

XVI. THE TOWER

Iris cringed at the array of cards laid before her. Old coffee mugs and dirty plates had been shoved to the side to make way for her tarot reading. The central card showed an imposing building: a tall black obelisk against gray clouds, and from its windows came fire and falling bodies. The colors were scratchy and faded, worn from shuffling, though it had never appeared in any of Iris' daily readings before.

She'd pulled the Tower.

Fuck.

Maybe she was just remembering the meaning wrong. Iris grabbed her faded copy of *Tarot 101* from beneath the table—the book was being used to prop up a broken leg—and flipped through the crusty, water-damaged pages until she came to the chapter on Major Arcana. Skimming past the Fool, Lovers, Death, and Devil, she finally came to the Tower.

“The Tower card represents sudden, unexpected change, upheaval, disruption, and sometimes *destruction*,” she whispered. Then she groaned, crossing her arms on the table and dropping her head. “*Fuck*.” She wasn't ready for change—hell, she was barely ready for *normal*—and now she had *this* to plague her for the rest of the day—probably for the rest of the week! “*Fuck!*” she said again, hoping the cards would hear her and undo the reading.

They did not.

Moving on with the day was a slog after that. Iris dragged herself from the table, brushed her teeth dejectedly, and threw on some jeans and a blouse that didn't smell too bad. She had left her apartment, locked the door, and was already down three flights of stairs before remembering she'd forgotten her wallet.

It was going to be a *long* day.

Her trip to the store was similarly frustrating. They were out of apples in the produce section. Seriously, out of *apples*? How does that even happen? Iris scanned the surrounding fruit. Mangos, oranges, bananas. Nothing good. Sighing, she moved on.

The store was out of frozen pizza and boxed macaroni too. Swearing under her breath, Iris left the place with nothing but a gallon of apple juice and a block of cheddar cheese. She'd have to come back later, when they'd “had a chance to restock everything, after the supply shortages,” as the boy at self checkout had said. Who the fuck ran out of apples? Who the fuck ran out of *frozen pizza*?

As she crossed the parking lot, Iris heard sirens wailing in the distance. She saw a column of smoke rising into the sky. Then she realized the smoke was coming from the same direction as her apartment. Iris started running, crocs pounding against cracked pavement.

Her apartment wasn't on fire. The building was fine. It was the apartment next door that had to be put out. Confused and frightened townies stood around the scene watching the fire truck pull away, police officers instructing families about the situation, children crying next to their panicked

parents. Iris slipped through the crowd and into her building, climbing all five flights of stairs until finally reaching her room. She could still smell the smoke as she shut the door.

Panic and fear beat within her chest. They boiled up her throat and bubbled out as tears began to fall from her cheeks. Her feet were blistered and hurt like hell. Even breathing was hard when she choked on her own nerves.

Fuck, *Fuck*, she had been so afraid. If her apartment, her home, had been on fire—but no, it wasn't, everything was *okay*. Yeah fuck that. Everything was *not* okay. She'd seen the smoke. She'd thought everything would be gone—had known it would all be gone—and she was utterly powerless to stop it. Iris hated feeling so insignificant. She wouldn't wish it on her worst enemy.

Some time later, Iris wiped her eyes and sniffled. She was lying on the carpet. Pulling herself to her feet, she glared at the tarot cards still splayed out on her table. Drawing the Tower was certainly *not* helping her panic attacks.

She needed a break.

And so she spent the afternoon painting, lost in loud music and smeared paint. Her single person apartment was just big enough to house a small art studio. Where other people would put a couch or television, Iris had instead covered the floor with rolls of plastic film, bottles of paint, and huge white canvases.

Iris finished a commission—a landscape of mountains and forested valleys, taken straight from a Bob Ross video, she guessed—and started work on a new piece: this one with great splashes of bright colors on the edges, and a dark form in the center. The darkness felt cloudy to Iris, pushing against the borders of light, but as she worked the cloud shifted. It thinned, became rectangular, and stretched the full height of the canvas. Around the spire's base she painted white waves crashing against sharp rocks. This would be a bastion of darkness in an ocean of light. From the spire she carved jagged lines of gray, like lightning, that stretched into the pink and orange skyline. She became lost in the color, the wooden brushes in her fingers, the sound of bristles rustling against canvas. Hours passed.

At last, she pulled away to admire her creation.

Wait. When had she drawn that fire? Were those bodies falling from windows? Why had she painted—oh, *fuck*.

It was the Tower. Distorted, yes. Brightly rendered, yes. But she'd painted the fucking Tower.

Iris threw down her brushes, turned the canvas so she wouldn't have to look at it, and stomped away. She needed a coffee. The dark froth brewed while her mind stewed. This card. This fucking card. Why did she have to draw the one card that would upend her entire day?

Her Keurig blinked at her, and Iris snatched her mug away, taking a deep drink. It tasted like shit. Peering into the mug, she saw old coffee grains stuck to the bottom. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cleaned them, maybe it was time to wash her mugs out. The grains flaked and swirled with the coffee. But they held a distinct shape, like a mountain piercing the earth. Like a tower.

Scrunching her nose, Iris set her mug down and leaned against the counter, staring at speckles of fake marble, trying to clear her head. The black dots had sort of gathered together, they were kind of rectangular. Kind of like a—

Iris jerked away from the countertop.

That was it.

She was losing her mind.

Over a fucking tarot card.