, she opened her mouth to scream out the little air that remained inside her when there was a loud pop in her ears and fresh air flooded into her as they emerged out into the corridor. Vicky dug her fingers into her minotaur’s fur, gulping in breaths as deeply as possible, her entire body shaking like a leaf while Asterion clasped her tightly. His body trembled against hers as he stood there for a long moment in front of the ruins of their home, pressing her against his chest with a desperation that spoke of never letting her go.

Finally, he took a deep breath and released one last shudder as he looked around, his head swinging in both directions over hers. A low, grating moan echoed through the halls like something straight out of her nightmare and Vicky’s arms prickled with the fear that leapt from her belly.

“I know that. I know that sound,” she whispered, her body shaking uncontrollably as her every nightmare for days came to brutal life. “It comes for me in my dreams just as it did that day.” She moaned; the sound pitiful to her own ears even as lost in her terror as she was. “The labyrinth

wants to feed. The walls shift as it hunts, and it always makes that sound when it comes to feed. It is the sound of its hunger and the long bones of its teeth. It wants the taste of my flesh and my blood upon its stones. It wants to drag my corpse deep within its walls so that it can relish digesting every part of me slowly."

Asterion growled angrily and spun left, his hooves striking the ground with every bit of his fury. It kept her sane, as did the slight prick of his claws suddenly unsheathing against her bottom. It kept her grounded in him. He became the sole focus of reality in that terrible darkness as he ran, his breath billowing mightily as he charged through one corridor and then another. There was something so exacting in the path that he picked, Vicky had to believe that it was intention and he was heading toward a specific destination. That she could tell from the incline that they were going lower did increase her worry. There was nothing that was safe about any of the corridors, so it ultimately mattered little of what direction they ran as long as it was to safety.

A frustrated roar followed them, the walls rolling as tendrils from the vines reached out toward them in a manner that she had seen before. Her fingers tightened into his mane as she watched the walls just behind them. The vines swarmed together, reshaping their masses around the stones that dragged inward until they reformed into a terrible face that had haunted her nightly since her arrival.

Its mouth opened wide, jagged sharp teeth of milky stone opening for her, a stench of rot surrounding her from a non-existent fetid breath of all the gore it had consumed over centuries. Whatever benevolent spirit it may have begun as, there was nothing left of it than the madness and hunger.

Vines rushed toward them like hundreds of arms and Vicky screamed, drawing Asterion's attention to what lay behind him. She heard his powerful heart stutter beneath her ear and his bellow of rage.

Rapidly readjusting her weight, he swiped out with one clawed hand, tearing through a rope of the vines hurtling toward them with the force of a honed blade. The resulting enraged scream from the labyrinth was deafening as its vines writhed with an angry buzz of hornets and its face bulged, eyes widening wildly as its mouth opened grotesquely even wider.

There was no escaping it.

Every corridor Asterion turned, the walls rolled and reformed into that terrible visage following close behind them; the torches flickering and

roaring wildly on the walls, casting brilliance and terribly deep shadows all around them as they descended deeper and deeper into the increasingly narrowing halls of what she suspected Asterion called the lower levels. The atmosphere turned to one of dank mustiness from the water she could see dripping down the walls, in some cases running in heavy streams, wetting the floors, and bursting out in frigid spraying every time the walls rolled and fractured. Torches sputtered and flared in response to the moisture, somehow kept alive by a force that Vicky didn't understand. Several nearest to them nearly died as the wet tendrils of the vines slapped at the fire in an attempt to bank the flames, while others streaked along the floor and wall, slapping and writhing in their fervor to get to them, Asterion dodging them with a sure-footedness, never once breaking his pace in their flight.

Worried that the vines would succeed and plunge them into darkness, Vicky her face up toward his ear and shouted. "Asterion, the torches?"

His head turned and he chuffed out a dry chuckle. "Do not worry for the torches. Our home may have been uprooted, but my sister's magic holds and lights the way still ahead. It is just a little further now. Once the labyrinth takes form, it is limited by its own laws in this place. We are safe as long as we can stay ahead of it."

She shot her gaze toward him, bewildered. "How the fuck do you know that?" she shouted.

He just gave her a quick grin and hooked another left.

The labyrinth screamed, its maw twisting in shrieking denial, walls surged and rolled more violently, its mouth opening to release dark vines that whipped toward her face at an alarming speed. They managed to get within an inch of her face, scarlet thorns each nearly the length of her finger, snapped toward her face when Asterion shifted her weight and lifted his shoulder at an angle to block it, a deep groan rattling him, just before taking another sudden sharp turn. The wet sound of ripping flesh was loud in her ears as flecks of something wet sprayed against her. She glanced horrifically at the splattered blood just as the labyrinth gave another ferocious screech from the corridors.

Numbly she shook her head. It wanted her. It had always wanted her, and he had defied it. For that, his home was destroyed and now he was injured. Tears slipped down her cheeks as the raging of the labyrinth grew louder. He was going to die for her… and she couldn't bear the thought of it.

Twisting her fingers into his mane, she tugged sharply, drawing his attention so he canted his head toward her, his ear turning attentively as he took another sharp corner, nearly jostling the breath out of her in the process.

Gasping, she dragged in another breath, her fingers tightening in his fur with dread for what she was about to demand.

"Asterion, you have to put me down," she wailed as a barbed vine came close to biting deep into his neck, dodged only at the last moment.

His enormous chest heaved with exertion, his breathing panting and billowing out of him. He had to see reason.

"Please!" She choked on a sob and his heavy arm curled tighter around her. "You can't die. Not because of me. I can't bear to see anyone else I love die. Not again."

His horns swung in denial, arching in what would have been a dangerous proximity to her face if not for the fact that he always maintained perfect control around her, cautious of his superior size and her human fragility.

"*No*," he growled. "You are mine. My mate, my heart. The labyrinth will have to find its own. I will not fail you," he panted. "I have no intention of dying today."

Her heart pounding in her chest, she shivered with dread at the terrible shrieking moans of the labyrinth and breaking stones all around them, among the wet leafy rattle and snap of vines. In the midst of her nightmare, she leaned into his strength, her fingers clasping tight around her charm. It grinned at her, its teeth gnashing and a black splattering of dark blood seeped through its teeth. Even though his breath billowed from his lungs like a freight train, he still never slowed nor loosened his grip on her in an attempt to put her down.

Its shadow gradually rose over them. The torches dimmed, dark ichor dribbled down on them, and Vicky slowly lifted her gaze from the thick column of his neck to stare death in the eye. Its mouth widened, the gaping darkness filling the space behind them, the long daggers of its teeth dripping with blood as it sped forward.

A few more breaths and it would have them. She could feel the strain in Asterion's muscles, his massive chest heaving against her. His great strength was failing and there was nothing she could do to help.

Eyes tearing, she ripped the charm from her neck. Her father had promised that it would always protect her and bring the blessings of the gods to her, but it was all a lie. Her eyes fell on the labyrinth carved on the opposite side, hatred for all it stood for filling her, before turning it in her fingers so that the worn face of Hera in profile stared back at her.

"If this labyrinth is yours," she whispered to the goddess's visage, "then you own all the pain it has caused. I beg you then, if you ever loved humanity, help us now."

The icy breath of the labyrinth fanned back her hair even as it whipped Asterion's mane forward to plaster against her. Lips thinning to the point of baring her teeth, Vicky pulled back her arm as the mouth began to descend, closing around them. Her love's helpless, enraged roar echoed around them as the charm spun from her fingers, the dim torch light gleaming golden off it as it flew through the air and disappeared into the dark void.

The stones around them suddenly exploded forward, the torches flaring high and bright as the mouth drew back and twisted on itself, rippling back away from them with a hideous shriek, the vines falling limp to the floor.

Asterion, his body shaking with exertion, slowed, his head turning to look back as he pace dropped to a trot. The face of the labyrinth was gone, the distance echo of its cries all that remained of its presence.

"What has happened?" His voice was thin and ragged with exhaustion, but she could still feel the firm tension in his body, prepared to face anything despite his weariness.

"It's gone," she whispered in disbelief. "My good luck charm, the one with Hera and the labyrinth… I was so angry and frightened… I begged the goddess for help and just threw it, and it swallowed it." She blinked slowly, turning her face up to him. "Do you think I killed it?"

His ears flicked, listening, and he shook his head, squeezing her tight against his chest. "No. Whatever you did, the merciful goddess heard you. Unfortunately, your charm has merely hurt it. Though it will not put it off for long, it grants us some time."

With an unexpected burst of strength, Asterion's pace picked up, moving rapidly through the narrowing corridors until he reached a level room painted with the same symbol of the labyrinth that she had seen on her coin. The room was lit with torches lining the walls and all around stood statues of the gods, their heads bowed as if staring at the staircase that descended at the center of the painted labyrinth. A soft sigh escaped him as

he stopped, his head turning slowly as he looked around the room. Vicky craned her head back, watching him, taking in the sadness on his face.

"This is Ariadne's dancing floor," he whispered. "It was her favorite place in the labyrinth. She would say 'brother, come dance the labyrinth with me,' and I would follow along the winding path with her, dancing the crane dance together."

Lifting a hand, she stroked his jaw. "You miss your sister very much. It's okay to miss her."

His massive body shuddered, a bleak expression crossing his face.

"I should not. She abandoned me, left me here alone." His tone was so sad, so desolate that Vicky's eyes prickled with tears.

Vicky swallowed. She understood all too well. "I know how that feels. I've been very angry with my father for years. He died—killed himself—when he was certain I was old enough to take care of myself. He wanted to rejoin my mother who died during the Ravening, but I felt like he abandoned me. That he chose his love for her over me." She sniffed back the sob that rose to her throat. "Sometimes there is no right choice that we can make when it comes to love."

His head lowered so that his grief-filled dark brown eyes could meet hers in their mutual sharing of pain and loss. Asterion's soft nose brushed her cheek and he nuzzled her, his breaths warming her neck.

"I have not come to this place since she left. I have been too angry. But perhaps you are right, and I can find a place within myself to begin healing. Hopefully, this will be the first step," he murmured. "Come, let us go."

Cupping his jaw with one hand, Vicky smiled and nodded in agreement, her heart filling with love as he pulled his head back and turned toward the stairs. She rested her head against his chest, trusting him, her body swaying lightly with his every step as he began their descent into what she couldn't imagine.

CHAPTER 25

The bright false sunlight poured over Asterion, blinding him briefly as he exited the darkness of the stairs, and he breathed deep of the fresh, clean air perfumed with life. He had forgotten how different this place was from the labyrinth in which he had been imprisoned. It was a holy place, and though part of him was hesitant to take refuge there when it was a place of the gods, he had little choice in the matter.

Vicky turned in his arms, her breath catching in soft wonder. "Asterion, what… how is this place possible?"

He shrugged. "How was the magic that filled my home possible? Ariadne fueled it from here, the well of the gods. The magic that she established there for my comforts and to keep the torches lit for me were linked to the force of this place, so that it would never weaken or pass with age. I do not know much about the things of magic, but this place is the source of everything. That I do know because it is of the gods alone, a place between the world of the living and the dead."

He closed his eyes, dragging in another breath, allowing the peace to flow into him before opening them to look out over the flower-filled meadow. Insects that did not exist on Earth, as far as he knew, hummed and in the tall grasses he could see the quaking paths of rabbits fleeing before him as he took his first steps into the soft, eternal spring. He snorted with amusement. Of course. Of all creatures, rabbits would have found a way to occupy this place. It was no wonder that there was an unending supply of them that found their way into the labyrinth above.

He could not even say for sure where they came from. Most things entered the labyrinth through the tunnels that connected to the mortal world,

but there was another entrance here that his sister had mentioned as they played at the edge of the silvered lavender forest bordering the high walls of the valley's perimeter. The forest there belonged to the gods and could be a portal itself at Their will, but for most beings such as themselves, it was one that only flowed one way… into the holy well. There was no escape for him or Vicky through there, but it guaranteed a level of safety unlike anywhere else. The deep-ones, efficient and dangerous predators that they were, at the very least could not attack them there. That alone alleviated many of his concerns.

This would be a good home for now, he decided as he walked through the grasses, enjoying the brush of the long green leaves against his fur. The give of the soil beneath his hooves was pleasant after so many years of hard stone. His head lowered as the tension from his body slowly lifted until he strangely felt lighter with the absence of the labyrinth's curse weighing over him. Although there was a chance that he would have to deal with the satyrs and any of the other occupants of the labyrinth should they find their way to this place, he considered the likelihood of that happening minimal unless Barbasa directly interfered. Spells hid the dancing floor from the eyes of those unworthy of entrance if they did not know the route. It always had. That was part of the test of the labyrinth in its oldest history.

Truthfully, though he had been there many times in his youth, even he experienced a moment of doubt that he would be able to find it again on his own. This time, Ariadne had not been there to guide him. Since he had never made the attempt, his own worthiness was something he questioned, he had not been certain of success.

Thank the gods it had worked.

A small hand tapped his chest impatiently, and he chuckled as his mate wiggled in his arms.

"You know, you can let me down now, right?" Vicky growled at him as her head swung this way and that, trying to see around his bulk.

"Maybe I like you where you are at," he replied complacently, rubbing his jaw against the top of her head.

She squinted up at him, her nose wrinkling as she attempted to scowl at him despite the humor lighting her eyes. She had long come to understand his playfulness, as subtle as he understood that it could be at times.

"Come on, you brute, put me down. This place is great!" she squinted across the distance where the temple loomed on a hill. "Is that a temple over

there?”

He inclined his head as he slowly set her on her feet despite his own silent objections on the matter. He preferred to carry his mate, if truth be told, but he understood her desire to explore her new surroundings. The well of the gods was a magical place.

“Come with me. I will have to return to dig out supplies, but behind the temple, there is a resting house provided for those who came here. There will not be much inside, but it will provide shelter until I can return with whatever furs and supplies I can find.”

Vicky spun around to gape at him. “Go back? You can’t be serious. No! Have you already forgotten the walls tried to *eat* us Asterion!”

“I have not forgotten,” he replied dryly. “To be more accurate, it was trying to eat you. It does not enjoy the blood of the immortals caught here and will only consume us in a fit of rage or, as I once witnessed with one unfortunate creature, in order to consume what it really wants.”

“And you don’t think it wouldn’t try to do just that?”

He grinned down at her humorlessly. “Oh, I know it would want to, except without me carrying you, it would have a very difficult time. There is a reason that I survived this long in the labyrinth, and it is because of this.” He pointed to the gold cuff banding his wrist. He knew it looked identical to the cuff on his other wrist if not for the symbols etched into it. “The glamour here allows me to pass through the corridors with minimal detection. It makes me a superior hunter despite the shortcomings of my height and bulk. It will conceal me a little to give me an advantage from the other creatures in the corridors above while I retrieve our belongings.”

“And what of the labyrinth itself?” she demanded.

He shook his head. “The labyrinth itself is wounded and will be sufficiently distracted so long as I do nothing to draw its attention.”

His mate nodded grimly as she inspected the cuff, her fingers brushing against the engraved symbols.

“I take it that this is another gift from your sister?”

He nodded. “Her last gift, the day before she left. She gave its match to Theseus.” To his surprise, he felt no bitterness speaking the name of the male he hated most. “It was how he passed safely through and could exit again when no others could.” He scowled. “Not even I can manage to exit as he did. The labyrinth will not detect my passing through the corridors,

but I was cursed to reside here. It will notice if I attempt to break free into the upper corridors."

A sad smile made a brief appearance on her lips. "She wanted to make sure you were protected when she could no longer be here."

Asterion's heart grew heavy with love for his mate… and for his sister whom he spent so many centuries being angry with and grief-stricken over. She had loved him and showed him the only way she could when confronted with an impossible choice, and he had never really given that much thought before until his mate came into his life. Now that he knew how full his life could be with his mate, he understood how difficult that decision had to have been for Ariadne to make.

"Come," he murmured gruffly. "Enough talk of sad things and worries. I will be fine. For now, let me show you where we will be staying. From what I recall, our new home is quite comfortable. There is even a vast garden to supply offerings for pilgrims and for the temple." He hesitated thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, it is possible that some of the wildlife here has been established for offerings and to feed those on pilgrimage as well. I recall seeing hens and quail among the grasses here in my youth and now there appears to be rabbits that are well established. I may still hunt in the lower halls from time to time to not overstress the animals here, but the food here is plentiful."

Taking her small hand in his, he dismissed the way her nose wrinkled at his observation as they walked across the meadow and climbed the marble steps to the temple at the top of the rise. Just within, he could see the statues of the gods and more who had occupied the chamber of the dancing floor, but he did not enter. He would not until he was properly cleaned. Instead, he tugged his mate along with him circling its perimeter, passing by the cool and hot springs that fed into the pools on a lower slope. Just past that was a small, elegant house that looked as it had in his youth. Its columns and walls were painted with bold stripes and red and blue with beautiful images of crocus blooms and festive scenes of men and women in celebration.

There, just within the courtyard, was another spring and pool. He knew this one was designed so that it constantly cycled, drawing anything unclean down through the far end where the mosaic floors disappeared at the edge of a crevice. Although the water returned from the ground pure through the bubbling spring, there was a second spring just behind the rear kitchens that provided water for the house. He suspected that much of what

lay beneath consisted of massive reservoirs of water that helped sustain life there.

Vicky cast a longing look at the pool, and he figured it was as good a place as any to allow his mate to rest. The water maintained a comfortable temperature and the solidly built couches off to the side were layered with thick mats and soft cushions, the magic in the place keeping everything as new and fresh as he remembered them.

Turning his mate to face him, he smoothed his hands down her arms and smiled. “You remain here. Bathe and rest. If you get restless or hungry, the garden and fountains are just beyond the rear down on the other side of the kitchens. I will return soon.”

Her brow wrinkled with concern as she peered up at him. “You are leaving now?”

He nodded, squeezing her shoulders gently. “It is best to do so now while everything is in turmoil, and none are likely to notice me digging through the crumbled walls for supplies.”

The sigh she gave him was reluctant and unhappy, but she did not argue. Her eyes cast down toward the pool and he tucked his knuckle under her chin, lifting her head to meet his eyes.

“I will not be long,” he assured her.

“What if…” she began but he silenced her, pressing his mouth against hers.

He was not capable of kissing as humans did but the simple press of mouths he could do, and the responding quiver of her body as she leaned into him told him that gesture was understood. Drawing back, he lifted his hand, gently dragging the back of his knuckles down the side of her cheek.

“Nothing can keep me from returning,” he assured her.

He left her there at the side of the pool, he strides quickening as they took him farther from her. As he had promised, though the halls resounded with chaotic cries from those creatures haunting the labyrinth, Asterion was able to make his way with ease back toward what was left of the place that had once been his home. He expected to feel rage when he looked upon it but when his eyes fell on the broken rocks barring his entrance, he surprisingly felt nothing.

It was not home any longer. His home was nowhere else except with his mate. A smile pulled at his mouth, and he bent down to grasp the first boulder, hauling it effortlessly out of his way. Though their flight through

the labyrinth had tired him, it had not completely depleted him it seemed—or the brief time in the well of the gods had restored him more than he thought because he made quick work of digging out a passage that allowed him access into the main chamber.

As expected, everything was in ruin, but he was pleased to see that many things remained intact. He located several sacks from his storage and filled one entirely with furs before turning to fill the others with the pouches of medicines he had collected and dried. Many of the plants had managed to survive and it would take many trips to transplant them, but he left them for the time being. He also left the bowls and utensils until he could take better stock of what the resting house had, but it was unlikely he would need them. Instead, he gathered his clothes and the leather chitons he had begun secretly crafting for Vicky in respect for her wish to try for herself, and with some luck was also able to dig out her astragaloi.

Dice, he mentally corrected.

Although he was fortunate that the magic that allowed them to converse worked just as well in the well of the gods, he would need to know her language when they escaped.

And they would. The thought that had begun to take formation days ago as a kernel in the darkness of his mind and in his nightly dreams had become fully formed after the labyrinth's attack. He would not suffer his mate to be threatened and live caged within the well of gods, regardless of how pretty of a prison it made.

One way or another he would get free her of this place.

Throwing the sacks over his shoulder, he bent to grab his labrys that had fallen from the wall, the gleam of its blade dulled with dust, and slipped it back through the hole in the crumbled wall. He took no more than two steps before he felt eyes on him and he stilled, his own gaze searching the darkness for the male he knew lurked there.

"You might as well show yourself, Barbasa," he called out.

There was a shuffle and scatter of stones before the satyr slowly stepped out from the shadows; his expression grim. He glanced toward the ruins behind Asterion and inclined his head toward them.

"This was the price you wished to pay keeping that female?"

"It is a small one."

The male's expression darkened. "Our home likewise suffered much damage, and we lost three beloved members of our flock and many more

were injured because of your ‘sacrifice,’ minotaur.”

Asterion inclined his head in acknowledgement, sympathy stirring in his breast. For all that he had no compunction about killing satyrs who attacked him, he never wished loss on anyone.

“You will still not do what it is right and surrender the female, will you?” the satyr demanded.

“I will not sacrifice my mate,” Asterion replied firmly. “I will not feed my own heart to this monster who keeps all of us imprisoned.”

“Not all of us have such gifts that were given to you by Ariadne,” the other male rebuked, and he could not fault him for it.

“No, you do not,” he agreed. “Nor are you cursed to remain here. There is a chance that you could find your way out when the labyrinth is distracted. I would recommend beginning your search now. My mate that you wish death on injured it by the grace of the gods, but your time is limited to hunt.”

“And then what?” Barbasa snarled bitterly. “Return to a world filled with those that hate and fear us and would see us destroyed? You forget, too, that none but Theseus has been able to escape, and we have no sorceress here to aid us. Your mate’s prayers, while incredible, do not make her such.”

“You are right. Only Ariadne could move at will by her magic. That is why I will find a way to destroy it.”

The male stared, a laugh startling from him. “Destroy it? The idea of it is madness. You have been prisoner here far longer than I and my kin and are chained here. What makes you think you can accomplish the impossible?”

“I have Vicky,” Asterion replied, turning away. “I suggest you not waste your time and begin your hunt soon. I know I will not be wasting mine.”

He walked away, ignoring the frantic clip of hooves of the male pacing back and forth behind him.

“Guard your mate well, Asterion,” Barbasa shouted after him. “Because I will not! Her blood for ours is worth any cost, even your anger. Until then, I will take your advice and pray to the uncaring gods for all of us.”

Asterion closed his eyes, fighting against the anger that unfurled through him and tamped it down with the iron of his will. It was just words. He would let it be for now. Should any attack, however, then they would know the bite of his labrys.

CHAPTER 26

Asterion was glad that Barbasa did not attempt to follow him. Although only the worthy would be shown the way, he wasn't entirely sure how that would work should he be followed. He would not have hesitated to kill the male to keep the way safe if it came down to it. As it was, only his respect for their one-time companionship kept him from slaughtering the male outright to safeguard Vicky. If the male was intelligent, he would follow his advice. Asterion hoped he did. The satyr flock needed healing as much as he did, and he did not think they would find it in the confines of the labyrinth as he had.

Although weighed down by the sacks and his weapon, it took him little time to return to the dancing floor and this time, he allowed himself a moment of peace there, the memories he thought faded rushed up, drawing tears to his eyes. His sister was there, her long dark hair trailing after her as she danced the crane dance over the painted path, her smile sweet and eyes dancing.

"Come on, Asterion. You remember the way."

His heart in his throat, he set down his load and followed the ghost of her memory through each step, the soft echo of her laughter in his ears and he swore for a moment he could feel the touch of her fingertips against his as she turned toward him and threaded her hands with his.

"I love you, brother. Never forget."

She disappeared back into the mists of time, and he blinked away his tears. She had said that to him, and he had not paid attention. He had been reluctant to dance that day. His spirit had already begun to sour at that point from his bloody fate and the torments of his hunger. He saw nothing joyous

to dance for, but still she had come and tried. Though she had planned to leave, she had come to him one last time to dance the dance and remind him of her love.

And he never would have had this moment—never would have been able to see Ariadne, even if in his memories, one last time—if it had not been for Vicky.

It was time to go home. Not to a place, but to where his heart dwelled. His mate was all that kept it and she was waiting for him.

Asterion picked up their things and descended the dark stairs. This time, he did not stop to admire his surroundings as he strode across the meadow and made his way to the little house behind the temple. Nothing tempted his eye, but his every need and hunger rolled through him, rising rapidly as he caught his mate's fresh clean scent.

Stepping inside, he could hear Vicky moving about in another part of the house and he shivered, his body demanding that he hunt down his female. It was the filth sticking to his fur, however, that made him pause and turn instead to the bathing pool and sink gratefully into its heat. Resting his shoulders against one side, he allowed the water to soothe his aches as he slowly and methodically began to wash himself. When his hand came at last to his cock, he groaned, his hips humping up helplessly against his hand.

Water lapped gently at his fur, stirred by the female stepping into the pool across from him. Even with his eyes closed, he knew she was there from the soft miniscule splashes of water as she moved through it toward him to the sweetness of her natural scent. Moaning, his eyes slit open to take in the sight of his mate, completely nude, her dark hair trailing in damp locks down her back and teasing the sides of her breasts.

Nothing he had ever seen was more beautiful and more precious. Nor had roused his hungers that they burned within him painfully. He thrust up into his hand and hissed.

"Vicky." The word fell from his lips in a low groan that brought a smile to her face.

As she waded toward him, the water became deeper, sliding up to cup her sex before sliding up her hips to the soft swell of her belly, rising until it kissed at the bottom curve of her breasts. His hand worked his cock, his breath gusting out of him in heavy pants as he watched her come to him with all the beauty of a nymph. Soft human hands stroked down the scars of

his chest concealed beneath his fur. The way she stroked them, he wondered how well she could feel them and if she knew what it did to him.

His lips peeling back from his teeth, he let his head fall back, his cock thickening further in his hand, the red haze of his hunger filling his mind. Her eyes smiled with hot pleasure as she ran her fingers lower to caress his abs and he allowed that hunger to come and fully descend upon him. Outside of the influence of the labyrinth, he did not fear it. Instead, he luxuriated in it, enjoying the primal rush of heat and blood through him as she explored him.

The first light touch of her fingers against his sex nearly made him cum, his balls tightening rapturously. Her lips parted at his reaction as he jerked upward in silent demand, her eyes glazing as she slipped her hand above his, stroking his length and exploring the head of his cock with interest. Her tongue slipped over her lips, and he wondered if she might take it into her mouth. His hunger clawed through his belly, and he growled. That would have to wait for another time because he could not.

Releasing his cock, his arm snaked around her, dragging her against his chest, her breasts flattening against his pectorals as the heat of her sex brushed the reddened head of his cock. His claws bit into her arms very slightly, enough to leave red lines scratched into the softness as, in one deft move, he turned and hauled her up onto the side of the pool, her legs looping over his horns as he lowered his mouth ravenously.

His wide, flat tongue covered her entire cunt as it swept greedily over the wet flesh. Vicky's soft cry of pleasure was the sweetest music, complementing that rich honey of her cunt. Asterion lapped at it greedily, every sweep of his tongue becoming quicker in his rapturous need to capture every drop of flavor until it burst over his tongue as Vicky cried out, her legs jerking against his horns with the power of her release. Still, he continued to drink from her, enjoying every shuddering gasp and quiver of his body until he deemed that he had enough of that flavor, and it was time to satisfy the greater hunger surging through him, twisting his gut with its frenzy.

The warmth in his belly burned as if he had drunk several goblets of Thera's wine, and his cock jerked against his belly.

Unhooking her legs from his horns, Asterion rose above her, anchoring her legs against his hips as he lined up with the puffy weeping petals of her cunt. The head of his sex bumped against her slit and a shiver of pleasure

ran through him as her slick coated him in her fragrance. His eyes rolled back in his head, his tongue stroking over his fangs as the hunger roared through him, its heat streaking through his veins and belly. Although he had her just a short time ago, he had to have her again!

His claws digging slightly into her hips, he flipped her, dragging her bottom up into the air so that her sex was fully presented to him at the perfect angle. Flushed dark pink with arousal, it was like a rose unfurled just for him, inviting him to enjoy its sweetest essence. His cock glided over it, every stroke coating it further with her arousal as her musk deepened with the fresh bloom of her need.

"Asterion," she panted, her bottom lifting to him, begging to be filled.

Hands slamming down on either side of her, Asterion snarled, his cock slipping into place and with a flex of his hips, it pushed through the silky embrace of her channel relentlessly until she was fully impaled on his length. Her little body quivered around him, her cunt pulsing with tiny tremors around his invasion, drawing his seed up.

His tail flicked behind him as he braced himself. His hunger raged at him to satisfy it, to ride her little body until it drew the fire from him. His breath labored in his chest with the effort to control himself as he forced himself to give a few gentle strokes, his body shaking with the way her cunt pulled at his cock at every retreat. Beneath him, his mate whimpered and moaned with each thrust, the sound ensnaring him, singing to him as his pace quickened, his hips pumping into her in an untamable rut that had his female practically slipping from beneath him.

Growling low in his throat, he transferred his weight to one arm, lifting the other hand to pin her between the shoulder, holding her in place. Her body writhed, her cries becoming louder as his cock drove into her, his testicles slapping firmly against her clit with every stroke. Her sheath convulsed repeatedly as he rutted deep, instinctively seeking the sensitive flesh around the mouth of her womb with each thrust that would open it ecstatically to his seed.

So beautiful. So sweet. So tasty. The sheen of sweat on her back made her glow in the false light like a polished rare gem. His horns scraped the stone on either side of her as he bent his head, his tongue stroking up her back, drawing in her flavor in a manner that made her quiver, her sex clenching hard around him again as she fully submitted to his pleasure as he drove into her repeatedly, claws scraping stone, hooves digging into the

tiles, as his seed rose furiously, his hunger coiling deep within, taking root just behind his pelvis.

Bellowing, he canted his hips at a new angle and quickened his pace as the first jettison left his body with a pulse of pure ecstasy followed by blast after blast of release until his cum slicked between them, dribbling around his cock from her cunt. With the last twitch of his cock buried deep inside of her, Asterion eased his hand from between her shoulders, noting the red scratches left there. The hunger finally quieted within him, and he drew away, his cock slipping from her body as more of his seed escaped in the absence of his sex trapping it inside.

Vicky sprawled beneath him, a quiet moan rising from her prone body. A smile curved his mouth at the sight of his female well fucked. His tail lashed again as temptation rose within him to mount her again, but he chuckled and patted her bottom fondly. In response, Vicky turned to grin up at him, her cheek pillowed on her arm.

"Oh my fucking gods that was incredible."

Chuckling, Asterion stood, dragging his mate into his arms as he stepped easily from within the pool, cuddling her to his chest. His heart warmed when, with a happy sigh, Vicky snuggled into his embrace, her fingers playfully toying with a lock of his mane as he strode to the only floor level bedroom. There, in the middle of the bed, he laid his mate out on it—his perfect sacrifice—before he too climbed onto the mattress, his body stalking over hers with renewed predatory interest.

Vicky's eyes slowly opened, a smile curling her lips. "Hungry again?" she whispered.

"Always," he rumbled.

Her arms opened to him. "Then come let me love you."

"Always," he repeated with a moan as her legs curled around his hips and he sank deep within her willing flesh. "And I will always love you equally in turn."

It was some hours later when they were well sated and laying on two beds pushed together to form a suitable platform that Asterion reached for the forgotten pouch dangling from the belt on the floor. Vicky gave him a curious look and propped herself up on her arm so that she could watch as he reverently opened the bag and slipped out the necklace from inside. The pectoral tumbled from his fingers so that it spun from its chain in his hand,

catching the light. His mate's gasp of delight made him smile as he turned and presented it to her.

"This is what I wished to present to you earlier," he explained. "In my time, gifts to win a bride were common. It was expected. I understood that even in my youth and so now, I wish for you to have this to convey the depths of my love that I carry for you." Nervously, he extended it out to her as he watched her from beneath half-lowered lids.

Her fingers shook slightly as she lifted her hand, her eyes wide as she looked from the necklace to him. "Does this mean what I think it does?" She swallowed, replying before he even had the chance. "You wish for me to be your wife?"

"My mate, my bride, my wife, my home, for a part of me wishes to live within you even as you live within me." He placed his hand over his heart solemnly.

A soft sigh fell from her lips and his heart froze lifelessly within his chest until the sweetest smile curved her lips, bringing him back to life again. With a laugh, she thrust herself forward into his arms, nearly oversetting him in his crouched position and he gathered her close with one arm and breathed in her alluring fragrance.

"Yes!" Her delighted shout rang through the house and beyond, startling a small flock of quail from the courtyard.

Her mouth pressed enthusiastically all over him with such an overwhelming display of affection that he allowed himself to fall back onto the bed with a laugh as his limber mate crawled over him with a squeal of delight. Which turned into a shriek of laughter when he grabbed ahold of her and pinned her to him to keep her mischievously roaming hands still. His heart filled with joy as he held her against him.

She was now truly his.

He wanted to shout it out for any to hear, even the spirit of the labyrinth jealously sulking as it licked its wounds. He wanted all to know his triumph and joy. What he had believed never would happen, had. He had a mate.

It was almost perfect. The gentle sounds of the well of the gods created a magical backdrop of peace and happiness. Only the labyrinth looming above kept his joy from being absolute. He would treasure his every moment with his mate, but one way or another, he was getting Vicky out of there.

CHAPTER 27

Vicky woke to the sensation of claws plucking at her hair, lightly weaving it together with such a tender touch that she melted against the broad chest beneath her, a smile pulling at her lips. Tipping her head so that her chin rested on Asterion's pectoral, she blinked up at her mate sleepily. Weeks later and it hardly seemed real. He was hers and, in this place, he was calmer than he had been in the labyrinth. He was still bossy and dominant as all hell, but he seemed less prone to fits of aggression and was far more relaxed than she had ever seen him. She could only imagine what he would be like if he were in the human world. There were dangers there, yes, except there, he would finally be free.

It had been on her mind a lot lately. As lovely as everything was in the well of the gods, as Asterion called it, with a sort of idyllic perfection, it was still a prison. A beautiful prison but a prison all the same. Nothing ever changed, their whole existence confined to an enclosed space. Sure, it was a lot more attractive with plenty of plants and small animals, but there was no real sunlight and no fresh breeze. It didn't feel alive, but then, if it were in a space between worlds, she guessed it wouldn't.

Regardless, it was clearly designed and used as a place of reflection and spiritual journey, which was all fine and good, but it was ultimately not a place for the living to pass their entire lives, bound forever within the magic. Unageing and undying. As attractive as that might sound to some, living forever in a cell in paradise was not the least bit appealing to her. And she didn't think it appealed to Asterion either after all the centuries he spent locked away.

“You are staring at me, mate?” he rumbled with sleepy amusement, his eyes cracking open. “Why is that?”

She lifted a shoulder and grinned impishly up at him. “Maybe I enjoy looking at you.”

Laughter vibrated through him and his arm snaked around, dragging her higher against his chest. He grinned at her shriek of surprise and Vicky laughed as he hugged her tightly against him and burrowed his nose in her hair.

Snorting with amusement, she shoved at his muzzle. “Come on, we are obviously up now.”

He groaned and moved to reinforce his hold on her with his other arm, but she wasn’t having any of that. With a chortle of glee, she wiggled out of his grasp, bounding off the bed as Asterion opened a bleary eye and watched with obvious interest as she stood and pulled on her pants, the heat of his admiring gaze planted firmly on her ass. Not that she could fault him. She would be staring continuously if they could fit him into a pair, though they would have to be altered to fit over the inhuman shape of his legs and tail, but damn that would be a sight.

Peering over her shoulder to see if he had moved at all yet, Vicky gave him a dirty look.

“Come on lazy, get up. I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.”

He narrowed his eyes and her pulse leapt at the heat that stirred within them. “If you are hungering, then it is better to remain exactly where we are.”

Laughing, she danced out of his reach and shook her head. “I think *that* hunger is satisfied well enough for the moment. Time to give my girl parts a rest for a few hours after last night and the earlier hours this morning.”

“Is it?” His head cocked as he regarded her speculatively. “It hardly seemed more than a taste that barely eases the ache to me.”

She chuckled with an amused shake of her head and watched as he rolled up onto his hooves. Her eyebrows raised curiously at what he was planning since he was good at not telegraphing his moves but was too late to evade his lunge as he captured her within his embrace. Peals of laughter fell from her lips as he nuzzled her, his tongue stroking over her pulse until she twitched with something a bit carnal in reaction before he set her back on her feet. Giving him a playfully fake sultry look over her shoulder, she pranced ahead of him, enjoying the sound of his heavy hoof-falls behind her

as she put an extra swing and wiggle into her hips. She immediately knew it backfired when her mate growled so deeply that her belly briefly clenched with desire. Her reaction was so strong that he chuckled as he swept by her when she nearly face-planted on the steps on the way to the garden.

Rolling her eyes, Vicky paused to grab a basket and followed him out. Like every day, finding fruit was never an obstacle, ripe berries filled the bushes and various fruits hung flush on vines and branches every morning when they went out. It was a bit unnerving. Unfortunately, despite its abundance, it was also pretty tasteless, but at least it was filling enough to satisfy their hunger. After which they immediately satisfied another hunger as they bathed.

The day stretched on with the same monotony as it always did. The same thing, every day. Vicky wanted to bang her head against the wall, the sound of yet another blade sliding against the sharpening stone working on her last nerve as it echoed through the confined space. Gathering up the dice she had been restlessly throwing, she stood, immediately drawing his eyes to her, his ears snapping forward inquisitively. She made a staying motion as he moved to set aside his blade.

"I'm just going to stretch my legs a bit. I won't be long," she assured him.

"I should go with you," he rumbled, his elbows braced on his knees as he leaned forward to peer at her.

She grinned. "Sharpen your blades. You know you want to. I am just going to the small hill over there to enjoy the wildflowers. I promise I will stay within screaming distance."

"You should not jest about such things," he cautioned. "If a satyr finds his way down here…" his voice trailed off, his countenance darkening.

"Sorry, it's a bad joke. And yeah, they could attack, but they haven't for weeks now," she reminded him gently. She had, in fact, spent the first two weeks after he returned with their belongings sequestered completely inside under his guard just in case any of the flock had followed him down into the well of the gods. It wasn't until after Asterion deemed the situation safe that he allowed her more freedom from under his watchful eye. "And I'll be just over there within view if you step outside."

He sighed but gave her a reluctant smile as the tension bled from his shoulders. "You are right. I worry too much. It is difficult for me to recall at times that I don't need to have the same vigilance as I had in the labyrinth. I

might as well still have you penned within our abode in the labyrinth if I cannot let you go even a short distance out of sight. That is no way to live." He dropped his attention back to his blade and ran it against the sharpening stone, his brow dipping thoughtfully, his eyes lifting briefly to meet hers. "Still, remain aware at all times. I will be here should you need anything."

She walked over and brushed a kiss against his furred cheek and smiled as his tail flicked against her rump playfully.

"I won't be gone long. Just bellow for me when you are done."

The corner of his mouth tipped, and she pressed a quick kiss to it before heading out of their home. The complete silence that surrounded her the moment she stepped outside would never stop being unnerving. There wasn't a chirp of a cricket, the calls of birdsong, or even the hum of a flying insect. As much as she would mass kill all mosquitos, if possible, she would almost rather hear at least one right now than the complete and utter silence. She never imagined how unnatural things could sound without the subtle sounds of life moving around her. In the labyrinth, it had been easy to dismiss since she was too busy trying desperately to ignore what lurked in the corridors, but here where it seemed to be a perfect imitation of being out in nature, it was disturbing to hear nothing but her own breathing.

Rubbing the goosebumps on her arms, she walked out from the courtyard into the grass. The smatter of red and yellow poppies was slight at first but as she climbed the hill, they grew thicker, their perfume pleasant as she plopped down among them.

"If this were Oz, I'm pretty sure I would be asleep right now," she observed aloud, following the amusing train of thought. "Pity, because at least in Oz, I could click my heels and get the fuck out of here."

She sighed and leaned back, her head tipping back as she tried to pretend that it was the real sun shining down on her. Lazily, she glanced around but startled and froze as the grass stirred several feet away. She slowly sat forward, peering into the grass, every sense on high alert. The grass rustled again, and a small quail peeked out to hoot at her before racing back into the flowers, its long tail trailing after it.

"Think you got the jump on me, did you?" she shouted after it, a nervous huff escaping her grinning lips.

Feeling silly, she laughed and eased back again, propping herself on her hands stretched out behind her. She was going to start jumping at shadows

next if she was nearing a heart attack from the presence of a quail or rabbit, the only other living things there besides them.

She turned her head lazily as she heard another rustle to the other side, this time closer. “Come back for more, have you? You certainly must be an inquisitive fellow…” her words died on her lips as she found herself staring at powerful legs.

Powerful, inhuman legs. Her gaze slowly slid up the length to an equally powerful, a very male body. With a squawk of alarm, she scrambled back away from the satyr standing just a few short feet away and jumped to her feet. A contemptuous look crossed his face as he folded his arms across his chest.

“Do not waste your time running. You would not have a chance of outrunning me if I decided to give chase. Which I do not. So, calm down. I have no interest in killing you,” he snapped.

She blinked up at him. “You… you don’t?”

His nose wrinkled as he tipped his head, the large curling horns on his head looking exceptionally heavy at that angle. “That is not entirely accurate,” he amended. “I do not have any wish to kill you currently. Initially, I had very much planned to kill you.” The grin he offered was at once both disturbingly cheerful and menacing. “I am Barbasa, by the way, little human. And you must be Asterion’s female.”

“I am his mate,” she snapped defensively and immediately wanted to smack herself for antagonizing the creature.

Rather than looking offended, his eyebrows flew up and his gaze drifted down to the pedant peeking out from where it was half concealed by her shirt. “Ah. So, the claim has been made at last, and you accepted? How curious. I never thought a human female would have it in her to accept such a bloodthirsty creature as a minotaur as her mate.”

“He is hardly worse than you,” Vicky replied as she inched back, offended on behalf of her mate.

“True in some ways, and very much not in others,” the satyr replied, his grin widening. “But yes, oh yes, I have heard of you. The first female born to capture his heart. I am impressed and curious. I admit that is what stayed my hand. As I said, I had intended to kill you at first. I watched you, waiting for the moment that you would be ripe for the plucking. An unknowing sacrifice to ease the anger of the labyrinth.”

Barbasa gave her a long curious look and sighed. “But I see there is no going back, now. Yes, there is no doubt about it. My old friend will never give you up. I suspect he would follow you into Hades itself, tearing down the great halls of the underworld in his attempt to get to you. I do not wish for Asterion to die. Nor can he stay any longer so long as you live. Even if I secreted you out of the labyrinth, he would not rest until he found you. He would never submit to the labyrinth again after you, though the spirit may not have quite realized that yet. No, the labyrinth cannot serve as his prison or sanctuary any longer.”

Vicky’s jaw dropped in disbelief. “Sanctuary? What sort of sanctuary is the labyrinth with all of its horrors?”

The satyr sneered. “Do you not ever wonder why his sister did not free him from here? Yes, this was his prison, but it also kept him safe from those who would rally together for no other purpose than to see him dead. At least here, there were only the occasional fools in the past who sought to make a name for themselves by the glory earned from the minotaur’s death.” His gaze turned reproachful. “Can you say that he can truly be safe in your world?”

She wilted, her heart sinking. “No. People will be afraid of him, and some might try to kill him.” She lifted her eyes to meet his mocking, hard gaze. “But they won’t. The world is changing, and humanity is now a minority in a world we now share with all manners of creatures. It is nothing like what you once knew. We have little choice but to learn to coexist.”

Barbasa frowned but something in expression lightened and eased as he considered her. After several tense moments, he sighed heavily and inclined his head.

“If you are so certain, then I will help you as much as I can.”

“Why should I trust you?” she asked. “This could all be a trap to get me into the labyrinth and away from him.”

He laughed. “You cannot. Trust nothing within the labyrinth. However, I will point out that at this time, my interests collude with yours and if I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t need to lure you into the labyrinth to accomplish this. I could kill you and escape with your body before Asterion even realized what happened. He cannot even scent me at my current position. It would be such a simple matter, and I owe you no loyalty.

Human life is so fragile and the labyrinth itself does not care if you are still living or not when it wants to feed."

His grin widened as she began to inch away but quickly sobered. "But, as amusing as that may be, I do care about Asterion. I would not wound him by killing his mate. I understand that pain all too well, but if he is to have you, then I would see to it that he escapes this place at last."

She swallowed but took a step closer. "How?"

"There is a way for Asterion to escape, but it cannot be by his hand. His curse ties him to this place and he cannot truly destroy that which he is chained to without destroying himself. I doubt he could even get close with the way that the labyrinth watches for him every minute of the day, its spirit shifting along its halls as it prowls."

She paled. "I would need to do it." Her words came out as a whisper, but his ears tipped toward her, and she knew he heard her, his stony silence responding in affirmation. She bit her lip so hard she could taste her own blood. She jumped slightly as she heard the deep bellow of her name rising from the near distance, her eyes darting up to meet the satyr's gaze. Though she was certain that Asterion could not see the satyr from his angled position on the opposite side of the hill, she knew that if she failed to return that he would come after her out of worry. If the satyr was right, she needed to keep her beloved mate in the dark so that he did not interfere. "I need a little time. Can you meet me at the stairway tomorrow? I believe Asterion plans to hunt then."

Barbasa inclined his head in agreement. "Tomorrow then."

Turning on her heel, she was acutely aware of his gaze following her as she raced back down the hill just in time to see Asterion's large frame step around the house, waiting for her. The moment she was at his side, he swept her up into his arms and hugged her close.

"I think poppies will become my favorite flower if you keep returning home smelling like them," he rumbled, bringing a smile to her face in spite of herself.

"Oh yeah? Maybe I should just start collecting poppies and rubbing them all over myself if you like it so much," she teased. "Perhaps you might even start eating them."

His eyes darkened with desire. "If you wish for me to eat flowers, you only need to ask. My mate already possesses the sweetest and most intoxicating of blooms right between her thighs. In fact, I cannot think of a

better thing to feast on right now," he growled as he snatched her up into his arms and carried her back into the house.

Vicky laughed and flailed in his grip in mock protest until by chance her eyes fell upon the hill from which she came. The lone silhouette of a satyr quietly watching them until he disappeared completely from sight as Asterion carried her back inside.

A tremor crawled through her, half lust from her mate's roaming hands and half dread for what was to come.

Tomorrow.

CHAPTER 28

There was something weighing heavily on his mate's mind, but Asterion was frustratingly incapable of guessing it and Vicky refused to speak of it, claiming that nothing was amiss. He did not like to call his mate a liar, but he felt the tension between them and knew that she was worrying. Perhaps she was uneasy that he was intending to go into the corridors to hunt?

Sighing, he hugged her soft, slumbering body to him. There was no helping it. He was already starting to see a dip in the rabbit and quail populations since he had put off going in favor of guarding his mate and constructing the cool room beneath the resting house. He did not like the idea of leaving her alone and vulnerable there without him. The first time he had felt safe enough doing so with all the chaos descending through the labyrinth, he had been certain that no one had followed them down into the well of the gods. But it was different now and he had the distinct feeling that something of great importance was set in motion.

He did not like it. The gods were quick to play with mortal and immortals alike. After finally winning some measure of peace, granted by the aide of the heavenly queen, he did not like the idea of anything or anyone interfering with it as it might suddenly be taken away.

Arm tightening around his mate, his tail flicked against the furs with agitation. Perhaps when he was above, he would begin investigating a way to get his female out. Even if he could not immediately follow her, he would be at peace knowing that she was safe from the terrors of the labyrinth and its inhabitants.

He had always known that their current situation wasn't a permanent solution, but he had enjoyed what happiness he had found for as long as it was in his grasp. Now it all felt as if their time was winding to a close. He did not know if he had a handful of days or weeks left to enjoy the peace they had found while he tried to figure out a way to get his mate out of the labyrinth, but he knew that he had to do so soon before something eventually happened.

An unhappy groan escaped him, and he felt Vicky stir at his side.

"Asterion? Is everything okay?" she whispered; her voice rough with sleep.

He stroked his hand in a soothing motion down her side. "All is well. Sleep."

She mumbled sleepily in assent, dropping quickly back into the grip of slumber. He did not still his hand but continued to stroke her, enjoying her softness and the faint scent of poppies and his mate's own sweet musk drifting up to him. Vicky was everything beautiful and vibrant that made his life worth living. He could not abide the thought of anything happening to her. Her death would not only destroy him but do so in the worst way. It would obliterate his very soul and everything that kept him from descending into madness.

Even if he could not find freedom, he would go to Hades knowing his mate was safe far from the reach of this place and every creature within it.

CHAPTER 29

Vicky shivered as she faced the dark staircase leading up to the labyrinth. Though the well of the gods had a tendency to run cooler like the labyrinth above it, her reaction wasn't from a true source of cold. Instead, it was from the dread forming into a cold lump deep within her. She felt as if the spirit of the labyrinth were crouched just above waiting like a spider in its web. Waiting for its moment to devour her. The absolute last thing she wanted to do was go up there.

It honestly felt verging onto suicidal to even consider it, but this was also her chance to save Asterion. Even if it had served for a time as his sanctuary in a cruel, twisted way by protecting him from the outside world, that time was over. He had been a prisoner of the labyrinth for long enough. Turning to face the satyr at her side, she met Barbasa's gaze.

"I have been waiting." There was no noticeable censure in his words as he peered down at her, merely as observation as to her tardiness. "Asterion has departed?"

She nodded. "This morning. I was waiting to give him a chance to get further into the labyrinth before we went."

Barbasa grunted quietly. "A wise decision. Very well, it is time then." His head tipped, considering her with a glint in his eye. "Unless you have changed your mind."

Vicky swallowed, wanting more than anything to say that she changed her mind. A sick feeling had settled within her belly now that the time had come. But meeting the satyr's gaze, she realized that he expected her to do exactly that. He expected her to run away. Was waiting for it in fact. She could see it in the smug gleam in his eyes.

She pushed away her fear, her chin lifting. “What do I need to do?”

He blinked in surprise and eyed her curiously. “You would truly face this danger for him?”

“I would do anything for him,” she retorted, her eyes narrowing at him in challenge. “He would do no less for me. He’s mine, and I don’t intend to leave here without him even if I have to burn down the labyrinth to do it.”

He stared at her, his eyes widening with a look of wonder. Suddenly, he laughed, a roguish but genuine smile lighting his features.

“If there are humans like you these days, I may find your world surprising yet. Funny you should say that by the way because that is exactly what you are going to have to do,” he said gleefully. He leaned in closer when she startled—she had not been prepared for that—his grin widening. “But that is not at all. That would destroy the labyrinth itself, but it would not save Asterion. To do that, here is what you need to do.” His voice dropping into a whisper, he explained how to save Asterion and finally put an end to the labyrinth and the terrible spirit that walks it once and for all.

Vicky stared at the dark stairway, her stomach twisting in knots as he straightened, his eyes glowing as he stepped closer into the darkness.

“Are you ready?” At her silent nod, he slipped onto the stairs, disappearing almost entirely except for the eyes that peered down at her. “This way,” he said softly. “We must be quick before Asterion decides to return and discovers too soon that you are gone.”

Nodding, she set her foot on the stairs and glanced up at his glowing eyes. “But you will show me the way, right?”

The faint shadow of his curled horns dipped as he nodded. “As promised, I will show you to the entrance to the true heart of the labyrinth. It is that which contains the anchor point of Asterion’s chains to this place. But then I will leave this place. This is all that keeps me here, after all. I prefer to take my chances among humanity than remain here to witness whether you succeed or fail.”

She cast him a curious glance. “What of your flock?”

Barbasa stilled on the stair ahead of her and looked back at her. He was silent for a long moment but his face hardened, his jaw tightening as his head dipped. “I took care of them.” He glanced up at her, his eyes bright with grief despite his unyielding expression. “I had to. They would not be safe to release into your world with the way the labyrinth had twisted them. I am not sure if even I am safe, but the madness that they descended into

disturbed me enough that I could not allow it. But nor could I leave them here to suffer."

Understanding dawned on her and it took all that she had not to gape at him in shock as he proceeded forward again. He had murdered his entire flock as a mercy killing for both the human world and for the satyrs and because of that, he wore his grief hard.

"I am sorry for what you lost," she whispered after him, drawing his bleak gaze back to hers. "But you did the right thing, I think."

He drew in a deep breath and released it with a nod. "Let us hope then that your world will not suffer any from those who do leave this place. I am not too vain to not know that this place changes us in terrible, unredeemable ways. But we shall see how the world fairs with Asterion loose upon it. First, however, you must find the anchor."

"What does this anchor point look like?" she asked as the darkness enclosed her. In the staircase there was no torch to provide light for her, so she braced a hand on the wall as she felt her way up one step at a time.

"You will find what you need easily," he replied. "The spell is written on a sealed ceremonial amphora. But this is no normal vase, its contents contain the power of the spell within it. It must be broken."

Her brow furrowed as she stepped out into the soft light of the dancing floor. "That's it? Just break a vase?"

The chuckle he gave in response was so sinister that it made her hair stand on end and she shivered as she glanced up at the statues to seek some hint of comfort from their austere faces. The satyr stood just beyond, his head tipped as he watched her, his glowing eyes following her.

"It is not quite so easy as you think," he whispered. "I only glimpsed it but once. It appears harmless on its pedestal in the midst of the vast room. There is no guard or anything that you will see that protects it but believe me when I say that the labyrinth is cruel. It will seek to destroy you to protect itself, but it will do it in the most terrible ways possible." A morose expression fleetingly passed over his face before he sighed and shrugged. "Come now. We must be quiet from here on out. It hears everything."

Vicky nodded. Stepping over to a sconced torch on the wall, she removed it and held it aloft. "Before we go. You mentioned that the labyrinth must burn. Why didn't it catch fire when the walls fell? Between the fire basin in our home and all these torches, it should have."

Barbasa grinned. “You did not notice that the labyrinth took care of what walls to bring down? It can bring up new walls from those it crumbles, but it doesn’t risk the flames. Not when it cannot even extinguish the torches for long before the magic woven along these halls brings them back. It remembers.”

He chuckled softly and waved her to him. “Enough talk. Come now. Hurry and be silent.”

Biting her lips, Vicky followed him up in the lower hall. As Barbasa said, though stone was crumbled everywhere, the way the stones had fallen indicated that they all dropped from the side bare of torches. It was the only clue that anything at all had happened there. Other than the remnants of broken stone that littered the floor, the walls themselves were rebuilt, the sight of which made her skin crawl.

Wrestling ahold of her fear, she followed the satyr deeper through the unending halls. There were fewer twists than she expected, the path surprisingly direct. It was a good thing too because she might have considered marking the walls and she had a feeling that would be a bad idea. There was a possibility that it wouldn’t alert the labyrinth to her presence, but that was a risk she really didn’t want to take.

Everything seemed quiet at least. Even the vines hung limply, though she still crept carefully by them, making sure they didn’t touch her as she passed as she observed Barbasa do just ahead of her.

After a while, the torches gradually became fewer and the air distinctly cooler and wetter. She could hear the trickle and drip of water adding to the dank atmosphere. Suddenly, she was plunged completely into darkness with only her own torch lighting her way. Her footsteps slowed nervously and Barbasa stopped, his glowing eyes peering back at her until she managed to get herself moving forward again. Though she trembled in the oppressive darkness, she pressed on, a feeling settling into her gut that what she sought was just ahead.

Soon this would all be over. She would do what needed to be done. After that? She had no idea. She did know she couldn’t set fire to it yet. Not until she found her way back to Asterion. Then they would burn down the bitch together.

She swallowed nervously when the satyr finally came to a stop. His entire body appeared stiff with tension as he peered into an entryway, his eyes turning to her last minute at her approach. Sidling up to him, Vicky

peered into the dark room as well. It was smaller than she expected but dark, her torch just barely revealing the four walls of the room empty of everything except a singular pedestal on which sat a large ancient vase.

Her breath hissed between her teeth in awe, but her gaze snapped away and back to Barbasa as he stepped away, a grim look settling over his face. He didn't speak, but then she didn't expect him to. He simply regarded her for a moment and inclined his head in a surprisingly respectful manner. With that brief bow of his head, he turned away and disappeared back down the hall, leaving her alone to her fate.

A wave of nausea hit her, but she pushed it back and clenched her jaw as she faced the room in front of her. Shifting her weight forward, she took a step into the heart of the labyrinth.

CHAPTER 30

Asterion sneered in frustration, his eyes trailing through the hall ahead of him as he headed back toward the dancing floor. He might as well return to Vicky with a couple of rabbits. He knew that she would not protest. He just had not anticipated this.

Prey was proving to be a lot more difficult to find than he had expected. Though the walls had rebuilt themselves, leaving only the smaller crumbled stones in the path, several of which partially buried its victims lying dead and rotting, but even weeks following the destruction there was still a feeling of ruin and a desolated quiet in the air. But then the labyrinth was recovering from unprecedented damage even if self-inflicted in its attempt to kill Vicky. There had been so much damage that he was certain that walls were still being rebuilt in the upper corridors.

He had yet to note anything living at all in the halls other than himself. Even the satyr flock was curiously absent. He hoped that Barbasa took his advice and got his flock out of there while he could. Although it sickened him to think of what horror the satyrs could commit on the world, he knew that the male would not leave his flock behind to suffer.

"So, you have returned. I knew you would," a soft voice hissed behind him and Asterion stilled, his body slowly turning to face it.

Confusion filled him at the sight of his mate standing before him. But it was quickly replaced with hot fury when her hips swayed as she stepped forward and something inhuman crossed her face. The labyrinth was playing games with him again. That was not his mate. He growled as he backed away from it and the thing smiled with Vicky's mouth but did so

with a coldness that twisted her expression into something horrible. Its brows raised at his expression, as its hands ran down its body.

"What is wrong, minotaur? Do you not enjoy this form? You have rutted it often enough… mated it," it hissed with a snap of its teeth before its furious expression was once again replaced by its chilling smile. "If this pleases you, I can be this."

"You cannot," he snarled, drawing back further from it, his lip curling in disgust. "You are not worthy to wear her likeness. You merely twist her beauty and warmth into something obscene and foul. You cannot replace her."

Its smile dropped away, its expression tightening with displeasure. "I can make you. I have left you your sanity because you have always served me well when I fed your rage and hunger. And I have enjoyed your defiance. It amused me especially when you still yielded to what I wanted… and enjoyed it," it cruelly reminded him with a tip of its lips. Its expression flattened once again with anger. "But *this*, I no longer find amusing, so it seems that I must make you mine again the only way I can. I did not wish to do this as I liked your individuality, but you leave me with no choice."

Growling, Asterion grabbed a torch from the wall, brandishing it before him. "You will not touch me again, creature."

It stared at the torch coldly and lifted its eyes to him. "Not yet," it agreed. "But will you truly know the difference when your mind is mine and this is all you see? Will you remember the taste and scent of your mate when madness runs through it and the taste of an intruder is on your tongue?" Amusement pulled at its lips in an obscene smile as horror filled him at exactly what the labyrinth intended. "Yes, now you understand."

Its head tipped, its smile widening despite the terrible anger darkening its eyes. As it looked at him, Asterion could feel the air thickening around him. He swiped his torch even though he knew it was a useless action of defiance, but he was not going to make it easy for the spirit. The labyrinth's evil seeped into him, drawing a familiar red haze over his mind, thicker than ever before and impenetrable as it warped everything around him, confusing him until he felt his anger mount. He could not recall why he was standing there with the torch in his hand, all he felt was rage and hunger as a familiar female smiled up at him and gestured down the hall.

“There is an intruder, Asterion,” she whispered. “Find it and kill it. Bring me its head, my pet, and I will reward you.” She cupped one hand over a breast and the other teasingly over her sex, inflaming his hunger for a sweetness he distantly remembered.

He wanted it. Needed it. Dashing the torch in his hand against the wall until it sputtered out, he dropped it on the ground at his feet. His eyes narrowing on his prize, he stalked forward with every intent to grab and rut the female he recognized as his, but she laughed and held up a hand. He went still, staring at the delicate hand curiously. Something was different.

“Not yet. First the intruder. I want it dead.” The pretty lips twisted grotesquely and Asterion stepped back uneasily. Something was not right, but she was his. Was she not? A deep groan of protest echoed from his chest and her eyes narrowed angrily. “Do not make such noise. Go now. Am I not your mate? Do this for me!”

He rumbled with uncertainty, but the red haze thickened, spurring on his hunger to such heights that he spun around, his nostrils flaring for the scent of warm flesh.

“Yes. Go. The intruder is yours to feast upon. You will honor me with its blood and death.”

With a bellow, he turned and charged down the hall, the scent of human flesh filling his nose. Humans were intruding on his domain. His tongue lashed over his teeth hungrily, his cock thickening as he raced all the corridors, his running steps thunderous. He did not care if it would hear him. It would run and he would chase. It could not escape. It would only make him hunger more. It would scream and wail, but he would have it to feast upon.

The closer he came, the richer and more drawing his prey’s scent became. His cock twitched in an attempt to distract him, but he ignored it. It would be sated soon enough. His mate would reward him for the sacrifice. Until then, he would tear his prey apart and bask in his mate’s pleasure.

His nostrils flared. There it was. With a roar, he bounded forward, and a female spun toward him with her eyes wide in surprise. There was something faintly familiar that barely penetrated the haze as her sweet scent flooded him and deepened. Her surprise was replaced by a smile that lit up her face. There was something about her that called to him that demanded he stop. Confused, he took a step forward and then another, his growl vibrating in his throat.

This new feeling nearly overwhelmed his purpose if not for the red haze boiling forward thicker than ever, dragging claws through his mind. He roared again, her smile quickly falling as he raced for her. He bared his teeth as he breathed in the fear that laced her scent, unable to understand why it distressed him. This was natural and the way it had always been. A growl rumbling in his chest, he drew out his ax as the female backed away with an amphora in hand that tugged at his entire being.

He shook his head, tossing away the sensation. Only one thing mattered now and that was how he hungered!

CHAPTER 31

The damn amphora thing was heavier than it looked. Vicky huffed. She was never going to get it down with just one hand. Wedging the torch into a nearby crack in the floor, she cracked her knuckles and approached the vessel again and gripped its handles firmly. A strained hiss of air escaped from between her teeth as she tugged it from its place on the pedestal with a loud grating rasp. She bit back a groan as she just barely avoided being knocked over by the weight of the vase.

What the hell did they put in this thing?

On the bright side, the fact it was so heavy could be a good thing. Hopefully, gravity would work well enough to shatter the vase the moment she let go of it. Straining, she lifted it higher against her chest, preparing to drop it, when a roar blasted through the room.

Swinging around with her prize still braced in her arms, she stared at the vaguely familiar, monstrous shadow blocking the entrance. It took an immediate step forward and her surprise gave way to relief when the torchlight fell over the shadowed features.

Asterion.

She smiled weakly at him, hoping that he wasn't too mad about this whole "breaking the cardinal rules and escaping where he left her" bit. Her smile, however, quickly wilted and died as he stalked closer, a predatory growl rumbling from him that caused the hair on her arms to stand up. She backed away a step, eyeing him worriedly when he suddenly burst forward with a shocking speed. Vicky jumped and skittered back as much as she could, terror leaping high into her veins. This was not her Asterion. This was a stranger whose blood-hungry roar echoed through the small room.

There was not the slightest recognition in his face as he charged toward her, only a lust for death. She had seen that hunger in his face before, but never directed toward her. She cried out, dragging the vase up as high as she could in front of her. It was a fucking miserable shield, especially against the ax that he withdrew from his harness, but she wasn't planning on hiding behind it. She hoped to knock some goddamn sense into him with it.

With a shriek, she launched it at his face with all her terror-fueled strength. Any hope she had of making contact shattered with the amphora as his ax swung down, cleaving into it with a brutality that would have been awe-inspiring if she wasn't the target of whatever madness had overcome him.

Surprisingly, Asterion slowed, his hand flexing on the handle of his ax, his eyes tracking her as she quickly skirted around the pedestal. He hadn't stopped but stalked after her like a predator toying with its prey. Now she knew why so many small animals died of fright when a predator caught them before they ever received a killing blow. Her heart was beating so hard that it felt like it was about to burst from her chest.

"Asterion, please. What has gotten into you?" she shouted, no longer even trying to be quiet. If his roar hadn't announced that something was going on, the crash of the amphora would have done it. She gestured wildly to the broken pottery, eyes falling briefly on a bull's horn gilded with gold laying among the shards. "That was what was chaining you to this place. You are free now. We can leave. Please, don't do this."

A cold laugh sent ice through Vicky's veins and her head snapped toward the entrance to see… herself? Vicky shook her head as her reflection smiled coldly.

"Foolish human. He is incapable of leaving me. You think *that* is all that holds him here? He is bound to *me* by *my* will."

Vicky drew in a sharp breath, realizing exactly what was wearing her face. She didn't understand why the spirit of the labyrinth was mimicking her appearance and voice, but she had an idea when it turned toward Asterion with a creepy as fuck facsimile of a sweet smile. He too had stilled, his head turned toward the spirit, his nostrils flaring as it held its hand out to him.

"Asterion, my mate," it purred, rousing an ugly, possessive fury within Vicky. "Kill the human and come to me. I hunger."

“Yes, my mate,” he rumbled, his voice impossibly deep, far deeper than it naturally was with a grinding sound to it that skidded over her nerves unpleasantly.

Vicky’s eyes snapped back to her mate in horror, her head shaking in denial as she watched him palm his thickening cock, but he was no longer looking toward the spirit but at her. His eyes blazed with such intense hunger that she felt her own arousal surge in response. That might have given her some hope if she hadn’t recalled that Asterion had not been able to distinguish between his hungers at first when it came to her. She was almost certain that he would not be able to now that he was under the compulsion of a spirit pretending to be her.

“That thing is not your mate. I am!” she shouted at him, quickly backing away.

His tread slowed and he regarded her with confusion but shook his head, his horns lowering aggressively as his knuckles whitened around his ax, and he stalked forward again. Vicky let out a panicked cry and hurried to put some distance between them, but when his growl became louder as his eyes tracked her rapid movement, she came to an abrupt stop. To her surprise, he also slowed, his predatory gaze piercing her.

“No running,” she whispered to herself. “Of course, somehow, we are still playing by the rules.” Clearing her throat, she spoke louder. “I’m not going to run from you. As if I could.”

She choked back a bitter laugh and tried to ignore the triumphant grin on the spirit’s face. Vicky licked her lips nervously as he warily stalked closer at a slower pace, his ears tipped toward her as if she were a source of potential threat. She shook her head, her eyes tearing with frustration.

“Fuck! You big dope, I don’t know what to do. You are mine, but I don’t know how to get that through to you so that you’ll remember,” she whispered around a sob as he drew near.

Somehow, she managed to stand her ground as he loomed over her so close that she could practically feel the intense heat of him through her clothes. His eyes narrowing, he reached out with his empty hand and grabbed her shoulder in a hard grip to push her down to the ground. The sound of her shirt tearing within his grasp was an obvious precursor to what he intended to do. She wasn’t so stupid to not know that he was positioning her for an execution. Her knees hit the stone painfully, making tears spring to her eyes as he straightened over her, his ax lifting up from his side.

Being beheaded is supposed to be a quick, painless execution, right? Gods, why wasn't that a comforting thought? But it couldn't be any worse than being chased around the room and hacked to death for the amusement of the spirit.

"Asterion, please don't do this," she whispered. "I can't stand the thought of another thing haunting you."

"Nothing will haunt him, human," the spirit retorted with amusement as it strolled closer, an expression of glee on its face as it watched the interaction between them hungrily. Its long, pointed tongue swiped out of its mouth to run over its lips and she shuddered. "He will not even remember you beyond this form that is now mine."

She trembled with anger as she glared over at it. Since it seemed that she was about to die, she had nothing to gain by holding back. "An illusion, you mean," she spat. "And a poor one at that. Even with a human form you cannot manage to look human. You just make it look vile and disgusting."

It shrugged. "It does well enough. With the influence of my power over his mind, he will never know the difference. He will continue to kill for me, and this time gleefully for my pleasure. And it will be me he ruts so that I can feast upon his energy. You will die, and he will be my mate for all of eternity."

Vicky's lip curled with derision. "You are a parasite. You are no mate because you are incapable of love. Glutting yourself on pleasure is not love."

The spirit hissed at her and glanced impatiently over at the Asterion. "Do it."

He growled and Vicky winced when he suddenly grabbed her ripped shirt with one hand to hold her steady as he lifted his ax higher, his eyes piercing her with a wild madness.

Vicky met his eyes, her lips trembling. "Shit. This is insane. This is not you. Do not let that sadistic bitch of a labyrinth win. It is deceiving you."

He cocked his head, his eyes traveling along her neck to her face as his ears tipped toward her. The ax in his hand shook as his brow dipped with doubt, conflict brewing in his eyes. He glanced back at the spirit and then at her. From behind him, Vicky could see the spirit stalking forward furiously, the human illusion disguising it rippling and cracking beneath the strain.

"Look at it. It is not even human. That isn't me. That isn't your mate," she cried out as various vines snapped to life, whipping toward her.

“Asterion. Kill it. *Now*,” the spirit shrieked

“You don’t want to kill me,” Vicky reminded him, her eyes squeezing shut as the ax lifted. “I am yours; I love you! You are free of the labyrinth’s power!”

The entire world felt like it had come to a full stop. There was no sound. No impact of the blade. Vicky wondered for a moment if she was dead and that the killing stroke had been so fast that she had in fact not felt it at all. Her eyes flew open when she heard a deep billow of his breath.

“Mine,” he rasped, and his eyes darted down to the pedant peeking out from the gaping fabric within his grip. The light from the torch shimmered over the stone.

“No!” the spirit shrieked in impotent fury.

Asterion didn’t so much as twitch in reaction to it as he dropped his muzzle so that it brushed against her cheek. “My mate and my bridal gift. You are real.” His voice shook as the ax trembled in his grip before dropping to the ground at his feet. He glanced down at it, his expression morphing to one of horror before his eyes snapped back up to her and he gathered her up quickly into his arms with a lamenting low. “What have I done?”

Tears flowed freely from Vicky’s eyes as she gripped him back. “You fought back, that’s what. Now let’s end this and get out of here.”

Asterion grunted in agreement and began to rise as he helped her stand but was suddenly jerked back out of her arms by an unnatural force. Vines swarmed over him as they hauled him back as he bellowed angrily, dragging him toward a wall to pin him in place. The labyrinth’s spirit grew larger, Vicky’s likeness dropping away as if melting off it and replaced by something far more terrible in appearance that barely resembled anything remotely human.

Comprised of tendrils of shadows, it had the general form of a woman but stretched out grotesquely, the edges of it twisted like the vines under its power or more likely the numerous strange “tongues” as it manifested before. Even its head was like a warped reflection of humanity, the features elongated, though the back rose to a geometric form as if it wore some sort of elaborate headdress. It snarled at her mate, its sharp teeth appearing more real than the rest of it as it passed by Vicky as if she weren’t even there and reached out a clawed hand toward him.

Another angry bellow burst from Asterion as he fought the grip of the vines. His eyes snapped to her, silently begging her to run as the spirit rounded on him, cutting off Vicky's view of him completely.

He wanted her to run… *now*?

Hissing between her teeth in angry frustration, she stumbled over the stone floor as her eyes searched for anything that she might be able to use to help him. She immediately headed toward the torch but stopped when its light cast a sudden brilliant gleam over the gilded horn. She stared at it for a moment but then rushed over and dropped in a low crouch beside it and quickly brushed the shards of pottery from it. Uncovered, it gleamed again in a way that was too bright to be credited to a torch. Taking it as a sign, Vicky snatched it from the ground and stood, turning it in her hand so that the pointed metal tip faced out like a blade.

Her jaw clenched as she turned and walked toward the spirit, keeping her footsteps steady so not to rouse its curiosity when it had already dismissed her as unthreatening. She smiled grimly to herself, her hand tightening around the horn. She might not be able to kill it, but she sure as hell was going to sting it hard enough to notice. Coming to a stop just behind the spirit as it leaned into the wall, its numerous tongues sliding from its mouth and body to caress over Asterion's body, Vicky straightened to her full height and jutted out her jaw.

"Hey, bitch, that's my mate!"

The spirit snarled as it turned toward her and Vicky used that moment of surprise to charge, thrusting out the horn with all her strength. The give as it pierced the spirit was surprising, as was its ear-shattering shriek of pain and surprise. It fell back against the wall behind it, its body writhing as Vicky continue to push forward, the sound of cracking rock mingling with screams, until she couldn't ram it in any further. Vicky stepped back, her body slick with sweat as she stared at the pinned spirit.

At her side, the vines that had held Asterion dropped away, and her mate surged forward with a snarl, pulling Vicky roughly behind him as he growled at the labyrinth's spirit. Vicky peered around him as his head bent to study the horn impaling it.

"What is happening to it?" she asked.

The corners of his mouth lifted with cruel amusement before his eyes dragged up to peer at the spirit twisting and howling on the spike of the

horn. His expression shifted to one of warmth, however, when glanced he down at her.

"Where did you get the horn, Vicky?" he rumbled.

"Over there. It was in the amphora that Barbasa told me to smash."

He whirled around, his face a mask of fury. "*Barbasa*? When was this?"

"He found me outside our home and told me how to free you, but focus, let's not get distracted here," she argued. "What is going on with that thing, and why are you asking about the gilded horn?"

He huffed in annoyance, the billow of breath bursting from him in a loud blast of air. "The end here," he tapped a claw on it, ignoring the snarling, gnashing teeth of the spirit, "it appears to be the end of a spell, one which *anchors* its target." His mouth curved smugly as his eyes turned toward her. "Do you understand?"

Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the horn. "You mean that it anchored the spell binding you here into the labyrinth by being included in the amphora and now that it pierced the spirit…"

"It has anchored it to this spot within the labyrinth," he finished for her and chuckled. Turning away, he stalked over to the torch still stuck between the floor cracks and yanked it free before returning to her side. He leisurely waved it back and forth in front of the spirit as it howled and shrieked at him. "It means that it cannot save itself or the labyrinth now." His gaze hardened. "The well of the gods has been lost to men for countless generations, its purpose is over and that of the labyrinth with it, though it has fought to remain alive. Now it's time for it to die."

With a hard smile, he stepped away from the spirit that had haunted and tormented him for centuries and lifted the torch to the vines that filled every hall from the highest to the lowest levels. They caught and the spirit screamed and screamed as he continued to walk, lighting each and every vine in the room ablaze. Vicky watched silently and when he returned and threw the torch among the remaining cluster of vines hanging near the spirits feet, she reached for him only to be hauled into his arms.

Asterion didn't say a word as he plucked her up and clutched her tightly to his chest, but he didn't need to. It was finally over. Ducking her head against his neck, she allowed the comfort of his heat to surround her as he stalked through the halls. As they passed, every torch blazed higher than ever, responding to the fire now raging and spreading from the heart of the labyrinth, adding their own flames to it as the fire consumed the corridors

behind them. The groan of stones followed as the vines burned away and the rumble of crumbling walls followed them as they exited into a sunlit world, and the entrance to the labyrinth collapsed behind them with a spray of dust and smoke.

Leaning into her mate, Vicky laughed with relief.

They were finally free.

CHAPTER 32

Asterion blinked against the burning brilliance of the sun, ignoring the pain and he drew in large breaths of the cleanest, sweetest air he had ever known. Vicky assured him that the pain in his eyes would likely lessen once he adjusted to the brightness of the sun now that he no longer had just the dim light that made its way into the labyrinth. That moment could not come soon enough for him. He wanted to fully experience everything of this new world, including its brilliance and beauty.

At his side, Vicky sighed as she crouched low to the ground, scraping away leaves with her fingers as she slowly began to uncover what looked like a cart and several packs. He frowned down at her with concern.

"Rest Vicky. We will move on soon enough."

She glanced up with a small smile and shook her head with an expression of wonder. "I don't even know how it is that we still understand each other. I guess we should be thankful that whatever magic that the labyrinth did was permanent."

Her smile widened as he rumbled in agreement, his ears flicking toward her as he gazed down at her fondly. With a wink, she returned to her work. After several minutes she shook her head in frustration and cursed.

"This shit has been sitting out here for months. The food is probably mostly bad." She picked a container up, sniffed it and gagged. "Yeah, definitely bad. We are going to have go back to the nearest town and resupply. Cock suckers all of them. They will treat us like shit," she warned, glancing up at him, "I don't even know if they will even let you in the gates, but they will trade with me at least. I still have good salvage that I didn't bother bringing out last time due to their fucked-up attitudes."

“They will allow me within their gates,” he replied confidently as he peered around, taking in the tall trees lush with green life. “About Barbasa,” he began.

She groaned as she began to shove items back into her pack. “He was worried about you and wanted to get you out of there. He knew that there would be nothing good to come of our situation within the labyrinth once he realized that we truly mated. And he knew that with your bond to the labyrinth, you would be unable to break your connection to it much less kill it. He was looking out for you and me. He knew if we didn’t act fast, something terrible would happen and I would be dead.”

Asterion grimaced. He could not argue against that. His first return to its halls to hunt and it had ensnared him and bent him to its will. He had nearly killed his own mate under the labyrinth’s illusions. He did not know if he could ever cleanse himself of the need and desire he had felt for the foul spirit when he believed it to be his mate. Still, the subject of Barbasa was not an easy one, though he felt a little better knowing that the male’s heart had been in the right place.

“He escaped with his flock?”

“Ah, not entirely,” she murmured sadly, and he glanced down at her in surprise. Her eyes lifted and met his. “He killed them, Asterion. He wasn’t even sure if either of you should be free in this world after how much damage the labyrinth did to you, but he couldn’t allow his flock in this world… or leave them to suffer,” she added.

“A difficult decision,” he rumbled, his heart going out to the one being he had briefly counted as a friend amid those halls.

“Yeah,” she agreed softly. Sitting back on her heels, she drew a deep breath and looked around before tipping her head at an angle to look back up at him again. “So, what do you think?”

“It is bright,” he rumbled. “But the air, I never smelled air so fresh.” His head dropped as he looked down at her. “Where do we go now, after we resupply?”

She smiled and shrugged. “Anywhere we want. Humanity no longer rules this world, though some like to pretend we do. This is a very big, empty world now with unlimited possibilities and dangers, especially with all kinds of creatures and monsters running loose. More importantly, we live by our own rules. We can go and see anything your heart desires.”

His ears perked with interest. He could choose his own home for himself to carve out and claim without hinderance, outside of the deference he would give to his mate's opinion. If he had to defend it against creatures to do so, even better. He observed his surroundings silently. It was fair enough to look upon, but he did not care for the sweltering heat. He could not see making their home there, even if they found a spot further away from the dead mouth of the labyrinth. As he considered some of the wonders that he had heard about from Barbasa, who had been much traveled and had lived in an alpine environment before the labyrinth had swallowed him and his flock, the choice was easy.

"I always wished to see snow," he admitted wistfully, and his mate's smile widened.

"All right, north it is. It's summer now, so I imagine it will be coming around fall by the time we get there, but I know a place we can hole up for the winter along my route."

He gave her a curious look, an unsettled feeling coiling within his belly. "I do not want to return beneath the ground."

She laughed, immediately setting him at ease. "No, it's an abandoned cabin I came across. We will probably need to do a few repairs and prepare it to weather out the winter, but it is quite cozy and far enough from any city ruins or towns that we can avoid most of the migrating groups. We can enjoy some peace and quiet among the snow and stars and then decide if we want to stay or do something else come spring. I think I need a break from ruined, crumbling buildings for a time, anyway."

He extended a hand to his mate, smiling when she slipped hers into it and curled her fingers around his. "Lead the way. As always, I am yours."

"And I am yours," she whispered back as he hauled her to her feet beside him.

Wrapping his arms around his mate, his heart felt full in ways that he had only dreamed of in his youth while trapped within the bloody depths of the labyrinth. Finally that life was over and another one could finally begin.

EPILOGUE

Vicky stretched against her mate's body cradling her and let out a little moan of contentment. The snow had been falling nonstop for days outside but the cabin was toasty warm between the roar of the fire in the fireplace and Asterion's large bulk wrapped around her. It had not been easy getting to this point, but the journey had been worth it. She admittedly had been a little worried about her mate laying the town to waste when they had restocked their packs to head north. He had not been amused by their rules and had not only refused to let her go in alone but had threatened to pull their entire wall down if they didn't trade with her. Not surprisingly, they had caved but it ended up taking an escort of no less than four guards to escort them to the trading post so that they could collect necessary provisions.

She chuckled quietly to herself. That was not the only time that Asterion's superior size, strength, general ferocity, and an unwillingness to take no for an answer had paved the way for them. It had also made her feel safer than ever on the roads as they traveled. Of course, they were both glad when it was finally over and could settle into their home, but the work had not stopped there. It had taken a month and a half of daily work to get the cabin habitable to live in full time. But now it was a cozy home for them, one that had witnessed their rutting in every single room and was thoroughly theirs. Vicky couldn't think of a single place she would rather be. Or any other male she would have been so content to spend her life with.

Snuggling into her mate's arms, she smiled, murmuring little wordless happy sounds as Asterion stroked a hand over her hip.

He chuckled. “You sound happy,” he observed, his deep voice vibrating pleasantly through her.

“That would be accurate,” she replied around a yawn. “It’s so comfortable I could just hibernate like a bear right here.”

“That would be welcome. I cannot think of a better way to pass the winter than by holding you.”

“Until one of us had to pee,” she quipped, drawing a rumble of laughter from her burly mate.

She loved making him laugh. Since leaving the labyrinth, it had been as if a fog had lifted from him, and the poison of the place slowly drained away. He had gradually opened up, being freer with his emotions without fear of falling into an uncontrollable state and laughed far more frequently. She never got tired of the sound of his beautiful laughter.

He traced his claws lightly down her belly in retaliation for her teasing and she squirmed, giggling, beneath his touch.

“Behave if you wish to receive your birthing day gift,” he chastised, his voice amused.

She craned her head back to peer up at him curiously. “A gift? For me?”

He hummed in agreement, his hand resuming its stroking pattern. “I retrieved it some time ago with the intent of making it a gift at the right moment. Since you have told me that it is your birthing day, it is the right time.”

“I said that I think it’s my birthday. It reminds me of it because the snow is falling but it’s hard to say because no one really keeps precise calendars anymore.”

He shrugged, unconcerned, accepting things as easily in that way of his that she loved so much. “Then when the first snow falls, we shall celebrate. It does not have to be perfect.”

She raised her eyebrows, rolling in his embrace so that they lay belly to belly. “Oh? And when were you born?”

“At the blooming of the almond trees, I was told.” He frowned. “Though you may not understand when that is since there are no almond trees here.”

“No,” she agreed. “But we do have apple trees just outside there. Perhaps we can celebrate your birthday with their blooming.”

He smiled, drawing her closer in a hug. “It is unnecessary, but it would please me simply to know that a year has passed with you.”

She grinned. “That is very sweet, but we do birthdays in this family, so you will be getting a gift at the very least. Now, speaking of which, where is my present?” she asked, sitting up eagerly.

Asterion chuckled and reached into a nearby basket in which he kept the leathers he was sewing, removing a bundle wrapped thickly in cloth from it. He pressed it into her hands with an indulgent smile and Vicky quickly sat up in his lap to unwrap it.

It didn’t take much to get the layers of cloth from around it but when she did, she gasped down at the soft pair of pants she unfolded. She ran her fingers over them. They were wool but obviously woven in a way to not be uncomfortable, thick, and itchy.

She looked up at Asterion in surprise. “Where did you get these? The towns rarely trade clothing goods to outsiders unless you are fortunate enough to come across them at a time of surplus.”

“That first town when we restocked,” he replied blithely. “They were being impolite about your clothing, so I cornered a male of great standing there and had him give me those, and these.” He withdrew another bundle and handed it to her with a smirk.

Inside, Vicky found another half dozen pairs. Her eyebrows raised at her mate. “You didn’t happen to threaten anyone with bodily harm to get these did you?”

He snorted. “I told him that I would rip his arm off and beat him with it if he did not wish to provide you with suitable attire after he and the others mocked you.”

Flushing with pleasure, Vicky bit her lip trying not to laugh at the mental image of the town head practically pissing himself as Asterion loomed over him.

“They are the best present I’ve had in a very long time,” she admitted. “And the story to go along with them makes it even better, though I wish I could have seen it in person,” she chortled. “But let’s not make a habit of acquiring goods through threatening violence when a firmly enforced trade works better for everyone involved.”

He grunted, unconvinced, and gathered her back into his arms. “As you wish. I am yours, my mate.”

“And I am yours,” she repeated back, pressing a kiss to the side of his warm muzzle. “For the rest of our time in this world.”

It turned out to be more years than either of them had anticipated after having lived within the magic of the labyrinth.

Within a year, they had their first offspring, and another followed three years later. More babies came as years continued to pass and the cabin had to be added onto. Asterion proved to be a talented beekeeper early on and because of that their trade of honey and candles, along with harvested and preserved apples, provided well for their growing family. People were nervous at first trading with him, but he mastered English quickly and spoke in such a gentle tone that it gradually won over those with whom they traded.

One decade stretched into another. And then a century passed, followed by a second as they watched the world change around them, growing and changing in new ways that Vicky would never have imagined. They died together on the same day at the very same hour, wrapped in each other's arms after three hundred and twenty years of marriage, and were thus honored by their clan of Minotaurs one-hundred strong, many with their own human mates and calves of their own, and a third generation born among the older offspring.

As the years continued on, they were remembered as the progenitors of the Minotaur clans, honored and beloved by all of their descendants.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for joining me on Vicky and Asterion's adventure within—and escape from—the labyrinth. For those who read the original novella in the Monsters in Love: Lost in the Labyrinth anthology, I hope that this expanded novel gave you more adventure and more to love with our couple. As someone who grew up with the Greek myths, I truly loved writing Asterion's story a twist and happy ever after for the tragic monster.

I also want to thank you for bearing with me and being patient while waiting for Raskyu'l's story Dangerous Monster (the name of which inspired this series). It is still coming but it just taking a little more time than I anticipated, but I expect him to have one hell of an adventure to come!

This year has been one of long novels and so time has gotten away from me a bit for which I apologize, but I have a lot of fun things planned and coming for the second half of the year and the first half of next year, so hang in there!!

In the meantime, for those who enjoyed Night Born and the Demonic Realms, a novella in that world will be appearing in the Monsters in Love: Lost in the Dark anthology. Can a ruined thanatos find redemption and a second chance at love? Preorder your copy and find out!

SJ Sanders

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Sanders is an author of fantasy, paranormal and sci-fi romance living in central Florida. She has a BA degree in History with a minor in Lit and enjoys reading romance, mythology, ancient history and religions, as well as sculpting and painting in her down time. As a writer, her interest in how cultures diversify and what they would look like on extraterrestrial and otherworldly platforms to the humans interacting with them and finding love fascinates her and inspires much of her work. She loves to challenge reader to dare to fall in love with unusual heroes at every opportunity.

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