**Mortal**

by **bluelances**

**Summary**

Talking to the cute someone on the bus takes guts, but it takes even more to discover humans aren't the only ones in the world. A separate realm of beings you'd never expect to encounter—terrifying if you haven't learnt the ropes.

But that should be easy enough, right?

**Notes**

before i start, apologies if i switch to second person bc i’m not used to writing in first. i've proofread it, but i don't trust myself so this is just a heads up. inspired by a prompt from @writing-prompts-s on literally like every social media platform. it states: "you build enough courage to talk to that cute someone you see everyday on the bus. their face turns dark as they respond ‘you shouldn’t be able to see me.’" enjoy this hunk of garbage i wrote. i have subsequent parts if you'd like, comment if you want more. and enjoy btw, bc i’m pretty proud of this piece hehe
Chapter One

I sat quietly on the bus, the soft chatter of businessmen and the low hum of its engine reminded me of my poor memory—how’d I forget my earphones? I sigh for the umpteenth time, forcing myself to zone out instead of listening to the businessmen rattle on and on about statistics and stocks, turning my gaze upon the attractive individual who had caught my eye since day one.

It was a nudge in my ribs: how he’d appeared to be quiet, enigmatic. There wasn’t a time where he didn’t have earphones on, merely covering his ears as the beanie sat snugly on his head. He had taken it off a few minutes later though, seeing that the air conditioning system had gone to shit and beads of sweat were forming on his head. The chilly air outside is a contrast to the humidity of the bus. The boy had ebony hair, some curled at the end—which stuck out stubbornly—only to stop at a hair tie. It was a cute ponytail, but he looked like someone who would deck someone in the face for calling it that. The boy always went with burgundy sneakers and skinny jeans, showing off what he had to offer—even as a male.

Eyeing him from the seats across him, I inwardly groaned at the days that I let pass by, clenching and unclenching my fists; if I didn’t talk to him now, then it would seem like the whole bus ride would be unpleasant.

Why? Because he’d always get down at the most unpredictable timings. I would direct my attention to something else, like turning around to look at the cloudy sky that would inevitably deliver bellowing thunder and fierce downpour; but once my head whipped back to his favourite window seat, he would be long gone. The air lingered—like there wasn’t anyone there initially. The small scribbles drawn by a finger on the frosted windows were gone, considering the brief amount of time he’d stayed on the bus.

If I hadn’t advanced sooner, the number of days left available to talk to him diminished slowly, gradually. The fire burning in my chest posed little to no help, only fuelling my urge to walk up to him. My eyes were trained on him with my every step, afraid he might disappear and slip through my fingers—even though he wasn’t mine.

Sitting down with head held high, I feigned indifference and kept any form of expression hidden as I saw the other flinch beside me. My mouth opened slightly, the soft introduction rolling off my tongue but not before the eyebrows of the boy furrowed together, displaying raw confusion across his pale skin.

His words don’t register within me, travelling around me in a hypnotising spell and mashing together to form a crushed ball, and then dissolving in the pool of my thoughts.

He mutters it again, words escaping breathlessly: “You shouldn’t be able to see me.” The boy says it with sheer disbelief that I take his word for a second, lips curling up into a smile at my gullibility at his stupid statement. My smile fell, however, when I noticed the grim expression he wore, his eyes had softened from the fact that I thought it was a joke.

"What?"

“Okay, so you’re telling me that you’re a gargoyle? And…?”

“God, you’re dense.” He rolled his eyes, earphones now removed, but he still sat facing the
window. I huffed, frustrated that he was being so frank about the fact that immortals exist; my arms were crossed in exasperation, but within, if someone looked hard enough, they would see that I possessed well-hidden interest in wanting to hear the boy’s story again.

“My name is Keith, and yes I’m a gargoyle—it just so happened that I was turned into a human by some spell. I escaped out of spite, mainly because I hated the owner, and also because I didn’t want to be perched on a ledge for the rest of my life pledging loyalty to the head of the house, which, hear me out—I don’t.” He mumbled while still staring out, the same furrowed eyebrows making an appearance again, “the owner never came home after one night, leaving his two kids-”

“And you left them there?” I whispered, my head already turned to him in question.

“Let me finish, Jesus. I knew of them even when I was given life in the gargoyle but wasn’t sure who did it; possibly by the developer of the house himself. The wife married into the Bathory family and had the two kids I mentioned, but died before I became human. The husband, or owner, was-”

“Immortal?”

“Yeah, you could put it that way, since you’ve grasped the concept of existing immortals. He was a vampire and lived longer than his wife did; he brought home another woman after a while—I was pissed. She’d had given everything to him together with two beautiful children, but she gets repaid like this after she dies? So I left. I couldn’t stand to be something that guards evil when it’s obvious the evil’s within the house.” The boy spat, delivering the last sentence with enough scorn to make me wince.

“So, in summary: you’re a sentient gargoyle, escaped from your master’s house. What’s next? Are you planning on vengeance?” I asked him, curious to learn of his next step.

He repeated the name with grudging acceptance, “Sentient gargoyle- okay yeah whatever you want to call me—just don’t call me that when you’re addressing me. Talk about me all you want, but call me by my name. I haven’t figured out the progress of what I’d do now, I didn’t think things through when I fled. I was stuck on this bus for a few, but I don’t think I can house here forever.”

I weighed the possibilities of my apartment, racking my brain for any disadvantages this man could bring - none, I suppose? He looks like one who throws his clothes anywhere and probably didn’t get the wonders of laundry. Dammit - I was hoping he’d be a potential assistant.

“How’d you get clothes anyway? I half-expected Victorian clothes.”

“I bought some?” Keith asked rhetorically with an eyebrow quirked up playfully, with a small tug on his lips as he looked at me.

“Right- I forgot.” I murmured, still lost in thought about the invitation to my apartment. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad—an immortal gargoyle as a roommate.

“How long will the spell last? Do you know?”

Keith shook his head, with earphones clutched in his hand.

“So, am I like, speaking to thin air now?”

He nodded, then, driving me to turn back to the clutter of passengers around the front. I was greeted with countless pairs of eyes staring back at my figure, some afraid, some confused. I gulped, my head whipping back to the gargoyle in question, stopping whatever I had to say with a
pale hand.

My head tilted in question, peeking around the hand to face Keith.

“Touch the hand.”

“What the fu— why?” I blurt out, once again gaining the attention of the other passengers.

“Do you want them looking at you funny? Hurry.”

I sighed, assuming that he’d make the embarrassment… less embarrassing. I let my hand wrap gently around his, feeling a rush of energy flow through me after immediate contact of skin upon skin; I had to close my eyes. It was like being pushed back against a wall, somehow, struggling to catch my breath but also floating high up in the atmosphere. Calamity amongst serenity; or the other way around—I wasn’t sure.

With eyes opened, I turned back to view the passengers, seeing if there was anyone still puzzledly staring at me. I was instead greeted with an abundance of skeletons, swaying with the bus’ movements—except they were… alive?

I jerked back in shock, hand shivering as I let go of the boy’s and took in the sight of the commuters. They conversed like regular people, some carrying their briefcase, while others engaged in a game on their phone. Keith noticed my confusion at the out-of-the-ordinary sight, unfazed as he explained. It made sense as he went ahead to talk.

“Those are the living people in this alternate realm. We take on countless different types of beings: centaurs, dwarfs, faes, deities, you name it. I’m not sure who rules the realm, but there are dangers of bringing a living be—”

“And you just brought me here?!” I whispered, uptight and rigid, making Keith sit up with widened eyes.

“Sh!” He shushed, placing the hand I previously held over my mouth in panic. “There’s a reason I chose to whisper instead of notifying any existing immortals on the bus.”

I rolled my eyes, settling back down reluctantly as I observed a translucent figure bid goodbye to the realm’s driver, descending down the bus’s steps. Were they a spirit? Matching my gaze, Keith followed the figure with scrutiny and confusion, but mostly the former.

I opened and closed my mouth, a question dying on my lips as another popped into my brain.

“What was that earlier?”

“What was what?” His voice was still kept low, only breaking his gaze when the bus’s doors closed. Keith turned back to me, awaiting my response.

“Whatever was that when I grasped your hand—it felt surreal.” I murmured, eyes fixated on the skin on my hand, unaffected and free of blemishes; wouldn’t that confirm what I felt was something of a spiritual level?

“I knew I could bring humans into the realm quite a while ago, but I never knew how I did it.”

“You mean to say that it’s something done out of purpose? It isn’t like touch-your-skin-and-get-cursed or anything of those sorts?”
“No, I don’t think so-”

“Doesn’t that mean you have magic in your body then? You could turn yourself back into a gargoyle—if you want, considering you don’t know how long the curse lasts.” I rambled on with unsupported conclusions, the possibility of being returned my old life slipping from my mind in between thoughts.

“I- I haven’t thought of it to that far of a distance, to be honest. I thought the life here was pretty decent to live out immortality than to be stuck on a rooftop as a sentient piece of rock.” Keith said, turning back to the front.

“Well, would you want to?” I inquired softly.

“I haven’t found anything worth to be staying human for,” he whispered in response, continually shaking his head as the bus passed block after block. “I haven’t found my place in this realm either. I’m stuck in a rut; I just hope to Hades that I’ll find a purpose soon.”

“You’ll find it soon enough—you ought to. But as much as you’d want vengeance, I don’t think it’s wise for you to march up and kick that husband in the balls, he’ll have his terribly large family hunt you the hell down!”

Keith shrugged. Oh stars, he’s going to do just that, isn’t he?

“Keith- no- don’t do it!” I whispered, annoyed, following the boy down as he muttered curses to himself in a blur of fury. I caught his wrist before he could advance any further, the strings of my sweater pulled to its limit in an attempt to hide my very human face.

Scanning the surroundings, all I saw were countless immortals, carrying on with life like average citizens. It was too late to go back now—Keith probably doesn’t even know how to reverse what he did! I sighed in defeat and gave in, taking a breath before announcing my next words and making sure that I’d keep to it.

“I’ll help you find him. I’m not sure how—but I’ll help you. Just- don’t barge into their house without even a little bit of protection, you might get hurt.”

The hint of a smile on Keith’s face was enough to keep me going in this unfamiliar reality, the warmth of his wrist in mine made my thoughts spiral more chaotically. Glancing up I was met with the same determined face from earlier, any hint of playfulness vanished from his face.

“Hook your arm around mine, and don’t make eye contact with others. Stay hidden in your sweater.”

Hell, I didn’t need to be told twice. Securing an arm around Keith’s, we set out down the pavement, unsure of our next destination.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Among rows of shops, Keith encounters someone he'd rather not engage in small talk with.

Chapter Notes

sorry this is a little late, this is a little shorter than the first. i'll be posting chap three soon!

The footsteps of our synched steps are the only thing keeping me from freaking out, passing rows and rows of shops that I’ve never seen in this part of town. There are cafés, souvenir shops, eateries, exterior painted bright, vibrant colours to please an architect’s eyes. The colours are burning into mine, though. I wasn’t used to the energy these shops gave off, let alone in an alternate realm. Everywhere was creeping with people, some walking their mythical creature of a pet and others messing with the skeletal bodies of the living.

Tapping a finger against Keith’s arm impatiently, I asked, voice barely above a whisper to avoid attention. “Where are you taking me? I hardly know this place; if I lost you I wouldn’t know where to go-”

Keith placed a hand on my mouth for the second time that day, pulling me into an alley where the place stank like a monkey’s ass. At least his hand was shielding me from half the smell, I would probably drop dead if I breathed everything in.

I stayed quiet in the seemingly eerie alley we hid in, not sure from what or who at the moment; but in a realm of immortals, anything felt possible. My eyes remained trained on the alley on the opposite side of the road, mirroring ours—dumpsters and all. We only stay in the shadows from a while, still clueless about what we might be hiding from until Keith speaks up from behind my head, the whisper hot on my ears and his hand limp on my mouth.

“Remember the spirit from earlier?” I nod at his question, mouth parted to ask him about the spirit when the relaxed hand clamps back down onto my face in haste—just as the same spirit walks past. As the figure walks… floats past, we let out a collective breath of relief but for different reasons. I was just glad that I wasn’t getting suffocated by a sentient gargoyle turned human in an alleyway—it would make the headlines, but it wasn’t going to be a pleasant one.

Keith was sweating despite the short duration of our little hiding game, bursting out the small space with a rushed but rigid nature in his step. He was tensed, with his jaw clenched and another breath held within him. I looked back over my shoulder to peek at the hovering clump of white, feeling that it knew I was looking even though its back was turned.

“Where- where are we going now? Who was that?”
“Nothing for you to worry about for now, (Y/N).” He muttered, the single sentence sending chills down my spine due to the sheer coldness in his words. “We’re going to find ourselves a wizard, I know you said you’d help me, but now that I think of it, it’s too dangerous for a mortal like you to stay here. We’re finding someone who can send you back to the mortal world, stay there and don’t return, please.”

My protest fell on deaf ears as we trekked through the streets, Keith remaining silent as I proposed to him the advantages of having an extra person on his quest—he wasn’t buying it. I knew from the look of trepidation on his face that he was scared something would happen to the both of us, or to him, or even to me. The glimmer of hope that he might be fussing over my safety despite having just met me made me smile—a small one, at the least.

I walk alongside Keith in hesitance, not sure if he, in his anger or annoyance, was going the correct way to wherever this wizard was. The string of shops ends abruptly, looking a lot like the length of the street I usually alighted at from the bus. I guess I was too preoccupied with daydreaming in my ride home to notice that I’ve passed the previous block countless times—a common occurrence for me that I’ve taken part in in the bus.

We strode past the apartment I called home for the time being, hands sweating despite the cold weather. For a few minutes, we went on to pass block after block, my familiarity with the street shrinking with each step. We stopped in front of an endless stretch of land that could go on for months, diminishing any hope that we’d find the wizard.

“Looks like he’s moved,” Keith said softly, a hint of sarcasm laced within his silk-like voice. I glanced between the gargoyle and the vast land, the bubbling mix of worry and anticipation inside of me increasing by the second. Was this realm that dangerous that a human like me couldn’t handle it? What could possibly occur for Keith to look so anxious earlier?

Despite this, the nervous excitement inside me failed to conceal itself, a small smile showing its way onto my face. I rolled my eyes, tugging on his arm to pull him away from looking like he could kill someone. I mean… if looks could kill…

“What are you smiling about?” Keith’s eyebrows were knitted together again, large amounts of tension surging around his body in random bursts. I just grin in response, ignoring the question entirely. We stroll back with silence, one-word answers exchanged between us; well, more of me rambling. Though all he had to offer were annoyed grunts and a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, I wasn’t complaining.

We reached the building of the apartment I housed in, ascending up the lift immediately and hoping that no weird creature would be resting in my bedsheets. Unlocking the wooden door, I found that it was the way I’d left it from this morning—clothes and coffee bottles and all. I sheepishly scurried around to attempt to clean up not even one-third of the mess, dumping most of the rubbish in the trash near my sink. The place was still crawling with junk, though, so my attempts were in vain.

“Make- Make yourself at home,” I blurt out, hands finding something to focus on as the boy trudged further into the apartment. Grabbing the coffee maker, I began to prepare some coffee. “Coffee?” I ask Keith who’s lounging on the couch, feet propped up on the table in front of him—at least that’s where I think he is.

He surprises me, nevertheless, making me jump as he comes up to me in the kitchen. It was cramped—too small of a space that it felt like his voice was lingering on my ear. Out of my peripheral vision, I see Keith opening his mouth to ask about the absence of a mug.

“I drink my coffee from a bottle,” I beam, handing him his coffee as I take the bottle I’d saved
from last night out of the fridge. Keith nodded with a tight-lipped smile, making his way back to the living room to rest for a bit while I took care of the untidy area.

I let him watch me work, feeling his eyes fixate on me as I travel from one end of the apartment to the other in haste. He doesn’t say anything in the time where I’m cleaning, sipping his coffee in the silence of the house.

I break the unbearable silence with two of my words, “what now?” It made the cogs in Keith’s mind turn and turn, thinking of something that could satisfy my question.

I see him shrug as I put away the magazines and books lying around and rearrange the television’s remote controls, something in me aching for my question to be answered by anyone.

“I could ask people about his whereabouts. He was pretty well-known here, I’m sure people would’ve got at least a piece of information about where he’s gone.”

My shoulders slump, halting the cleaning-up process as I looked up at him, “there is a myriad of immortals roaming the streets. How are you going to find someone who can give you directions?”

“It’s the only way out at this moment, given that I’m too tired to think of a good plan.” I sigh, our next actions brought to a stop again as we’re unsure of where the wizard might be. I try to speak up to propose something—anything—when the door interrupts me, making an authoritative and vivid sound on the worn-out wood of a door. It was like an answer to my question—an answer I wouldn’t want to find out now that there was someone unknown at the door. Keith brushed past me like a predator, silent and agile in hunting its prey. His head hovered over the doorknob with caution, also wary of who could be behind the door. Looking back at me for confirmation, I nodded slowly, eyes narrowed at figure’s shadow that was looming intimidatingly.

The orange glow of the fluorescent light in the corridor proved the scene to be eerier than it was and I absolutely disliked it.

The breath caught in my throat made me stand up straighter once Keith had opened the door, revealing our visitor’s expression of a nasty scowl filled with fury. My hands were clammy, slick with sweat as I swallowed my heart that managed to weave its way up my throat. I immediately felt a shiver, and it was most certainly not the cold weather.

If I’d knew what was going to happen, I would’ve picked the previous scene over this current one.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Things happen in a blur, all in a single night.

Chapter Notes

ughh i’m so sorry this is incredibly late, i apologise greatly. it was a hectic week. enjoy!

I let out a forced breath as the monster marched in with angry steps against the ground, causing me to back up against the kitchen counter. I notice Keith standing in the doorway in confusion and worry written over his face, before turning my gaze back to the person in front of me.

All I could focus on in that moment of panic was the classical music playing in the neighbouring apartment, the shrill sound of the bow against the violin’s strings brought out a grandiose melody I’d only hear in an auditorium, yet my ears were graced with this song in a place of residence. In an instant of terrifying contrast, I see a flash of black and a body in front of mine instantaneously, not really knowing where he’d appeared from.

“Back away,” Keith spat with venom, and I felt his body rumble having had both my hands on his back. To feel his back muscles move under my touch was one thing, but at this timing where I’d be flustered? Really, (Y/N)? The other just grunted in response, struggling to hold his ground to reach for me. He was getting frustrated with every second, especially with how Keith easily towered over the other.

“What do you want with her?” Keith spoke again. Tempted, I peeped out from behind his back, curious. The ugly glare was still on their face, eyes fixated on me and me alone. If I hadn’t been careful, curiosity was going to get me killed one day—and no one would be there to help me.

The creature wrestled with Keith for a bit, pushing against the gargoyle’s stronger arms with difficulty. The black-haired boy managed to shove the other further for fear of hurting me in the process, putting up a fair fight in the small kitchen.

“She- she-” They started, the creases and grooves of the skin of the monster making a more distinct appearance now that they were furious. I wasn’t sure what mythical creature they took on, because I’ve never seen or heard of anyone who looks like this in the storybooks. Keith’s hands were thrown to the side, the other obviously frustrated that he’d made a fool of himself by coming up here alone—with minimal skill and a lack of manpower.

They had a young voice, too youthful and bright to be a part of some group; a group that required a uniform. Drills, shouting and bloodshed that encompasses plenty of hardcore and tedious training—I felt they were too innocent, too pure, to go through the frightening reality of war. They were eyeing me from across the street from earlier, feline-like eyes following me as I stroll with an arm hooked around Keith’s. I noticed the badges and pins secured on the uniform, a daunting aura
surrounding them despite their young age.

Their eyes scream crimson, but that wouldn’t necessarily mean they would automatically be a vampire, right?

“She shouldn’t be here,” they said uncharacteristically quiet, the grappling coming to a halt as they explained the reason for the raid of the apartment. “A human shouldn’t be able to trespass onto the realm that this world holds. It is dangerous for her, we are only making sure the safety of our immortals—”

Keith cut him off straight away, a hand on my waist to push me back behind him again, “Safe? Wow, for you to march in without stating your business and potentially attacking my fiancé is definitely safe. Yep, hundred per-cent safe.” Keith murmured with sarcasm, body still shielding me from the potential enemy right in front of him. My head shot up to him, then, pure incredulity on my face.

What the hell was he thinking? Fiancé?! I was about to say something when the same hand from earlier mimicked a zipper; he was asking me to shut up.

“But she is not bound to you yet. We must take care of her if she is not your wife.” The officer stated with arms crossed and suspicion increasing by how we were acting.

“Give us a few more months, we aren’t ready as of now. As you can see, we are in a bleak situation at the moment.” With that, I choked on my own saliva, trying to keep a straight face with all the lies he’s feeding the officer.

“What’s the ring?”

“We, uh, we haven’t had the time to get rings, plus, she has sensitive skin.” With that, Keith gave him a strained smile, urging the creature to retreat back to wherever he appeared from. When his arm came to rest just above my hip, it felt undeniably natural. Like he was meant to do that—like it was intended for only him to be able to hold me like this.

With the palpitations occurring in my heart, it wasn’t hard to know that I was slowly falling for him.

That wasn’t good.

I began to zone out as Keith walked me to the door to bid goodbye to the officer, staring into space even after the door closed.

“What was that all about?” I whispered, tearing myself away from the secure, firm grip of his arm. Feeling something weigh down on my finger, I took a glimpse to find a beautiful gold ring wrapped around it, urging me to look up at Keith.

“I had to help you. I didn’t know how else to, so I said you were my soon-to-be wife. If we need this to keep up, we’ll need an effective disguise and actual rings.”

“So are we, um...” I trailed off, not sure of what I wanted to get across to him in my state of frenzied panic. Keith surprises me, again, by taking my petite hand in his larger one, the weight making me swallow a lump in my throat that I didn’t know was there.

“Will you, (Y/N),” With a simple pull of his hand, he brought me closer to his body; the warmth radiating off him was like a sun, though, if he was the sun, I think I’d be a thousand times of that, “do me the honour of becoming my fake wife?” Keith asked softly due to our close proximity, the
low voice slowly becoming like a song for me.

Does he always have this tenderness in his voice when he’s talking to other people? Or was it just for me?

The moment was perfect, somehow. If there wasn’t an abundance of problems circling us right now, I think I would’ve enjoyed it extensively. Even so, the worrywart inside me was buried deep, for now, relishing in the man in front of me and loving how the same song began from next door.

It gave me flashes of contrast, then, but now there’s none of that. No scary officer, no unsure feelings of what they might do if they caught hold of me. The sublime blend of the piano against the violin was terrifyingly marvellous, and I was starting to think that I was staring at his purplish-grey eyes for way too long.

I cut eye contact before he could comment on it, instead focusing on his clavicle.

“How’d you know my skin was sensitive?” I whispered, softly, noticing that I’ve avoided the question altogether. Keith rolled his eyes with a smile, ignoring mine as well.

“…And yes, I will fake marry you.” I answered after a while, responding to his smile and inquiry with a similar smile spread across my face.

“Woohoo! I’m getting married! Fuck all of you!” I exclaimed jokingly, downing more of my bottled coffee in the midst of adrenaline.

Keith’s laughter rang throughout the apartment, ascending in volume with every cup of coffee he had drunk. I giggled along with him, learning more about what he’d witnessed in the house of the Bathory’s that wasn’t an unhappy memory.

Heavy beats and a trumpet sounded, hinting at a broad music taste of my neighbour—or maybe he only liked classical and jazz. Either way, I wouldn’t complain about Louis Armstrong’s ethereal tunes.

I finish the coffee in my bottle, standing up to put it away and continue the clean-up that was previously interrupted by the officer. A sway of the hips was a natural for me, sauntering into the kitchen with a skip in my step. Even with my back turned, I could feel the same pair of eyes on me the whole time, innocently drinking his own coffee without a care in the world.

“What?” I said after a minute, scrubbing at a stubborn stain on the frying pan I used to make a scrambled egg for. My face scrunches up at an ache the stain was giving me, rejoicing in triumph once it washed away under the running water.

He startles me the third time today, coming up behind me with precise secrecy that I only heard the second distinct change of music from behind the thin walls. “Nothing.” He says softly, giving me a smile turned smirk before placing his cup in the sink. Filling it with tap water, I leave it to soak for a while, or maybe I was just lazy to clean another mug.

Before he can leave the kitchen, though, I take his arm to pull him closer, a peculiar sense of boldness overcoming me. Loosely, I wrap my arms around his neck, indulging in the familiar feeling that had returned to me. His hands drift to rest on my waist, following the slow sway of my hips to the song.

I look over at Keith, finding that his eyes are a little glazed over, caught in a spell I hadn’t meant to
cast. Like silk, both Ella Fitzgerald’s and Keith’s whisper of the lyrics travel to my ears like a lovely song, except one of them is actually in a song. The laugh that escapes my mouth is out of irony, and it seemed to snap him out of it.

The moment shattered like a wine glass, splitting into a million shards at the speed of light. As fast as he moved to protect me from the officer, he pulled away from my touch with similar haste, detangling the interlocked hands that rested just below his ponytail. My heart fell six feet deep, as my mind was trying to find something to say—anything, really—but my head was just as hazy as his eyes were earlier.

Keith pulled away reluctantly, feeling the hesitance emit from him. I opened and closed my mouth countless times, each time the shortness of breath preventing me from saying whatever I wanted to say—which was, fortunately, nothing.

*Did I hit too close to home?*

Keith let out a tense sigh and made his way to the living room, waving off with a hand to say that he was fine.

I felt just the opposite; it was unquestionable he was, too.
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Both trek cautiously on the others’ feelings, tiptoeing as light as a feather.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We didn't speak until hours later, where we've slept through aching bones and unpleasant headaches. The tension was unbearable.

I emerge from the bedroom, legs feeling uncomfortable due to sleeping in my jeans. My hair was unkempt, sticking out like leaves on a tree branch and my eyes seem to droop no matter how much I try to keep them open.

As a guest, I should've given Keith the bed and me, the sofa, but I couldn't bear to face him after what he'd done. He made me think a lot the previous night, successfully getting me to stare into space many times where I've lost count; I only got to ponder over one question the whole night: Did I cross a boundary?

Scratching an itchy spot on my head, I tried to blink away any hint of fatigue as I grabbed a new set of clothes and the towel left hanging by my window. I rushed through a quick rinse, feeling refreshed from the hot water that fell from the silver sprout of the shower head. Lathering up shampoo suds in my hair, I did the same to my body, washing it away sooner than I'd expected.

I'm reminded, also, of the gold ring slapped onto me yesterday, weighing down on my finger more it should. I play with it once all the soap is gone, running the index finger of my other hand along it with surprising tenderness. I don't feel like a recently proposed-to person, but nor do I feel like a regular girl sustaining a fake relationship with a gargoyle to protect my safety. I'm somehow caught in the middle, but I'm not sure what's the name for it.

I stepped out of the cubicle, discovering that the steam from the water had fogged up the mirror like it always has. I began to slip on the necessary clothing with ease now that I've taken an invigorating shower, dressing with a pair of shorts that made my legs cheer at being exposed. Securing the towel with my two hands, I start to towel dry my hair with a sense of vigour, squeezing out any excess water that may have been stuck in my locks; perhaps it was pressurising weight of having to talk to the one other person sleeping on the goddamn sofa that drove me to dry with so much action.

Soon, the sensation of my hair led me to stop, as it grew to feel weirdly unusual all of a sudden. Looking into the now steam-free mirror, I notice the lack of wetness in my hair; it was entirely dry.

Weird.

Finishing up with the shower and getting over the weird encounter with my head full of hair, I made my way to the kitchen to grab a new bottle of coffee from the fridge. Ice cold, just how I liked it. I drank the beverage in silence, the calm atmosphere of the morning making me forget the
lack of sleep I've gotten from all the overthinking.

Inevitably, I'd have to face him sooner or later, but I couldn't focus on a proper apology. How could I, when the only thing my mind could fixate on was his crestfallen expression?

I sighed for the umpteenth time that day, despite it only being the morning. Placing the bottle on the serving counter, I boiled water for Keith's drink which contained an actual coffee bag. I stir the coffee with a certain amount of dread, unprepared for whatever that could happen when I'd pass him the coffee mug. Stealing a slice of bread from the Breakfast Box, I munch on it quietly; I couldn't care less if it was expired.

I trudge into the living room with caution, already finding him awake with a hand covering his eyes. I set the coffee down carefully on the table in front of the sofa he slept on, scurrying to close the blinds on the windows from which light seeped through. I take a sit in front of the serving counter of the kitchen, perched on one of the high stools I purchased from IKEA. It was heartbreakingly expensive that I could only afford two.

"So..." I trailed off again, voice dying with the sun that subsided—there wasn't any point in pulling the blinds down. Keith sighed, removing the hand shielding his eyes now that the room had darkened a little. The boy said nothing as he moved forward to sip on the beverage, only turning to me after he'd composed himself.

Before he could open his mouth though, I cut in, afraid of whatever he was going to say. "I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to force you into something you don't lik-"

He'd shaken his head, fast, closing his eyes again and cradling his head in his hands in defeat. "You caught me." He said softly, voice cracking like the ground after a drought. By then, I was already striding across the room to sit beside him, a tender hand on his arm.

"But it wasn't because I didn't like it."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't had contact with anyone before. I retreated because I didn't know how to react. I guess, when you did that, with your arms around my neck, I panicked—and I'd remembered how disloyal the husband was. I didn't want you to get close to me. It was either because I was afraid you'd leave me or the other way round, but my head hurts too much to think right now."

I let out a sigh of empathy, understanding immediately. It was a familiar feeling for me, having had only a couple of friends at the university I attended before this big hoo-ha happened. "I get it, though if I were to get out of this alive, I think it would be healthy if I let more people in. You don't have to follow my advice, but you could start with me."

I let Keith decide if he wanted to answer me, staying quiet as I got up from the comfy sofa and strolled to my bedroom to find some clothes my previous butch of a girlfriend had left behind. Getting a new towel from the drawers I brought both the former and the latter back to the living room, placing them gently beside him and held out my hand dramatically like I was a bellboy welcoming him into a hotel.

"Bathroom's right down there. Have a shower and then we'll talk after."

He still was mute as he gathered the things, following the directions I gave him. I watched him go,
gradually laying down at the space he had occupied the night before. All I heard was the click of
the bathroom door locking before I drifted into a light sleep that led me to float just above cloud
nine. I was, now, at least; I think I handled that pretty well.

I was awoken to the similar sound of the door unlocking, looking ahead with droopy, sleepy eyes to
see that Keith had emerged from the bathroom, his hair also washed in haste due to the short time
he'd spent inside. From here I could smell the shampoo I had used, and the lovely fragrance of the
body wash I didn't know I owned.

Coming out with wet hair was one thing, but topless? That was something Keith wouldn't let me
live that down. Without warning from my conscience, I smiled teasingly with a tilt of my head,
although I was the one turning hopelessly crimson.

"What?"

"Nothing, just admiring the view...of my apartment."

It made Keith chuckle, hands still entangled in his hair to dry out the water in it. Once he felt
satisfied, he ruffled through his ebony locks with a hand to fluff it up. The towel dropped soon
after, letting it hang around his neck like an Olympic swimmer. The sun decided to flit through the
apartment at the right time, travelling through the blinds and projecting its light across the walls—
and across Keith.

It lighted a spark in me, feeling the same skips happen to my heart at the gorgeous non-human
standing in front of me. The boy caught on to my fluster, testing the waters with a question of his
own: "Only the apartment?" I shrugged from my place on the couch, turning my head to stare at
the blank television showing my exact reflection, "Yeah, only the apartment. Dream on."

I saw him from the corner of my eye, rolling his eyes and putting on the shirt I'd given him earlier.
I held a hand out in feigned despair as he popped the cap of my bottled coffee, witnessing him gulp
down a large amount of the drink. He made a face once he'd finished his sip of the coffee, closing
the cap back on.

"You drink that?" I nod in response, unimpressed at the negative reaction. "You do know there's a
ton of glucose in here, right?"

"Why are you using such big words? Yes, I know it has a lot of sugar in it."

Keith rolls his eyes again but this time with a hint of a smile, added in with a scoff that tells me he
thinks I'm unbelievable; I think I'm believable enough.

Once he was dressed, he plopped down beside me on the couch to decide what our next step was.
Discussing the wizard ended up with unexpected turns that had us stuck at dead-ends, and had to
change our plans a couple of times. I was getting dizzy by the fourth hour, drifting on and off the
line of consciousness as we went over our plans yet again.

By the sixth hour, my head had rested on the elbow that was propped on Keith's shoulder, who
noticed my lacking response of only grunts and hums whenever he'd asked a question. Slowly, he
sat back cautiously as to avoid a jerk that could make me lie on something more sturdy, and
slowly, he started talking.

Keith started with the same benign voice he'd use on me, speaking softly about the time he just had
run from the house and how he felt just like I did: scared, clueless, lack of spur. He didn't know
where to go in that moment of rage and found the bus I'd been taking; he drops off and busies
himself with the stores around if he wants, but by night he's back on the bus, mostly sleeping since
no one could see him.

Keith also talked about the visitors that came to the house before: some were related by blood,
while others came to negotiate on trades or business. Despite his claimed hatred towards the owner
slash husband, I can see that he doesn't despise him entirely, given how he'd had remorse hidden
within a sullen expression.

The constant whisper of the things he'd gone through in life in this realm falls from Keith's lips; it
barely keeps me awake, but it would seem rude to fall asleep in the middle of it especially since
Keith isn't someone who's open about their feelings. He might take it as a form of discouragement,
and with what happened last night, I wouldn't want to bet on it. The whispers die on his lips once
he'd notice my breathing patterns turning into one of peace, assuming I had succumbed to the
temptress named Slumber.

The distant murmur of the ceiling fan is kept at a low speed, whirring with whoosh-like sounds
each time it makes a cycle. All I can sense is the stiffness in Keith's arm, perhaps done so
deliberately so it would make my nap worthwhile. I rest there with a sense of calmness I haven't
felt in a while, feeling like everything was in place at the moment and that nothing could come
between us, albeit we weren't together.

Despite all the perfect conditions to fall into a splendid slumber, the loud beating of my heart kept
me wide, wide awake. Only the echo of my heart thundered inside my head, never missing a beat
of the confession-like sentence escaping from Keith:

"I adore you—it's like you make me feel weirdly protective."

Chapter End Notes

slow burn is finally happening, huh?
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Keith acts on his feelings, gradually.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With me now asleep, Keith helped himself to the television, aimlessly switching through the channels with the remote control he found wedged between the sofa cushions. Notwithstanding the confession, exhaustion took over me soon enough, the wild beating of my heart turning into something more peaceful now that I had someone to lean on.

At some point, I could hear the blurry chatter of whatever was on the TV; after all, my pillow wasn't something inanimate, I still could slip in and out of sleep whenever I felt uncomfortable. I shifted a little to settle down into a more comfortable position, only to perk up at the single sentence dramatically whispered by an advertiser.

Keith's fatigue was evident in the way he missed the boisterous "Looking for a Fortune Teller?" of a statement broadcasted to all the ends of this realm. I snatched the remote control out of his hand, frantically switching back to the channel he had passed earlier.

I managed to seize the channel just before the opportunity had flown away, catching phone contacts and catchphrases similar to those of the human realm. I shriek, excited of a new lead that may bring us a step closer after all the discussing we'd done.

The sharp sound I made had woken Keith up, still dazed from the short slumber. From there, my words didn't make much sense, speaking with a flurry of words swirling like leaves in the fall. In a blur of my euphoria, my arms descend around Keith's middle, tackling him into the squeezy couch I also got from IKEA.

I wasn't sure what it was, but like the other times, I was struck with immense confusion at my sudden boldness. Maybe it was the cute bed hair or the lazy smile he had on his face despite my ramblings—perhaps it was the twinkle in his eyes or his sheer attractiveness? Before I could pull back, I felt his arms wrap around me, tightly, like I wasn't something meant to be let go of.

"Taking my advice, I see." I tease quietly into the crook of his neck; surely he could he feel the satisfied smirk on his skin.

"Shut up." No malice laced in his voice, no exasperation nor was there any sadness. I let him hold me for a while longer, standing proud and tall at the helm of my ship, knowing that I, too, was growing along with him: I was letting someone in.

Keith retreated with a sense of hesitance, masking it skillfully with a familiar smirk of his. I was still laying atop him, feeling the calloused grasp of his hand on my cheek; it was bliss. One stare into those amethyst eyes of his was enough to send me spiralling down a dark hole—I knew I was smitten then, but now it was crystal clear to the naked eye more than ever.
I broke contact hastily, escaping from the warmth of the other's hand. My eyes diverted to the table where I had written down the numbers from the television; it was the only hint of where we could find the wizard.

"Sorry," I mumbled quietly, not sure if I wanted Keith to hear it or not. He shook his head casually like he didn't just enjoy that—no, he wouldn't have. I picked up the phone from the table and started dialling the number, keeping my eyes trained forward in an attempt to will away Keith's hard stare; he would bore holes into the sides of my head at the rate he's going.

A gruff voice at the end of the line answered my call, speaking with earned authority and a rasp I never quite hear from other men. He spoke rapidly with speed faster than a cheetah; it was as if he already received too many calls, putting them on hold before he proceeded to regard his next customer.

"Wait wait, slow down."

"I will, but you gotta tell me what you want."

"Whatever was in the advertisement, fortune teller? Wizard? Yeah, whoever he is—he's reliable, right?"

"You bet your money!"

"I'm broke, so, no; could you just tell me where to find him?"

" Doesn't work that way sweetie-" 

I jerk as the incessant beeping cut me off, bringing down the phone that was starting to feel clammy in my hands. Quiet moments ticked by as I waited for the same voice to return onto the line, only to be met with a silence that ironically sounded deafening. In frustration, I shot up from the sofa, phone nearly cracking in my hands by how tightly I was grasping onto it.

The phone stared at me with anticipation and apprehension, somehow making faces and mocking me about how badly it had just gone. I nearly growl, typing in the numbers with much urgency and frustration I memorised from a while ago. I blurt out the one thing that could only get them to drop everything and listen to me.

"I'm a human."

From my peripheral vision, I saw Keith fumble to stand up, preparing to come over with the least bit of that "what are you doing?" look in his eyes. I hated it. Holding a hand out, I backed away into the kitchen with cautious, slow steps, the serving counter being the only thing separating me from him. Once I know I had their attention, my tongue rolled its words off faster than my brain could ever comprehend. It was a never-ending monologue that spilt from my lips, a sob story—it was the same valiance that consumed me all these past days.

"I'm a human."

My smile grew with every sentence exchanged with the other party, trying my hardest to conceal my excitement in between in my words. I hung up the phone with haste, the grin on my face reaching its apex at both my ears. Keith's smile made its appearance, too, but it was more of a gentle one; it looked a little rueful, now that I've noticed.
I brushed it off with a shrug of my shoulders, immediately getting some pen and paper for the address they'd given me. I wrote it down fast with handwriting only I could understand, a bunch of cancellations and scribbles on the mistakes I was making. Drawing a face on the piece of paper, I muttered out a little joke I thought of.

"Ending this on a happy note."

Keith's small laugh caught my attention; seeing that same gentle upturn of his lips made me do the same, beckoning him over to the kitchen. He walked with steps that matched mine earlier, careful and gradual, like he was entering another world that was held in the kitchen.

"I did okay, huh?" I said, leaning against the counter in a relaxed stance, my eyes trying their best from getting lost in Keith's. "If you got the wizard's direct address, you did great. Though I wouldn't buy that tearjerker of a story." Keith joked, voice still raspy from the nap he had taken.

My jaw dropped open in protest in feigned shock, but a smile soon worked its way onto my face as I quickly searched blindly for my phone, the home one already forgotten since it's done its part. My eyes darted between Keith and the text displayed on my phone, speaking with a smug, posh voice: "How dareth thee fig mine own impressive acting skill?"

"Please don't talk like that, I've had enough of Shakespeare when I was still in the Bathory's."

"Why not? Shakespeare is- Oh, who am I kidding—all I know is R&J and Hamlet."

"That's what I thought."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" My hands were on my hips, a pause set by me for dramatic purposes.

"You practically live in the '50s! All your CDs and vinyl records are getting dirty from the amount of time you're keeping them."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Rude. You're rude."

"Not as rude as you with assuming I like Shakespeare because I'm from the 16th century! That's just low."

I rolled my eyes, knowing by the tease in his voice that he wasn't at all close to being serious. Turning away, I grab a snack from the fridge, popping open the packet and get straight to eating. I click my tongue as the silence grows between us, with only our faces speaking the words.

"Well?" Keith questions. My head dips lower, somehow proposing a challenge with just my eyes. The smile on my face morphs into one of amusement.

"Your comeback?"

I shake my head at his question, shrugging as I walked past him still eating my packeted snack. I look over my shoulder to lift an eyebrow before advancing toward the living room, the same channel playing softly ever since that advertisement went on air.

"I'm still waiting."
As he walks over, I finish putting the last gummy bear into my mouth, laying back onto the sofa. I face the front, defeated. "I'm not saying anything because I don't have a comeback."

Keith is well delighted as the same grin appears, pleased at having won this round of lighthearted bicker. I hold out a finger, eyes suddenly having taken its interest towards the television to avoid looking at him—my finger dances, shaking it at him to prevent any smart comment from rolling off his tongue. He smirks in victory nonetheless and eventually, it makes its way out, anyway.

"1-0. I await our next battle."

My finger was still held out, left arm suspended in the sharp silence. I grope blindly for the sofa's cushions, flinging it as soon as I'd grabbed hold of the fluffy object. Luckily, my aim proved to be helpful as it hit Keith in the torso, causing him to glance down as if I'd shot him.

"Didn't think the battle would commence so soon."

Hearing that only spurred me on, grabbing more cushions than I could ever fit in my arms in one swoop. I launch them, now with less accurate aim since all I could see was fabric; one of them had hit the vinyl turntable, setting the playful mood with one of Frank Sinatra's melodies. I ran out of pillows soon enough. Only patterned cloth covered my eyes—and then the eyes of Keith's came into full view, stunning me entirely. A surprised yelp was all it took for Keith to overthrow me, knocking the cushions over and subsequently, me, onto the couch.

"No-no, Keith stop!" In a flash, all I could feel were his fingers on my sides, giggles resonating throughout the small apartment. He wasn't laughing, but to see him smile, God, it was seeing heaven itself.

The tickles halted all at once.

"Oh no, oh God, I said that out loud, didn't I?"

Keith's response to my question was interrupted by the scratch of the vinyl record, with 'I've Got A Crush On You' starting to play; weirdly, it feels like the exact time in the bathroom from this morning. The air felt thin and somehow suffocating and enclosed around me, but now it felt less unnerving. I wouldn't have powers, now, wouldn't I?

I shake off the worrying thought with a shake of my head, brought back to the matter at hand by a soft mumble of my name. Realising my eyes were fixed on him the whole time, I feel heat consume my cheeks in a flash, flustered at everything that had to go wrong tonight. Like other times, I'm stuck with a certain amount of stagger, resembling a stupid fish when I'd open and close my mouth.

The flurry of thoughts in my mind only multiplied as I witnessed Keith lower down ever so slightly, with a stiffness that he was trying to resist. I was met immediately with his soft lips on mine, the last thing, hopefully, to go amiss tonight.

To a pleasant surprise among the ceaseless beating of my heart, I felt the move of his lips on mine for just a second; that tempted me to return the accidental kiss. He pulled away soon after, however, leaving me to disguise disappointment as indifference. The small wave of water hovering behind him proved a terrific icebreaker for our awkwardness-

Until I realise that, of course, a possibly sentient solid wave of water was staring back at me, just as clueless as I was.
"Who- Whatever you are," my eyes drift from Keith to the water, heart speeding up at the fact that it is indeed something I'm looking at with my own two eyes, "just don't hurt us."

"Hurt?" Its voice resonated throughout the apartment as the wave of water transformed into a body with humanoid, scale-covered hands resting on their hips. With fingers webbed together, they looked like they came straight out of a fairytale. Their eyebrows were drawn, looking at me with confusion.

The panicked shout I let out would really do a number on my neighbours—because I'm most definitely freaking the fuck out.

Chapter End Notes

they kiss! i'm so so sorry this chapter took more than 3 months to upload. i've been busy and reluctant to continue because of my confusion on how to end my story. i'll leave it out of the picture for now, however, because writing for this story is really fun. i hope you all will forgive me :(
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

The sea goddess isn't what she seems.

Chapter Notes

as apology, you guys get another chapter!! :)

Their head tilted, more in confusion rather than fear, eyes staring me down like I was the alien one in this group—which I was, realm-wise. I wouldn't go as far as to criticise appearance, but one would recognise them as the odd one out.

The person stretched out a hand, beckoning both of us to stand up. Human instinct would drive me to retreat immediately, but the hypnotic air those eyes gave off had me hooked. I placed my hand gently in theirs, feeling theirs close around mine with surprising tenderness. The way they reacted despite us being strangers made it unusual, especially since I expected a more hostile response.

They pulled me up with ease as if no strength was used to do it, smiling down at me with the mesmerising and striking blue in their eyes. They let me step back to catch a breath, the crimson in my cheeks from Keith's kiss never ending and only continued to increase; it was clear that the mystery person knew they looked good, no matter the number of scales or the fin-like ears they had.

They did the same to Keith, only for the other to brush the hospitality with a shove to the outstretched hand, muttering something along the lines of how he could get up himself. Keith dusted off his pants as he stood, stunned as he came face to face with the person. Just like that day, Keith moved faster than ever to shield me from the potential threat, blocking me off from the line of sight from the person.

"Do not fret, I come to you both not as a foe, but as a friend."

"Why do you speak like we're in the Victorian era?" My eyes furrow at the rude question, smacking Keith on the back where he responded with a soft "Ow!"

"I'm so sorry for my friend, he's not exactly- uh- he doesn't welcome people easily." I blurt out, quickly, peeking out from behind Keith's broad shoulders.

"From the looks of it, I don't think he's your friend." There's a smugness laced within the teasing voice, similar to Keith's, but done in an I-like-you kind of way. Unless they're using that tone of voice to make me realise that maybe Keith favours me as well? No.

My head whip back to Keith, his voice sharp and cold, lacking its previous softness and benignity all in one sentence. He barks it out like a demand with a heavy breath, impatient of having to wait.
"Stand down, soldier. My name is Sedna, the goddess of the sea, in Inuit religion, anyway. I came after your friend after hearing her distress from below, and it turns out she is a follower of the sea."

"What?" Was that the source of boldness I've felt for the last few days? The water I've been washing my hair with, or the cups I've been cleaning? The possibility seems thin and unlikely, but somehow it convinces me due to it being the only reason I could come up with.

"You did not mishear me." Sedna continues on, the long flowy dress that she wore following behind accordingly in line with her careful steps around the messy apartment. "You can control water."

"Don't you seem a little young to be a water goddess?" My hand descend on his back again, this time the smack landing a little harder than the first one. "Keith! Don't be rude."

"I'm just being the practical one asking the sensible questions."

"You run your mouth without initial thought, boy," Sedna's voice resonates throughout the apartment again, ringing in my ear like a fire alarm that never ceases. I see water crawl towards the goddess like a predator through every nook and cranny of the room, circling around Keith like group hunters ready to pounce on their prey. The water, acting like ropes, tighten around the gargoyle, squeezing and prying at Keith's skin like it was fragile clay.

It was a small storm contained within the room, a chilly breeze and water covering every inch of the room except for my legs. The liquid cornered my two feet in a snug little circle, keeping them dry. The goddess marches up to Keith as his skin does indeed crack, pieces barely holding onto each other as they struggle to stay knitted at the seams. I open my mouth as I reached out for him, only to be silenced with a similar binding across my mouth.

"Don't speak, follower."

I turn sour at that single sentence, frustrated that even I couldn't help Keith in the situation I brought upon us. My mind begs for my heart to obey her orders, but I try to remove the water over my mouth anyway. My head began to hurt with all the non-stop concentration, eyes soon drooping as if I've never slept for a century.

Keith's strained gasp snaps me out of temporary slumber, allowing me to focus again on the matter at hand. Parts of his skin had already fallen off, the despair and horror lingering in his eyes so intense I couldn't help but call out through the flurry of water. Like the parting of the Red Sea, I felt as powerful as Moses as the Bible stated, calling out to Sedna with a dry, cracked voice. It did feel like I'd slept for a hundred solid years, the water sucking out my body's moisture, perhaps.

The binds return to my arms and legs, this time, and the magic infused into keeping me immobile is stronger. Keith lets out a choked yelp as he reaches his absolute peak, glancing around like a lost child looking for any form of help; the resemblance was uncanny, and it scared me. I've only known the guy for a couple of days, but not once have I seen him this afraid of someone.

Her slender but crooked finger that slowly traces Keith's jaw reminds me of her confused act when she first appeared; I wrestle more violently against the binds at that thought. The satisfied and smug smirk spread across her face made me reach the apex of my anger, driving me to try to break through the water binds entirely as a few more pale pieces of skin drop to the ground. A cry
escapes from my lips as I see Keith's head fall in defeat—a sign that Sedna was waiting for.

"Good. You now know of my capabilities. I dare say you will not cross over the line whenever I am in your presence, yes?" There was the same teasing element in her voice, but something sinister lay in between the lines of her words, posing a challenge to either of us.

It was an answer Keith was reluctant to say out loud, worry washing over him like an overflowing bucket of water that he couldn't fulfil this promise. It would be easy for me to say yes because I'm almost positive that I would never live to see daylight if I provoked her concealed wrath.

But Keith? I'd predicted him to be someone who would never hesitate to protect anyone dear to him. The sullen look whenever he looked out the bus window proved there were many stories locked within his person; ambiguous in choices but absolute when it came to people he loved. I would assume it was safe to say that he loved me from the way he's protected me—no matter if it was as simple as a big-brotherly love—I would accept, but I would still find myself trying to convince the stubborn heart that beats for him at this moment.

Silence, along with the gushing of the body of water, appeared almost bellowing and booming; it mocked and into our throats, it shoved down the odds that were not in our favour.

"So?" Sedna's single word cut like a knife. The question sent chills instantaneously.

Anyone who passed the living room in curiosity, provided the door was open, would see the binds in which it held us hostage, they might forget it within a day or two. Anyone who bothered to help our situation, possibly, they'd drop it a week later. But to witness it with my own two eyes was something I never vowed to see again; I was the only one with this incident engrained in my brain—how Keith had grappled against flowing water, how his skin gradually deteriorated, how-

"Fine. I will not cross any lines, not as long as you're up in my face." Keith hissed the last words with the venom of a cobra with shortness of breath, mouth parted from the tightness of the goddess' magic.

"See that you do." With one last glance at Keith, she let both of us go with a wave of her hand as if dismissing disobedient students from her office. With the power she holds on us, it would seem she's the president, and we're mere citizens—we don't stand a chance.

"Keith!" I scramble over with numb limbs, imagining the severity of the damage done to his body. He groans as he sits up from his initial position—face first, holding a pale hand over the bruised areas on his body. Slowly, minute by minute, the cracks filled in with new cells that returned Keith's skin to its original state.

Sedna's voice tore through the moment. "Remember my words. Rest, I will bring you two to the wizard tomorrow. Do not take this as an act of reconciliation." With that, the body of water faded away with its creator, leaving us to our own silence and the sudden dryness. Keith had his head in his hands, with his eyes closed and face drawn into one of frustration and pain.

I place my hand on his bruised arm with caution, rubbing a thumb to soothe him of not all his problems, but at least a couple of them. I sigh out of fatigue as I stood up from my spot on the ground, walking up to the vinyl turntable to play a famous, but timeless Chopin Nocturne. The soft piano proved its comfort at the release of my tense shoulders—even Keith looked like he felt much more relaxed.
"C'mon, let's clean you up," I whisper softly, crouching just in front of the figure clutching his body full of injuries. I steady the shaky breaths coming out of my mouth and take his free hand in both of mine. Slowly, the gargoyle raises his head to meet me eye to eye, his face and features so beaten down and so tired.

Keith mirrors my sigh, knowing there was no back and forth with me as he lets me lead him to the neighbouring sofa. Finding the first aid kit was a little harder than I thought, considering the accumulating mess the living room suffered from (no matter how much I cleaned, either). A victorious smile took over my face as I spotted the familiar white cross against a red background, placing it on the floor beside me.

If the gargoyle wants to complain, he doesn't show his desire to, following my instructions intently as he settles down on the couch. Keith sits there snugly, and in front of me, where I can tend to the bruises the water binds brought about. I don't do much except apply anti-inflammatory ointment and massage it a little, allowing the blood clots to at least release its hold on the arteries. Seeing, also, a chiselled body at this hour and timing could not be more inappropriate, resulting in me swallowing a few lumps when tending to his bruised body.

Empathy soon takes over my desire, and soon, guilt.

"Sorry."

Keith looks at me as if I'm crazy, which I might be soon enough. "For what?"

"For not trying hard enough to break free. Even when I could control water, I should've-"

Keith holds up a finger like the time I did to him before our cushion fight. Same place, same arm—except this situation posed an entirely different context than the last. Its irony lingered at the back of my mind as Keith spoke.

"You've just discovered you possess powers of telekinesis and hydrokinesis. Telekinesis with your record changing, and hydrokinesis with... you-know-who."

I raise an eyebrow in question, unsure of where he was going with his point.

Keith sighs again. "The point is, don't apologise for things you can't control. It wasn't long since you've learnt of your abilities. I'm not being mean, but you're inexperienced and an amateur, you have much to learn; you couldn't have saved me even if you weren't bound."

Those last few words stung, but it was the truth; truth had to hurt at some point. My assumption of Keith being a big-brotherly love type of person stood proudly earlier, but now I'm convinced our relationship is reduced to one of a mentor-student's. I nod in agreement, and an awkward silence falls between us soon after.

"Goodnight, Keith." It was clear that there was disappointment in my expression, which I tried to mask as skillfully as I hoped I did. I closed the door a little harder than an average night, wishing the slam would show my discontent.

Exactly like the other night, everything mirrored the other—where I slept on my bed and he, on my sofa. The same question of our unspoken feelings lingered in the air, making our slumber a little colder than it initially was. The only difference was that Keith was freezing, the night's breezes showing him no mercy; I didn't offer him a blanket.
It only further fuelled the growing amount of regret—regret that I should've said something else.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

That same someone provokes the gargoyle, making the unbearable pain that he carries with him crystal clear.

Chapter Notes

you get a new chapter! and you get a new chapter! everybody gets a new chapter!

We set out the next morning with tired eyes and sore bodies, taking into account what Sedna had done to both of us the day before. Keith had suffered more than I did, but that didn't remove the emotional turmoil I'd gone through. It was undeniably the longest night I've been up and conscious for.

No words were exchanged between us in the morning, the only conversation was a combination of subtle nods and strained smiles during breakfast. It was way more awkward than a first date, making the both of us shift in our seat more than once. It was eating us alive from the inside.

Clutching my bag straps with tensed hands, I walked alongside Keith to the place where Sedna had wanted to meet us; it was a note drawn into the mirror in my bathroom in the morning, remaining foggy no matter how much time had passed. I inwardly groaned when I had come face to face with it in the chilly morning, washing it away immediately with both hands full of water.

With my terrible sour mood so early at dawn, the water that I was slowly learning to control refused to rain down on me. Instead, the water split right down the middle of the shower head, delaying the journey set for the day. I managed to get a decent wash-up despite its stubbornness, resorting to pleading with hushed profanities.

We trudge along the path, passing blocks and blocks of shops that I recognised on the recent bus ride. The hoodie I picked out started to feel sticky on my skin, prompting me to try to remove the hood resting on my now-heated head. A hand caught me before I could finish the removal, though, jerking a little when I'd felt the familiarity of the weight on my arm. I was starting to get used to it, but I wouldn't say it's a good thing.

"Don't." Keith's eyes held mine before he continued, "please."

I gulped down a lump at the softness, nodding even when he'd already turn around and walked on. At that moment, the heat of my woollen top didn't matter to me, for all I could focus on with my reddened cheeks. With breeze came a drizzle, and with the light downpour came a heavy one. At least, with the unpromising power of hydrokinesis, I managed to keep myself dry with my recovering mood.

I run up to Keith to hook my arm around his that was tucked into his pocket, taking on the
onslaught of rain with seeped-through-with-water clothes and a shivering body. I said nothing as the water around us halted, creating a circle big enough for us to fit in.

"Sorry for not sheltering you sooner; I couldn't get this thing to work out earlier—getting this whole power thing controlled is strangely frustrating."

"No, it's uh- it's... it's fine." Keith stumbled, giving me the least bit of hope I wasn't the only flustered one.

"Look, about the kiss back in the apartment-"

The same song that resonated through the apartment was put on repeat a second earlier, the music seeping from my earphones. In the next, however, all I felt were warm, calloused hands on my face and soft, soft lips on mine. I inhaled sharply, body tensing up with the tension of a thousand rubber bands. He moved against me almost effortlessly, primarily since he was so closed off when it came to physical contact.

I return one of my own with a tilt of my head, but not before Keith pulls away suddenly—as if realising what he'd done. He only sighed before he muttered out an apology, walking on without me in tow. I looked to the side, despite him not being beside me, hoping I could hide my terribly crimson cheeks.

Keith took long strides, possibly to avoid me, making me struggle to keep up with his fast pace on the white concrete as he rounded the corner of the place Sedna had requested to meet. It was a beautiful little bookstore that was linked with the neighbouring coffee shop, a short menu of the things they served as customers looked through the vast amounts of books. Most tables were already occupied as we made our way into the combined store, but Sedna was nowhere to be found after we both had done a quick scan of the space.

"Where is she?" I said quietly, leaning over into Keith's space so he could hear me. It was by a long shot that maybe Keith would know where she would be, considering he's better at this non-mortal thing—but if he didn't have a clue about where she could be, then it would be long before we'd find her.

Feeling him shrug urged a sigh out of me, walking to the back of the growing queue. "Might as well get something, I may like it."

Finding a table in the corner, Keith had gone to sit down, looking around the place in curiosity. My smile made an appearance—witnessing him gape at an unfamiliar place would always be funny to me... and cute, I guess.

I collected my thoughts, shaking my head in protest to my feelings before I embarrass myself further. "One cup of tea please," I halt at the next words, waiting to spill out as I glance back to Keith at the back; I hastily added a cup of coffee.

My eyes had turned itself back to Keith naturally, and while he seemed to be my recent focus, his wasn't consumed by the interior decor no longer. Following his gaze, I settled on the same spirit lurking in the bus and along the streets, before my eyes flitted back to the dark-haired boy seething and trembling with rage. Recalling on the times we've encountered the spirit, I realised I've only seen him brush off his fury with a shake of his head, a word not muttered between us.

His anger bled from him freely now that I wasn't there, and if I didn't do anything, he'd act in the
absence of a levelled head. Abandoning the barista who had called out to me, I squeezed through chairs and tried to avoid handbags lying on the floor, only to feel him slip through my fingers. With a simple push of his chair, Keith's feet carried him across the coffee shop and straight to the spirit.

Was he holding back because of me?

Picking up the leaflet Keith collected from an employee earlier, I rushed over while making sure my head was tucked neatly under the suffocating hoodie. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I walked over to Keith with hurried steps and a reprimand on the edge of my lips. Sensing my presence, he held an arm out to stop me from advancing forward, staring down the spirit with a face so, so grim.

"What do you want, Kogane?" The spirit spat back, its venom mirroring Keith's expression.

"You know what I want, leave the kids alone; maybe then I'll stop being so uptight around you." With this, a hand had made its way onto Keith's forearm in an attempt to calm him down.

"Keith, oh, Keith, do you even know what you speak of? They're my step-kids, how should I-"

"You aren't married, are you? They're not your step-kids by law and not your children to corrupt by blood."

"Seems like your days away from the Bathory house have made your senses falter. Wouldn't you be able to sense your Master? I'm telling you that he married me, and I get the last word."

The spirit wandered off, but not before giving me a calculated look with dull eyes that screamed bloody murder. Her white, pristine dress trailed off behind her lazily, waltzing out the double doors together with its owner.

Before Keith could pursue her, the same hand that rested on him anchored him to his senses, the rage and frustration fading from his eyes bit by bit.

"Remember, don't barge in without protection."

Hearing my voice brought Keith down entirely from his tower of blurred fury, the same amethyst eyes that shone brightly now looked tired and lacked his usual playfulness.

"I'm sorry." I sighed quietly, letting a rueful smile take over my face as I ran my thumb over his arm. I continue to lead him out the store, the quest for the wizard put on hold as I bring us out into the still pouring rain.

"It's okay, breath with me."

Slowly, I try to get hold of my mind that was still racing with never-ending questions about the spirit, focusing on a circle that could shield us from the rain. It began small, before opening up to allow our clothes from soaking right through.

By now, the streets were abandoned, the downpour driving immortals home as it would do to living beings. The rain and our collective breath-ins and breathe-outs were the only noise I could make out, the chatter in the coffee shop dying out.

I continued the breaths, not realising that Keith had stopped and instead chose to look at me. Before I could take another breath in, I hear him mutter a barely audible, "hold me."
"What?"

He didn't answer, after a minute's wait, and instead decided to walk away from my faltering grasp, clearly flustered with whatever he'd just asked.

"Keith- wait!" With my voice, he only increased his pace in the freezing rain.

Until I enveloped my arms around him, squeezing as tightly as I could as if I'd caught a rare species. The cold water soaked with his shirt provided my crimson face with some comfort, my mouth immediately moving against my will.

"Scream. Scream all you want."

And so he did, with my words. He let a cry of raw anger escape, mirroring the thrashing of trees and the howling wind. It was a screech so piercing it set my heart ablaze with sorrow and pain for him. I clutch onto him, arms circling tighter and tighter around him until it seemed impossible. I kept my feet rooted to the ground as I let go of the circle, the onslaught of rain falling on us like debris of a building.

"Let it out, I'm here to anchor you," I mumbled into his shirt, his back shaking from the screaming he'd done. He was shaking so terribly, I wasn't surprised he hadn't cracked like before in my apartment. Letting go briefly, I face him as he crouched down.

"I can't believe he'd do that. I thought he would change with the number of years I've lived out."

A sob made its way out after, his hot tears contrasting against the cold water from the sky. His body shook with each sniffle, face scrunched up so badly that he looked like a different person.

"You can't control how people change, but you can command how to live out your life if they do."

"I know, but..." Keith trailed off, his voice sounding hoarse and raspy. I held out a hand to brush locks of ebony hair away from his face that he hadn't bothered to adjust earlier, seeing the brokenness and fragility of the gargoyle even without the cracks in his skin.

That was something I never wanted to witness again.

"Let's get you back," I said softly, resting my forearms on his, "maybe then, we could talk about why he affects you so much."

Keith nodded weakly, too tired to protest and too weary to answer me verbally. With better control of my hydrokinesis, I create a shield for us both, hooking an arm around him again.

In the deserted streets, we trailed off to my apartment together, the initial meeting with Sedna long forgotten.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Keith opens up—the one thing that he's still afraid to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk home was silent, the only noises being the constant tap of our feet on the concrete and the occasional chirps of cicadas and rustling of leaves. I kept an arm wrapped around Keith for comfort, and also for the sorry excuse of keeping both of us warm in the freezing wind.

I fluster up when I realise I have the keys to my own apartment, rummaging around in my bag to find them so we'd be let into my comfortable abode. Hearing the familiar jingle made me sigh in relief, spotting the vibrant keychain a second later.

In the comfort of my home, I wrapped an abundance of blankets around the gargoyle shivering on my sofa and offered him a cup of coffee—the one bought from the coffee shop long forgotten.

"So..."

"He treated me like a son."

"But I thought you-"

"I did, I do, but I lied about it on the bus—I had nowhere to go after I'd become a human, so I faked a commoner's persona and claimed I lacked a place to rest my head. It wasn't entirely false."

Putting down the coffee cup, he found something else to place his focus on, eyes appearing glossy from where I was seated.

"It was long before he brought home that other woman, the spirit. I worshipped the ground the guy walked on until then because I'd known he's helped a lot of other people. He felt affected by the disease she died of, I saw. I witnessed his terrible eating habits and puffy eyes. I just- I didn't think he'd have the heart to- to love any other woman after she died."

I offered a hand of mine.

"The kids were precious too—Aiden and Allayia." Hearing this, I could only manage a small smile, the hand outstretched ignored by Keith. I pulled back in mild embarrassment before he caught it with his own, eyes never pulling away from the photo frames perched on the television table.

"Please, stay."

"I wasn't going anywhere, Keith."

"They were... active; they loved running around the house in pursuit of each other, playing hide
and seek. Their hugs were nice, too. After guarding the house alone, it felt comforting to fit in."
Once again, I see his face scrunch together in pain and stupid tears he’d never admit he shed. In a
moment of comfort, I offer a gentle squeeze to our linked hands, hoping to ease his pain.

Before continuing, Keith wrenched his hand out of mine, hopefully as an excuse to pick up his
coffee cup rather than from discomfort. I foolishly wished for my assumption to be correct as he
continued to talk, knowing it will never be confirmed. His eyes looked blank and lost as compared
to before.

And then they turned to rage.

"Within a day, the warm feeling I've come to love left instantly. At that moment, I've never felt so
cold on a July afternoon."

Silence engulfed us, making me lose my ability to speak for a second or two. Keith took the
opportunity to crack a joke.

"That was a shitty analogy, wasn't it?"

I grinned. "Yeah, kinda. Too poetic for me."

"Please appreciate poetry more."

"Hey, I'm not the one who came from the 16th century."

"That argument's old, find something else to wound me."

I rolled my eyes in annoyance, despite the smile growing on my face. Standing up from the sofa, I
make my way to the kitchen to get something to eat, only to find that it desperately lacked food.

"Oh crap. We should probably get more food."

"Then let's go."

"Do you not feel tired from screaming your lungs out?"

Keith ignored my question completely, stretching out a hand that made me look up to him in utter
confusion. I lifted an eyebrow in question.

"We're married, aren't we?"

"Oh... yeah." Grabbing some cash off the counter, I interlace our fingers together, the weight of
that sentence still ringing in my ears; it made my cheeks turn to a deep salmon. I wasn't exactly
opposed to that idea if it rang true.

The rain still continued on after hours of pouring, the streets slick with water and drains filled to
the brim. Even if my hydrokinetic skill allowed me to, I wouldn't succeed in ceasing the downpour.

The grocery store was mostly empty at this time of the day, witnessing more teenagers than adults
shopping for ingredients. I picked up a basket upon entering, immediately dragging Keith to the
confectionery section.
"I thought we were eating actual food."

"I can't cook."

"You're the worst wife ever," Keith laughed, pressing a soft kiss onto my hand.

*Oh my god.*

I managed a small smile, my heart skipping more beats than I could count; at this point, I was so hopelessly smitten. Gulping, I pray that I don't stutter, tearing my gaze from Keith.

"Well, you married me." I shrugged nonchalantly, already dumping a few sandwiches into the basket. Keith sneaked in a bottle of peanut butter, along with a packet of dark chocolates.

"For your information, I hate dark chocolate."

"You just hate it because it tastes weird."

"Why else would anyone hate something?"

"Sight?"

"Now that's just being judgemental," I laughed, placing a few boxes of milk chocolate into the pile of junk food.

"Or maybe it reminds them of someone who died, so naturally they'd avoid it," Keith explained, making me hum quietly in response.

"Have you?" I asked as we strolled through the empty store. A group of kids rushed past us with hushed voices, possibly pulling a prank on someone. Keith spoke up once they had left, looking elsewhere as he continued his story. It caught me off-guard, the basket in my hands feeling heavy with the things he was telling me.

"I saw him do it. His wife really loved this dish he made, but after she passed, he avoided it like it was the plague."

"Huh," I muttered, more to myself than to the other. "I wish if I could ever love someone that much to do that. Love sucks."

"Who said it does?" Keith responded, a little smile gracing his face naturally. Seeing his smile was Christmas morning, not that I'd let him know.

"Cupid seems to miss every time he fires his arrow, so I pretty much give up now," I concluded with a smile, before getting interrupted by the store's announcement of its closure in a few minutes.

"Boo, a killjoy," Keith remarked, leading the both of us to the counters in comfortable silence. The cashier looked bored out of her mind, especially with the amount of "food" we'd purchased, she bagged our items at a rate that could rival a sloth's.

After several minutes, we made our way back to the apartment, though we never let go of each other despite the night's darkness. I only wish it'd be done without the need of acting. It was a miracle that no one else had broken down my door, claiming that I leave with them.
The lie that Keith had saved me with provided me safety, but falling in love was a separate, unexpected trait that wasn't listed in our feigned marriage. I ponder with a hand through my hair on the sofa that felt fluffier than usual, noticing that we neither searched for the wizard nor have seen Sedna in the last few hours.

Once Keith had emerged from the restroom, I rush in without second thought, ignoring his enquiry in the process. I hadn't noticed his perplexed expression, the words fading out in mid-question. Stripping down had allowed me to, at least for a small amount of time, release the tense knots in my body. Muffled shouting go unnoticed as I wash up the soap suds with haste, only becoming clear once I turned the knob on the shower's water system.

Keith.

Throwing on clothes was an obstacle as much as unlocking the bathroom door, witnessing the familiar sight of water flooding into my vision. In the centre of the chaos, was Sedna.

And she looked absolutely furious.

"Get away from him!" I mirror her anger, projecting it into my voice despite my trembling limbs—I just hope the water goddess doesn't realise my concealed fear.

"Or what?"

"You weren't there when we went to the place you asked to meet. Why are you doing this?"

"Why?!" I flinch at her outburst, the water around my feet rising to protect me despite not calling out to it with my mind. I stand my ground, however, provoking the clenching of her fists which made her water binds tighten around the gargoyle. I snarl.

"You were incredibly vague in your note. If you wanted our presence, be more specific."

"Was I not clear in the message?"

"We don't read minds, Sedna! We set out at whatever time we saw fit, there wasn't any hint of it on the mirror!"

"But I am confident I-" She faltered, her fists losing its crushing effect on Keith. Dropping him with my distraction, he struggled to his feet to shield me from the sea goddess. Stepping in front of Keith, I place my body in front of him. I've had enough of people speaking for me.

"I'm stupid—I mean it when I say that, and I mean it when I say details are crucial." Take it from someone who sucks at detective games, I mutter quietly. I internally breathed a sigh of relief, thanking the valiance that had served me well from before. "Just- please stop harming Keith like he's a toy and throwing a hissy fit whenever things don't go your way."

"I don't take orders from you." She retorted, and with a flick of her finger, the water drained from my floor.

"If you claim you don't, why remove your only weapon of threatening?" I mutter, "in time, we'll just find the wizard without you."
"You wouldn't dare," Sedna remarked, eyes burning and eyebrows knitting together with vexation.

"Why are you so adamant about finding him?"

She paid no mind to the question and instead carried on with a command. "Tomorrow we meet at noon, at the same place."

"No," Keith called out, partially leaning onto me in compensation for his weak limbs. "somewhere else, anywhere."

"Fine. Await a second message." And with that, her form merged with water, and she vanished.

With the absence of water supporting me, Keith's weight began to appear more coherent, making me stumble over my feet before regaining enough balance.

"Hey, you doing okay there?"

"I'll be fine, let's just focus on having dinner."

"Dinner?" I asked, bringing him onto the sofa where he could rest. "All we bought was junk food."

"Good eye on that, Captain Obvious."

I roll my eyes. "Get the food, jerk. I'll make us something to drink."

Keith makes himself at home as he did with the first time he'd come here, switching between channels before settling on something that piqued his interest.

"Coffee?"

"Sure." His mumble was distant, eyes glued to the television in curiosity.

I get two mugs from the dishwasher before I hear plastic being torn open, and then distinct crunches against the blurry chatter of the show Keith watched.

"What're you watching?" I spoke as I emerged from the kitchen, setting the two cups down on the coffee table; I hear the scripted words switch to music.

"The news."

"Keith, that's a music channel."

"Uh- uhm yeah—I meant the music channel."

I shrug without question, perhaps embarrassed from the songs they played. For the rest of the night, we spent our time critiquing music videos and sometimes, I find my mind drifting to the thought of Keith jamming to alternative rock.

"That was A+ cringe."

I giggle. "Tell me about it. This is all that pops up in my recommended on Youtube."
"What? Wait- what's Youtube?"

"Keith, you- you don't know what's Youtube?"

He shrugged.

"Oh my god, you're in for a ride."

"Should I be scared?"

I brush his question with a little shrug of my shoulders, a smile creeping onto my face without any effort.

"Yes, definitely yes," Keith concluded, settling beside me as I power my laptop on, the brightness shining in both our faces in the dim lighting I hadn't bothered to change.

"Basically, it's a website that's a platform to upload and watch videos. If you like a specific uploader, there's an option to subscribe to them." I elaborated, pointing to parts on the screen to bring light to my explanations.

Keith nodded along to my words, though his movements seemed slowed and awkward. Was he feeling sleepy?

"Keith?"

His skin was cracking

Oh god.

"Keith! Say something!"

Oh god, oh god, oh god.

"Keith!"

He let out a groan in response, bits and pieces of skin landing on his lap as the Youtube video I was just explaining about droned on in the dim room.

My hands tremble, finding little to no comfort even by touching him; by now he's turned pale, and his skin felt cold as ice.

"Water. Get me some water and I'll-" He cut himself off with a cough, face scrunching up into a pained expression as his skin continued to fall.

"Are you crazy?! Water is the whole reason why your skin's cracking!"

"(Y/N), please. Just give me some."

I huff, the edges of my mouth turned down into a frown. Despite that, I make my way back to the kitchen anyway, pouring the leftover boiled water into a new mug.

"Here."
I watch him anxiously as he downed the contents in the cup, letting out a breath I hadn't known I was holding when the colour in his skin returned with the warmness of the water.

"Why? Why is water the catalyst for your recovery?"

"It's salt water like Sedna's that damages my skin. Time heals, but it'll take a deep and fruitful slumber like the last to properly regenerate new skin cells. We don't have the time." Keith lifted his hand to bring the cup to his lips before continuing. "Being a gargoyle means diverting rainwater away from the roof of a house, and the grimy water deteriorates the quality of the cement of the gargoyle; the same happens when it comes into contact with sea water."

"Oh, right, okay."

"Boiling water rids of any bacteria; its pureness saves time—my skin wouldn't be healing this fast if you'd given me water from the fridge, so thanks."

"Do I have to bring around a flask filled with hot water from now on?" I joked, leaning against the serving counter of the kitchen.

Keith shrugged with a smile, "maybe."

His sincere smile meant well, and I liked it, but the single word rang in my mind—we might have to fight Sedna one day if she decides she's done with our shit.

And when she does, we have to be ready for her.

Chapter End Notes

hi :3
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

A fall-out brings strained tension, while a revelation is made on a stroll with the goddess.

"It's a long journey before we eventually reach the wizard on the other side of the realm," Sedna explained, fiddling with the collar around her neck. Her eyebrows knit together in discomfort but tried her best to mask it with a scratch of her neck.

"Okay, but what's the quickest route there? It sounded like bad news when someone barged into our house to supposedly arrest me."

At the corner of my eye, I see Keith gulp nervously, although he concealed it almost immediately with both of his hands.

We listened intently as Sedna, with a marker, traced twists and turns on a map, the stinging smell of the marker's ink hitting both our noses like a slap to the face. I grimace as the smell intensifies and does its job of distracting me from whatever the sea goddess had to say.

"Do you prefer to set out today or tomorrow?"

If I had shown any hint of surprise at Sedna's rare show of kindness, she must have brushed it off as she searched both of us for an answer. I nudge Keith.

"Oh- uh, let's just start tomorrow, she's pretty worn out today."

I wouldn't have minded embarking on our trek today, but my fatigue began to weigh down on me as we wrapped up the meeting. The amount spent on forging our routes and plans seemed to pass by like a breeze, but now with the short walk home, time moved slower, sluggish and tortoise-like.

The time at home with Keith was the same as always, feet curled up on the shared sofa in front of the television that constantly re-ran the suspenseful crime series. Countless cups of coffee were splayed across the table as I lay half-asleep, yet again, in Keith's side with the poor boy as red as a tomato.

The television drones on about the undiscovered unsub, and then in the midst of falling asleep, I hear Keith mumbling something—words weirdly similar to the one of the actor's.

"What was that?"

"Oh crap sorry- I didn't mean to wake you up. I was just thinking about how many times I've watched this episode—I really like this show."

I giggle. "Noted for future references, and it's okay, I wasn't really sleeping anyway. On second thought, I'll even buy the DVD for you to watch."
"It's an old show, I'm not sure that they'd have it on DVD."

I shrug with both shoulders, tapping the arm that is wrapped around me. "You never know; if you really love it, you'd hunt for it till the ends of the earth."

"I won't go to extremes to get it, since whatever I love always seem to slip away from me."

"What do you love?" I whisper to him, eyes lazily trained on the bright television, however not realising that he was looking at me.

"It's more a matter of who, at this point in my life."

With that answer, my body decides, bit by bit, to shut down along with the warmness that Keith was providing. I never got around to hearing about what or who he loved, sleep overtaking me without effort. The next morning is a blur in the hustle and bustle of getting ready, stuffing into the already crowded backpack, things I wasn't sure if I needed. I look over at Keith, seeing an unimpressed expression plastered across his face.

"What?"

"Nothing; you're just packing a shitload of things you wouldn't need."

I roll my eyes and stuff one last little thing into the canvas bag—an extra bottle of boiled water.

"You're really worried huh?"

For the second time in five minutes, I roll my eyes again and swing the backpack over my shoulder, walking past Keith, which he then trailed not too far behind me. Sedna had advised meeting at the lobby of the building, where she'd show up with her amount of things needed for the journey ahead.

"I'm just trying to make sure you don't get killed by a gush of sea water."

"I'll try my best not to."

"I'll take your word for it—Keith the gargoyle, at 10:17am, said that he'll try his best not to die."

"If you keep quoting me, we'll be late. C'mon before I close the elevator door on you." Keith teased, mimicking the closing of two doors with his hands.

Spotting Sedna amongst the bustling lobby wasn't hard. She was the mythical being with the most flare in her appearance: silky ebony hair that didn't seem logical considering she lived in water and a long flowy dress decorated with shades of blue.

"What's with the activity in the lobby?" I enquired, eyeing some demon who had just knocked into my shoulder.

Sedna pointed wordlessly to the poster posted on the grimy walls of the apartment building, a large red 'WANTED' stamped on the crown of my head. Without being able to examine the poster of how they'd gotten the photo, I felt Keith's hand in mine and the thumping of my own feet against solid concrete. With each person we pass, they give us looks of confusion and then gradual recognition.
"There!" Someone bellowed with a rough voice.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck!" I yell, the shortness of breath catching up to me sooner than I had expected it to. I look our joined hands and then at the worried look Keith was giving me. Until we reached safety, I had to push on.

"I'm fine! Look ahead!"

"Okay good, just- don't look back now."

Of course, he'd say that. Now with curiosity clawing at my guts, I clench the hand in front of me tighter than usual, feeling familiar fingers twine through mine. With the new few steps, I slow my pace to take a deep breath, before regaining speed to run away from the eager captors hot on our heel.

Curiosity got the better of me, beckoning me to crane my head to look back at the ever-growing crowd of people running after us. With a gasp, I feel myself stumble and the triumphant laugh of the first few. The sultry weather made my clothes feel stuffy, throat already begging for some water.

With the heat of a million suns, I feel the hand of the same demon pulling at the clothes on my back, its scorching hot flames threatening to melt off my skin. A shit-eating smirk made its way onto his face, preparing to bring hell just for a sum of money at my capture. I feel doom approaching just as Keith twirls me around him, making me land behind the shelter that was his back.

"Stay away!" In one roar through gritted teeth, wings shot out the back of Keith's shirt, blocking a quarter of my view of the now furious captors.

"Get out of the way, creature!"

I flounder backwards as his wings drag on the ground, coming to rest behind him and feigning a path of granted access to me. I softly let out a sound of wonder as he generates a gush of wind with his robust wings, forcing the crowd back into a tangle of limbs with each other.

"Come, now. Into the whirlpool." Sedna called out, already halfway through.

Gathering me into his arms, he wrapped his wings around both of us protectively. I bury my arm around his middle as I hear him mutter out a "hold on tight".

We emerge unharmed and surprisingly dry as the whirlpool hovers over a pond out of town. Stepping onto wet grass after Sedna, the running water of the ornamental watermill in contrast with the speeds of the portal reaches our ears.

"Jesus, all that running was tiring." I leaned over with my hands on my knees, mirroring the other two people that were caught in the crossfire. "Sorry for... all that."

"It's not your fault, someone had just gotten hold of your presence in this realm and had a 'wanted' poster put up," Sedna reasoned, closing the portal with another wave of her hand.

"No, it is still ultimately my fault. I was caught up in my desire to leave here that I had called a
number on an advertisement. The operator wasn't listening so I revealed that I-

"She revealed she was human," Keith cut in with a growl, voice now low and feral before continuing, "to which she brushed me off like nothing."

"I had to do anything to get his attention among all the calls that were coming in; I didn't think it'd get so bad." I shrugged nonchalantly.

"You didn't think it'd get so bad- Was the officer who barged in not enough proof that your existence here isn't safe?!" Keith argued with balled-up fists full of exasperation.

"Fact check, you're the one who let him in! Plus, if you're so insistent on this, then tell me why it isn't safe—say it loud and clear so I can hear why I shouldn't be here, fighting for my life because of a mistake I'd made!"

Keith heaved a sigh in frustration, deciding to avoid the question at the look of Sedna's face. She looked like she was the caretaker of two children with bodies full of rage.

"I liked it better when you two were all lovey-dovey." She rolled her eyes, gesturing with a hand. "C'mon, it's this way."

I let out my own sigh of frustration and resignation, trekking behind the goddess without giving much thought to the gargoyle standing near the pond.

As we walk over different terrain, word from three of us was small and rigid, with the occasional sounds of the opening of a bottle and the 'whooshing' sounds of Sedna playing with water. It went on for what felt like forever before the goddess finally settled at an open space that had several floorboards that circled the empty centre.

I let out a sigh in relief at resting my feet, immediately taking a seat on the wooden board closest to my company.

"We might have to hit the hay here; it will be too late to turn back if we aren't able to find a more sturdy place to rest our heads."

Nodding, swinging my backpack around so I could have some water. Sedna spoke again. "I will go out to find some firewood, we can start a fire."

"And risk them knowing our whereabouts?" Keith asked, almost mockingly.

"Keith, it's freezing out here. You don't expect us to sleep with icicles stuck in our hair, do you?"

"First off, it's not cold to the point for it to snow; I've had worse experiences being perched on top of a fucking mansion!"

"Oh, shut up, who asked for you to be brought to life anyway?"

"I never wanted to be alive! I never wanted to have witnessed his love for his dead wife and then see him bring in another like it's a game!" Keith cried out, his face crushed up in redness and anger.

"People in my realm make TV shows about those, so I'm not too hung up on your situation. Get over it." I spat, surprised at the raw contempt that escaped my mouth.
"Get over it? Get over-"

With a roll of her eyes, Sedna waved her hand to bind our mouths, clearly vexed by our incessant squabble.

"We will wait for one day before setting up a fire; it will be easier to collect firewood in this weather rather than risk a trip in the rain tomorrow." Sedna released the binds, conscious of the way that her water would make Keith's skin falter.

"How do you know it'll rain tomorrow? Wouldn't the rain extinguish the fire?"

"She's a water goddess you dimwit, she'll make it rain and create a shield around the fire." Keith looked away in chagrin.

"(Y/N), you're coming with me. Keith, clear up the place."

I trail behind the goddess, sending Keith a glare before I leave the open space and enter the woods; he flips me off with similar annoyance.

We encounter land crowded with twigs and branches as we tread deeper into unexplored woodland. The slowly darkening sky fulfils its job of robbing us of our sight, though Sedna informs of a fallen tree just a stone's throw away.

"Wait... but we don't have a chainsaw."

Water began to swirl in intricate patterns around Sedna's held out hand before gradually taking the shape of the said tool. The water-formed object materialises and lands swiftly in her palm.

"Will I ever be able to do that?"

"With enough practice, maybe."

She seemed confident in cutting up the fallen tree without any difficulty, leaving her to it as I practice some simple water summoning. I envision an apple in my mind, feeling the familiar swish of water and its energy circling around me. However, with the goddess' sudden giggle, my shape falls onto the ground, wetting the dried up patch of land.

"It's not too bad, but you'll need to observe more closely. You're like an artist, studying plantations and designs and objects to get its dimension and shape correctly."

I sigh. "I guess so, though I don't expect much from this. Everything that I've always been interested in doesn't seem to work out."

"That doesn't seem like the case. You're fond of Keith."

"Wh- you literally just saw us fighting childishly, how would you conclude that assumption?"

"I've seen the day where we agreed to meet for the first time. It was raining because of my sour mood since you two failed to meet me-" My mouth opens to justify our absence from the café, but she holds up a finger. "But- I saw the way you'd held him that day. That afternoon where he screamed so painfully. You provided comfort by being his foundation; that's why I didn't
intervene, I pushed away my anger because I recognised your love."

"You think I love him?"

"Yes, I think you do."

I only sigh with the confirmation of falling in love with Keith, gathering the newly cut wood from the tree into my arms. Is that what all the fluster was about? My heart racing faster than our escapade just now when he does the hand-holding thing? The tight pulling in my chest when he kisses me?

My mind drifted to all the times that we've had together—the supermarket trip, the dance in my kitchen, that something he said on our first evening on the sofa. Sedna had to guide me from bumping into trees with the help of her water powers on the way back, grunting in relief as we finally reached the open space where she didn't need to steer me away.

Keith had cleared the area nicely, already lazing around on his own sleeping bag while he waits for our return. His hooded gaze showed no emotion, but he rose in defeat to help me when he'd seen Sedna's glare.

"Thanks."

He sent me a curt nod, settling back down onto his sleeping bag with reluctance.

"He's letting his pride get in the way, let him take his time."

Unpacking the food I'd prepared earlier, I munch down on my dinner along with Sedna, willing myself to prevent looking at the source of my problems. Within minutes, the goddess bids us goodnight, leaving us in a silent and calm night with only our hearts making the ruckus.

I try my utmost best to ignore him for the rest of my meal, sneaking glances at him in my peripheral view with little to no shame. Gulp down a quarter of the water in my bottle, I sort myself in between Sedna and Keith before facing the other way, clutching the makeshift pillow in hopes that he'd say something.

With no words lingering in the air, I swallow and try to clear my mind of distractions, finding it a problem when all I'm reminded of is his warmth. I pull the duvet closer to my chest, closing my eyes and wishing that I'd slip into a dreamless slumber.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

A single, but unique flower plays a massive part in unravelling this baffling mystery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night passes by without any problem, finding myself awakening from a well-rested sleep at the crack of dawn, which seems unrealistic even for me.

The sky is a calm dark blue, enlightening into a sky blue with each minute that passes. Air feels fresh in my lungs, bringing me some time to think as I listen to the birds call out for their offspring and the gentle rustling of trees brought about by the wind.

I notice that the sea goddess had left the sleeping bag I prepared for her and instead see that she was resting on the floorboard not too far from me. Keith also was with her, talking about God-knows-what when they could've been sleeping.

Oh, they aren't talking about me, are they? I sigh in defeat as I lay back down, staring into the cloudless sky atop me. I collect my thoughts from yesterday's events, realising the bad blood still going on with Keith and myself.

"Hi." A head pops into my vision.

As Keith blocks my vision from the bright blue, I give him a small smile.

"Hey, yourself," I whisper, voice still mildly rough from slumber.

Keith settles down beside without saying anything else, both arms propped up on his knees with his hands interlocked. He shrugs his shoulders awkwardly as I focus on the shoes he'd been wearing from day one. I look at him.

With mild reluctance and equal stiffness in our voice, we apologise in a blur of words—twisting over and under each other like a tightly woven piece of fabric. A light giggle escapes Keith, which he then lets me speak first.

"I'm uh- sorry, for of course this whole thing; I even got us on the run, which I'd be more relaxed about if I knew how they had gotten that photo of me."

Before he could respond, I warn him. "No smart remarks."

Keith looked to the ground in potential guilt, attempting to hide his widening smile with terrible skill.

"I'm sorry too. I was frustrated about the incident and the demon touching you—I guess I was just fatigued with all this running around."
"Do you desire to go back to your old life?"

"A little. I wish I could've spent more time with the kids."

"Aiden and Allayia?"

"Yeah. I'm surprised you remembered." He smiled, however ruefully.

"I like your stories. It's something different from listening to professors drone on in lectures." I prop myself up on my left elbow, with my hand supporting my head while the other rests on my torso.

"Are they really boring?"

"You bet it." I grin.

I see Keith return the gesture with one of his own before packing his sleeping bag snugly into its original state, securing it nicely onto his backpack with precision and skill. It almost looked like the advertisements. With less talent and accuracy, I fail in the binding of my own, settling for a rather untidy version of the male.

In our journey, we sat out further into the outskirts of town, with the bundle of firewood split evenly between the three of us. We come upon weirder creatures, more fascinating places and breath-taking sceneries. In the midst of lunch, we spot a small house built among a garden—possibly managed by the owner of the house.

With fields over fields of flowers and plantations, my mind travels in every direction at the possibilities of how they'd take care of every single crop. The entrance was already beautifully designed—a grandiose arch decorated with flowers of vines, while a lone path led up to the house. That track had allowed us to admire the hard work of the mysterious farmer, where bright, vibrant flowers contrasted with the dull colours of wheat in every other patch of land.

Small walkways provided little space to pass, with Keith suggesting we walk in a single file. As the gargoyle led the front, Sedna took the middle, and I claimed the very end of the line. The soil crunches under our feet, making it the only audible sounds within the massive plot of land. In the garden's beauty, I feel only the opposite way—bleak and anxious. I wait in anticipation for something- anything to happen, but nothing makes their entrance as we continue along the path.

With more space for my legs to breathe, the main trail provides for us to walk side by side. I now notice that the garden is spread out across a semi-circular plot of land, where five large paths ultimately lead back to the house. Perhaps it improved its convenience—I know I'd rather not trace the curve of a semi-circle just to make my way back to my house.

The same eerie feeling settled in my stomach, struggling to hold my ground as the uneasiness made its way to my head. My pants were stained brown in the next minute, while my hands fought against the unknown weight that pulled me down; my hands hardly left the fertile land.

The cacophony of voices next to me provided me with the opposing factor of comfort. Chaos. Pandemonium. I try my best to listen to either one, but they crash into each other like a fight in a roaring coliseum, one contestant lusting for the other's blood. The words merge together in a messy painting, the disarray of colours driving me crazy.
I grapple for my breath in one second, and in the next, I feel myself floating amidst the clouds; it was similar to the first time I'd touched Keith's hand in the bus.

_Keith_

My eyes shot open immediately, expecting the bright sky blue in my eyes, but instead was faced with an infinite expanse of nebulae. The mixture of colours should disorientate me, yet I feel calm in this remote oasis. A sound catches my attention, urging me to crane my head toward the noise in curiosity and finding a lonely man tending to his flowers.

Wasn't the ground just empty earlier? Within each corner of my eye as I turn step by step, land changes from a stark white to a garden which stretches across multiple metres.

'She's coming soon.' The unprompted voice echoes in my head, which then is followed by the man standing up. I take a cautious step forward, trekking slowly on the same path toward the man.

"Who is?"

Without warning, his eyes widen at the sight of me, taking off at the speed of a cheetah's. He stopped short just in front of me, however, his expression of longing changing into one of solemn.

"You strangely look like her."

"Who? The one who's coming?"

"No. My first love." He whispered. "My only love."

"What happened to her? And what about you?"

Hesitation seeped into the grave countenance he held but heaved a deep sigh in defeat at my interest. "I'll tell you."

"I was the child of Abigor Bathory, while my biological mother, who was a gardener, passed from childbirth. Abigor was a famous duke who lived on for years on end that even his people wondered whether he made a deal with the devil for eternal life. His first wife, at the time, banished me from the castle and state as I was her source of hatred. How they fared in life—I'm not sure, but there was some word about the tense air among the higher-ups."

"My only joy was to grow the flowers and plants after my expulsion, which the Duke had taught me in his spare time. After going through several nights of my father's absence, I'd learned that he abdicated from being the ruler of his state, and settled down in a mansion not too far from his original place of rest." Sighing, he muttered the next few words with a sombre expression. "He never returned, though, he did send me postcards from time to time. The tone in his writing did not sound sinister or possess any loathe, but I figured he regretted creating me with my mother since he was a young adult at the time. They were scarce after a while, but I imagined it was just because he didn't want to be seen with a lowlife like me."

I allowed him to carry on with his story, deciding to let him know of my knowledge of the Bathory household at a later timing. The look on his face softened when he continued, halting my steps as he did. His eyes trail to a single flower growing amongst the others—its colour was like no other.
"A woman came to my garden every now and then; she stole my flowers and bore no mind or apology to the one who grew them. I followed her out one day, discovering that she was selling the stolen items. With that information, I managed the garden and made sure my flowers were in tip-top condition, never having the courage to confront her about my true intentions."

"The true intention was that you loved her?" I murmured to him, hearing the man hum in agreement.

"With hard work and a bit of magic that I stole from the castle, I managed to create a flower like no other: a smeraldo flower. That was the flower I was looking at earlier."

"You stole from your step-mother? That takes guts." I smiled with the gardener, looking back at the flower he was talking about.

"Yet I didn't have the guts to talk to the woman."

"She didn't come to the garden one night. I found out by word that she died. I managed the garden with the utmost care, anyway; I believed she was still with me in spirit."

"I knew about the Bathory household, my uh- my friend told me about them—he's a gargoyle that guarded his mansion back then."

"I knew that you knew. Your face isn't exactly difficult to read when I mentioned my father." The man laughed before his expression softened yet again. "I know also that you favour the gargoyle. Your love is undefeated."

I break eye contact. "Is it- Is it really that obvious?"

"It's more of a feeling rather than basing it on your expression. I can feel it within you."

"Is it the result of being half-vampire?" I joked, my head resting on my closed fist.

"Is that the immortal being my father took on?" He inquired. "That would explain all the confusion about the duke's everlasting youth."

"Yep."

"All citizens of the state were perplexed. I, on the other hand, was enchanted by the fact that there was possible eternal life in the world. The death of my first love led to blame the mortality and weakness of humans, but I realise the burden of living out the never-ending pain and sadness."

"She died of a disease?"

"Indeed, the Great Plague was terrible. Information tells of its existence in London, but none mention that a few unlucky ones contracted it from a bobolyne stupid enough to travel. She... was one of them."

I nodded along wordlessly, staying silent with various thoughts dancing through my mind.

"Enough talk, you should get going." I expect the man to head back to his home, but he instead strolls toward the flower he'd specially grown for the woman; I panic when he reveals his small shovel.
"Wait, wait- what are you doing?" I ask, eyebrows furrowed in utter uncertainty and doubt.

"It's the least I could do by burdening you with that boring story."

"It's not a shitty story! I like it, actually, please just," I hold my hands out in protest, "don't dig it out. You spent so long growing it! Why give it to me?"

"Your resemblance to the woman I love is uncanny—even if it's a dream or if it's someone that looks immensely like her, I'll feel more at ease if I know, at least, somehow that she's got the flower I crafted for her."

"I don't feel like I should be the one receiving this."

"You don't have to feel like you're the 'one'. I'm giving you this simply because you'll need it on your journey."

"How...so?"

"It's for you to find out." He smiled warmly, carefully digging the roots out from beneath the ground. With a blink of my eyes, a pot had appeared beside him. I stare in awe as he places it into the container with skill and undivided fastidiousness.

"How do I carry it..." As if answering my question, the pot disappeared into thin air, fostering an increasingly puzzled expression from me.

"I have placed it where you need it the most—you'll find that a little magic can assist you in great ways. Hasten your steps, for she's hunting the three of you with bitterness and indignance."

"Who is hunting us down?"

"The Duchess. The spirit. I'm sorry, but farewell, for now."

Before I could get a word of protest out, consciousness returns to my body without finding out whatever the gardener meant. Keith was the tensest when I'd finally come to, sensing the hardened and stiff look on his face with one of my hands.

Escaping from my daze, I removed my hand almost instantaneously and searched for the man I'd just been talking to.

I shoot up from my spot on the ground, sprinting toward the house in a hurry in hopes of catching the son of the duke. I grunt as I pass by the land which housed the smeraldo flower, heart sinking as I notice the digged-in soil. Upon reaching the house, I twist the doorknob with intensifying suspense, only to find it empty; it looked like it was abandoned long ago. Various gardening tools lay around and on shelves, empty pots each designed with a different pattern take up every inch of the space. A lonely bed took its place in the corner, the sunlight flitting through the unbarred window. It looked like a heavenly sanctuary.

"I lost him."

"You lost who?" Keith asked after having followed you.
"The gardener. He was the son of the Duke." I murmur to myself rather than the gargoyle.

"The Duke?" A look of bafflement crosses Keith's face, and then recognition, as the name rolls smoothly off his tongue in time with me.

"Abigor Bathory."

My eyes widen at the last thing he's said to me, the Duchess, his first wife was the spirit in the café from a few days ago. But what did she want with us?

'The flower.' The same uneasiness settles over me, aware of the fact that Keith noticed as he reaches out for me in the next moment.

Instead of leaving consciousness to enter the realm from earlier, a vision engulfs me—a blurry smudge of white staining the rim of my mind as the scene unfolds before me.

I see the look of horror on the Duchess' face as she hailed for the doctor, frustration etching into her countenance when he'd failed to answer. Her fury and anxiety heighten as she paces the closed door, tensing whenever someone behind it coughs.

"How is he, doctor?" She asks as soon as the doctor flings the door open, hardly getting a step out into the hallway.

"I'm afraid his condition worsens with every second, your Royal Highness." Removing his mask of protection, the doctor states hesitantly, evidently unprepared for the onslaught of the Duchess' words of hostility.

"You're a doctor, aren't you? Can't you find the cure to the plague?!!"

"There are other patients I should tend to, your Royal Highn-"

"To hell with other patients! Go back into the room and create a cure for my son!" She rushes him back into the room without a care for the doctor's safety. I was convinced that the doorknob would fall off with the amount of brutality she slammed the door with.

"I need the flower." She utters with obvious agitation. "Bring me my sorry excuse of a step-son. Make it quick."

*Did she mean the gardener?*

The scene changes into the garden, with nightfall already gracing the area. Soldiers barge into the house, passing through me as they hold up spears, ready to attack with the Duchess' word. I turn around to find her trailing behind the organised and practiced positions of the guards. Though with the knowledge of this being a vision, I panicked nevertheless, when she stared straight ahead at me. She walked past me into the house, scoffing as she found the house empty, to her displeasure.

With a shout, the soldiers moved around to inspect the place for the desired item, each of them obeying the Duchess as she shoots orders out left and right. Finally, they depart from the gardener's house with a sour mood, to my relief.

My hairs stand on end, at the end of the vision, when the Duchess mutters to herself. "I'll come for you, just you watch." She looked into the house one last time, scoffing, again with a hideous scowl.
on her face.

*Just a vision,* I told myself; However real that felt, it was *just a vision.*

It ends on an abrupt note, the scene of the comfortable abode fading away to the edges of my mind as I come to yet again.

"She wants the flower. The flower that the gardener grew for his love. And she's furious. The spirit's furious." I whisper, looking up at Keith as he brings me to my feet.

"Then we better get moving."

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed this chapter, more to come! ;)
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

A mythical creature makes it stand, though it's becoming almost routine at this point.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I update Keith and Sedna as we walk ahead, exiting the thick foliage. At once, an open field of greenery, accompanied by an aqueduct, filled our vision.

The creation designed to carry water to the town we departed from stretches on for miles into the next place of residence. We carried on to walk through the open field of tall grass and wildflowers, with the burdensome reminder of our firewood weighing down in my arms. The skip in our steps was brought about by discovering new, unknown places, but they slowed into a stroll when we realised that this could carry on for forever.

I halted with doubt and dread consuming most of my body when I work out how long ago the 16th century actually was.

"The plague came in 1665... it's practically the 2000s now. How would the Duchess be able to keep her son alive for that long?"

"Aren't the both of them immortals?" Sedna asked, placing the wood gently onto the grass as it, too, took a strain on her water magic.

"Do you think it's because two immortal beings marry each other and the 'im-' in 'immortal' cancels out?" I crack a joke.

"I-" Keith sighs, though, the same voice of the gardener's echoes through my mind.

'You're... actually correct. When two immortals form a bond and produce an offspring, the baby won't... actually live as long as their parents do.'

"But then how does she...?"

"Cryogenic processes," Sedna cuts in, as the gardener makes a sound of agreement in my head. "I remember where my people were made to craft the slab of ice from beneath. The Duchess had made a deal with my father to keep me from lashing out every few minutes. The men my father forced me to marry couldn't take 'no' for an answer, so that's what caused all the frustration."

"Wasn't your moment of fury the thing that saved the people of London from the Great Fire right after the plague?"

The sea goddess scoffed. "That wasn't enough thanks, apparently."

As we talk, the gardener fills me in with his theories on what the spirit could've done with ease, as
compared to the earlier times where I'd have to lose consciousness. My head hurts a teeny bit with all the concentrating, but its tension on my brain becomes less and less with each attempt.

It could be through the middle ground of where Earth and Heaven met that the gardener was talking to me, or through any other potential method. I wouldn't deem it as telepathy, however, since now I can't imagine what both Sedna and Keith are thinking as their faces both scrunch in disgust.

"What is it?" I asked, regretting it as soon as the words left my mouth. The foul stench reaches my nose a second later, the two immortals trekking ahead of me to find out its source.

"That's a pretty large victim—what animal could possibly be its predator?"

Another regret.

Its growl was the first thing that had caught our attention, its massive size becoming clear as day as the creature takes its place behind us.

"Fuck-"

"(Y/N), Keith, take cover—I'll handle this."

"Wh- no! No one's handling anything! It's way too strong for us." I yell out at the sea goddess, hurried steps easily breaking into a panicked run for both me and Keith. I see the gargoyle beside me prepare to unfurl his wings, but Sedna's cry catches our attention again. "It has incredible speed and is a terribly good jumper, Keith. I suggest keeping your goddamn wings unless you want half of what you have at the moment!"

"What the hell do you want us to do then?!" Keith says, clearly already agitated with the way things were turning out for us.

"Just stay clear of my way, I'll distract it." Sedna stood her ground, her once flowy dress was torn and tattered at the ends due to the creature's claws.

"We are not leaving you in Death's grasp, literally!" I bellowed, circling the monster from the back as Keith stood at its side.

"Hey!" Keith was the centre of the beast's attention now, an obnoxious finger pointed at the creature. "Didn't Hades leave you in the Underworld? What in the living fuck are you doing here?" The hound responded only with a growl and a display of his massive teeth, which multiplied my fear thrice as much as Cerberus' two other heads made their appearance.

"Three for three, we're done for here." I sighed, already accepting defeat without a fighting attempt, jerking back as I barely escape a swipe of its head.

"No, not yet we are. Stop sighing, you dimwit!" Keith glared at me while dodging the dog's attacks.

"Okay, new plan, the heads at his side are protecting the middle one, where- ack!" Sedna stumbled to her feet before continuing, "-where his vital organs are. Cerberus assumes a hostile front and is naturally protecting the place where we'd do the most damage."
Keith shrieked, letting out a loud yelp as he uses his wings to launch himself to an area where he'd be safe. The gargoyle took Sedna's advice in an instant, letting his advantage of flight vanish once he'd seen the canine's menacing claws.

"You two take out the right and left first—Cerberus is exceptionally protective of the head in the middle. Do not let it catch on that that is our plan. I'm going to try to create a drug with my powers so we can sedate the hound—only God knows whether we'll need it in the future. Give attention to the middle head but focus on eliminating the other two, at least to the point that's equivalent to knocking someone unconscious; that's our priority."

I nod while Keith manages to reply with a curt "Got it!" before he grins at me.

"Ready?"

"You're too unpredictable for the necessary preparations, good sir." I tease, while my eyes are fixated on our enemy. I look away briefly to see that the gargoyle rolled his eyes, the dog's middle head struggling to find a focus point between the two of us.

"Make the heads go cross-eyed. They'd be confused and might bang into the other in pursuit of us."

I breathe a quiet "okay" to no one, feeling the energy coursing through me as my powers increase with dedicated concentration. Spotting the abandoned firewood just a stone's throw away, I try my best to summon it with my mind, albeit to no avail.

"I've never had much practice with the mind thing; I guess I'll just stick with water for now."

A minute giggle pulls me from the focal point I've decided to centre my mind on, a sharp, lively contrast to the grim situation we were currently in. Keith didn't seem like he enjoyed letting his moment of glee and amusement escape, cheeks flushing at the temporary distraction he'd provided me with. Nevertheless, I was glad I could hear his laugh, again. Tension settles even more heavily as we freeze in place under the canine's scrutiny.

"What do you suggest we do, now? It undoubtedly will go on the offensive if we move even an inch." I say, the three-headed dog eyeing us with suspicion, the middle one switching between the both of us.

"Here's something: wrap your binds around me like what Sedna did to me the first time we met her."

"Wh- Are you crazy?! Can't you just use your wings?" I whisper, clearly distraught by the sheer mention of water against Keith's fragile skin.

Keith sighed. "I might be. We haven't discovered what type of water you carry in your hands—it might not be salt water like Sedna's. Plus, I don't want a teared-off wing." My expression softens as I give my all in showing my disapproval, pleading wordlessly to resort to a different tactic.

'Trust me.' I see the gargoyle mouth, the lively, sparkling eyes of his presenting their own fair share of hope and adventure.

With reluctance, I nod with dread of what might happen, while bringing my hands to the side to allow water to flow freely from my fingertips.
Walking side by side with Sedna on the way here hadn't been so bad, especially compared to the other times where she’d literally tried to obliterate us. In the brief walk, before the two discovered the foul-smelling animal, she coached me, listing out her tricks on how to focus my energy so my powers will be at its peak when I want it to be.

"I understand that you find it difficult without the presence of the mentor who passed down the powers you now have," Sedna commented, voice low and hushed in respect of my privacy.

"Passed down, as in by hereditary processes? But- Who will that be? I'm positive no one in my family possess any-"

"Your mother. She was a Naiad."

"A... Naiad?"

"A water nymph, you dimwit." I sighed at the nickname Sedna picked up as a result of Keith's and my constant jabs, shrugging with little to no resolve for the playful epithet.

"Is that how I'm able to control water? How did she even become a Naiad anyway?" My brows knitted together in bewilderment, going through the times where I've encountered any unusual water incidents that had my mother as the main star.

"Remember the one ride at the water park? I could feel your awe when your mother had come to save your drowning self. You'd gushed to your mother that night about how you saw a tail attached to the middle of her body, naming all the different species of marine animals that you've learned in school." A gentle smile appears on the goddess' face as she recalls what I had said to my mother.

"She waved off your moment of wonder with a hand, but then dived into a story about how different lakes had different types of water fairies or spirits. Bigger bodies of water held those that one would commonly find in the ocean, while smaller ones, like ponds or rivers, had smaller species of a nymph."

"...I remember asking her what kind of fish she was."

"Yes, you did; and you spent years figuring out what she was, the storybooks on your shelves slowly replaced by larger volumes of guides on aquatic animals. You were also fascinated with space and time, with how matter came into place, how planets were formed, how Jupiter's storms remain so powerful even after decades, centuries."

"And yet, I never pursued what I really wanted," I said to myself, mostly.

"Does it make you wonder about how marvellous would it be to see someone of the sea make contact with an astronaut or an extraterrestrial?" The sea goddess murmured as she glanced at the sky; among twigs and roots, her steps gradually relax into a stroll.

"You wish to see the stars?" I inquire with a small voice—the ground in my head becomes uneven, and the air is polluted with the smog of my never-ending questions.

"Never before that—but I kept track of how far you've gone in learning about the sea and sky. From then on, I've listened, through your mother, to myriads and myriads of facts that spilt from your mouth over the years."
"Huh. I never would've known I'd meet the sea goddess on my way to getting back to my own realm."

I recall on the words that we exchanged on the edge of the forest, sifting through the conversation to do what the goddess recommended. I soon feel a gush of water exit my palms effortlessly, wrapping Keith up in its grasp and lifting the gargoyle.

My feet meet greenery and soil as I tread back to distance Keith from the predatory hound.

"Hang on tight, you cocky gargoyle!" I yell, hands travelling from left to right, up and down—anywhere that would distract Cerberus' two persistent heads. Keith, barely having a hold on his bearings, barked directions at me as he had a first-class seat in avoiding the dog's stupendous teeth.

With each direction, I hear the collision of heads and a warning growl to the both of us, spotting Sedna giving us a thumbs-up while she held a plate of... cake?

In the next few minutes, there was the outcome of several successful clashes of the two heads; both knock themselves unconscious with the constant impact while Sedna hurries to present the middle head with the plate of cake she was carrying.

The guardian of the Underworld gobbles it up, leaving a trail of saliva that drips from his mouth and onto the grass below it—which then, the growth of some plant takes place.

'Aconite, or wolf's bane—poisonous, so don't bother touching it.' The words of the gardener resonate in my mind the moment the flora emerges, imprinting the simple warning into my brain.

Another wave of magic, then, washes over the three of us; its silhouette deforms and shifts into a million other shapes as we watch on in anticipation. It finally shrinks down into a feathered animal, its head tilting both ways with certain sharpness and curiosity. It settles into a black crow, cawing and nipping at its black feathers before resting its body on Keith's shoulder.

I inch my hand toward the creature's beak, letting it sniff me. "Your hair's as black as night. Naturally, it'd gravitate toward you." I laugh, petting its head gently as it leans into my hand in response. "I guess it was just Naberius in its Cerberus form," I whisper.

"Naberius?"

"He's a demon that ranked a little less than the Devil, who I assume is the... prime ruler of hell?" The crow caws again in acknowledgement to my explanation, beckoning me to carry on with the details.

"He had nineteen legions of demons under his command, so he was pretty damn powerful; introduced by Johann Weyer in 1583 in one of his publications." I elaborate to the both of them.

"Does he have a human form too?" Sedna asks. I can see the yearning in her eyes; I can see her desire to touch an animal of the sky.

I nod, eyeing the crow as I gesture for us to continue on our trek. I look back at the poisonous plant, an unwillingness to leave it behind strikes deep in my heart.

"Maybe he'll show you later. The guy's a little worn out." I murmur, heaving a sigh at the already bustling afternoon we've had. Following the stretch of the aqueduct, we resume our precarious
walk on the open fields, wanting nothing more than a warm fireplace near our bodies and a hot beverage down our throats.

"I can feel the pull of the wizard's magic getting stronger with each push forward—though it wavers slightly, it's there nevertheless." The goddess says.

"Do you think he's expecting us?" I raise my doubts sheepishly.

"Why would he be?" Keith asked, perplexed.

"Wouldn't the news of a human on the run travel with haste? I'm confident he's already refusing us his services." Sedna scoffs, treading in front of us as our undiscussed leader. "Men are always like that, running away from their problems when it inconveniences them."

"I didn't know she would sound like a middle-aged mom when she complained like that." I grin up at Keith, glad to be the receiver of one of his own as well as the goddess drones on in the distance.

Chapter End Notes

i had to search the web for what cerberus might be weak to and i find out he's weak for a piece of cake.... well, drugged cake but like still a fat mood. greek mythology goes beyond whatever i had in mind tbh
Two little siblings with enormous hearts are excited to see what the new visitors have in store. On another hand, a battle with feelings in the dead of the night is inevitable.

After what felt like hours, we come to a stop at a second-story house while the aqueduct continues on into the next town. It looms over us as Naberius did earlier, his form now posing a friendly, companionable aura. Its massiveness takes us off-guard, only now noticing the double doors that led into the abode. Above the doorway was a balcony with a parapet that spread into a semi-circle, enabling its user to view the open field with ease.

It was made of red brick with jet black windows, its corners twisting and turning into intricate patterns as additional concrete was added onto the edges of the house to carve gargoyles that never end in creativity. My eyes land on an empty pedestal just before the eave of the house escapes my vision.

Was that where Keith was crouched over as the house's gargoyle before he left for good?

Sedna leads us out of our wonder, with leaves crunching under her ever-changing shoes and unlucky twigs snapping with each step. She stalks toward the double doors with the confidence we both didn't possess, using the rusty doorknocker to apprise the resident of our presence. We follow behind reluctantly.

"If the doors open by themselves, I'm out of here."

Indeed, the doors creak open that reveals to us the eerie lobby of the old, run-down house, with no one present, at least in our line of sight. Before I get a chance to turn on my heel to bolt, the silhouette of someone moves into the centre of the doorway; the candles of the room's chandelier light with a single clap from the shadow.

The sudden flood of light brightens the room immediately, bringing warm and mellow tones that dance around on the person's face.

"What brings you here, humble explorers?"

I lean over to whisper into Keith's ear. "I honestly didn't think we'd get this far." I see the hint of a smile on the gargoyle's face before the sharp, piercing tone of Sedna's distracts me from the other's expression.

I hear Naberius caw in return after the goddess explains our purpose, its wings spreading unexpectedly to a majestic length as he travelled from Keith's shoulder to the house's owner.

"Abigor Bathory. On behalf of my family, I welcome you to the Bathory household. My wife is on a quest to find... something to cure our sick son, but no matter, we greet anyone that doesn't pose a threat to this home." As his eyes roam over each of us, his countenance changes when they come to
rest on Keith. He quickly fixes his slip-up and reverts back to a neutral expression, motioning with a hand to receive his guests.

I feel underdressed, suddenly, as I place a foot inside the estate, which floors never seem to end. Every inch of the house was covered in luxurious rugs and plush furniture that would cost very much of a bomb.

"Our abode, I hope, welcomes you as well for as long as you wish to stay. However, I suggest straying from the east wing on the second floor, where our sick son is held. You are free to roam the house wherever you like. Your fellow blue woman here has informed us of your long travels and that you require a place of rest before continuing. Is that right?"

I nod wordlessly, shooting an appreciative glance at Sedna for telling the white lie.

As he proceeds on to talk about the house, a room on my left distracts me from the already-stunning foyer. At the far end of the room, a piano stands tall and intimidating, while white silk curtains were drawn to prevent the blinding sunlight from reaching the interior. Other instruments take their places on the slightly elevated stage at the centre of the room, with chairs to accompany.

As my head cranes to look at every nook and cranny of the room, I hear something. "Sh!
Someone's here!"

"What- Who's there?" I ask, my eyes trying their best to locate the source of the voice. I get no response as I voice my question, instead opting to look at the different instruments that fill my eyesight.

"A grand waltz is well underway, I suppose; the abundance of instruments here is splendid!" The goddess' voice fills my ears, her eyes skimming over the different violas and harps, while trombones and tubas are kept snugly in their respective cases.

Abigor smiles fondly as he, too, enters the area, speaking with pride as his hands move theatrically in time with his words. "Wait till you see the ballroom—this is just a practice room for our hired orchestra. They are incredibly magnificent!"

I send the two out with a wave of my hand, settling into one of the leather seats, noticing a curve in the orchestra's chairs; its formation was similar to those of the shows I went to. However, only one music stand possesses sheet music, to which I flip through with delicacy.

"Can I interrupt your curiosity, mademoiselle?" Keith leans against the doorway, arms crossed over his body and face plastered with a playful smirk.

"Mademoiselle? That's new. We aren't in France, you know." I shoot back teasingly, scanning over endless notes and annotations made in the scorebook of the musician. My eyes travel over french words printed in black ink and pencil markings at the end of each bar. They dance around me like magic, playing a melody only I know in my head before Keith sidles up to me.

"You know for a gargoyle, shouldn't you be pledging your allegiance to Mr Bathory?"

"Shut up with your witty jokes, I'm trying to get this someone to dance with me. Any tips?" Keith tilts his head, sparkles shining in his eyes.

"Oh? Who's this someone, then? Should they go through me first?"
"I believe she's someone who drinks coffee out of a bottle and loves to tease a gargoyle...and also only eats junk food since she can't cook."

"Wh- hey!" I burst out in laughter as my hand descends on Keith's arm in a loud 'smack!', pointing at him with my other hand on my hip. "I can cook a decent meal, thank you very much."

"Then why, pray tell, haven't I had any proper food since my breakout from the Bathory home?"

"That's because I'm not sure about what stone people eat. You're here in the skin, but maybe your insides are all concrete."

"I'm pretty sure I function as a human for the time being since there was that spell that materialised my existence into a man."

"Okay, Mr I-keep-track-of-how-I-became-alive, we get it." I roll my eyes, closing the scorebook with reluctance. Like that, the melody in my head also cuts off abruptly—like a door opening in the midst of a celebration. I decide to play around, focusing my mind on the doors that led into this room.

They open a second later, welcoming the familiar feeling of relief as I beam. The same two reenter as Sedna's eyes trail over the room and land on mine. She mouths something I can't quite understand, her efforts drowned out by Abigor's booming and firm voice.

"I was just talking to the sea goddess about your rooms, shall we?"

"Wait, no- that isn't necessary, Mr Bathory. We will be well on our way after sitting for a few." I protest, my hand hovering in the air in front of me to emphasise my statement. In response, the man shakes his head with a slight smile and a bow of his head.

"No need for such a high-strung tone, love. Abigor should be fine and pay no mind about the rooms, we don't mind having guests over."

Sighing in defeat, I nod my head as thanks and strut over to Sedna, waiting to hear what she's been wanting to tell me. Keith follows behind obediently, the unknown voice still left undiscovered as the two continue to crouch inside a cupboard.

"Wasn't that Uncle Keith? Who was that lady?" A timid, small voice spoke to the other, leaning into the other's side for protection.

"As friends? Or like 'like' each other?"

He shrugs, opening a different door of the installed wall cupboard for the two of them to crawl through. "C'mon, in you go. We shouldn't be down here in the practice room when Dad asked us to stay in our rooms. Be careful on your way up there."

Sedna excitedly whispers to me as I catch up to her. "You did the mind thing!" I nod along, returning her enthusiasm with a smile of my own.
Up throughout a winding staircase, we ascend up into the second story of the house, the doors to the balcony filling our sight first. To the right, tape blocks access into the east wing of the estate which left us to roam the area of the west.

"I'm afraid the rooms on the west are more of recreational purpose, rather than for a place of rest. There are two rooms for the three of you, though I will have no say in who sleeps with who."

I suppress a giggle at his last sentence, though my hands clench and unclench the straps of my backpack. I look to Keith and then Sedna as Mr Bathory smiles at us as a parting gesture before making his way down the stairs.

Before Keith and I could make any noise, Sedna takes up the chance to voice her preference in haste, leaving us heaving heavy sighs as a sign of resignation.

"Guess I'm stuck with you." Keith shrugs, looking unbothered with the roommate sorting as he turns the knob of the room slowly. It was bathed in sunlight, with traces of blue setting the theme of the open space. Translucent curtains soften the sharp rays of light from the outside, fluttering as mild wind weaves through the fabric like a dance. The same cloth drapes over the queen-sized bed, accompanied by a tasselled rug as its finishing touch.

A vanity sits beside the bathroom, unmistakably also made with the wood of an oak tree; its attached mirror stretches tall and ends with carved timber. The room's restroom skyrocket past my expectations, as well, with the opulent comfort for a bathtub and wallpaper painted a neutral shade followed by wainscot on the lower part of the walls. A screen with a single embroidered flower stands in the corner of the spacious lavatory for changing garments.

"Woah." The word escapes me, my brain fishing for more compliments to describe the grandiose room.

"Close your mouth, or flies are gonna be moving in." I playfully shove Keith with my right hand, though his reflexes act on auto-pilot, grabbing me by the elbow to drag me down with him. A harsh 'thump!' resonates throughout the room as the backpack slips through my other fist. The landing is soft for both of us, thankfully. The collision ruffles the sheets beneath us, and then within the next second, a sweet fragrance wafts through the air and into our noses.

Again, the gardener returns with a witty remark in my head. ‘It's the scent of Gardenia, where the smell blends in with its surroundings. Enjoy your time with the gargoyle.’—it snaps me out of the trance I caught myself in.

"Er, sorry." I scramble to get my body out of Keith's personal space, almost tripping on the fallen bag in the process. I swallow, turning my back without missing a beat to pick it up. My steps increase in speed to reach the other side of the bed before freezing in place in the midst of unpacking.

"What is it?"

"I just realised we don't have any more clean clothes to wear. Ugh, I hope I don't have to wear my sweat-ridden shirt from the forest trek a day ago."

"Maybe we could borrow some from the house? Abigor did sound like he couldn't care less about having some people in his million-dollar house."
My mouth twists in contemplation, finally shrugging in hopes that he'd provide us with some clothes.

"Finally, my chance to see you in Victorian clothes. I cannot let it go to waste." I grin, eyes twinkling with sheer joy that only makes Keith laugh in disbelief.

"You're unbelievable."

"You've called me that before. Try again." I dismiss his semi-insult, unpacking the packed backpack I've lugged around for the past few days. I hear him feign contemplation, a low, humming sound while finding the perfect insult for me.

"How about incredible?" Keith says softly, my heart jumping over a hurdle while racing with its opponents.

Like a cheesy scene in a movie, I see that his hands rest comfortably in his pockets while the continual blowing wind makes both the blue curtains and his hair fly with a unique form of lightness that not even a feather would possess.

Sedna knocks on our door, its interruption both unfortunate and blessed for both of us. I wouldn't know what words to reply with, but, I do adore our exchanges.

"He wants to talk to us about something. Come on."

I swallow again and nod briefly, failing to spare Keith a glance as I follow the goddess out of the room and downstairs into the foyer. Inevitably, footsteps follow behind me a second later, however sounding more laid-back as compared to the quick ones of mine and Sedna's.

We reach a room, its size similar to that of the foyer. A dining table sits in the middle of the room, with legs thick and sturdy to support its weight. A table runner of significant length and thickness is arranged neatly atop the surface, paired with a bouquet of flowers that takes its place in the centre.

"Sit down, sit down. We mean well in this household, but I do need to tell you something." Abigor states, voice lowering into a murmur. Keith shifts uncomfortably at this, the fabric of his clothing rustling like leaves in a breeze.

"I must mention that I am well acquainted with this young man right here. He was a gargoyle that guarded the house, going all the way back to the days in the 17th century when this house was built. Though he fled from here, and while I still don't know his reason, I want both him," he gestures to Keith, "and his counterparts to know that I hold no hard feelings against him."

I look to Keith's side profile on the other end of the table, noticing the now relaxed features of his face. He sighs before intervening in on Abigor's next words.

"Is it okay if we talk in private, Mr Bathory?"

"It's perfectly fine; and, address me as Abigor, please." The man bids us goodbye as Keith stuffs his hands in his pockets again, patently struggling with something nagging at the back of his mind.

Sedna now looks over to me with a question lingering on the edge of her lips, with eyebrows
furrowed at her confusion.

"You knew about this?" I nod, using Keith's and the host's absence as an opportunity to explain the way we met and everything that he's told me so far.

"You mean he brought you into this realm knowing its dangers?" I nod again.

"Jesus, that boy. Bringing someone who doesn't belong here to exist in this realm has its... consequences—which is why we're making Mr Bathory bring you back as soon as we get a good night's rest."

Their conversation proves to be short, albeit, as the two come stumbling back into the room with smiles that hinted at their rekindled friendship. The tension washes away like blood on a rag, seeping through drains and out of sight now that the two were chatting of their memories together.

"I imagine your fatigue with endless trekking and sleepless nights. How about we bring you your dinner as you get comfortable in your rooms?"

"Are we not dining here?" Sedna asks, standing up nevertheless.

"My wife is afraid of people eating from this table, especially since the condition of our son has worsened over the years. She banned all of us, even herself, from consumption on this table in worries of diseases that may have snuck into our house. Oh, whatever shall I do, with the Masquerade approaching?"

Abigor sighed, "no matter. I'll figure something out soon. Now, if you'll excuse me, I will assist our cook in making your dinner."

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"Are you done yet? You've been in there for way too long!"

"I'm a girl, let me do my stuff."

"Like what? Shave your legs?"

"They're too much time to manage, I'm just chilling in the bathtub."

"(Y/N), I'm being serious—I'm not eating dinner until I'm showered."

"Jeez, alright! I'll clean up, and then it's all yours. Jack your meat for all I care."

"What the fuck is jacking my meat?" He shouts through the wooden door. I refrain from answering, then, my face staining red; he didn't know inappropriate slang.

Sticking to my word, I freshen up and wash off the grime and dirt from the day's work, changing into a comfortable outfit provided by Abigor who, of course, waved it off like it was nothing.

Keith also scrubs himself clean within a short period, coming out of the bathroom fully dressed just as someone knocks on our door.

The tray held in Abigor's hands is filled to the edge, threatening to spill over with the sheer amount...
of food overflowing from the host's grasp.

"Keith, I think you should take this." I open the door wider for the gargoyle to receive the tray of food from Abigor as I feel the familiar warmth of the man's smile. He thanks me silently.

I wait for my turn as a servant passes me his tray of food that mirrors Keith's in amount, but differs in cuisine.

"Ooh, thanks for the meal; and your hospitality."

"No problem, love." Abigor bids us goodnight and signals for the last servant to serve Sedna in the room next to us.

The night ends in laughter and teases, accompanied by getting mildly tipsy from the wine that they provided us with. The trays were now left on the vanity as we lay side by side on the queen-sized bed. It allowed us to spread out our limbs a little, but otherwise, we would collide with the other.

"Hey, where am I gonna sleep?" Keith asks sleepily.

"What do you mean? You're lying on a bed, dummy."

"Aren't we sleeping separately? I'm not gonna want to wake up with your pit in my face."

I smack Keith for the third time today.

"My pit isn't gonna end up in your face, don't worry; we'll just sleep on both ends. Here, I'll make a line down the centre of the bed with pillows." I suggest, already grabbing the spare pillows that were stacked atop the bottom one.

Keith rolls his eyes but back faces me anyway, curling up into a ball before muttering a soft 'goodnight' to me. I smile at his attitude, though I thank the same bravery from before that allowed me to lean over; I never would've taken the shot if the energy of my hydro-related powers didn't pulse through my blood.

I plant a feather-like kiss on his cheek—as if the peck didn't exist at all. He doesn't respond after, though that was expected. I settle down into my end of the bed, trying my best to catch some sleep, though to no avail; even Keith's slow breathing does no work of lulling me to sleep. I wasn't sure about how much time has passed with my constant tossing and turning.

"Is staying here really that dangerous? I'm not sure about what I'll do once this all ends; does it mean Keith will have to remain here?"

I shake my head at the possibilities that flow out of my mouth, while my head cranes to look at the gargoyle beside me. It does nothing to calm a head full of questions and a heart full of trepidation.

"Goodnight, Keith," I say to no one, eyes boring into the velvet material that covered the top of the Tudor bed. "I hope our journey doesn't end after I go back; I'll miss you and your presence." I murmur into the stagnant night while the wind howls from outside.

I only hope for the rustling of leaves and the calm of the darkness to hypnotise me into slumber.
while my feelings rage like a storm in me. I whisper one last thing.

"I think I love you, you stupid gargoyle."
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Learning of the realm's dangers only heighten fear and anticipation.

The blur of the morning doesn't do much for the reflective haze of my mind and the hefty weight of my eyelids with the amount of sleep I managed to claim. My awe with the house's lavishness remained, however, when taking a much-deserved shower as compared to the one I breezed through last night.

The monotonous beating of the water droplets on my back is almost therapeutic when I wash out the soap suds out of my hair. The shower was enough for me to sort out my thoughts and relax, though, if I did have the time, I wouldn't mind indulging in a bath or two before we leave.

Drying off was easy, now that I faced lesser difficulties in controlling the water dripping from my hair. I put on the clothes provided by Abigor—a simple, blue dress with trumpet sleeves; its neckline cutting was in the form of a V-Neck.

"Are you done? I'm all sweaty from the tossing and turning. This bed's seriously terrible when it comes to comfort."

I call out from the bathroom. "Are you sure you slept on the bed? Maybe your stupid ass fell onto the ground in the middle of the night." My fingers fumble with the button at the back of the dress before sticking my head out the door after struggling to nudge it open. "It was perfectly fine for me; you're overreacting. Now stop complaining and help me with this."

With a foot, I push the door until it was wide enough for the other to enter, moving further in while both of my hands remain tangled up behind me. Keith only sighed at my situation and swatted them away, treating each button with surprising delicacy.

"You know, blue does really suit you." Keith murmurs, lost in the world of the easy task I asked him to help me with.

"Really? Maybe it'll suit you too. I guess Abigor's really strict on following colour coordination." I giggle, looking over my shoulder to find that the gargoyle was on the last button. Once he finished, I spun around to wave my hand as a temporary farewell gesture; with a twist of my wrist, a small amount of water flowed from my fingertips and onto the other's face.

"A child; I'm roommates with a child." I caught a hint of a smile on Keith's face before he shooed me away from the door.

Once we were ready, we both make our way down into the dining room, finding that Sedna had already freshened up, though dressed in one of her own creations.

"I forgot she can change her clothing with her powers," I lean over to whisper. She was engaged in a conversion with our host, who was also consuming the first meal of the day.
"Morning guys. How's the-" I manage to cut myself off as I notice the decorations put up around the house. The fabric used for the curtains and our bed was hung in four inverted arcs that met in the middle of the room. The table runner from yesterday was switched out for a cloth that covered the table, and a couple more bouquets were added to conclude the already impressive appearance of the room.

I wander out into the other parts of the house to find that the themed decorations spread from one end of the estate to the other. Feathers stick out from the lamps installed on the walls, mimicking the ones on masquerade masks. The doors of the ballroom were currently open, with Abigor's servants in the midst of setting up the remaining of the room's ornaments.

Foldable tables were being set up along with chairs that matched the table's cloth; faint music travels along the walls of the two-storey house, playing the same melody that sounded in my head.

Indeed, the practice room, right next to the ballroom, was also furnished with chandeliers and plushly cushioned settees that allowed guests to rest their feet after dancing. A violinist practised their solo while the others tuned their instruments and read through the scorebooks.

If this is just the violinist, I cannot imagine how magnificent it'll sound with the whole orchestra playing as one. They don't seem to mind the intrusion as I stand around, taking in the sights while they get comfortable in the space provided for them. Eventually, I take my leave, closing the double doors behind me for some deserved privacy.

I get blocked on my way back to the dining hall, however, by two little kids with jet black hair to match Abigor's. I tilt my head at their confrontation.

"Hello?"

"Hi! I'm Allayia! We noticed that you-" The other yanks her back by her shirt, giving a look of disapproval along with outstretched hands to emphasise his point. The smaller girl just rolls her eyes and detaches his hand from her dress to walk up to me again.

"We noticed you're friends with Uncle Keith when we saw you in the practice room yesterday."

I fake a look of surprise as my mouth morphs into an 'O' shape, offering a hand to the little girl in front of me. "Do you want me to take you to him? You two can call me your noble steed on which you ride on." I swing my fist as a protagonist of a film would, looking to the reluctant brother with hopeful eyes.

"How about you lead, Aiden?" I whisper.

"How do you know my name, lady?" He whispers back, though he still climbs onto my back.

"Uncle Keith told me about you two. He misses you both a lot."

I hear Aiden grumble to himself while I secure Allayia in my arms. I stroll back to the dining room as the girl tells me about what happened.

"Daddy and Mommy married after Daddy stopped being the Duke. He commissioned for this house to be made and when Uncle Keith came alive, he asked for a place to stay. We had fun together until one day Uncle Keith went away without saying anything."
"Wait, how do you know the word commission?"

Aiden speaks up from behind me. "We've been around for preetty long as infants, so we've learned a lot of things within the short amount of time when we've already grown older into younger children."

"You do know you're-"

"Yep, we know, though, our brain washes away our memories sometimes so we can't exactly remember our childhood when we've grown up."

"It kinda sucks." Allayia continues from as she clings onto her brother's arms. "Even now, we struggle to remember Uncle Keith and whatever fun he had with us. I think if he didn't come into the practice room earlier, we wouldn't have recognised him now."

"It's that bad? It's lucky he entered, then, because it'll pain him if he knows you don't remember him." I murmur, head still swirling with a bunch of questions to ask the two. "Do you two mind if I ask about your Mommy?"

Allayia nodded and gestured to Aiden, who picked it up and started to talk as I turned a corner.

"Mommy was a mortal person Daddy fell in love with, and she was a wonder. She'd look immortal to you, now, because she was very, very pretty."

"Yeah! Mommy would always make me sit beside her as she put on her face paint! She was really good at it!"

"It's called make-up, Allayia." Aiden corrected. "She asked us not to worry, but we knew she was sick. We watched from the door while Daddy's servants prevented us from entering. The doctor couldn't do much either since it was a disease that died around 200 years ago."

"Even the doctor didn't know how Mommy got the disease." Allayia talked under her breath, a growing frown on her face. I stay silent for a few seconds, letting only the sounds of my footsteps sound throughout the corridor.

"Do you hate Uncle Keith for leaving you?"

I get mixed responses as the two contemplate over either a 'yes' or 'no', finally giving up when I continue.

"At least you still recognise Uncle Keith, and you two seemed okay with talking about him. It's hard to hate him, huh?" Both of them nod while we finally reach the dining hall.

"Maybe at the time he left but... after that, we were just sad." Allayia piped, the pout on her face reaching an all-time low when I place her on the ground. Aiden climbs off my back and sets his smaller hand in mine; his sister follows suit.

"Are you two okay with meeting Uncle Keith? If not, you're free to go now; you can tell me when you're ready."

"Don't worry, kind lady, I think I'm readier than my brother," Allayia claims proudly.
"More ready."

Allayia only sighed at his grammatical prod but stood her ground anyway, puffing out her chest in a dramatic manner.

"Abigor had to help with the ballroom decor, so he's currently not here. Sedna followed." Keith said, still devouring the morning's breakfast with enthusiasm as if he hadn't eaten just the night before. The three of us wordlessly enter the room as the gargoyle continues to inhale the food with no knowledge of the two children.

When his statement garnered no noise, he turned back to face us as a flurry of emotions pass through his expression which settles down into a melancholy and longing look.

"Aiden? Allayia?" I crouch down and ease my hands out of theirs, smiling as a form of encouragement.

Keith audibly sucks in a breath as he lowers down to his knees, controlled and tense like a rusty machine which has yet to be oiled. As the two approach the gargoyle, he briefly meets my eyes with his own stained with an emotion that was beyond belief.

"Do you remember Uncle Keith?"

Allayia choking up a little but gives her response while Aiden struggles to form words.

"Do you remember me, Aiden?" Keith repeats, a hand inching closer to the boy's small face.

Again, he says nothing but rushes forward to engulf the gargoyle in a bear-crushing hug. Allayia joins a seconds later as she sobs shakily into Keith's shoulder. I watch on as Aiden sniffs, too, beginning to hiccups even before his tears have fallen.

"Hey, hey, shh, I'm here now. Uncle Keith is sorry for leaving so fast." He gulps before wiping the tears flowing from both of their eyes and arranging their unkempt hair to its rightful place. "Do you want something to eat? Uncle Keith will tell you about why he had to leave."

They numbly ate their bread as Keith dragged a chair to the corner of the table so he could be between the two. He spoke with a dramatised version of how he'd fled the house and met me in the bus, skipping our intimate moments and stolen kisses as he told the story. Keith eventually led up to our battle with Naberius and the discovery of the house.

Aiden's and Allayia's tears were long gone as Keith concluded the story with a ruffle to each of their heads; he directed an appreciative look toward me before entertaining the two children again.

Abigor strolls in, deep in conversation with the sea goddess before he halts in his steps. He refrains from apprising the trio of their presence and chooses, instead, to observe the scene from afar. Aiden, however, realises his father standing at the far end of the room and smiles, beckoning the older man over to the dining table.

"And just what Uncle Keith was telling you about?"

"How he ran away, fought evil people and protected the kind lady and-"
I laugh. "Take a breather, Allayia." My elbow rests on the ear of the chair while I rearrange the girl's messy hair.

"Come to think of it, the kind lady didn't tell us her name." Aiden giggles, pointing his finishing piece of bread at me like a sword. I heard a grunt and a soft reprimand of Abigor's before the boy sets his food down obediently.

Keith beats me to it, though, and says my name with the same emotion I couldn't place in his eyes earlier. I break contact and stare at Allayia's plate of unfinished eggs, concealing a small smile that was growing on my face.

While the two continue to repeat my name along with Keith, I approach Sedna quietly and spout out an excuse I made up to speak with the goddess privately.

"Sedna, are we planning to depart soon? Didn't you say the realm was gonna affect me at some point? What kind of 'affect' exactly?"

She heaved a sigh. "It's time I told you, anyway. The realm possesses a line of barrier around the immortal being that prevents the person from getting infected."

"Infected from what?"

"Calm down, I manage to put a barrier around you when you first came into the realm. I'm one of the four that work for the 'government,'" Sedna quote with her fingers before continuing, "in this realm."

"So you're basically Secret Service," I state, a look of amazement crossing my features.

"You can call it that, yeah. I manage the sea, while my sisters of the sky and earth control and overlook their respective elements." Before I can open my mouth to ask, she talks about her last sister. "My youngest sister is a little bit temperamental and manages Hell along with Baal. She is a little younger than the three of us but handles problems that come her way with professionalism that even sometimes I don't have. Our meetings are scarce due to the chaos that would ensue if we leave our post, and we haven't seen one another in years."

I gestured to all of her.

"I know, but I have someone to take my place on the throne for a little while. The woman currently taking over is someone I trust dearly; she's been with me for many years. We all work for the Gods above which is the highest position in our realm. They decide the final ultimatum or bill that any of their parliament members bring up."

"Oh sweet baby Jesus, I thought everything I read about was fake. I can't believe Paimon's real and everything about- oh my God."

"Except Paimon's a girl in here, don't forget. I already knew of your existence when you first touched Keith's hand in the bus and made sure you were protected from the contagious disease of the Red Death. As of now, you're protected by my own creation, but I'm not sure how long my shield will last."

"Immortals are guaranteed that shield, then?" Sedna nods in response, though stays silent after her elaboration. I ponder over everything she's told me and finally decide to talk.
"But you said Red Death. Didn't the Great Plague happen in 1665? Is there any relation to it?"

"It differs in both realms. The Red Death's been going on for centuries, though we aren't sure exactly why either. Someone must have slipped out from the immortal realm to infect your mortal world with the Great Plague. Our epidemic names don't mirror each other though."

"That's so... weird. Why would anyone do that? Isn't it easier for reference if you just stuck to the same name?"

"I'm in no place to say anything, don't look at me like that." The goddess raised both her eyebrows. "What I'm saying is, the Red Death has been around for when the first immortal was born. Our world was made as such that everyone who was born immortal would have the bubble of protection around them at all times. Bringing you into here is dangerous and isn't encouraged. There are spells to counter the disease and shield the person, but no one has observed the effects of the Red Death on a mortal... unless you'd like to be the first."

I roll her eyes at her dark humour and her cheeky smile.

"You're the one who put the protection on me, you probably know how long it'll last, right?"

Sedna shakes her head, followed by a shrug and a sheepish scratch of her nape; I sigh in defeat at her reply. "I'm so fucked, what am I gonna do? Why did Keith even bring me in here?"

"The reason at the top of my head would be that you wouldn't feel embarrassed. The second one would be the fact that he didn't want to embarrass himself either." She places a hand on my shoulder as her voice lowers into a whisper.  

"Moreover, Keith felt lost when he first entered the realm. He needed someone like you—a laid-back, but also a headstrong person. Your bubbly personality and sardonic responses allowed him to calm his nerves. You might not see the change, but Keith was much more closed-up than when you first met him. He chose to tell you his story on the bus because he felt something in you that he could confide in. It's fate, kinda, if you want to call it that."

"Fate is shit, I'm supposed to be studying now, but I'm stuck in a realm frowned upon by my own people with a vampire-turned-wizard, two immortal kids, a sea goddess and a sentient gargoyle. I seriously am really fucked." My hand stay glued to my forehead in disbelief, eyes closed for dramatic effect.

"I understand if my information is messing with your brain, but you needed to know this sooner or later."

"Okay, cool, no biggie! I'm just a lowly mortal learning about the advanced government you guys have and the possibility that I might literally die in this realm."

Now, it was the goddess' turn to roll her eyes.

"What about our departure from the Bathory house?"

"Heh, about that..."

"I didn't do anything! I just uh-inquired about whether we could stay for a while more before leaving. Plus, she's not coming back until a week later, and the masquerade is in three days; we're safe."

"Why?! I can't afford to miss university classes!"

"Hello? A masquerade ball is approaching? You must be out of your mind to not have the thought of attending it cross your conscious!"

"What are we even going to wear to the ball?" I asked, a little too loudly for our host to hear.

"Outfits made by the exceptional seamstresses of my knowledge, of course! I've designed them to be more modern since I don't imagine you want to be wearing tight corsets and cage crinolines." He sashays from his place behind Aiden's chair to take his place beside us within a second.

I hold my hand in a silent protest, gaining an understanding look from Abigor.

"They will be ready just before the masquerade, though you will have no chance to try it on before. If anything is too tight or loose, I'll help you mend it."

Abigor notices that I was well on my way to ask about that cryptic statement but only held out a hand as an answer. He swiftly blew on his palm, where the breeze carried small sparkles and dust that shone in the light.

"Right... you're the wizard we were looking for. Mending with magic?"

"Yes, with magic- and oh, please, refer to me as a magician, dear; 'wizard' makes me sound so old!" Abigor lets a hearty laugh escape before shooting both of us a wink. "I'm off to assist my workers with the crafting of your outfits, now. Ta-ta!"

"That wink was definitely meant for you." I teased, walking away from our conversation as I stand and watch the trio interact. Keith never ceased in his storytelling and Aiden's and Allayia's interest never dwindled.

As much as I wish for life to be this fulfilling, I wouldn't bet anything on it considering an atrocious Duchess was hot on our heels.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Arguments and the masquerade's flowers. How hard could it be?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next two days fly by with the amount of entertainment provided with Abigor's massive estate. Along with the two children and Keith, it was hard to keep a straight face with the gargoyle's persistent jokes and the laughter of Aiden and Allayia.

The preparations for the masquerade also went well underway, transforming the grand house into a magical place with glimmering lights and taking away the initial eerieness that lingered in the corridors.

Lamps of different colours graced the ballroom that put the sunlight to shame, allowing their light to dance around in the open space like a wardrobe of outfits blending in with the ones beside them. The chandeliers produced temporary light for the ballroom, though will be switched off for the actual event.

Emerging from the bedroom just before the morning sun strikes, I wander down the stairs in search of the dining room for some water to quench my thirst. In the darkness, I manoeuvre around couches and the home's floor plants, inching around the unfamiliar space.

The marble floor felt cold and chilly, while my feet begged for comfort; they seemed to sigh in relief as they met with the rug of the dining room. In the middle of the room's table sat a single orb of light, bathing the place in dim crimson light. The source of light had no base, like a candelabra, nor a catalyst, like firewood, to keep the spark from snuffing out.

My eyes never leave the orb of light as I pour myself a glass of water, the sound of water mixing with the sounds of the world waking up. Birds chirp and branches sway slowly in the morning breeze, though the sun never rises. Like a moth to a flame, intuition brings me closer where I am in no place to fight the pull; the light brightens with each step of mine.

The cup of water I poured for myself is left abandoned on the side table as my hand inches closer with the hesitance of a thousand worlds. I stand frozen with the bright light shining across my face; the spark sends shadows dancing in and out of my peripheral vision.

As soon as my fingers come in contact with the unknown entity, they retract swiftly, while the remnants of a scalding linger on my hand. It was similar to sticking a hand into a furnace, while fiery fire crackles and hot ash bursts from its entrance. Immediately, the light diminishes into a small blue spark before bursting into millions of colours that occupy the room.

The colours move around like wandering souls, messy and discordant, but soon assemble into a vision similar to the ones in the garden. The Duchess then enters my sight, though she seemed to be frailer and her appearance didn't mirror a ruler's. Her eyes remain crimson, however, caused by
sickness and not by anger. A cloak wraps itself around her body, while white fur decorates the outer material; it stains red like her eyes.

Around the dishevelled woman, chaos rings out throughout the area. People run loose like rabid dogs, while billows of smoke taint the once blue sky. I'm unable to feel the rush of cacophonous energy clashing with one another, but I'm beckoned forward by the Duchess herself; my feet obey.

My hip didn't seem to mind the pain as it collided with the dining table, finally hearing the panicked screams and flying debris that littered my vision.

"Hurry up, now, dear son! Your legs are for running, are they not?"

I open my mouth to reply, but the voice that comes out isn't my own.

"I'm trying, Mother! This plague is slowing me down."

The Duchess just sighs in resignation and lurches forward, picking her son up effortlessly. From up here, the dirtied floor looks so distant and far that I'd be afraid to be dropped. Her dress messes with her footsteps, sometimes causing unintended trips and stumbles over the uneven concrete.

The string used to moor the boat hung onto their last threads, tearing apart as the Duchess all but dumps her son into the wooden canoe. I feel the boy's frustration growing, as well as the spread of the Great Plague within the small body of his. Once the woman rows out far enough from the port, I can feel the rush of water in my hair and in my clothes.

Again, my voice calls out with a grappling edge as bubbles float to the surface. "Mother! Mother?! Why are you doing this?!" Even in the water, my cry stands crystal clear, whereas the Duchess has trouble talking. With a hand, she materialises back into a spirit while she engulfs her son with both arms. Her spirit form seems to allow the boy to breathe, but even then, he gulps for breath after every few minutes. Eventually, the ocean floor becomes visible as a dark-skinned man emerges from a cave. He dons a golden crown embedded with crystals of different sizes, possibly mined from the rocks nearby.

"Greetings, Duchess Vivienne. Here so soon?" The man was dressed from in a brown robe while a shawl rests on his shoulders. Tied to his hip was a sheath for the weapon he wielded, and on his face, a mocking smirk.

"Shut your mouth, King Arno. We're out of time, and the city is burning to its bone. Have you got it?"

"Fitted just for you, it's ready."

"And will your daughter be silenced and tamed?" The Duchess held no eye contact.

"Of course, a deal is a deal in my culture. No more floods and disasters."

"I'll see to it if you refuse to hold your word." She spat with poison, before turning toward her cowering son. "Come, boy, this is the point of no return. Mother will see you very soon, alright?"

The boy's explicit discontent slips through the facade he had on, face contorted into disagreement and confusion with each plea he gave out. The Duchess only continued her sweet talk, dipped in honey and topped with cream; she swam back to the canoe after.
Through his eyes, I see his mother's silhouette fade away along with the darkening water he was being dragged into, with arms flailing around wildly and a shriek that stains my mind.

The realistic vision ends abruptly in contrast to how it began, its coloured illuminations dying down and withered into the dining table and eventually, the show ends when the room is cast into darkness. The extinguished light emits strong, unwavering energy, causing me to stumble under its power. A bated breath escapes me without warning, while the windows near the top of the walls invite the delayed sunlight of the morning. They wash over me like a god's blessing that arrived too late, tinting my face with yellow and orange as the dawn's events weigh down on me.

One person stands in the doorway as my eyes refocus on my surroundings.

"Keith," I whisper, the name rolling off my tongue with ease.

In the next moment, my knees crumble, and my head spins around a pivot. The gargoyle wastes only a second before lunging with a long stride in hopes that he'd catch me safely. Luckily, before my knees meet the floor, Keith manages to reach me in time.

"Did you see that, Keith?" I feel the faint movement of a nod against my head and then followed by his arm around my waist as he assists me to one of the chairs.

"If she's sailing away, that means she must be going to Italy. That messed up place was London in 1665—she must have needed to fetch her son from England since he was wearing a school uniform." I murmured.

"It would make sense that that was the case. The Royals are usually remarkably rich and uncaring, even when the people in their country are dying."

I shrug as my knees regain the strength from before, my head manages to clear, too. Keith recognises my intention for my morning wander, bringing me the glass of water that I'd poured earlier. Fear strikes me, however, when the water turns a deep red as my fingers hover over the cup; it reminds me of the spirit's bloodshot eyes that send chills running throughout my body.

"The realm's Red Death is affecting you with every day you stay here, love. I granted three days per Šedna's request, and I pose no displeasure with having you here, but it is not fit for you to stay."

Abigor enters on a perfectly timed cue, and with one flick, his hand transforms the contaminated liquid into clear water.

"I'll leave after the masquerade—I don't want to die at the hands of an unpreventable disease, anyway. But what I won't do, is leave when Duchess Vivienne is coming for something that I didn't even want."

"You're not going to take her on, are you, love?" Abigor asks timidly, yet his appearance still stood tall.

I shrug again, looking to Keith for answers. I hoped he had something to say, considering he was the one that was set on avenging Abigor's wife. Albeit, he proved me wrong when he stayed silent on the matter which made my thoughts spiral into a deeper maze.

I raise an eyebrow. "You're supposed to be helping me out here."
"I know I said I wanted to, but uhm, we've seen what she can do first-hand. Does that not scare you? Plus, I talked with Abigor and told him about the flower that the gardener gave you. He knows about his wife's intentions, and he doesn't feel like he should have other people destroy the Duchess for him."

"I am immortal, child. You do not need to worry about me."

I ignore Abigor's statement, sighing as I turned toward Keith in my seat. "The whole reason why I agreed to help you, Keith, was because of the story you told me on the bus and in my apartment. You look so broken and full of rage that I was convinced you'd turn the whole world around on your fury. We all know now that Duchess Vivienne was the stupid asshole that just had to travel over to Italy with her infected body and threw her son into an ice block so that he could be conserved until she could find the cure! If you weren't angry before, I'd imagine you to be tearing the hair off your head by now, Keith! What happened to that drive when I first met you on the bus? Is this not our fight?"

"Because it isn't, dimwit! This isn't our battle to interfere with your pity for me just because I told you about my story! Abigor's been around for centuries-"

I cut him off, standing up in my exasperation. With legs still unstable, my hands find the timber of the dining table as support. "I know he's existed for centuries, but every injury he suffers is a threat to his death!"

"He's immortal!"

"Quiet." Abigor holds up a hand to stop us from arguing any further, his authoritative voice halting our next words instantly.

"In this time, Vampire numbers are diminishing. Vampire hunters cross over to our realm with every chance they can get, as with other types of immortals. They're equipped with special shields that allow them to roam our land without being affected by the Red Death. In this realm, the same consequence applies to everyone: If they are the last living one of their kind, injuries are likely to kill off the species. You wouldn't believe it if I told you that there were many more different types of immortal people and animals that existed way before humanity even came around. Some are greedy, unfortunately; that led some of the most beautiful creatures to their extinction. (Y/N), in this case, is correct."

"Wh-what? So there's a possibility you'll die?" Keith turned around to face Abigor, distraught clear on his pale face. Abigor only nods in response before his face settles into a solemn expression.

"If you really want to avenge his wife, protect your master, first," I muttered, using the regained strength in my legs to walk away from our heated dispute.

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"He's just so- argh!" I have no words left, instead opting to throw my hands up in sheer frustration. Sedna only sighs at my outburst while she sips from her cup of tea, choosing not to say a thing since I've cut her suggestions off from the moment she pulled me away.
"Wasn't his intention of dragging me into this whole thing to help him? Why is he backing out now?"

"You don't know the Duchess' powers. He might just be worried about you."

"Or worried about himself." I scoffed, staring out Sedna's window with hands on my hips. Her curtains were green instead of blue like ours, her Tudor bed, too, differed a little in design and drapes. The vanity was a little smaller than our room's, and the bathroom was decorated in iridescent tiles.

"Either way, he wants no involvement with the thing that he so loved so much—this household, its master and his two immortal children... and his late wife. I don't understand; what changed his mind?"

Sedna shrugs at my question, setting the cup of tea down on the bedside table with caution and poise.

"It's no place to be fighting now. The masquerade is approaching tonight, and you shall have fun before returning."

"I'm not returning until she's put in her place."

"Do you even know what she has planned?" The goddess enquired mockingly. "Are you even capable of bringing her down?"

I stutter at the question, shifting my weight on both feet as I contemplate the answer. "I'll- I'll train, or something! I've been practising my powers for the past few days, and I'm getting better at my telekinesis."

"You don't just get better at something in a week, (Y/N). Plus, how are you going to take her down? You'll need a foolproof plan, a myriad of allies on your side, the Duchess' weaknesses. That's a lot of things."

"You'll help me?" I say sheepishly while my shoulders rise to my ears.

Sedna rolls her eyes. "Of course I'll help you."

My shoulders slump with relief at her statement, propping my head on my elbow on the window sill as I look out to the empty, monotonous fields that stretch all the way until they escape my sight. The air closes around me; it makes me feel like I'm dreaming. I'm floating amongst stars and swimming in oceans where I need not breathe—and then it all comes at once.

Blue and blue and blue everywhere.

Water from the aqueducts overflows onto the vast expanse of green, crashing into the neighbouring wave with intensity and grace. The strong currents don't shake the building, however, but abates within seconds to reveal a city bursting to life. Women dressed in long, flowy dresses that end at the heel, while donning large-brimmed hats with feathers as its decoration. Men wore tight suits with expensive, patterned fabric and shoes that shone under the sunlight. Golden gates stand tall against intruding folks, while a large garden takes its place in front of the house that burst out in colour. A stone path leads from the gates to the doorstep of the estate, while smaller, secondary walkways stretch out in symmetric directions for visitors to view the flowers. In the centre of the
trail of cobblestone, a fountain.

I blink once, twice, willing to dream to go away. It lingers in my sight, refusing to leave—until I realise that it rings true that this was the scenery outside the window.

"Sedna, come see this."

"I already am." I can hear her wonder and awe as she stands behind me, the deep blue of her hair mirroring the waters that just travelled through the land.

Scrambling down the stairs, I reach the entrance of the house in record time to see that the gates were visible from a distance. Street vendors called out with a rough voice while the click-clacking of the hooves of horses echoed throughout the area. Atop the highest tier of the fountain stood a carved woman that looked awfully like Sedna; her vase of water travelled down in a straight line, enabling the cycle of the system. A porte-cochère, crafted with stark white stone and glimmering gold stood majestically over my head.

With the curious footfalls of mine, I briskly walk to the dining room only to find that it was abandoned compared to the several figures that occupied the space just this morning.

Searching the household took a longer time than I expected, the marble floors and towering walls seemingly expanding beyond its original size to when it existed in the open field. More rooms fill my vision as I walk past those already lavishly furnished and decorated, mapping out the wreaths hung on the double doors in my head in case I lose my way in the midst of the party. At the end of the long corridor, I stop in front of the ballroom where Abigor was on his way to draw the curtains that covered the full-length windows.

"Abigor! Did you see what happened outside? The grass changed into a city that's just crazy with activity!"

Abigor only grins and shrugs, securing the drapes with a tieback which end had a glowing piece of rock. It looked newly polished and resembled a full moon; its texture was smooth and allowed a prism of colours shine through. At its bottom, a small brown tassel was attached, possibly made of the same material as the curtains. He noticed my curiosity with the jewel, speaking up as I turned it over to observe the creation.

"Moonstone. Each of the gemstones that I own is installed in these drapes. Many of them came as gifts from foreign states and empires that presented our son with jewels. Since he wasn't immortal, they thought expensive, sought-after items were a little boy's wish." He sighed before tracing a finger along the surface, following the reflected glare gradually.

"No use mourning over something in the past now," Abigor straightened his posture, clasping his hands together before gesturing to the entrance of the ballroom. "Will you help me with a teeny, tiny favour before the masquerade commences this evening?"

I nod immediately at the request.

"Splendid! I need you to go out to the marketplace of the city you just saw and help me with an errand that involves the florist just down the street. I will have this written down on your hand in invisible ink so don't fret if you're unable to remember. In a vertical floral arrangement, I need red dahlia, maroon snapdragons, blue lisianthuses, veronicas and asters and lastly, white larkspurs; ask the florist to finish it with ivy, hosta and euphorbia." Immediately, a tingling sensation works
its way up my arm; the hidden text shows itself before fading from my sight.

"I need this next one in an oval-shaped arrangement; these two types of flowers are both pink—china asters and zinnias. The florist should fill in the gaps with wild verbena, but if he doesn't, would you be so kind as to remind him?" With his second request, another breeze brushes through my other arm; thankfully, this list is a tad bit shorter. "Try your best to return by sundown, dear."

"Okay, sure!"

Approaching the front doors with a skip in my step, I nearly step out without currency and a jacket. However, a servant who stood by the door gives me an envelope without any words and then hands me a piece of apparel which I recognise as Keith's. A tilt of my head conveys my confusion, but they just smile as they unlatch the lock of the massive double doors.

The eagerness and anticipation of seeing the 18th-century city took over my initial perplexity as I stroll down to come face to face with the golden gates that I'd seen earlier. They open for me without any password or command; the rich gold seemed to be filled with whispers of encouragement to roam the marketplace as I desired to.

Wild traffic presented itself to be prominent and active at this time of day, with horses carrying the rich around in carriages and while those who operated stores transported their supplies in wooden wheelbarrows. Others rode on horses alone as they sported layers of leather and silk with boots that end at their knees.

It was easy to spot the florist's shop from here, especially with their flowers bursting with an array of colour against the dull and plain colours of the dresses and suits that passed by. The earlier excitement was replaced with bitterness and dread, noticing that the gargoyle was currently conversing with the man running the stall. The man gathers the flowers that he'd requested, wrapping it up nicely and providing the foam needed for the bouquet. Keith waits patiently for the second set of flowers, though I realised that standing in the middle of the roads made me look like a fool.

"A bouquet of pink china asters and uh... pink zinnias; oval arrangement." I saw nonchalantly, without sparing a glance toward the gargoyle beside me. Neither apologised, which highlighted the current bad blood between us. I feel eyes on me as I direct my attention toward the busy florist inserting stalks of wild verbena, choosing to focus on the prices in front of me instead of giving into temptation.

"You know I'm not angry at you, right?" Keith mutters with a strain to his voice, hearing the familiar crisp of the wrapping paper as his fist clenched.

"You didn't say a word for the whole morning, I assumed you were."

Keith audibly sighs. "I was working up how to talk to you, though I changed my mind when I heard you talking to Sedna."

"I- You heard all that?"

"Well, only the part where you said 'He's just so- argh!' and when you assumed about why I was hesitant about helping. Oh, and also the one where you're confident about eliminating the Duchess."
"Okay yeah, I get it, you don't need to rub it in my face."

Keith only rolls his eyes. "I have sensitive hearing."

"Really?" I look at him for the first time since our morning quarrel.

"No. I have a tendency to annoy someone that's right beside me though."

It was my turn to roll my eyes in response. I don't say anything and receive the bouquet from the florist's waiting hands before telling him my next order. Looking down at my arm, the list of flowers appear on my skin as I read them out.

"Blue lisianthuses, veronicas and asters, white larkspurs, maroon snapdragons and lastly, red dahlias. Could you finish it with ivy, hosta and euphorbia? Vertical."

"Can I add in a single pink peony? Separate order." Keith only smiles as the two large arrangements render his hands full. My mind then drifts to the single peony he'd requested for, wondering what he needed it for.

"You people are driving me crazy with your orders." The florist joked with a smile on his face as he bundled my bouquet up and touched it up with a ribbon before handing it to me. "The magician's orders for the masquerade, I presume." I nod with a matching smile, dropping the money from the pouch into his hand. I turn on my heel to head back to the house-turned-mansion as the gargoyle collects his final order.

"You coming?" I call out to Keith, his single peony perched atop one of the larger bouquets as he made his way to me. The last glimpse I saw of the florist was a knowing grin directed toward Keith and me.

The people's eyes follow us from the street up to the entrance of the house, feeling their burning gaze on our backs. As the gates open to welcome us in, I glance behind to find that their heads were already turned, hiding the curiosity with indifference while carrying on with their lives.

"Why were they all looking at us?" I whisper.

"Oh no, they were all looking at you, I'm sure." Keith beams, mirroring the one that our florist had on earlier.

I only shrug in response to his explanation. What was he on about?

Chapter End Notes

i'm sorry i'm so bad at updating chapters pls forgive me :^)
Chapter Fifteen

The madness of the masquerade catches up with the Duchess’ entrance.

The walk back from the street wasn't particularly uncomfortable, though I expected the silence from the other. Abigor was quick in his steps as he greeted us from the doorway with a tense air around him; servants scurried to take the bouquets from us upon the order of their master, followed by mixed tones of 'yes, sir's coming from behind the abundance of flowers.

"What is it?" I asked softly, provoking Abigor to look around for any eavesdropping individual. He relaxed visibly, his steps carrying a lighter weight as he brought us to a more secluded part of the home.

"A servant of mine told me that he's seen a shape floating amongst the hallways of the house, though he wasn't sure if it was real."

"It's your wife, unmistakably. Why else would there be a hovering spirit out to haunt us?" I grimace at the harshness of Keith's sarcastic question before he speaks up again. "Is there anything else your servant observed about the figure?"

"I'd have to ask him again on that. He did not specify its appearance or anything like that." Keith shrugged at the answer, dumping the change from the florist back into the magician's unanticipated hands.

"I might be able to confirm the identity if you could get the information from your servant. Years of being something that guards a house really can sharpen someone's detection skills. I'm surprised I hadn't joined a detective firm." My eyebrows furrowed at his joke, though however small, it didn't phase Abigor as he sent us a curt nod—and within a second, another command rang throughout the walls.

I raised an eyebrow at the other.

"What? It's tempting whenever I went out to help him and get stuff in the 17th century. The drama amongst everyone was overflowing that sometimes I'd get involved."

My mouth opened as a question threatened to spill.

"Not in that way. I just asked them for whatever they'd found unusual, and it was pretty much solved under twenty-four hours." Keith said smugly, now walking backwards with arms crossed in front of him.

"Watch out for the stairs, you dumbass," I muttered, catching the gargoyle by his waist at the last minute. "You're going to be bumping into many more things without me here." The sentence passes by without much thought as I ascend the stairs toward our shared room, unaware of the sheer pressure of my words.

Closing the door to the room, I notice two exquisite packages neatly wrapped and placed on either side of the bed. The addressed recipient seemed to correspond to where we'd slept the previous
nights; Keith's faced the wall on the sun-covered mattress, while mine was closer to the window. The light provided a whisper of magic, somehow, to both of our parcels. Letters that spelt out our names on parchment with ink appeared to glow under the rays of the sun.

My curiosity is interrupted, however, when a brooding Keith walks into the room with a stroll that could match a tortoise's. He only dismissed my (curiosity-turned) confusion with a wave of his hand, and very much like me, had his attention stolen by the wrapped paper laying on the soft bedding.

"What's this?" I shrug, telling him that I preferred to open it together with him when he asked another question about why my package was still unopened.

The crunch of paper seems to never end in the room as we unravel the items wrapped in coloured parchment and crêpe paper. Its decorative ribbons match the hue of the fabric inside which never seem to end as I pull it out. The shape of the dress spreads out naturally as I examine the beautiful cut of the gown. Its neckline adopts a Queen Anne's design with the collar propped up against the wearer's neck. The long sleeves fan out at the elbows, and the dress expands at the waist area. It takes on a burgundy colour, with charmeuse as the main fabric; lightweight cotton lines the underside of the apparel, allowing wind to travel through the garment in hot weather.

It shines under the daylight; no doubt it'd do the same under the coloured lights of the ballroom.

Something prods at my back, then, prompting me to turn around to find a fluttering hanger with a pair of tiny wings attached to its inverted hook. It circles up and over me excitedly, with my eyes going in all places to keep it in sight. It voluntarily slips the sleeves onto its arms, hovering over to a wall-installed hook to allow the dress to flow freely. A headdress carved into a circular shape also shoots up from depths of the wrapped paper, seemingly annoyed that it was left behind; it, too, settles onto the hook and loses its charm as soon as it gained it.

I look over to Keith with a mesmerised expression, a surprised smile gracing my features. The clothing in the gargoyle's package felt on edge, as well, waiting to be let out of the stuffy parchment.

"Is he going to make you wear tights?" I giggle.

"I hope the hell not." Keith sighed.

A simple white shirt, a black waistcoat and an undone tie was the first piece of clothing to reach our eyes; under that, there was a suit jacket of the colour that matched my dress. Embroidered with gold at the ends at the sleeves, it looked like it would cost thousands just to obtain it.

Keith placed the other pieces of clothing on the bed, revealing the final parts of the tuxedo. Holding up a pair of pants, he heaved another sigh at it before putting it beside the mess of parchment and crepe paper. "I desperately hope this fits me." At his beaten-down tone, a laugh escaped me without effort.

"At least it's not tights," I state, turning on my heel to shower as the bathroom presents its vacancy like a newly-bought present. "When I'm done, please exit, I do need to get ready." I purse my lips and flutter my lashes for dramatic effect—it manages to make Keith smile for a bit before he relaxes on the bed; the clothes hovers around on its own in its particular order, finally descending on the arms of the hanger.

The shower in the luxurious bathroom proved itself of the same quality as the previous days. I clean myself slowly, taking my time as I rest my feet in the bathtub and let the hot water do its
wonders. The steam fogs up the mirror as I brush my wet hair into place before removing the water from within. With a towel wrapped around me, I prepare to exit the bathroom—though something else happens before I can. The mirror clears in a minute, urging me to turn my head to the empty space behind me.

"Talented little bird, aren't you?" She pauses. A chuckle breaks through the tantalising silence, and the howl of the unnatural wind in the small washroom was haunting to the bone.

"You here to ruin my life too?" I calmly reply the spirit as it floats beside me. Its breath was clear against my neck, putting me in my place with a silent warning. The water against my face feels cool, though it doesn't compare to the chills that run through my body at the Duchess' quick manoeuvres.

Something in me tugs at my arms, a feathery but ceaseless sensation that makes its way up and down; it annoys me, though it halts at the murmur of the spirit.

"Oh no, you're not part of my range. Too skinny and weak, even for a half-immortal." I can feel her taunts despite seeing no physical presence—it was like a slap to the face as she hovers next to me. "You do know the person that I'm doing this for; surely, you'd forgive a wretched mother like me." She travels under my skin like a bug, chewing away at my flesh in a desperate endeavour to tempt me.

"Were you the one who showed me the vision?" The whisper of her answer was faint amongst the heavy breaths I took. "Why did you do it?"

"So you'd understand that I wasn't just a crazy woman; I have motives like everyone else. I'm sure you get it, don't you?"

"Motives like personally bringing the plague to Italy? Mass genocide of a race that flocked to your country in search of refuge? How are those motives? Do you know how many people suffered under your rule? It's one thing to suck at ruling a state and another to be an absolute xenophobe; it just so happens that you're both." I spat, turning around to come face to face with her disgruntled expression. Red with anger, I stalk up to her with a finger pointed to her chest. "A woman like you have no place in royalty, nor in this world. I'd die before I let you do anything like that again."

"I'd like to see you and your friends try. Time is ticking and, frankly, you're out of it." She presents a wintry grin toward me after her threat. All I hear, then, is a discordant cackle before she disappears completely, leaving me in a daze as I stare blankly at my reflection. Only the frantic shout of Keith's distract me from the words circling around in my brain, relentless and unending.

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"What is it? Hey!"

My fingers don't do their job—they fumble with the door handle for a couple of seconds before I successfully manage to unlock it. The gargoyle searches my face for an answer, though it was hard to form any kind of words with the warning in my head.

His hands land on my shoulders as he checks for injuries, but visibly relaxes when he finds none on my body.

"What was it that you saw? I heard you shouting, and I asked you to open the door but... it seemed like your ears were blocked... or something."

"I did feel a strain on my arms earlier; they were aching to open the door. But no... it might be too
late, after all."

"Too late for what?" Keith squeezed my shoulders in curiosity and fear, although he showed more of the latter on his face. "Use your words, dumbass!"

"The spirit, Keith. It's her, I saw her in there; we're out of time, and I don't understand what that means! How soon until she comes?" I brush off his persistent hands, pacing the room with apprehensive steps that didn't seem to stop. My mind races faster than any cheetah, thinking over the different options of what the Duchess could've meant.

In a blur, Keith's hand makes their way onto my elbows, seizing them to prevent me from striding in a panic. I end up near the window where even the billowing curtains trigger anticipative alarms in my head; the wooden windows creak under the breeze, setting an eerie atmosphere.

"Breathe. Follow me, in... and out." The gargoyle shakes my elbows in agitation, signalling the ends of his tolerance for my incessant mumblings. He gives me a few minutes to collect myself, leading my stiff feet to the edge of the bed. "Start to finish, tell me the story."

"You're not really good at comforting people, aren't you?"

"Focus, (Y/N)."

I roll my eyes at his demand, brushing a hand through my wet hair and adjusting the towel around my body. With everything that's happened, it felt like a second shower would be necessary.

"She appeared when I was drying my hair. I asked her if she was the one who showed me the vision in the dining room from this morning and she said yes. It was the reason that she gave that pissed me off; that's why I shouted. I think I might have said something that changed her plans."

"Changed her plans, how?"

"Well, Sedna did acquire information that Duchess Vivienne was returning a week later. That's why she asked for three more days of accommodation, where we can enjoy the masquerade without the intrusion of that crone..." I lift my shoulders into a shrug, "...and also because she really wanted to attend the party. Saying the stuff I did, probably changed her mind about her grand entrance."

"It was going to happen eventually, though. You can't stay here long, either, can you?" I shake my head, my legs find shelter under my chin and in my arms—they provide temporary comfort.

"Sedna's bubble helps me from contracting the Red Death of the realm, but even she doesn't know how long it'll last."

Keith heaves a sigh at my elaboration, now having his head in his hands in exasperation while his mind formulates a plan.

"You are thinking of a plan, right?"

"I think so; can't concentrate with you in your towel though."

"Oh! Uhm-"

"It's okay, I'll leave you to put on your dress. Take your time."

Heeding his request, I throw some water to rid of the cold sweat running down my body with the
earlier interaction. The dress willingly slips off the hanger and lands straight in my hands, where the satin material feels ethereal and heavenly. The piece of apparel spreads out in a fan, with the middle open for me to step into. As it slides up my body, the buttons on the back click with ease, making it less of a hassle for me. With the headdress as the last part of the outfit, I expect it to drift toward me as it did just now, though it stays lifeless on the hanger.

"Are you ready?" Keith calls with a hand already on the doorknob. It twists here and there, preparing to open at any moment. I stumble over to the hanger as quickly as I could, removing the headdress from its resting place just as Keith nudges the door open.

"Wait- uh-"

Keith stands there, frozen, closing the door with his foot as he stays there with an astounded expression. With his mouth partly open and his eyebrows raised, I couldn't resist making a joke.

"Close it, or I'm going to close it for you."

"Oh er- sorry about that." Keith scratches his clothed arm, the burgundy of his jacket complementing his fair skin and slicked-back dark hair.

"So- How is it? How do I look?" I twirl on the spot for the dress to reach its maximum effect. He coughed through his words, masking the compliment perfectly. "You look great."

"What was that?" I mindlessly ask, figuring out the start and ends of the headdress in my hands.

"I said you look good. That's all you're getting out of me today."

I shrugged at the defensive tone, thrusting the head accessory into the other's hands for help. Keith might have been an expert in bridal items because he fixes it on with little to no effort, adjusting the curve so it'd fit perfectly onto the crown of my head. The headdress barely manages to touch my nape, making me flinch in surprise at the metal's coldness.

"Stop moving, you dimwit." The gargoyle says quietly, eyes concentrating on making sure that the accessory sits nicely on my head.

He doesn't look half bad when he's this focused.

"How are you so good at these things?"

"Allayia loved to use crowns. Sometimes Aiden would join in and wear them with her, so I'd had to be the person to secure them on their heads. That stuff was usually just made out of parchment and glue, my work, of course." Keith smugly says, securing the ends of the headdress with a latch. His hands are soft as he pats my head, obviously proud of this ability that he's developed.

"Oh, stop it, you. We get it, you're good at this. Give me the tie." Weaving the necktie over and under, the knot forms under a full minute. Slipping it over the other, I tuck it into the waistcoat and tighten the tie around his neck. "There—prim and proper with a completed tuxedo."

My grin makes Keith smile, though it fades as he turns around to open the door for me. Beyond it, I can hear the bustle of Abigor's guests familiarising themselves with the house and the warming up of the orchestra. The aromas of different foods mix with each other, wafting up the staircase and lingers in the corridors of the estate.

Sedna's door remains closed and still, signalling that the natural energy of her presence was absent.
"She must be downstairs already. C'mon, we should get going."

I nod at his statement, linking my arms around Keith's to prevent myself from tripping over my own feet. The music carries itself throughout the walls and weaves through the different rooms. Before we can mingle around with the other guests, Abigor stops us just as our feet reach the last step of the staircase.

"Glamours, for both of you. They change the look of your clothing, but they will remain the same to both of you. I have no say in how your charmed garments would appear to other people, however. They run out eventually, too, so be prepared for weird stares from the public."

"Are we the only ones who know what the other is wearing?"

"No, I've nulled the potion for Sedna, the siblings and myself."

"Okay, cool. At least the siblings can see how well I rock this dress." I grin, adjusting a part of headdress' metal that was sticking into my scalp.

"I'm not certain on what you've just told me, but, duly noted." Abigor nodded with as a finalisation to his comment, preparing to stroll away to greet his incoming guests. Before he could, he stopped himself short and returned straight to our side. "I forgot to place your masks inside your parcels—they were crafted in haste, but my servants are terrifyingly excellent in their job. I made sure they matched your apparel." With that, he departed to make his way to the foyer.

We slipped on our masks with haste, fastening the straps behind our heads. Despite the distance, Abigor's hello's were the most distinguished amongst the messy chatter of the masquerade attendees, addressing each and every one of them by their last names.

"It must be taxing to remember everyone's names," I whispered into Keith's ear as he drank his potion. I took mine just after the other had finished his, shaking off the weird effects the drink might have caused. I felt the tingle of a sensation run through my body like poison, instantly transforming the outfits we had received. Through a tiny mirror where a woman was checking her hair, I spotted that my dress was not much different from the actual one, though its sewing resembled a mantua with its overskirt drawn back over my hips. Keith sported a burgundy justacorps, paired (regrettably) with tights and knee-length boots; his necktie was replaced with a white cravat, stuffed neatly into the justacorps for volume.

I couldn't resist the urge to laugh at his outfit.

"You're wearing tights in your glamour." I snickered, elbowing Keith in the ribs.

"Dammit, I bet Abigor did it on purpose."

I rolled my eyes with a small smile, dragging him along the decorated walls of the house-turned-mansion; we squeeze through excited guests to look at the lighted corridors and rooms, with their doors wide open for anyone and everyone to go in. The ballroom was left to the last of our exploration destinations, allowing us to pick up a drink and some food to feed our hungry stomachs. With Abigor staying true to his word, the only source of light was from the wall lamps installed on each column. At its full capacity, the dancing figures bathe in a blend of colours as their garments twirl along with its wearers.

The talented players of the orchestra fill the large room with music, enhancing the masquerade's remarkable atmosphere. The conductor raised his voice just as they'd concluded a full suite from a well-known composer, inviting everyone onto the floor for a waltz.
"You know I don't dance, right?"

My face scrunches up unknowingly, shooting the gargoyle a look of scepticism.

"Did you not at least dance with the kids?"

"Well... yeah, but it was more of a forcing-Uncle-Keith activity than most. The siblings didn't exactly care about what I preferred."

"Oh, come on, it's a masquerade! They don't have these in where I come from any more—everything is just about partying until you're drunk and avoiding the attention of every professor. I don't get much downtime from when I'm studying either; it's pretty much just me crying when I can't understand something."

"That sounds absolutely terrible." Keith cringed, looking to the prepared guests—it was as if they were waiting for us to join them in the exuberant dance.

"I exaggerated a little, but it really is. Grant me one night of enjoyment before I go back, please?" Keith sighs, then nods in defeat at my genuine plea, offering his arm so that we'd join the troupe of dancers. With my left on his shoulder and his right on my waist, I begin to look around expectantly for the Duchess; I feel him clasp my other hand tightly and in response to my nervousness, he gives it a little squeeze.

Keith leans down to murmur in my ear, eyes trained on the other guests circling around us like spinning tops that never fall off their tips. "Relax. She's not here."

And with that, we take off dancing into the stagnant night of the 18th century.

The gargoyle skillfully whirls me around on the timbered floor, the music of the violas and tubas overpowers the click of our heeled shoes and the triumphant shouts of the conductor. The orchestra subsides into a decrescendo and increases in volume as the song reaches the highest peak, where my hair knows no end and my dress defies gravity.

Keith guides me step by step into the familiar '1-2-3' beat, our toes missing the other's just by a millimetre as the colourful lights hypnotise me into a trance. He pulls me closer with a pull on his arm, knocking the breath out of me and bringing my face merely inches from him. No one seems to get in our way in the middle of the waltz where my mantua flies like a bird in a breeze and the sparkle of the floral design catches on to the lamps' rays perfectly. Keith's justacorps flaps with each turn as his countenance remains neutral and his grip on my hand loosens.

It loosens just as the instruments fade with the conductor's hand movements.

In a blur, the people around me dissolve into cracking bones, while I stand in flesh and blood. The waltz halts abruptly and a distinct melody plays above all forms of noise, jumbling the questions and worries in my mind as they mix like chemicals.

"Danse Macabre. The Dance of Death; it's the dance of the dead." I whisper with wide eyes, just as my partner and the burgundy of his suit fades from my vision. Words of alarm spill from my mouth like a waterfall, drowning all the enjoyment and happiness I felt earlier.

Is this what it means to be a stranger to a realm?

Time passes like the ocean, ever-moving and ever-changing. Time travels from side to side like a
pendulum, diving into the depths of my anxiety just for the fun of it; like a plaything. Time seems to pause when a booming sound makes its way through the large mansion, bringing each and every activity to a standstill. It seems to taunt me, mock me, ridicule me while I look on in terror and trepidation; only laughter of the entity named Time and the Duchess ring through my head and my body, plaguing the safe kept heart I'd manage to obtain while with the gargoyle.

All withers away as Duchess Vivienne makes her debut, hailing the darkness inside her and answering to the devil on her own accord.

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